



# The Elementary Concepts of Historical Materialism

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# Preface: Marxism-Leninism and the Class Struggle

Allow me, in presenting the new edition of Marta Harnecker's little book, to recall to you a very simple idea.

It is a simple idea: but its theoretical and political consequences are important.

Here is the idea: all Marx's *theory*, that is to say the *science* founded by Marx (historical materialism) and the *philosophy* opened up by Marx (dialectical materialism) have as their center and at their heart *the class struggle*.

The class struggle is thus "the decisive link" not only in the political practice of the Marxist-Leninist worker's movement, *but also in theory*, in Marxist science and philosophy.

Since Lenin we have clearly understood that philosophy represents the class struggle in theory; more precisely, that all philosophy represents a class viewpoint in theory against other opposing class viewpoints. Therefore we know that Marxist-Leninist philosophy (dialectical materialism) represents the proletarian class viewpoint in theory: it is the "decisive link" in order to understand Marxist-Leninist philosophy and to develop it. It is the "decisive link" in order to understand why this philosophy can cease to "interpret" the world in order to aid its revolutionary transformation.

But that the class struggle is also the "decisive link" in Marx's scientific theory, is perhaps more difficult to understand.

I content myself with only one example: *Capital*. Here is a book which contains the Marxist science, the fundamental principles of the Marxist science. However, we ought not to give ourselves illusions. It is not sufficient to have a book before us: it is necessary to know how to read.

For there is a manner of “reading” *Capital*, a manner of “understanding” and of “viewing” the scientific theory of Marx which can be *completely bourgeois*. Bourgeois meaning: influenced, marked, permeated by bourgeois ideology, very precisely by the bourgeois *economist* or *sociological* ideologies.

For example, one can read *Capital* in the following manner: as a theory of the *Political Economy* of the capitalist mode of production. One will begin with the economic base, one will examine the “labor process”, one will distinguish the “forces of production” and the “relations of production”, one will analyze the commodity, money, surplus value, wages, reproduction of capital, rent, profit, interest, the falling rate of profit, etc, etc. In short, one will tranquilly discover in *Capital* the “laws” of the (capitalist) economy. And when one will have finished this analysis of the “economic” mechanisms, one will *add* a slight addition: social classes, the class struggle.

Isn’t the short unfinished chapter on social classes *at the very end* of *Capital*? Isn’t it *only* necessary to speak of social classes after having taken apart the entire mechanism of the capitalist economy? Didn’t Marx call on us to consider social classes (and thus the class struggle) as a simple *product*, the final *product* of the structure of the capitalist economy, its result? Aren’t social classes a simple *effect* of the capitalist economy, *and the class struggle a simple effect of the existence of classes*?

This reading, this interpretation of *Capital* is a grave deformation of Marxist theory: an *economist* (bourgeois) deformation. Social classes are not at the end of *Capital*: they are present from the beginning to the end. The class struggle is not an effect (derived) of the existence of social classes: the class struggle and the existence of classes are one and the same thing. The class struggle is “the decisive link” in order to understand *Capital*.

When Marx gave to *Capital* the subtitle: *A Critique of Political Economy*, he didn’t only want to say that he was proposing to criticise the classical economists, but the *economist* (bourgeois) *illusions* as well. He wanted to radically criticise the bourgeois illusion which carefully separates the activity of production and exchange (the economy) on the one hand, and social classes, political struggles, etc., on the other. Marx wanted to show that all the conditions of capitalist production, circulation and distribution (thus the entire political economy so-called) are dominated and permeated by the existence of social classes and the class struggle.

Let’s explain in a few words the essential principle of Marx’s thesis.



There is no “pure” economic production, there is no “pure” circulation (exchange), there is no “pure” distribution. All these economic phenomena are processes which take place *within social relations* which are, in the last instance, that is to say beneath their “appearances”, class relations, antagonistic class relations, that is to say relations of class struggle.

Let’s take the *material* production of objects of social utility (use values), such as it presents itself to the unaided eye in units of production (factories, farms employing wage labor, etc.). This material production presupposes the existence of “productive forces”, where the “labor force” (the workers) set to work the instruments of production (tools, machines) which transform a raw material. A bourgeois “economist” or an “economist” reader of *Capital* will see here a simple process of technical labor. But it suffices to reflect back to Marx to see that this is a false reading. It is necessary to say: the productive forces are put to work in the labor process *under the domination* of the relations of production which are relations of *exploitation*. If there are workers they are wage laborers, thus exploited; if there are wage laborers who only possess their labor power and are constrained (by hunger: Lenin) to sell it, then there are capitalists who own the means of production and buy labor power to exploit it, to draw from it surplus value. The existence of antagonistic classes is thus inscribed in production itself, *in the heart of production itself*: in the relations of production.

But it is necessary to go much further: the relations of production are not something which are *added* to the productive forces simply as their “form”. The relations of production *pervade* the productive forces, since labor power, which sets into motion the “productive forces”, itself forms part of the “productive forces”, and since the process of capitalist production tends ceaselessly to the maximum exploitation of labor power. And since it is this tendency which dominates everything else in the capitalist production process, it is necessary to say that the *technical* mechanisms of production are subordinate to the (class) mechanisms of capitalist exploitation. That which one calls the productive forces are at the same time the material *base* (the “technical base” said Marx) and the historical *form of existence* of the relations of production, that is of the relations of exploitation. Marx admirably demonstrated in Volume I (Section 4, chapters 14 and 15) that the successive bases and *forms* of the organization of the productive forces (from manufacture to large scale industry) were nothing more than the successive bases and forms of the material and historical existence of the relations of capitalist production. It is thus an economist and technocratic error to separate the

productive forces from the relations of production. What, in fact, exists is the unity in their forms of material existence of the productive forces and the relations of production *under the domination of the relations of production*.

If such is the case, there is no “pure” production and no “pure” economy. With the relations of production, antagonistic classes are present from the beginning in the process of production. With these antagonistic class relations are laid the basis of the class struggle: the class struggle is materially rooted in production itself.

Class struggle: the struggle of the capitalist class to exploit the working class, the struggle of the working class to resist the exploitation of which it is the victim. I carefully specify that the class struggle is not a one way affair. The struggle of the capitalist class is exercised over the working class with extraordinary ferocity, well before the working class begins to reply, to mobilize itself, and to engage in its great historical battles. The class struggle of the capitalists never ceases, it is part of the very system of the capitalist mode of production.

But this is not all. No society exists, that is to say continues in history, except by, at the same time that it produces, reproducing the material and social conditions of its existence (of its production). For the conditions of existence of capitalist society are the conditions of *exploitation* to which the capitalist class subjects the working class: the capitalist class *must reproduce them* at whatever cost. In order to understand *Capital* it is therefore necessary to raise the problem of reproduction; one then sees that the bourgeoisie cannot assure the stability and the continuance of the exploitation (which it imposes in production) except by conducting a permanent *class struggle* against the working class. This class struggle is conducted by perpetuating or reproducing the material, ideological and political conditions of exploitation. It is conducted *in production* (reduction of wages, repression, sanctions, anti-union activities, etc.). It is conducted at the same time *outside production*: here the role of the state, of the repressive apparati of the state, of the state ideological apparati (political system, schools, churches, news media) intervene to subjugate the working class by means of repression and ideology.

If one reads it in this manner, *Capital* ceases to be a theory of the “political economy” of capitalism to become the theory of the material, legal-political, and ideological forms of a mode of production founded on the exploitation of wage labor, to become a revolutionary theory.

If one reads it in this manner, one puts back *into their correct place* political economy, the productive forces, technology, etc.

If this is so, one can turn to *another idea* of the class struggle and renounce certain illusions, “humanist” illusions for example, which are derived from petty bourgeois ideology (and which are the compliment of “economist” illusions). In renouncing “humanist” illusions one is forced to abandon the idea that capitalist society could have existed in some manner *before* the advent of class struggle, and that the class struggle which we know was the *act* of the proletariat (and its allies) in revolting against the “injustices” of society. In reality the class struggle of capitalist society is consubstantial with capitalist society: it began with it: it is the bourgeoisie who conducted it from the beginning with an unequalled ferocity, against the then unarmed proletariat. Far from simply revolting against “injustices”, the proletariat only at first *resisted the attacks of the bourgeois classes*, before organizing itself, developing its consciousness, and passing to the counter-offensive, then to the offensive, until the taking of power.

If this is so, if Marx’s scientific theory gives us proof that everything follows the class struggle, then one better understand the reasons for this event without precedent in history: the “fusion” of the theory of Marxism and the workers’ movement. We have never reflected enough on this fact: why and how did the workers’ movement, which existed before Marx and Engels wrote the *Communist Manifesto*, recognize itself in a work as difficult as *Capital*? It is their common point of origin: the class struggle. This was the heart of the daily practice of the workers’ movement. This is at the heart of *Capital*, at the heart of Marxist theory.

Marx returned, in the form of scientific theory, to the workers’ movement that which he received from it in political experience.

As Mao said: “Never forget the class struggle.”



# Introduction

*Philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways,  
the point, however, is to change it.*

– Marx, *11th Thesis on Feuerbach*

What is the significance of this change from the interpretation of the world to its transformation, announced by Marx in the *11th Thesis on Feuerbach*? The necessity of abandoning theory in order to pass over into action; in other words, the necessity of abandoning the library and its books in order to commit oneself exclusively to revolutionary political action?

Many young Latin Americans, tired of the revolutionary rhetoric which has never succeeded in producing a single political act that has really transformed the conditions of misery and exploitation of the great masses of Latin American workers, have fallen into the tendency to interpret this sentence as advocating a change from theory to action, as if all theory were only the interpretation of the world, and as if all action implies a transformation of it.

If this were so, consequently Marx would have had to abandon his books and his study to dedicate himself exclusively to political work. Nevertheless, to the very end of his life, intellectual work occupied a great part of his time, although he did not abandon immediate political work.

Marx's life therefore poses a dilemma: either Marx was not consistent with his affirmation of the necessity of passing from the interpretation to the transformation of the world, or he considered that there could not be a transformation of it without preliminary knowledge of the reality which he wanted to transform, without a preliminary knowledge of how it is organized, what its rules of functioning and development are, what social forces exist to realize the change, in short, without a scientific knowledge of it.

There can be no doubt that the latter was Marx's position.

The *11th Thesis on Feuerbach* did not announce the death of all theory, but a break with the theories of man, society and history, which until that moment were philosophical theories which were limited to contemplating and interpreting the world, being incapable of transforming it because they did not understand the functioning mechanisms of societies.

What existed until that moment, in relation to society and its history, were: either philosophical theories about history – philosophies of history, or historical narrations and sociological analyses which were limited to describing events which occurred in distinct societies. What *did not exist* was *scientific knowledge* of societies and their history.

The *11th Thesis on Feuerbach* indicates, therefore, a *break* with all the philosophical theories of man and of history which only interpreted the world and *announces the beginning of a new scientific theory*, the scientific theory of history or historical materialism, which founded a new scientific field: the *science of history* in the same manner that the scientific theory of Galileo founded a new scientific field, the science of physics.

Let us step back for a moment and analyze the significance of this word “theory” as it is used in scientific language.

In the same manner that the process of material production attempts to transform a definite primary material (for example, copper) into a definite product (for example, pipes, electrical cables, etc.) through the utilization on the part of the workers of specialized means of labor (machines and tools, etc.); the process of the production of knowledge attempts to transform a definite primary material (a superficial, deformed perception of reality) into a definite product (a rigorous, scientific knowledge of it). Intellectual workers realize this transformation utilizing definite instruments of intellectual labor, fundamentally: the scientific *theory* and *method*. The body of more or less systematic concepts of a science is called theory (for example: the theory of gravity, the theory of relativity, the Freudian theory of the unconscious, etc.). The form in which these concepts are utilized is called method.

All *scientific theory*, therefore, has the character of an *instrument of knowledge*; it does not give us knowledge of a concrete reality, but it gives us the means or instruments of intellectual labor which permit us to arrive at a rigorous scientific knowledge of it. The theory of gravity, for example, does not give us an immediate knowledge of the velocity at which a stone falls from a definite altitude, but it gives us the means

with which we can make this concrete calculation.

When we speak then of the Marxist theory of history, we are speaking of the body of abstract concepts which serve intellectual workers as an instrument to analyze, in a scientific manner, different societies and their laws of functioning and development.

This body of concepts of historical materialism include the following concepts: the production process, productive forces, technical relations of production, social relations of production, relations of production, infrastructure, superstructure, ideological structure, juridico-political structure, mode of production, social formation, political conjuncture, determination in the last instance by the economy, relative autonomy of the other levels, social classes and the class struggle, transition, revolution, etc.

The fundamental beginnings of this body of concepts, although still very fragile, is found in *The German Ideology* (1845-46). This work can be considered as marking a true theoretical revolution in the thought of its authors. With it Marx and Engels inaugurated a new science where before had reigned the philosophies of history, where there had existed only philosophies of history and narrations of empirical historical events.

What is the breadth of this scientific discovery?

To explain this we will use an image employed by Louis Althusser. If we consider the great scientific discoveries of human history, we can imagine the different sciences as regional formations of great theoretical “continents.” We can affirm that before Marx only two great continents had been discovered: the continent of Mathematics by the Greeks (Tales, or whomever the myth of this man designates) and the continent of Physics by Galileo and his successors. A science like chemistry founded by Lavoisier is a regional science of the continent Physics. A science like biology by integrating itself with molecular chemistry is also entered in this same continent. Logic in its modern form is entered in the continent Mathematics. On the other hand, it is very possible that Freud discovered a new scientific continent<sup>[1]</sup>.

If this metaphor is useful, we can affirm that Marx opened to scientific knowledge a new continent: the continent of History.

This new science founded by Marx is a “materialist” science, like all the sciences and, therefore, its general theory has the name historical materialism. The word materialism simply indicates the strict attitude of the scientist before the reality of his object, which permits him/her to grasp, as Engels said, “nature, without any addition from without.”

But the expression "historical materialism" is, nonetheless, somewhat strange, since the other sciences do not employ the word "materialism" to define themselves. We do not speak for example of chemical materialism, or of physical materialism. The term materialism, used by Marx to designate the new science of history, has as its object to establish a line of demarcation between the previous idealist conceptions and the new materialist, that is scientific, conception of history.<sup>[i2]</sup>

Until now we have spoken of historical materialism and of the great theoretical revolution which its appearance provoked. Now we must ask ourselves: is Marxist theory reducible to historical materialism, in short, to a scientific theory?

No, Marxist theory is composed of a scientific theory: historical materialism, and a philosophy: dialectical materialism.

Althusser shows us that "a correlation exists between the great scientific revolutions and the great philosophical revolutions. It is enough to compare the major events in the history of the sciences on the one hand, and major events in the history of philosophy on the other. The great philosophical revolutions always follow the great scientific revolutions. From Greek mathematics followed the philosophy of Plato, from the constitution of the Physics of Galileo, Cartesian philosophy, from Newtonian physics, Kantian philosophy, from mathematical logic, the philosophy of Husserl, from the science founded by Marx, a new philosophy: dialectical materialism."<sup>[i3]</sup>

Consequently, for philosophy to arise and develop itself, it is necessary that the sciences exist. Perhaps, due to this fact, there did not exist philosophy before Plato.

The transformation which the birth of a new science produces in the theoretical field, is not felt immediately in the field of philosophy, a certain time is required for philosophy to be transformed. This necessary lag of philosophy with respect to science has been felt for a long time in Marxist philosophy or dialectical materialism. "The thirty year desert between the *Theses on Feuerbach* and *Anti-Duhring* is evidence of this, as are certain long periods of deadlock later, periods in which we and many others are still marking time."<sup>[i4]</sup>

On the other hand, owing to the intimate relationship which exists between scientific discoveries and philosophical transformations, it is in the most advanced scientific analysis of Marx and Engels, especially in *Capital*, where we can find the most developed theoretical elements from which to elaborate Marxist philosophy. Lenin said, quite correctly, that



we ought to look in *Capital* for dialectical materialism, that is, Marxist philosophy.

Marxist theory is formed, therefore, by a scientific theory of history, or historical materialism, and by a philosophical theory which corresponds , to this revolution in the field of the sciences: dialectical materialism.

In the lines above, we have noted the weak state of elaboration of dialectical materialism, a situation which is explained by the necessary lag of philosophy with respect to new scientific discoveries.

Let us now examine the level of elaboration which exists in the body of concepts which constitutes the general theory of historical materialism.

This body of concepts was never developed in a systematic form by Marx and Engels. It was, nevertheless, employed with great success by these authors, to analyse the system of capitalist production, permitting them to obtain a profound knowledge of it. Through *Capital* the international proletariat can know the reasons for its misery and the means to end it in a revolutionary manner. The prodigious discoveries of Marx and Engels give the working masses a correct orientation for their struggles. The capitalist system has been laid bare. The conditions of its birth, its development and its destruction has been analysed, The objective conditions of revolution have been pointed out. The epoch of utopias has come to an end.

This body of concepts which was not developed in a systematic form by its creators, has been unevenly elaborated by their successors. The concepts pertaining to the infrastructure, for example, have been better elaborated than those pertaining to the superstructure. This is not the result of an accident, but of the fact that they are the concepts used most frequently by Marx in the analysis of the economic structure of the capitalist mode of production. Studying the form in which Marx uses them in *Capital*, has led to a more systematic elaboration of them, although one still insufficient in many respects. The major part of the other concepts remain, on the contrary, in a state of “practical concepts” (but which produce a knowledge indicating the general lines which ought to guide an investigation).

The actual state of the theory of historical materialism is, therefore, more or less the following:

- a scientific theory of the economic aspect of the pre-monopoly stage of the capitalist mode of production and some elements with which to understand the stage of monopoly capitalism
- the absence of a developed scientific theory of the ideological and

- juridico-political structures of the capitalist mode of production
- the absence of a scientific study of other modes of production (slave, feudal, etc.)
- some elements of a general theory of the transition from one mode of production to another. Above all, elements to understand the transition from the capitalist to the socialist mode of production (dictatorship of the proletariat, non-correspondence between property relations and real appropriation, etc.)
- the first elements for a scientific theory of social classes, above all of the social classes under the capitalist system of production
- some elements for an analysis of the political conjuncture (theory of the weakest link in Lenin, Mao's system of contradiction).

Now, the undeveloped state of many aspects of Marxist theory ought not to discourage us, but on the contrary, should encourage us to a profound and critical study of all which now exists and to an elaboration of the general concepts which are urgently needed for the analysis of our societies. Moreover, we should not forget that the Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese and Cuban revolutionaries did not wait until Marxist theory had been completely developed to commit themselves to revolutionary struggle. And finally, what has been learned in the struggle itself has helped to develop theory.

Neither should we forget that Marxist theory is only one of the aspects of the theoretical formation of a revolutionary militant.

If we were asked to describe the broad outlines of this kind of formation, we would say:

The *first* aspect of the formation of a revolutionary militant is the study of Marxist theory. History shows us that the union of Marxist theory and the workers movement gives to the people of our time the possibility of "transforming the world", of "making revolution".

But, although Marxist theory is fundamental for the constitution of a serious revolutionary movement, which passes from revolutionary romanticism and voluntarism to a stage of realism and of the effective preparation for action, by itself it is not enough.

To remain at this stage is as Mao said, "to contemplate an arrow without ever launching it", or to "repeat a record" forgetting that our duty is to "learn the new", to "create the new".

The *second aspect* which we must not forget in the formation of a revolutionary militant is the creative application of Marxist theory to the concrete reality of his/her country.

Revolutions *in general* do not exist, only particular revolutions, adapted to the situation in each country.

It is necessary to struggle against the type of study which frequently arises in Marxism, a study which is not a function of the practical necessities of the revolution, but simply to acquire new knowledge. It is necessary to link the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism to the concrete practice of our revolutionary movements.

It is necessary to study the history of our countries, to know the specific characteristics of our social formations. To study what defines our economic structure, the form in which the different relations of production are combined, which relation dominates, what are the strong and the weak points of this structure. To study the ideological structure, the dominant ideas among the masses. To study the structure of power, the internal contradictions of this power, etc.

This study of our concrete social formations must be realized through the gathering of the greatest amount of data concerning this reality, critically analysed in the light of the general principles of Marxism-Leninism in order to obtain correct conclusions.

The *third aspect* of the formation of a revolutionary militant is the study of the political conjuncture of a country and at the world level. It is not enough to know the history of a country, to know its present state of development, it is necessary to pass to a more concrete level, to the study of the “present moment” of the class struggle in that country and at the world level, that is to say, to the study of the political conjuncture. It is fundamental to determine who are the friends and the enemies of the revolution at each stage of its development. To be able to determine the economic, political, military and cultural power of each of the groups which confront each other, etc.

To avoid ineffective theoreticism and senseless practicicism, it is necessary that every revolutionary militant strive to form himself/herself in a more or less profound manner, in all three of these aspects.

Now, the *objective of this book* is to help to understand Marxist-Leninist theory. The study of the concrete reality of each country is the proper task of each revolutionary movement.

Our work is limited, therefore, to presenting in a pedagogical, yet at the same time rigorous form, the principal concepts of the general theory of historical materialism. These concepts were enunciated by Marx, Engels and Lenin and used by them in the study of concrete realities, but nevertheless, they never developed these concepts in a systematic way.

This book seeks to examine these concepts by making a critical study of them, in other words, seeking behind the words into the profound thought of their authors, which will permit us to avoid dogmatism and enable us to creatively apply these concepts in the analysis of our concrete realities.

This critical study of the principal concepts of historical materialism attempts to incorporate the most recent investigations of them, which distinguishes the content of this book from the other manuals on Marxism which we have previously known.[<sup>i5</sup>]

To carry out our objective we have been obliged to begin with the more developed concepts. We have begun with the concept of production which is the basic concept of Marxist theory: it is the production of material goods which serves as the basis for explaining the other aspects of society. Next we will study the concepts of relations of production, productive forces, economic structure, infrastructure and superstructure, ideological structure, juridico-political structure, mode of production, social formation, political conjuncture, transition. All these concepts which are fundamental to the scientific study of the *social structure* are studied in the *first part* of this book. The *second part* studies the effects of the social structure on the individuals who live in it and the action which they can exercise on this structure: the social changes and the class struggle. Finally the *third part* refers to the Marxist theory of history and gives us a general idea of Marx and Engels contribution on this issue. Apparently the “normal” thing to do would have been to start with this general idea, as the other manuals do; nonetheless, to formulate this general rule in a scientific and comprehensive form for the reader, it is necessary to return to the arduous road of the systematic and rigorous study of all the previous concepts.[<sup>i6</sup>]

Here we recommend what Marx wrote to Lachatre on March 18, 1872:

Dear Citizen,

I applaud your idea of publishing the translation of *Das Kapital* as a serial. In this form the book will be more accessible to the working class, a consideration which to me outweighs everything else.

That is the good side of your suggestion, but here is the reverse of the medal: the method of analysis which I have employed and which had not previously been applied to economic subjects, makes the reading of the first chapters rather arduous, and it is to be feared that the French public, always

impatient to come to a conclusion, eager to know the connection between general principles and the immediate questions that have aroused their passions, may be disheartened because they be unable to move on at once.

That is a disadvantage I am powerless to overcome, unless it be by forewarning and forearming those readers who zealously seek the truth. There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits.

Believe me, dear citizen,

Your devoted,

*Karl Marx*

Now then, the uneven development already noted of the concepts of historical materialism is reflected in the content of the diverse chapters. Some manage a fairly rigorous and scientific presentation of the concepts; others are limited almost to merely the posing of problems. Our intention has been to show to the reader this situation of uneven development. To accomplish this goal we have used the method of theoretical work and critical reading which we learned studying the *Works of Louis Althusser*, in the main, and those of his collaborators.<sup>[17]</sup> Each time that we have found sufficiently clear texts of these authors we have used them in a textual or semi-textual form, showing whence they came so that the reader might be able to return to the original.

The questions and the summary which appear at the end of the chapters have a pedagogical purpose, as much for those who study on their own as for those who use the content of this book in courses of formation for workers and students.

The themes for reflection which follow the questions cannot be answered on the basis of the content of the chapter alone. Their objective is two-fold: on the one hand to show the theoretical problems which can be posed in the study of determinant concepts; on the other, to indicate the possible applications of the theoretical concepts in the analysis of our Latin American reality.

The general bibliography which is presented at the end of the book sets forth the principal texts which ought to be read in the first stage of formation. Each text is accompanied by a critical commentary to orient the reader. At the end of this bibliography, in which the texts of each author are presented in chronological order, concrete suggestions are made as to the manner in which they can be organized for a more

effective reading.

The content of this work should not be taken as dogma but as an effort at the pedagogical investigation and exposition of a certain number of instruments of theoretical labor. If any of these instruments, instead of facilitating the production of knowledge of a concrete social reality, make it more difficult, there is no doubt that it should be modified, perfected or in an extreme case, abandoned.

The bibliography at the end of each chapter attempts to facilitate the critical study of its contents.

We recommend that our readers study the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao Zedong, inasmuch as they, even though not elaborating systematically many of the concepts of historical materialism, have narrated and analysed their own revolutionary practice from which we have much to learn.

But to read them, to study them, to assimilate them, does not mean simply reciting what we read in these texts. Famous quotes are not enough, what is needed is the creative application of Marxist theory. Lenin harshly criticised those politicians who limited themselves to quoting from books without ever making the effort to confront reality in a creative manner.

They... pick out passages from books like a scholar whose head is a card index box filled with quotations from books, which he picks out as he needs them; but if a new situation arises which is not described in any book, he becomes confused and grabs the wrong quotation from the box.[<sup>18</sup>]

Finally, we want to especially thank our professor and friend, Louis Althusser and all those who, in one way or another, have made possible the realization of this work which is the fruit of a true collective labor and to warn our readers that it will be absolutely sterile if it is limited solely to augmenting the scope of our knowledge of Marxist theory. Let us remember that Marx's ultimate objective was *to transform the world*.

Santiago, Chile

January 1971

# 1

## Production

### 1.1 Introduction

We begin this pedagogical exposition of the principal concepts of historical materialism with the production process, not by an arbitrary decision, but because this concept is to constitute the base on which we are going to build the theoretical edifice of historical materialism.

*For Marxism, the ultimate understanding of historical processes must be sought in the form in which human beings produce their material means of life.*

The materialist conception of history starts from the proposition that the production and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure; that in every society that has appeared in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided into classes or orders is dependent upon what is produced, how it is produced, and how the products are exchanged. From this point of view the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men's brains, not in man's better insight into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange. They are to be sought, not in the *philosophy*, but in the *economics* of each particular epoch<sup>1</sup>.

Now then, all production is characterized by two inseparable elements: *the labor process* which is the transformation of nature by human beings

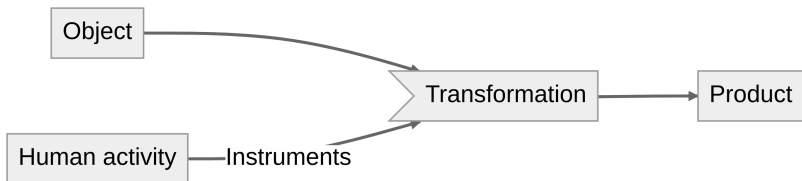
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<sup>1</sup>Engels, *Anti-Duhring* (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), p. 365

to convert it into a useful object and the *relations of production* which are the concrete historical form in which the labor process is realized.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 The Labor Process

The **labor process** is any process of transformation of a definite object, either natural or already worked upon, into a definite product, a transformation effected by a definite human activity, using definite instruments of labor.



The moment of transformation is the determinant moment, the most important moment of the labor process. The labor process refers to when the object undergoes a process of transformation in order to be converted into a useful product. This transformation is realized through the activity of human labor utilizing more or less developed (from the technical point of view) instruments.

This labor process was studied by Marx in the first volume of *Capital*. Relying on it, we can now redefine in a more precise manner the different elements which are a part of this process.

## 1.3 The Elements of the Labor Process

These elements are, as we see them: a) the object of labor, b) the means of labor, and c) the human activity used in the process.

### The object of labor

We must distinguish two types: raw material and primary material.

**Raw material** is the substance which comes directly from nature, which is untouched by labor.

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<sup>2</sup>In previous editions we did not differentiate between the “labor process” and the “production process” in the process of transformation of nature. Now we are convinced that it is necessary to distinguish between the two, since, as we see in this chapter, the basis of the production process is the reproduction of its conditions of production, while a labor process can go on without having this end.



Examples: trees in the forest waiting to be cut down; minerals to be extracted from the mines, etc.

**Primary material** is the substance which has undergone some modification as a result of labor.

Examples: cut wood, refined ores, etc.

Now then, primary materials can constitute the principal element of a product or they can intervene only as auxiliary materials.

*Auxiliary primary materials* are those which:

- can be absorbed by the instruments of labor themselves; coal or electricity for the machinery, oil for the wheels, etc.
- can be incorporated in the principal primary material to produce in it a transformation of a material character: dye in leather or wool, chlorine to bleach fabrics, etc.
- can serve simply in the execution of labor as in the case of materials destined to illuminate or heat the places where work goes on.

In the true chemical industries the distinction between principal and auxiliary primary materials is blurred, since, in the final product, none of the primary materials employed appears.

## The Means of Labor

What Marx called the means of labor can be defined in a strict and in a broad sense.

*The means of labor in a strict sense are the things or the conjunction of things which the laborer interposes directly between himself/herself and the object of labor (raw or primary material). They serve as intermediaries between the laborer and the object of labor.*

Examples: the hammer and saw in a small furniture factory, the sewing machine for a tailor, the mechanized shovel in mining, etc.

*The means of labor in the broad sense encompass, in addition to those means mentioned above, all the material conditions which, without intervening directly in the process of transformation, are indispensable for its realization.*

Examples: land, factories, roads, canals, irrigation projects, etc.

Owing to the fact that the production of material goods can not be realized without the participation in it of both primary (or raw) materials and the means of labor in the broadest sense, Marx called these elements *means of production*.

*The means of production are constituted by the objects of labor*

*and the means of labor in the broadest sense.*

It is necessary to point out that in many Marxist texts the term “means of production” is used to designate what Marx defined as “means of labor.” This notion can lead to misunderstandings.

### **Human Activity Realized in the Production Process**

The human activity developed in the process of production of material goods is called, commonly, labor. This labor, which is expressed in a certain quantity of products implies the expenditure of a certain quantity of human energy.

*Marx called the human energy expended in the process of labor “**labor power**”.*

The fatigue after a day at work is only the physical expression of this expenditure of energy, the production of human activity developed during the labor process. Good food and rest permit this energy to be renewed.

The concept of *labor* should not be confused with that of *labor power*. Each one refers to absolutely different realities. One example to make the difference clearer: in the same manner that a machine does a definite amount of “labor” in a certain number of hours (canning a definite amount of vegetables) and to achieve this end uses a certain quantity of electricity, a worker in a noodle factory in eight hours of work daily succeeds in packaging a definite quantity of kilos of noodles and, to accomplish this end, expends a certain quantity of human energy. Therefore, the human energy or labor power is radically different from the realized labor, which is only the expenditure of that labor power.

By confusing the two concepts the classical economists were incapable of discovering the origin of capitalist exploitation. They held that wages were the price of the labor realized by the worker, but when they calculated how much they ought to pay him/her, they totally forgot this declaration and instead of calculating the price of the labor realized (number of shoes made, for example) they calculated the price of the objects which the worker had to consume to restore his/her labor power (not only material objects such as: food and shelter for him/herself and his/her family; but also cultural objects: radio, movies, sports, etc.).

### **The Product: the Result of the Labor Process**

*The final object created in the labor process is called the **product**.*

The product has use value.

*Any object which corresponds to a definite human necessity (physiological or social) is said to have **use value**.*

However it is necessary to point out that although generally every product has use value, since if it did not there would be no justification in producing it, not everything with use value can be defined as a product. Objects exist which correspond to human needs without having undergone a previous process of transformation. This is the case with air, which corresponds to the need for breathing. It has use value but it is not a product.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.4 The Role of the Means of Labor in the Labor Process

In sum: any labor process is a structure formed by three fundamental elements: labor power, the object of labor and the means of labor, which are linked together in definite relations. Now then, the most significant elements in the labor process are the means of labor in the strict sense. They determine the type of activity which the individuals must carry on for the production of the products, determining in this way the type of relationship which is established between the laborer and the means of production.

Agricultural labor, for example, changes completely when the tractor is introduced. In place of requiring 20 laborers to work the land, with their shovels and hoes, now a single person is enough to drive the tractor and produce the same yield. In this way labor ceases being fundamentally manual. This explains Marx's affirmation:

It is not the articles made, but how they are made, and by what instruments that enable us to distinguish different economic epochs.<sup>4</sup>

Now then, although the means of labor are the determinant elements in the labor process, they do not always occupy a dominant place in the structure of this process. In countries with a low technological level, for example, labor power occupies the dominant place. This is the case in primitive and slave societies and, in general, in the so called "underdeveloped" societies. A different situation exists in advanced capitalism, where the kind of means of production employed – highly developed machinery

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<sup>3</sup>When an object is produced, not for its direct consumption, but for its exchange with another in the market, it is called a *commodity*.

<sup>4</sup>Marx, *Capital*, (International, 1967), volume I, p. 180.

- dominates the entire process subordinating the laborer to its rhythm, converting him/her into an automaton of production.

## 1.5 Labor Process and Production Process

Until this point we have studied the labor process concentrating on the simple and general elements which are part of it, without concern for the concrete historical conditions in which this process develops. To do so we need to present the laborer in relation to other laborers.

Now then, Marxism holds that human beings are not alone and isolated in their struggle to transform nature, that to create the labor process they establish definite relationships among themselves: relations of mutual aid and collaboration, relations of exploitation, or relations of transition between both extremes. These relations which human beings establish among themselves in the labor process are what determine the character which this process assumes in an historically determined society. A great difference exists between labor conducted under the whip of the overseer of slaves and the labor carried out under the watchful eyes of the capitalist.

Marx called these relationships *relations of production* and insisted that every labor process goes on under definite relations of production, that is, that the form in which human beings transform nature is never isolated, but on the contrary, is determined by the type of relations which they establish in the labor process.

We call the **production process** the labor process which goes on under definite relations of production.<sup>5</sup>

This distinction between labor process and production process explains why Marx refused to speak of production in general.

For Marx, production in general did not exist; production is always historically determined.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>This definition will be better understood in studying the chapter on relations of production. In it we will see how the production process tends to reproduce as much its material conditions as its social conditions of production, that is, the relations of production. The distinction between labor process and production process we owe to reading Bettelheim's book: *Economic Calculation and Forms of Property*, (MR, 1975).

<sup>6</sup>"Thus when we speak of production, we always have in mind production at a definite stage of social development. . ." Marx, "Introduction" *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. (International, 1970), p. 189

## 1.6 Division of Labor

In any social production there exists a division of tasks, that is, a division of labor. The greater the complexity of society and the higher its level of development, the greater the differentiation of tasks.

We must distinguish the following different types of division of labor: division of social production, technical division of labor and social division of labor.

*We call the division of social production into different wings, spheres or sectors the **division of social production**.*

Examples: division between agricultural labor and industrial labor; divisions within industrial labor (metallurgy, chemical, textile, etc.); division between industrial and commercial labor, etc.

*We call the division of labor within a process of production itself the **technical division of labor**.*

This technical division of labor is especially developed in modern industry. Each worker or group of workers does a specific job which corresponds to one part of the process. In the automobile industry, for example, different sections exist which compliment each other until in the end a finished car is produced. Here no worker produces a final product. What is converted into a finished product is the common product of all of them. This technical division of tasks within a process of production permits greater efficiency and therefore, a greater expenditure of labor by workers.

Now then, the technical division of labor can lead to the division of social production. This is the case with chemical activity which began as a simple technical division in the process of production of textiles and was later converted into an autonomous wing, into a true chemical industry.

How then do we clearly distinguish between the technical division of labor and the division of social production?

Marx gives us the fundamental elements of an answer in the body of *Capital* when he refers to the division of labor and manufacture.

What characterizes the technical division of labor is that the specialized, isolated laborers do not produce commodities, that is, use values which can be taken to market to be exchanged for others. What each specialized worker produces is only a part of the final product. Only that which is the result of a collective labor constitutes a commodity, that is a use value exchangeable in the market.

This is why chemical activity, which was born as a specialized labor but within the textile industry, should be considered in this case within the technical division of labor. The objects which this activity produces do not go to market, but pass directly into the process of dyeing cloth.

But the same thing does not occur when chemical activity becomes independent of the textile industry and constitutes itself as an autonomous industry. In this case its products go to market and not directly to a definite process of production. In this case the technical division has constituted itself into the division of social production.

Finally we should be clear that the technical division of labor does not refer only to the division of labor within one factory. It is not the same to speak of the division of labor within a production process as it is to speak of the division of labor within the factory itself.

As the development of the productive forces advanced and their social character matured, units of production which had previously constituted part of the division of social production came more and more to depend on each other, in such a way that the relations between them could no longer be left to the hazards of the market which once determined the operations of production. From then on these relations in essence had to be determined beforehand, and therefore, predicted with anticipation and ruled by a plan. When this occurs the future of the products is predetermined in a socially conscious manner, eliminating in this way the role of the market. The units of production, in place of constituting a process of autonomous production, "became cells of the technical division of labor" thus elevated to a higher level.<sup>7</sup>

This happens, for example, when industrial combinations are produced in the socialist countries. Petroleum extractive industries, refineries, and distribution enterprises constitute a single process of production in which the units of production represent only a technical division of labor. Only the final product of this combined process of production reaches the market. In the previous stages there is neither buying or selling, only the transfer of a product from one unit of production to another in accordance with a pre-established plan.

*We call the **social division of labor** that distribution of the different tasks which individuals perform in society (economic, political and ideological tasks) and which are carried out as a function of the place which they occupy in the social structure.*

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<sup>7</sup>Charles Bettelheim, *The Transition to a Socialist Economy*, (Harvester Press 1975).

This social division of labor began historically with the division between manual labor and intellectual labor. Only individuals who came from the dominant classes had access to the latter.

Let us see the way this social division exists in the process of capitalist production. In this process there intervenes, for example, specialized workers, technicians and engineers who perform definite technical functions. Now then, the distribution of individuals from society into these different tasks does not depend on purely technical criteria (better aptitude, greater preparation) but on social criteria. Certain social classes have access to certain tasks, other classes do not.

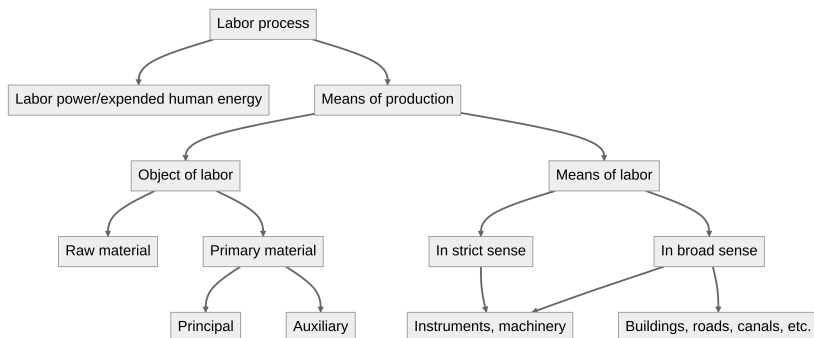
It is the social relations of production, as we will see later on, which determine this social division of labor.

## 1.7 Summary

In this chapter we have defined what is meant by the labor process, the principal elements which form part of it, and the importance of the means of labor in the production process, the difference between the labor process and the production process, and finally, the form in which labor is divided in society.

We have seen the following concepts of the general theory of historical materialism:

- production
- labor power
- raw material
- primary material
- principal primary material
- auxiliary primary material
- means of labor in the strict sense
- means of labor in the broad sense
- means of production
- social division of labor
- division of social production
- technical division of labor



## Questions

1. What is meant by labor?
2. What is the essence of the labor process?
3. Can hunting and fishing be considered as labor processes?
4. What is meant by labor process?
5. What is meant by labor power?
6. What is meant by raw material?
7. Can the copper which is used to make electrical cables be considered as primary material?
8. What is meant by primary material?
9. What is meant by principal primary material?
10. What is meant by auxiliary primary material?
11. In what kind of industry can principal and auxiliary primary material be confused?
12. What is meant by means of labor?
13. Why can we not use the word “instruments” to designate the means of labor?
14. Can we consider a bridge to be a means of labor?
15. Why are the means of labor the determining element in the labor process?
16. What is the precise definition of the concept “means of production”?
17. Can there be labor without means of production?
18. What is the difference between labor process and production process?
19. How should we understand Marx’s statement that “production in general” does not exist?
20. What is meant by division of social production?



21. What is meant by technical division of labor?
22. Can we speak of technical division in the labor of an artisan (for example, of a weaver of shawls, of a carpenter who makes small quantities of furniture)?
23. What is meant by social division of labor?

### Themes for reflection

1. How is the minimum wage of a country calculated?
2. If the capitalist has an interest in making the worker labor for as many hours as possible, how can we explain the fact that in the majority of capitalist countries the work day is eight hours? Why in some socialist countries is it only six hours?
3. What would it mean if the workers were the masters of the means of production?
4. In the Latin American capitalist societies, to whom do the means of production belong?
5. Is the technical division of labor of advantage or disadvantage to the workers?

## 1.8 Bibliography

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# 2

## Production Relations

### 2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter we saw the simple elements which form part of the total labor process; in this chapter we will study the relations of production which are the historical form in which this process is realized. In any production process definite relations are established between the different agents of production.

*All the individuals which in one manner or another participate in the process of production of material goods are called **agents of production**.*

The relations between the agents of production can be grouped into technical relations of production and social relations of production.

First let us examine each of these relations separately before studying them in the inseparable unity in which they exist in manufacturing and large scale industry.

### 2.2 Technical relations of production

To clarify what we mean by technical relations we begin by distinguishing between two types of labor processes: individual and cooperative. The *individual labor process* is realized by a laborer working in isolation, transforming a definite primary material into a definite product. This is the case of the artisan or the small peasant producer. The *cooperative labor process* is realized through the participation of various laborers. We can distinguish two forms of cooperation:

1. *Simple cooperation* in which all the laborers realize the same tasks

or very similar tasks. This form of cooperation occurs in the hunting operations of primitive peoples in which a group of hunters armed with spears attempt to surround an animal. It continues to occur today in technically undeveloped agricultural labor.

2. Complex cooperation which is established on the basis of a technical division of labor. For example in the process of sowing, some laborers make the furrows, some plant the seeds, etc.

The fundamental characteristic of the individual labor process is the existence in it of the unity of the laborer and his means of labor. The quality and the output of the labor of the artisan depends on the personal ability with which he/she handles the instruments of labor. He/she controls or exercises absolute domination over the entire labor process, deciding when, how and where he/she ought to work.

The *cooperative labor process* is fundamentally characterized by the existence of common social labor, which if it is carried out on a sufficiently wide scale requires a directing force to put the different individual activities into harmony with each other. This directing force must fulfill the general functions which arise from the difference between the general motion of the production process and the individual movements of those who form part of this process.

Marx said in this respect:

In all forms of labor in which many individuals cooperate, the cohesion and unity of the process is personified necessarily in a volition to command and in functions which do not effect the partial labors but only the total activity of the workshop, as occurs with an orchestra director<sup>1</sup>.

In the case of a capitalist industry – a shoe factory for example – not all the workers carry out the same tasks within the production process. Some work directly on the transformation of the primary material, that is leather, in our example, to convert it into a final product, a pair of shoes ready for sale. However, in order that these direct laborers, specialists in only one part of the process of production, be able to effect a coordination of labor, the participation of other persons capable of controlling and directing the process of production, either partially or totally, is required.

Both types of labor are necessary to set the means of production into action.

Any process based on large scale cooperation, implies, therefore that

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<sup>1</sup>Harnecker cites this to the Spanish edition of Vol. 3 of Capital, pg. 367. Being unable to locate it in the English edition we have done our own translation.

the individual laborers lose control or domination of the labor process. Thus a separation is produced between the individual laborer and the totality of the labor process. This process is no longer set into motion by the individual laborer, but by the collective laborer which requires as one of its elements a group of laborers which carries out the functions of direction and control of the labor process. Together with the function of direct transformation of the primary material arises the function of direction and control of the total labor process<sup>2</sup>.

***Direct laborers** are the agents of production who are in direct contact with the primary materials, and **indirect laborers** are those who have a function of organization, vigilance, and control, at distinct levels of the labor process.*

Up to this point we have spoken of the common character of all forms of cooperation: *the existence of a collective laborer out of which arises definite functions of direction, and control of the labor process.*

Now let us look at some of the different characteristics which depend on the different types of relations which are established among the elements of the production process.

A cooperative process of production can exist which implies a *unity between the laborer and the means of labor*. That is, in which the laborer in the collective form implies a control or domination on the part of the individual laborer over the instrument of labor. In this case there is a *separation* of the individual laborer with respect to setting into motion the labor process, which now is in the hands of the collective laborer, but a *union of this laborer with the means of labor*, his personal ability being considered.

Another type of cooperative production process can exist in which the individual laborer has lost not only domination over the setting into motion of the labor process, but also over the means of labor, as occurs in large scale industry, where the laborer becomes one more piece of machinery.

Under these conditions a new unity is constituted, which replaces the unity of the laborer with the means of labor already examined, *the unity of the means of labor with the object of labor*. It is the machinery which transforms the primary materials, the laborer becomes its slave. This object-machinery unity constitutes, according to Marx, "a material

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<sup>2</sup>We treat here distinct functions, which, in definite historical forms of production, are personified in agents which are separated from the collective laborer and impose their authority over it – but which can be given, in other historical epochs, as a simple differentiation within the collective laborer.

skeleton independent of the workers” and becomes a faithful element of a labor process ready to receive whatever worker comes along. In this way a total separation is produced between the individual laborer and the means of production. The need for the collective laborer becomes a technical necessity. The collective laborer is transformed into a *socialized laborer*.

On the basis of what we have seen we can affirm that the type of relationship which is established between the individual laborer and the means of labor depends fundamentally on the characteristics of these means of labor. Hence Marx insisted on *the decisive role which the means of labor play* in the concrete historical forms which the labor process takes.

In summary, in any production process there is established a definite type of relationship between the agents and the means of production, a relationship in which they are linked by the technical characteristics of the labor process: technical division of labor, type of cooperation, technical characteristics of the means of labor, etc. These relationships are characterized by the type of control or domination which the agents of production can exercise over the means of labor and the labor process.

*Technical relations of production are the forms of control or domination which the agents of production exercise over the means of labor in particular and the labor process in general.*<sup>3</sup>

## 2.3 Social Relations of Production

Up to now we have seen the technical forms in which the production of material goods is carried on. The direct laborer and the indirect laborer are agents of production which expend their labor power in technically

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<sup>3</sup>This relation between the agents of production and the means of production was not made explicitly by Marx, Engels and Lenin. Nonetheless an attentive study of Capital and the manuscript *Precapitalist Economic Formations* by Marx shows that he was preoccupied by the problem of the relation of the laborer with the means of production, utilizing diverse terms to name it: “effective possession”, “real appropriation”, “effective appropriation”, “control”, etc.

It is to E. Balibar who, in *Reading Capital* studied these relations, naming them “relations of real appropriation”, opposing them to relations of ownership, that we owe many of the ideas expressed here. We have preferred to call them technical relations of production because they are established within the production process as a result of precise technical conditions: the degree of technical division of labor, the type of technology employed, etc.

On the other hand, it appears that by naming them in this manner we are establishing a clear line of demarcation between them and social relations of production.

different tasks, which depend on the *technical* division of labor within the productive process.

But this *technical* process of production never exists in isolation from the *social conditions* which make them possible. All social production is historically determined.

In a concrete society it is possible to observe, in general, that there exist individuals who are owners of the means of production and individuals who must work for the others: *the laborers*.

The *laborers or direct producers* are immediate agents of production, in short, those who expend their labor power inside the production process itself. From the technical point of view they are divided, as we have seen, into direct and indirect laborers.

In the societies in which the private ownership of the means of production exist, the *owners of the means of production* play a role in the general process of production, without necessarily figuring as direct producers, since being masters of the means of production makes the process possible. Since means of production are the indispensable material conditions for production, and since it is impossible to produce without them, persons who do not possess these means, or possess too small an amount of them, end up working for those who own the fundamental means of production.

### The Agents of Production

If we call *agents of production* all those who participate in one way or another in the process of production of material goods, we can then classify these agents from two points of view:

1. From the *technical point of view*: direct laborers and indirect laborers.
2. From the *social point of view*: workers, who do not own the means of production, and owners of the means of production.

It is important to indicate that this is a matter of two points of view for the study of the same agents of production, and not of the technical or social tasks to be completed by different agents.

Each agent of production is thus doubly determined. The agent is determined as much by his/her technical function as by his/her social function. If we take the capitalist system as an example we see that: the worker is, from a technical point of view, a direct laborer, and from the social point of view, a laborer without the means of production. The capitalist in turn is, from the point of view of his/her social function, the owner of the means of production, and from the technical point of

view, can play the role of an indirect laborer (administrator), as occurs in small industries where the owner and family work, or he/she can play no role in the process of production itself, being in this case a non-laborer. On the other hand the supervisor can also be considered from these two points of view. From the technical point of view, he/she is an indirect laborer and, from the social point of view, he/she is a non-owner, who, nevertheless, as we will see later on, fulfills within industry the social function of the capitalist.

It is important to know that if each agent of production is doubly determined by the technical and social functions he/she fulfills in the process of production, the latter function has the dominant role. The technical function of vigilance, control and direction of any total production process has, for example, a very different character when it is subordinated to capitalist relations of production, than when it is subordinated to socialist relations of production.

### **Right of Ownership, Real Ownership and Effective Possession**

Up to this point we have spoken of property but we have not said what we understood by it. Let us now begin to define this concept, starting by defining what we mean by right of ownership.

*Right of ownership* is the right which one who possesses goods has to use, to enjoy and to dispose of them. Let us explain each of these terms:

- *The right to use*, that is, to make use of goods which one possesses in accord with their natural characteristics. For example: to use land is to cultivate it; to use a vehicle is to drive it.
- *The right to enjoy*, that is, the enjoyment of the fruits which these goods produce. For example, to enjoy the fruits obtained from the cultivation of the land. The right to use and enjoy these goods is called usufruct in law.
- *The right to dispose of*, that is, to assign goods one possesses to definite ends or to delegate this right to third persons.

This right of ownership can arise from a simple collective consent motivated by political or ideological reasons, or can take on finished juridical forms. Moreover its content varies according to the different historical epochs. The content of the right of ownership characteristic of modern western society cannot be applied therefore, in a mechanical way, to any other type of society. The concept of private property characteristic of the capitalist system of production cannot be applied to feudal society.

In the feudal system distinct grades of private property existed: “em-



inent but not effective ownership by the most powerful persons" in the feudal hierarchy 'over immense terrain; direct but not absolute ownership, since it was linked to obligations and services to the small and middle sized lords. This hierarchy of rights to the land was imposed on the base of feudal society, that is to say, on the exploited peasants."

It is important to distinguish between a *right of a juridical character* and the *real power* to use, enjoy and dispose of goods.

Let us see how this statement is applied to the problem of the ownership of the means of production. We distinguish between the *right of private ownership* of the means of production, and the *real ownership* of them. When the right of ownership is transformed into a *real power* to use, enjoy and dispose of the means of production, and consequently of the products resulting from the process of production, we say that there exists *real ownership*.

In order that this real ownership exist it is necessary that whosoever holds this power be able to set into motion the process of production. Therefore, in this case, a definite type of control over the means of production must be combined with a definite type of dominion or control over the labor process. Juridical ownership necessitates, consequently, a definite technical base, that is, a definite structure of the labor process, in order that it be transformed into real ownership.

We can see here *how the technical relations and the social relations of production interpenetrate in an inseparable manner; how the technical relations serve to support the social relations, which in turn act on them giving them their specific historical character.*

**Effective possession** is the capacity which the owners of the means of production have to put-them into motion.

In summary, there exists **real ownership** of the means of production when effective possession of these means and the power to dispose of them and the products they produce are united in the same hands.

$$\begin{aligned}
 & \text{real ownership (of MoP)} \\
 & = \\
 & \text{power of disposition (of MoP and the product thereof)} \\
 & + \\
 & \underbrace{\text{possession and dominion (of MoP)}}_{\text{effective possession}}
 \end{aligned}$$

When the juridical owners of the means of production have real ownership of them, the direct producers are totally separated from these means of production: they are non-owners who have lost all dominion over the means with which they work and over the total labor process<sup>4</sup>.

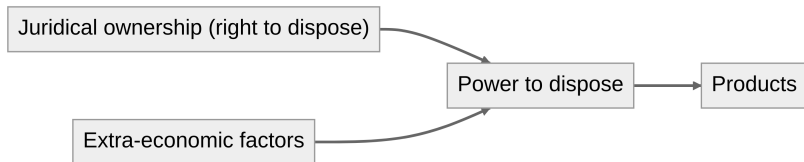
It is this relationship of ownership/non-ownership which the agents establish with the means of production which explains the relationship of exploitation which is established between them. The relationship of the agents to the means of production therefore determines the relationship of the agents to each other.

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<sup>4</sup>It can happen that real ownership and juridical ownership are not in the same hands. This would be the case of an agrarian program which would naturalize the land, that is, transform it into state property, while delegating the right to dispose of it to the communes or regional centers. The state would have juridical ownership, the commune real ownership. Another case of separation of juridical ownership and real ownership is that of a supervisor in an enterprise. The capitalist continues to be the owner from the juridical point of view, but it is the supervisor who now disposes of the means of production and their products. There not only exists cases of non-correspondence between juridical ownership and real ownership, but there can exist other forms of combination of the elements of property rights.

There are cases in which juridical ownership is separated from effective possession, that is, the right to dispose of the means of production and the products of labor which are in the hands of third persons. This is the case of the servile production regime where the landowner has juridical ownership of the land and the direct producer. The servant, to whom the master has conceded a piece of land, has effective possession of it, since with his own means of production he makes it produce.

The landowner has here a juridical right which is in contradiction with the effective possession which the peasant direct producers have. When this non-correspondence exists between juridical ownership relations and effective possession, the right to dispose only of the products is transformed into a *power* mediating the intervention of extra-economic factors (politics and ideology). The servant, who could live off his own production, goes to work the land of the master only under the whip of the overseer. Something very different occurs under capitalism, where the capitalist not only has juridical ownership but also real ownership of the process of production. To the laborer there is only one alternative: either die of hunger or offer his/her labor power to the capitalist.



Another interesting case is the joint stock company. In this case there exists many owners in the juridical sense of the term, but generally only a very small group of them have real ownership of the means of production.

## **The Concept of Social Relations of Production**

As a result of what we have said above, we can define the social relations of production in the following manner:

*We call **social relations of production** those relationships which are established between the owners of the means of production and the direct producers in a definite process of production, relationships which depend on the type of ownership relation, possession, dispossession or usufruct which they establish with the means of production.*

We can distinguish two fundamental types of social relations of production which depend on two forms of ownership of the means of production.

- a. *Relation of exploiter-exploited.* It exists when the owners of the means of production live off the labor of the direct producers. The principal relations of exploitation are the following: *the relations of slavery*, in which the master is not only owner of the means of production but is owner also of the labor power (the slave); *the relations of servitude*, in which the master is the owner of the land, and the servant depends on him and must work gratuitously for him a certain number of days of the year; and finally, *capitalist relations*, in which the capitalist is the owner of the means of production and the worker must sell his labor power in order to live.
- b. *Relations of Reciprocal Collaboration.* These relations are established when there exists a social ownership of the means of production and when no sector of society lives off the exploitation of another sector. For example, the relations which are established between members of primitive communities or the relations of collaboration which, according to Marx, characterize the communist mode of production.

## **2.4 The Relations of Production in Manufacturing and Large Scale Industry**

In this section we will study how the technical and social relations of production form an inseparable unity in definite processes of concrete production such as manufacturing and large scale industry.

### **Manufacturing**

*Capitalist manufacturing* was born when a capitalist, an owner of means of production (instruments of labor, a building, etc.) brought together a

relatively large number of workers who labored at the same time, in the same place and under the command of the same capitalist.

Marx said that the conditions necessary for this occurrence are fundamentally two: a certain quantity of money accumulated by a sector of the population: the capitalists, and the presence of a free laborer dispossessed of all means of production, who, in order to subsist, has to sell his labor power to the capitalist who possesses those means.

In manufacturing, labor primarily takes the form of simple cooperation. Each laborer carries on the same operation with the sole difference that now he/she labors in common with other laborers. Because of this Marx says that the difference between the artisan's workshop and manufacturing is, in the beginning, purely quantitative. The essential characteristic of both processes of labor is *the unity which exists between the laborer and the means of labor*.

Manufacturing which began as nothing more than simple cooperation, but subject to the capitalist as owner of the means of production, evolved rapidly, impelled by the desire to augment capitalist profits, into new forms of cooperation, each time more complex. Thus was born the technical division of labor within manufacturing. Laborers became specialized among various tasks in accordance with their aptitude. These tasks took on each time a more partial, more limited character.

The technical character of labor in manufacturing, therefore, has two fundamental characteristics: it is primarily *manual labor* which depends in great measure on the force, ability, safety and speed of the form in which the worker manages his tools of labor. In the second place it is *detail labor*, that is to say, labor in which each worker is specialized in a very specific task and only the sum of all these labors comes to constitute the total object. This has positive effects since it implies an increase in labor efficiency: with the same effort, in the same time, more products are produced. But it also has negative effects: the laborer is reduced to only one set of motions such that his/her body becomes deformed in order to better respond to the highly specialized manual activity which he/she must carry on.

The simple elements of manufacturing are, therefore, the *detail laborer* and the *instrument of labor*. These simple elements are combined in a *specific mechanism* which is the *collective laborer* formed by the conjunction of *detail laborers*.

The existence of this collective labor, in which each laborer fulfills highly specialized tasks, makes necessary the existence of a directing force

to harmonize the distinct individual activities and execute the general functions necessary for the setting into motion of the total production process.

This function of control, vigilance, and direction is converted into a *function of capital* as soon as the labor subject to it assumes the form of collective labor.

This function which was born as one of the many tasks of the collective laborer is separated from it and is transformed into a function which dominates it and crushes it. The collective laborer thus loses all domination over the labor process.

The important thing is to study the form in which this function, by itself of a technical character, is overdetermined by the social function which capital plays.

Since the capitalist process of production has as its fundamental goal to increase surplus value (unpaid labor), the directing role that the capitalist (or one of his/her representatives) performs in the production process is not limited solely to the fulfillment of technical tasks, but at the same time, these same technical tasks of control, vigilance, and direction are overdetermined by the necessity of extracting the maximum of surplus value. The indirect laborers are transformed into enforcers within the production process, they demand from the workers the maximum output, thus increasing beyond the technical necessities, the burdens of vigilance and control to prevent the workers from obtaining the return on their labor, etc.

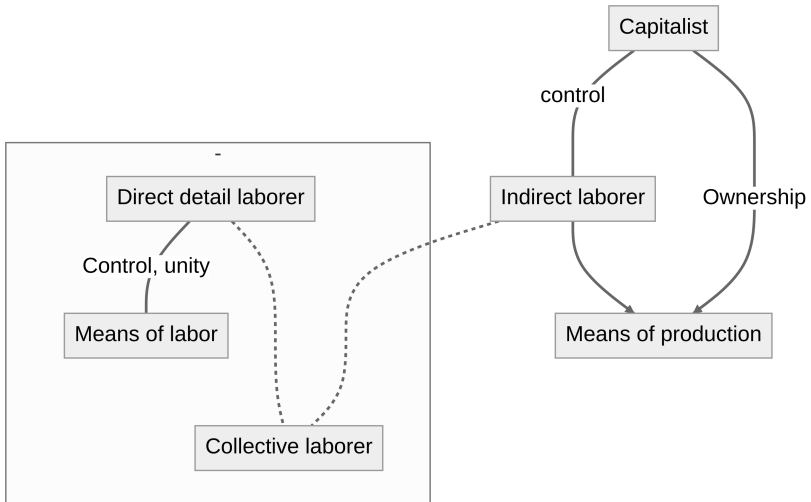
Let us see what Marx said on this problem:

If then, the control of the capitalist is in substance two fold by reason of the two fold nature of the process of production itself, which, on the one hand, is a social process for producing use values, on the other, a process for creating surplus value in form that control is despotic. As cooperation extends in scale, this despotism takes forms peculiar to itself. Just as at first the capitalist is relieved from actual labor as soon as his capital has reached that minimum amount with which capitalist production, as such, begins, so now, he hands over the work of direct and constant supervision of the individual workmen, and groups of workmen, to a special kind of wage laborer. An industrial army of workmen, under the command of a capitalist, requires, like a real army, officers (managers) and sergeants (foremen, overlookers), who, while the work

is being done, command in the name of the capitalist. The work of supervision becomes their established and exclusive function. . . It is not because he is a leader of industry that a man is a capitalist; on the contrary, he is a leader of industry because he is a capitalist. The leadership of industry is an attribute of capital, just as in feudal times the functions of general and judge were attributes of landed property<sup>5</sup>.

Therefore, we have in manufacturing a definite combination of technical and social relations which is the following: the capitalist is at the same time the owner and the one who controls (personally or through his/her representative) the process of production in its totality. The laborer is not the owner of the means of production but he/she still controls the management of the means with which he/she works. Remember that the characteristic of manufacturing is the unity which exists between the laborer and the means of labor. There still does not exist the total domination of all the elements of the production process on the part of the capitalist.

Diagram #2: Manufacturing



In the stage of manufacturing the juridical ownership of the capitalist of the means of production still does not correspond to a full real ownership of them. Labor, still depending on the skill of the worker, is not totally subordinated to capital. The Capitalist, many times, must

<sup>5</sup>Marx. *Capital*, Vol. 1, pp. 331-32.

give way before the pressure of the laborers in order to not lose a skilled laborer, who has succeeded in increasing his output thanks to his/her long experience in specialized manual labor.

Now then, in a definite moment in the development of the capitalist mode of production, the technical base of manufacturing: *the unity of the detail laborer and the instrument of labor*, which implies that the output of the labor is limited by the physical capacity of the laborer, comes into contradiction with the necessity of capitalist accumulation. In this manner manual labor is replaced by mechanized labor realized by means of the machine.

### Large Scale Industry

*Large scale capitalist industry* is different from manufacturing. The difference is the function which the means of labor has acquired within it. The revolution in which the means of labor lead to a revolution in the general process of production is the so-called *industrial revolution*,

Of what did this revolution consist? In the introduction of machine-tools in the production process. These machines integrated into a technical unity the apparatuses and tools with which the manual worker labored in manufacturing. They ceased being implements in the hand of laborers and became "implements of a mechanism or mechanical implements."<sup>6</sup>

Marx defines the mechanical implement or machine-tool as "a mechanism that, after being set in motion, performs with its tools the same operations that were formerly done by the workman with similar tools. . . From the moment that the tool proper is taken from man, and fitted into a mechanism a machine takes the place of a mere implement."<sup>7</sup>

The machine-tool thus made it possible to overcome the organic barrier which had arisen between the laborer and the means of labor in manufacturing and to increase production considerably as a result.

This completely transformed the relationship between the laborer and the means of production. The setting into motion of the means of labor in manufacturing no longer depended on the personal aptitude of the laborer. The organization of production becomes completely independent of the characteristics of the power of human labor.

A complete separation is established between the laborer and the means of labor. At the same time a unity is established between the means of labor and the object of labor.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid, p. 373.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

The process of production can no longer be defined as the coming together of a certain number of workers, but as a conjunction of machines ready to receive whatever worker comes along.

Capital, which began by seizing upon the labor process in the technical conditions given by historical development, and subject to the laws of capitalist accumulation, revolutionized totally the labor process. Until that moment, said Marx, there had only been a formal subjugation of labor to capital. Now, with the introduction of the machine-tool, there existed a real subjugation.

Collective labor becomes here a technical necessity and is converted, according to Marx, into “*socialized labor*”. It now becomes harder and harder to distinguish the role played by each individual laborer in the production of the final product<sup>8</sup>.

The character each time more socialised, of the structure of the labor process (and the relations within it) comes into contradiction with the private character of the real ownership of the means of production, that is, it comes into contradiction with the relations of production.

We have, therefore, in large scale industry, the following combination of the technical and social relations of production: the capitalist is at the same time the owner of and the one who controls and directs (personally or through his/her representative) the total production process. The individual laborer, on the other hand, finds him/herself totally *separated* from the means of production: he/she is neither its owner nor has any control over them, and as a result finds him/herself totally subordinate to capital, socially and technically.

This coincidence of social and technical relations of production, of relations of ownership and real appropriation, to use Marx’s terminology,

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<sup>8</sup>As the revolution which produces machinery is introduced into one sector of production, it requires the analogous transformation of the other sectors of production (the spinning machine implied the necessity of the imposition of a weaving machine and both lead to the mechanical-chemical revolution in printing, dyeing, bleaching, etc.), with the result that the finished product is each time less the product of the laborers who carry on the last stage of its production.

The product of the last laborer is the aggregate of the labors already completed of many other laborers in other sectors of production.

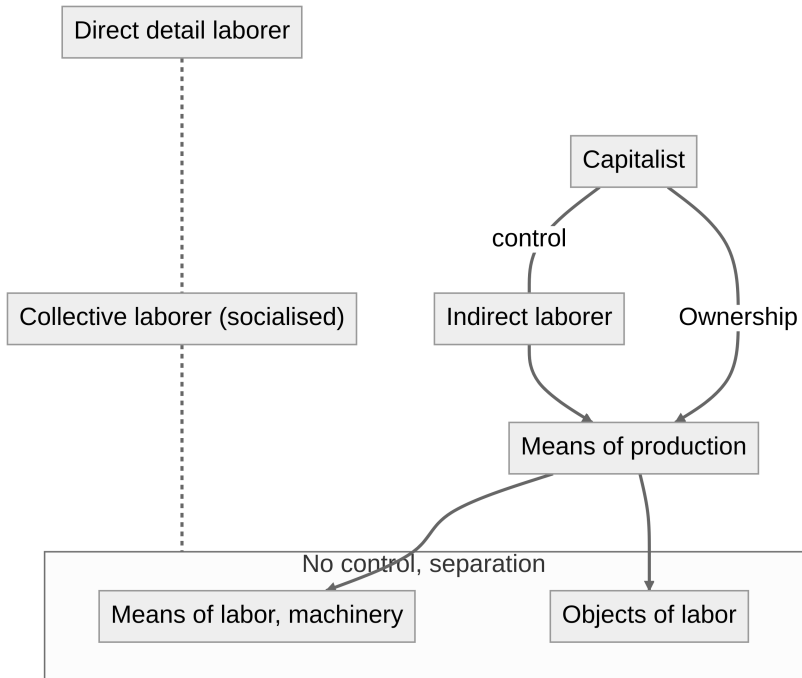
The structure of the labor process of the capitalist mode of production has, consequently, a contradictory character: the separation of the laborer from the means of production and the subjugation of the individual laborer to the private ownership of the means of production is contradicted by the increasingly socialized character which the collective laborer acquires, on the one hand, and by the growing dependency of the distinct processes of labor within society on each other. We will develop this point further in the next chapter.



which transforms the juridical ownership of the capitalist into a real ownership and totally separates the laborer from the means of production, is what makes the character of the process of capitalist development in this stage totally irreversible.

It is no longer possible as it was in the stage of manufacturing for the manual laborer and the worker to leave the factory and return in one way or another to the old artisanal production. This has occurred with some agrarian reforms in which the process of collectivisation of the land has not been accompanied by the creation of a corresponding technological base. The methods and techniques of individual labor is still maintained, only now they are carried on within the terrain of collective ownership. Any political retreat can lead, in this case, to a turning backward in agricultural production toward independent small ownership.

Diagram #3: Large scale industry



After having analysed the form of the union of technical and social relations of production within capitalist manufacturing and large scale industry, we can better understand in what way the social relations of

production play a dominant role in this process, provoking a change in the technical structure of the process.

It is the desire to increase its wealth which drives capital to seek new formulas to augment the amount of surplus value. Since it cannot increase the length of the work day, which has a physiological limit and a political limit imposed by the struggles of the working class, it becomes necessary to succeed in diminishing the part of the work day dedicated to pay for the labor power of the worker, thus increasing the unpaid part or the work day which the capitalist appropriates for him/herself.

For this to happen capital must seek forms of increased productivity of labor by increasing its intensity (the Taylor system, etc.[^izzy]) and replacing manual labor with machine labor.

The technical relations of large scale industry have originated in and been overdetermined by the capitalist social relations of production.

Therefore, independent technical relations do not exist, only a definite form of their subordination to social relations of production. Consequently, if these relations change, the form in which they structure the labor process, that is the technical relations of production, must change also. This will be the case of the transition to socialism, where new social relations of production will begin to be imposed, which by their effects, must begin to modify the structure of the labor process in such a way as to permit the real appropriation on the part of the laborers of the process of production, definitely eliminating the separation which capitalism establishes between the worker and the means of production.

## 2.5 Relations of production. Reproduction of production relations.

We have demonstrated above that there exists two types of production relations:

- *Technical relations of production* or “relations of human beings with nature”
- *Social relations of production* or “human relations with each other through the means of production”.

We then saw how these relations form an inseparable unity. Therefore we can conclude:

***Relations of production are formed by the technical and social relations of production.***

Up to this point we have analysed production relations from a static

or structural point of view. Now we must refer to them considered as a process, that is from a dynamic point of view.

Any production process does not produce only material products, but it also produces and reproduces its social conditions of production, that is, it constantly reproduces the production relations within which the capitalist production process operates. Thus, at the same time that it produces commodities it reproduces capitalist production relations: capital and wage labor.

In this reproduction of capitalist relations superstructural factors intervene. For example, the juridical forms of private ownership and the labor contract, and the presence of an army ready to move into action when the capitalist system is endangered, are superstructural elements necessary for the reproduction of the capitalist system. Superstructural factors are even more necessary to reproduce production relations where there is no correspondence between juridical ownership and effective possession of the means of production.

The specific type of relationship which is established between the owners of the means of production and the direct producers, depends on the type of intervention of the superstructural elements.

As we have just seen, superstructural elements do not intervene in the same manner when capitalist relations of production exist as when relations of production typical of slavery exist.

## **2.6 Social relations of production are not simply human relations.**

Social relations of production cannot be considered solely as human relations, relations between human beings. They are relations between agents of production, that is, between human beings who have a definite function in the production of material goods, which depends on the form through which they relate to the means of production: *between owners of the means of production and the direct producers*. This relation between human beings passes, therefore, through a relation with objects: the means of production.

This point is of great importance, since it destroys all the utopian ideas about “collaboration between workers and bosses”. The relations between workers and bosses cannot be “fraternal” as long as their relations with the means of production remain unchanged.

Besides, it is important to understand that these social relations of

production are established independently of human will. The capitalist exploits and will exploit the worker, even if he does not propose to do so consciously, even if he struggles against this exploitation, since the objective laws of the capitalist system are inflexible: either the exploitation of the workers or the death of the industrialist, there is no other alternative.

When Marxism affirms that it is necessary to destroy capitalist relations of production, that it is necessary to “kill the industrialist”, it is not affirming that the capitalists must be destroyed physically. It means something very different: what must disappear is the function of the capitalist, the function of the exploitation of the laborer typical of the capitalist system of production, and this is only possible if capitalist relations of production are destroyed and replaced by other relations, socialist relations of production.

## **2.7 Summary**

In this chapter we have studied the production relations. We have now distinguished technical and social relations of production. We have seen how they form an inseparable unity, taking as examples manufacturing and large scale industry. We have seen how the production process reproduces these relations. Finally, we have seen they cannot be considered simply as human relations, since they are established independently of human will.

In this chapter we have used the following concepts of the general theory of historical materialism:

- technical relations of production
- direct laborers
- indirect laborers
- social agents of production
- ownership rights
- real ownership and effective possession
- social relations of production.

## **Questions**

1. What is meant by simple cooperation?
2. What is meant by complex cooperation?
3. What is meant by direct laborer?
4. What examples exist of direct laborers who totally control the

means of production?

5. What is meant by indirect laborer?
6. What is meant by technical relations of production?
7. What is meant by agents of production?
8. Why can a person who does not work in the production process be considered nevertheless an agent of production?
9. What is meant by technical agent of production?
10. What is meant by social agent of production?
11. What is meant by social relations of production?
12. What is meant by right of ownership?
13. What is meant by real ownership?
14. What is meant by effective possession?
15. What is the technical unity which characterizes manufacturing?
16. What is the technical unity which characterizes large scale industry?
17. What is meant by collective labor?
18. How is the function of direction in the capitalist process of production characterized?
19. How could you demonstrate that in capitalism the means of labor is the most significant element in the labor process?
20. Why, if the social relations of production are relations between individuals, can they not be considered simply as human relations?

### Themes for reflection

1. Why is the distinction between direct and indirect laborers important?
2. Is it possible for the workers themselves to control the production process?
3. What is the role that machinery should play in a socialist system?
4. Is it enough that the right of capitalist ownership of the means of production be suppressed for the workers to achieve effective possession?
5. Why is it important to insist that social relations of production are not human relations?

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# 3

## Productive Forces

### 3.1 The Productive Forces

In the previous chapters, we have studied the elements of the labor process, and we have seen that the means of labor are the determinant elements of this process, those which determine the form that production takes and, therefore, the kind of technical relations which can be established between the workers and the means of production. We have seen, moreover, how these technical relations are over-determined by the social relations of production. And all this has helped us to understand one of the basic concepts of Marxism, the concept of *relations of production*.

Marx tells us in the preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*:

In the social production of their existence, men invariably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material *forces of production*... At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production. (Progress Publishers, 1970, pp. 20-1)

What do we mean, then, by productive forces?

The productive forces are apparently no more than the elements of the labor process considered from the point of view of their productive

potential, especially power<sup>1</sup> and the means of labor<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, to understand the productive forces as such, it is not possible to examine the elements of the labor process in isolation. When Marx studies manufacture, for example, he shows us how the technical division of labor and the forms of collective labor established therein not only augment the individual productive forces but also produce new productive forces which are not limited to being a simple sum of the forces combined there.

The simple fact that the workers work in a common place, although only under simple forms of cooperation, augments the productivity of labor power by developing the spirit of competition among the different workers. Later, when forms of complex cooperation are established, the specialization of the workers into different tasks and the coordination of these tasks into a single collective worker produces a notable increase in the productive forces of most groups of workers. The difference between the sum of the individual productive forces and the productive force of the collective worker is greater and greater. Thus is born a *new* productive force which, under capitalist conditions of production, becomes the property of the capitalist without his having to pay the slightest amount of money for it.

From what has been said above, we can understand why we maintain that to understand the real productive forces we cannot consider the elements isolated from one another.

The decisive factor in lending the potential productive elements a real productivity is the labor power of man. He is the only one who can put the means of production into action. Without human labor, the means of production have only a potentially productive character. For this reason, Marx, in considering the development of the productive forces, conceives of the way in which the productivity of human labor is increased in terms of the utilization of this or that means of production.

From the above, we conclude that it is necessary to distinguish between *potential productive forces*, which would be the elements of the labor

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<sup>1</sup>In this process (of labor), man as a natural power confronts the material of nature. [Man] puts into action the *natural forces* which form his body-being, his arms and legs, head and hands, in order to in this way assimilate, in a way useful for his existence, the materials that nature offers him. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I (italics by Marta Harnecker). In a letter of Annenkov, Marx speaks of "productive faculties of man" (December 28, 1846).

<sup>2</sup>In the chapter about large industry, Marx speaks of the productivity of the machine and says that it can be measured comparative to the productivity of the human labor force.



process seen as isolated from one another, and productive forces as such, which arise from a historically given combination of these elements.

We believe that it is in this sense that the following text of Marx can be interpreted:

Whatever the social forms of production, laborers and the means of production always remain factors of it. But in a state of separation from each other either of these *factors* can be such only *potentially*. For production to go on they must unite. *The specific manner in which this union is accomplished distinguishes the different economic epochs of the structure of society from one another*<sup>3</sup>.

These different combinations produce different productive results, which can be measured by the level of productivity of labor<sup>4</sup>.

The productive forces of a society grow, develop, and are perfected in the course of history. And this development is determined, fundamentally, by the level of development of the means of labor.

The advance from stone implements to iron ones permits for example, an important increase in the productivity of labor of primitive peoples, thus increasing the development of the productive forces.

The same thing happens with the introduction of machine tools in capitalist production. From that moment the development of the productive forces grows at a dizzying pace.

It is important to point out that the rhythm and character of this development of the productive forces depends directly on the nature of the relations of production under which the labor process develops.

It is the capitalist form of accumulation in the pre-monopoly stage which produces the massive integration of machine tools in the production process, thus giving a great impulse to the development of the productive forces in this mode of production.

Nevertheless, the same process of accumulation is what, later, in the monopoly stage, tends to brake the development of the productive forces, as we shall see later.

The development of the productive forces is, therefore, neither linear nor cumulative; it is a development which depends on the structure of the production process: on the relations of the agents among themselves and of the agents to the means of production, that is, on the relations of

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<sup>3</sup>Marx, Capital, Vol. II, pp. 36-7 (Marta Harnecker's italics).

<sup>4</sup>That is to say, the number of products that can be produced in a determined amount of time.

production.

How then are the affirmations of Marx as to the determinant character of the relationship which the productive forces have over the relations of production to be understood? By saying that it is these latter relations which determine the rhythm and form of the development of the productive forces are we not denying what Marx asserted?

We think not. We think that when Marx, Engels, and Lenin use the words base, root, conditions sine qua non, support etc., to explain the relation that exists between the productive forces and the relations of production, what they are doing is pointing out the determinant role which the development of the means of labor has in the creation of certain material conditions which make possible the establishment of determined relations of production.

Thus, we understand better and better the Marx text which affirms that the instruments of labor indicate on the one hand the level of development of man's labor power, and on the other the social conditions in which he works.

*They [the instruments] indicate the level of development of man's labor power* because the productivity of his labor depends fundamentally on the means of labor which he utilizes. The level of labor productivity carried out with a tractor cannot be compared to the labor realized by a cart drawn by oxen.

*They* indicate the social conditions of labor because the technical characteristics of the instruments of labor determine the specific structure of the labor process, on which specific relations of production are based. We have already seen, in the previous chapter, how the introduction of machine tools produces a very important change in the structure of the labor process which is characterized, on the one hand by the conversion of the labor process into a highly socialized one in which collective labor fulfills a technical need and, on the other hand, by the conversion of the worker into an individual absolutely separate from the means of production, since in addition to not owning the latter, he has lost all dominion over them. This technical relation serves as a support for the capitalist social relations of production.

Both relations as we shall see further on, will come into contradiction with the nature of the productive forces, that is, with the increasingly more socialized structure of the labor process within the whole of production and with the increasingly greater interdependence of the different sectors of production.

Before studying what is meant by the increasingly social character of the productive forces whereby we shall be able to better develop what is meant by the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, let us define some concepts.

**Potential productive forces** are the elements of the labor process, when considered apart from it, from the point of view of their productive potential. Productive forces proper are the *forces* which result from the combination of the elements of the labor process under specific relations of production. The result is a given productivity of labor<sup>5</sup>.

*The level of development of the productive forces is measured by the level of productivity of labor.*

## 3.2 The Socialization of the Productive Forces

As we have already seen, the productive forces are, except exceptions, constantly developing. This process of development itself, beginning with individual production, into a process of more and more social.

The production of an artisan which is an individual production process is surpassed by industrial production in which the production process has a social character. The means of production can only be set in motion by a group of workers and, hence, none of them can say that the product of his specialized labor is *his product*. Production is transformed from a series of individual acts into a series of social acts, and the products from individual to social products.

The ever more social character of the productive forces cannot be reduced to the socialization of the labor process within the factory as some Marxist texts seem to suggest.

The socialization of the productive forces overflows the boundary of

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<sup>5</sup>We must not confuse the *forces of production* with the *character* or *nature* of *these forces*. For example, a determined force may have a mechanical or human character depending on where its impetus comes from or it could be from a mixture of the two. Nevertheless, as the forces of production are whichever ones arise from the combination of the elements of the labor process in a determined production process, it is the specific type of combination that determines the nature or character of a force of production. This could be individual in the case of artisan production or social in the case of a cooperative system. But the social character lends specific characteristics to manufacturing and to large industry: a workers collective formed by parcel (packing) workers in manufacturing and the collective socialized worker in large industry. What's more, the social character extends to the interrelationship between diverse sectors of production, as we will see in the following point. It is this *character*, which the forces of production take in each concrete production process, that enters into contradiction with the character of the production relations.

the factory. It depends principally on two factors:

- a. The evermore social origin of the means of production, and
- b. the ever more social destination of the product.

### **The Ever More Social Origin of the Means of Production<sup>6</sup>**

The ever more social origin of the means of production is understood to express the fact that those means of production come from an ever greater number of branches of economic production. Thus, primitive agriculture, for example, is self-sufficient, that is, the number of means of production of non-agricultural origin that it uses is very limited. But agriculture progressively requires for its own production means of production whose origin is more and more diverse: more complex tools, disinfectants, electrical energy, electrical equipment etc. The same happens in each branch of industry, whether it extracts raw materials or manufactures secondary products.

The growing socialization of the productive forces, therefore, manifests itself in the fact that each branch of production needs means of production whose origins are increasingly diverse. This process is the counterpart of the greater division of labor and the growing specialization of economic activity.

### **The Ever More Social Destination of the Product<sup>7</sup>**

The ever more social destination of the product is understood to express the fact that the products which are the result of a production are destined generally, either directly or indirectly, for a growing number of users.

This phenomenon has diverse implications, especially the following:

1. Each branch of production works directly or indirectly for a growing number of other branches. This is merely the other side of the growing division of social labor, Thus, for example, the chemical industry, which when it appears for the first time as a distinct sector of production only works for a small number of industries, progressively extends the range of applications and uses of its products. Presently, the range of applications for the products of the chemical industry is almost infinite. It extends to agriculture, to

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<sup>6</sup>This point is a literal translation from the text of Professor Bettelheim: "Les cadres sociaux-economiques et l'organisation de la planification sociale," which appeared in the journal *Etudes de Planification Socialiste*, 1-2, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 24-25.

extractive industries, to metallurgical industries (especially in the treatment of metals), etc. If we take into account the indirect uses, it appears that currently each branch of production works for every other branch and, therefore, also experiences the repercussions of all the variations which can occur in any sector of the economy.

2. The ever more social destination of the product is also manifested in another form, if we examine the dimensions of the whole system which is served by one unit of the product. With the progress of the productive forces, these dimensions are generally (although not necessarily) growing. Thus, we pass successively from the local, to the micro-regional, to the regional, then national, then international level.

The necessity of state ownership of certain means of production is so much the stronger as these means are utilized more in activities (or economic units) more highly integrated in the social division of labor, set in action in it whether because of the very nature of the means of production or because of the destination of their products.

In summary, the socialization of the productive forces is not limited only to what happens within the factory but refers fundamentally to the growing interdependence of the different sectors of the national and worldwide economy.

*The socialization of the productive forces is the ever more socialized character of the labor process in a given production process and the ever greater interdependence existing between several sectors of social production*<sup>8</sup>.

Each capitalist depends more and more on all other capitalists. This was not the case of the small, isolated industries working for a very limited market. If one of them stopped, it only provoked a local disturbance. On the contrary, a stoppage in a grand enterprise devoted to a very specialized industry can provoke an upheaval throughout the society.

On the other hand, it is the growing socialization of the productive forces of the society which has brought even those countries ruled by the laws of the capitalist system of production to recognize the urgent necessity to plan their economy and to transform *into state property* those sectors which are basic to the progress of the global economy.

The ever more social character of the productive forces comes into

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<sup>8</sup>This last point is what fundamentally characterizes the current moment of capitalist development.

increasingly acute contradiction<sup>9</sup>, with the private character of capitalist appropriation of the means of production.

We say that it comes into increasingly acute contradiction, not that it gives rise to contradiction since, from the beginning of the capitalist mode of production, a contradictory unity has existed between the private character of capitalist ownership of the means of production and the social character which labor power has had since its beginning, a contradiction that did not exist in the era of artisan production. Precisely this contradiction has been the principal impulse to the development of the productive forces in the first stages of capitalist development. The capitalist driven by the desire for profit and having united under his command a certain number of workers and stimulated thus the development of the productive forces, has continually sought to obtain greater profits: first by specializing the workers to the maximum point, then by introducing machinery.

But, to the degree that the productive forces develop, especially to the degree that the instrument of labor is perfected, the machine, too, continues to socialize the collective worker within the factory and, at the same time, continues to intertwine different sectors of production, to the point where the contradiction is transformed from the motor force for the development of the productive forces into the brake. This contradiction, then, takes on an antagonistic character, thus preparing the material conditions for the destruction of the capitalist relations of production.

The classic Marxist-Leninist text treats this antagonistic contradiction as the non-correspondence between the development of the productive forces and the existing relations of production. Now let us look at the classic Marxist theses in respect to this problem.

### 3.3 The Correspondence and Non-Correspondence of the Productive Forces and the Relations of Production

Marxism maintains that the productive forces and the relations of production develop unevenly. In general, the development of the productive force is constant (although periods of stagnation can exist). On the contrary, the relations of production do not change everyday, and they tend therefore to be left behind in relation to the development of the

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<sup>9</sup>The specific character of the Marxist notion of contradiction and its difference with the Hegelian notion will be developed in a more complete form in a book which is in preparation: *Los problemas fundamentales del materialismo dialéctico* ("The Fundamental Problems of Dialectical Materialism").

productive forces. Bit by bit, a non-correspondence emerges, the relations of production begin to be inadequate for the expansion of the productive forces, they begin to block and to brake their own development; an example of this non-correspondence is the monopoly-capitalist system, in which the productive forces, which have reached a high level of socialization, in contradiction to the private character of property relations.

On the other hand, the development of the productive forces is abetted and stimulated when the social relations of production correspond to the level of development of the productive forces. This is called the **law of correspondence** between the productive forces and the relations of production.

This idea of correspondence is frequently employed by Marx and Engels. In the Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*, Marx writes:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations which are independent of their will, namely relations of production which correspond to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production.

It is important to dwell on this notion of correspondence since it forestalls the establishment of a one-sided relation: the productive forces lead to the relations of production, and vice versa. That is, it keeps us from thinking of the relations between the productive forces and the relations of production as relations of cause and effect.

The relations of production, as we have seen, are not the simple effect of the productive forces. For example, *capital* makes us see that the establishment of capitalist manufacture in the heart of feudal society was not produced solely as the simple effect of the division of social labor nor of the perfection of the instruments of production. The participation of an element external to the productive forces was also necessary: the accumulation of a certain quantity of capital in the hands of a certain group of people. The establishment of the capitalist system of production requires what Marx called **primitive accumulation**. This is not explained by the development of the productive forces alone. The productive forces are, therefore, only determinant in the last instance. It is important that we not forget the phrase "in the last instance" because it serves to establish a line of demarcation between *mechanical determination* in which the determined element is the simple effect of the dominant element, or cause, and this *different kind of determination* takes place within a complex structure in which the other elements of the structure act, in turn, on the determinant element in the last instance.

Thus, the expression “determination in the last instance” does not resolve the theoretical problem. It has a negative utility, it rejects mechanical determinism, but what is its positive content? It would seem to be that of indicating the material limits within which given relations of production can be established.

There is no kind of exploitation which can be established in a social group before a surplus product exists.

Socialist relations of production cannot be established before the existence of a significant level of socialization of the productive forces.

Therefore, in studying the kinds of determination realized by the productive forces it is necessary to avoid two important errors: *mechanistic determinism* supports the idea that the socialization of productive forces will bring as its inevitable result the establishment of socialist relations of production, and corollary to that, there is nothing more to be done than to wait for this to take place spontaneously.

The second error consists in the *underestimation of the minimal limits necessary to establish socialist relations of production*. If we cannot expect the conditions to be absolutely mature for the establishment of socialist relations of production, neither can these relations be instituted by political decision. For example, to oblige peasants who are tied to their land and who cultivate it individually and with very rudimentary instruments to work collectively is to impose an idealistic measure unrelated to any necessary minimal material conditions. On the other hand, the introduction of tractors and other agricultural machines makes the peasants understand, through new working conditions, the necessity of collective labor and, thus, socialist relations of production might be established on a firm base. In this respect, it is interesting to study how the revolution in China and Vietnam has learned how to conduct the changes in the countryside all the way to the establishment of socialist relations of production, without forcing the peasants to accept decisions by higher governmental agencies.

### 3.4 The Role of Science in the Development of the Productive Forces

We refer, finally, to the question of the relation between science and the productive forces, since science occupies an ever more important role in the present world.

Some theorists of the Second International sought *the* final or determi-



nant cause of the development of the productive forces in the progress of knowledge, and in the advances of science. This was Kautsky's outlook, for example.

It is obvious that the progress of science, and especially the natural sciences, has exercised an important influence over the development of the productive forces and in particular over the development of technology. Contemporary large-scale industry would be impossible without the application of modern scientific discoveries in the fields of mechanics, physics, and chemistry. Modern, large-scale agriculture is based on the application of chemistry, and of agro-biology, etc.

But, although scientific knowledge plays a very important role in the development of the productive forces, it would be incorrect to seek the fundamental and determinant cause of this development there.

The development of science depends on the form in which a given society produces its material wealth.

In a letter to Starkenburg, on the 25th of January, 1894, Engels wrote:

If the technique, as you properly say, is for the most part dependent upon the state of science, then so much the more is science dependent upon the state and needs of technique. If society has a technical need, it serves as a greater spur to the progress of science than do ten universities. The whole of hydrostatics (Torricelli, etc.) was produced by the need of controlling the mountain streams in Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We only acquired some intelligible knowledge about electricity when its technical applicability was discovered. Unfortunately, in Germany, people have been accustomed to write the history of the sciences as if the sciences had fallen from the sky.<sup>10</sup>

The economic and social conditions of production determine not only the acquisition of certain scientific discoveries, but also their application.

For example, the property of steam as a source of energy had already been discovered in ancient Greece. But at that time the existence of slavery made the utilization of that discovery unnecessary, since it was possible to take advantage of the large quantity of manual labor available.

The capitalist laws of competition represent, in contrast, an enormous stimulus for the development of technology and, consequently, of science as well. New machines with a greater output are constantly needed in order to produce at lower and lower costs, and in this way to conquer the

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<sup>10</sup>"Marx-Engels Correspondence 1894".

market. The situation changes when capitalism becomes transformed into monopoly capitalism. The monopolies corner the inventions' patents to prevent their falling into the hands of competitors. Only an infinitesimal portion of them is ever utilized. An example of the braking effect of monopoly capitalism on the development of science and its application to production is the case of atomic energy. The capitalist monopolies have put up great resistance to the peaceful development of atomic energy.

Summing up, scientific discoveries only create the possibility for the development of the productive forces, but they are dependent on the social relations of production for their realization, that is to say, for the application of scientific discoveries in production.

### **3.5 Summary**

In this chapter, we have defined what we mean by productive forces and what it means to say that the productive forces determine in the last instance the relations of production, although it is the latter which itself determines the rhythm and nature of the development of the productive forces.

We have explained what is meant by the socialization of the productive forces and how this socialization comes into contradiction with capitalist relations of production. We have expounded upon the manner in which the classics pose the correspondence and non-correspondence between the productive forces and the relations of production, applying to the fullest extent the terms correspondence and determination in the last instance. Finally, we have briefly looked at the relation between scientific development and the development of the productive forces.

We have had before us the following general concepts of historical materialism in this chapter:

- Productive forces
- Socialization of the productive forces
- Determination in the last instance

### **Questions**

1. Are the elements of the labor process productive forces?
2. What are potential productive forces?
3. What are the productive forces as such?
4. What do we mean by the character or nature of the productive forces?

5. How are the productive forces measured?
6. What is the productivity of labor?
7. What does it mean that the relations of production determine the rhythm and nature of the development of the productive forces?
8. How do we explain that the productive forces are determinant in the last instance of the relations of production?
9. What is meant by the ever more social origin of the means of production?
10. What is meant by the ever more social destination of the product?
11. What is meant by the socialization of the productive forces?
12. How do you explain the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production in capitalism?
13. What do we mean by the determination in the last instance of the productive forces over the relations of production?
14. What is the correspondence or non-correspondence between the productive forces and the relations of production?
15. How does science figure in the development of the productive forces?

### **Themes for Reflection**

1. What is the most adequate definition of the relation between the productive forces and the social relations of production?
2. Does the labor process based on complex cooperation necessarily imply a separation of the worker from the means of production in socialism?
3. In advanced capitalist society, can science be considered as an element of the productive forces?
4. What must be done to establish socialist relations of production in a country where there exists agricultural production of a rudimentary and individual nature?
5. Does there exist in Latin America sufficient development of the productive forces so as to be able, through a revolution, to establish socialist relations of production?



# 4

## The Economic Structure of Society

### 4.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have given us all the theoretical elements necessary to understand the Marxist concept of economic structure. Nevertheless, we shall not begin with Marx's work but rather end up there. We will start with a critique on a definition of economics which reflects the way in which bourgeois economists present the problem.

In the Lalande dictionary, political economy is defined in the following manner:

A science whose object is the understanding of the phenomena and... the determination of the laws which concern the distribution of wealth, as well as those of production and consumption in as much as these phenomena are linked to that of distribution.

In this definition, the preponderance of distribution over the other aspects of the economic cycle is clearly accentuated. We will examine each one of these aspects in order to determine which of them determines the whole process.

We begin by examining the relationship which exists between the relations of distribution and the relations of production.

**4.2 Relations of Production and Relations of Distribution**

Distribution is the way in which the total social product is divided among the different members of society. We will call the total social product the entirety of goods produced in one year. Let us suppose that a capitalist society produces in one year a total social product equivalent to 100 million dollars.

Of this quantity, the capitalists and landlords receive a much larger part than the workers and employees.

We could imagine a division of the \$100,000,000 in the following manner:

Capitalists	30 million
Landlords	20 million
Workers and Employees	50 million

The capitalists and landlords, who constitute a small group of individuals within society, in this example receive half of the total social product.

Therefore the following question arises: Why do the capitalists and landlords receive such a large part of the social product when they are just the ones who do the least work?

Why are there people who have enormous cars and two or three houses when, on the other hand, there exist people with nothing?

Is it because the capitalists and owners are more intelligent, better endowed, or harder working than the workers and peasants?

It is Marx's great merit to have demonstrated, through his study of the capitalist mode of production, that unequal distribution does not depend on the greater or lesser endowment of human capability, but rather it depends fundamentally on the ownership or lack of ownership that individuals have over the means of production. It must be that the capitalists are the owners of the industrial means of production and the landlords are the owners of the land, that they are able to appropriate the major part of the social product.

The struggle of workers for better wages is basically a struggle for a better distribution of the social product. But while the means of production are private property in the hands of a small group of individuals in society, this group will oppose a more just distribution; it will only make small concessions in order to calm the workers' protests.

The distribution of the social product depends, therefore, on a previous distribution of the means of production. It is the way in which the means of production (elements of the process of production) have been distributed which fundamentally determines the way in which the social product will be distributed. To affirm this is to state that the relations of distribution are determined by the relations of production. This is what Marx says in the following text:

Let us moreover consider the so-called distribution relations themselves. The wage presupposes wage labor, and profit-capital. These definite forms of distribution thus presuppose definite social characteristics of production conditions, and definite social relations of production agents. The specific distribution relations are thus merely the expression of the specific historical production relations. (*Capital* 7, Vol. II I, p. 882)

And later, on the following page:

The so-called distribution relations, then, correspond to and arise from historically determined specific social forms of the process of production... (Ibid., p. 883)

### 4.3 Relations of Production and Relations of Consumption

Consumption is understood to mean the act of using an object to satisfy a determined need. In this we do not mean only the consumption of food, but also the consumption of cars, radios, etc.

If we look at the whole society, we see that not all the objects produced in the production process are consumed directly by individuals. For example, tractors, sewing machines, all the products of the extractive industries in general, etc.

These products are not consumed directly but are used as means of production in other production processes.

Thus, two types of consumption can be distinguished:

- a. **Individual Consumption.** Direct consumption of use value by individuals in the society. Examples: food, clothing, automobiles, etc.
- b. **Productive Consumption.** Here, use values are not consumed directly by individuals of the society, but rather they intervene in new production processes as means of production. They are consumed productively; that is, they are used in the production of

new use values. For example, tractors are consumed in agricultural production.

*What is called individual, consumption is the direct consumption of use value by the individual.*

*What is called productive consumption is the consumption of use values as means of production.*

At this point, we can see that it is by beginning with production that we are able to define the different types of consumption. We will now examine the role of production in individual consumption.

1. Production supplies to consumption its object. Consumption without an object is not consumption. How does one consume an auto if it has not been produced.
2. Since the product is not an object in general but a particular object which must be consumed in a determined way, the object of consumption also imposes; therefore, the form of consumption. The act of consuming a car, for example, implies a knowledge of how to drive it, etc.
3. Production not only supplies the object of consumption and determines its form, but it also continually creates new consumption needs. If we observe contemporary capitalist society, we see how producers of merchandise exert a great deal of effort through advertising to create new needs. The change in fashion is one of the most notorious examples. In summary, production produces: the object of consumption, the form of consumption, and the consumption instinct.

But the relationship between production and consumption is not unilateral. Consumption also has a role in production. If the objects produced are not consumed, a paralysis of production results. It is consumption which creates the necessity of new production.

#### **4.4 Relations of Production and Relations of Exchange**

The necessity for exchange arises from the division of labor. When a man does not produce all the objects necessary for survival, he must exchange his surplus products for other needed products.

The exchange of products is a phenomenon that is intermediate between production and distribution.

The intensity, extent, and form of exchange are determined through the relations of production. Limited exchange corresponds to limited



production. Private exchange corresponds to private production, etc.

## 4.5 The Determinant Role of the Relations of Production

After analyzing the different relations that are produced within the economic process, we arrive at the conclusion that the relations of production constitute the determinant element. As Marx put it:

A distinct mode of production thus determines the specific mode of consumption, distribution, exchange and the specific *relations of these different phases to one another*. Production *in the narrow sense*, however, is, in its turn, also determined by other aspects. . . there is an interaction between the various aspects. Such interaction takes place in any organic entity.

*Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1970, p. 205.

It is this determinant character of the relations of production that explains why Marx would have these relations intervene exclusively in the definition of the economic level.

Let us see how Marx defines this level. In Volume III of *Capital*, in the chapter on the trinity formula, he says:

For the aggregate of these relations, in which the agents of this production stand with respect to nature and to one another, . . . is precisely society, considered from the standpoint of its economic structure. (*Capital*, Vol III, p. 818)

In this text, he is referring both to the technical relations (agents/nature) and to the social relations of production (agents/agents).

Also, the text of the *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy* confirms this definition:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely, relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material force\$ of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society (*Op. cit.*, p. 29)

But this text not only confirms the definition of the economic structure as the totality of the relations of production of a given society, it also adds something else of importance: the material base on which are established these relations of production, that is, the degree of development of the productive forces. This is important in order to understand the dynamic

character of the economic structure which is *at the same time a structure and a process*.

Until now we have seen that the relations of production define the economic level according to Marx, and that these relations are conditioned by the forces of production, and that Marx employs the concept of *structure* to account for its specific form of combination in the different historical epochs.

But what does Marxism mean by structures?

## 4.6 The Economic Structure and the Marxist Concept of Structure

In developing the Marxist concept of structure, we will try to arrive at an explanation of why Marx does not take into account, in order to define the economy, the other aspects of the economic cycle: distribution, exchange, and consumption as do most other definitions.

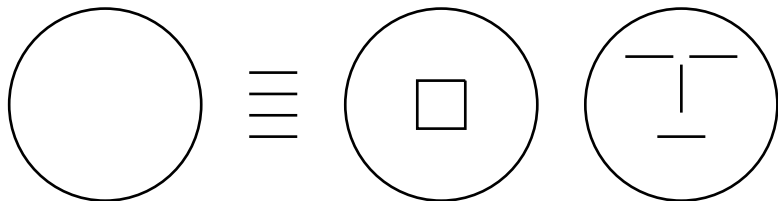
We should begin by differentiating two concepts: the concept of totality and the concept of structure.

The concept of totality is a very broad notion which is commonly applied in an undifferentiated way to any conjunction of elements from the simplest to the most complex like society itself.

In a strict sense, we define as a totality that “whole” which is formed by the conjunction of · juxtaposed elements which have no specific form. For example, a bag of sugar. This “whole” is formed by a certain quantity of tiny sugar crystals, which will take the form of its container, and without the change of location within the totality affecting any individual crystal.

The concept of structure, on the other hand, refers to a “whole” in which the elements are not juxtaposed, but on the contrary, are distributed according to the organization of the entirety. It is this organization which determines the function each element fulfills within the totality.

The following diagram should permit a better understanding of what we mean:



The elements that are combined are a circle and four line segments. In the first structure, the four line segments form a square in the center of the figure; in the second, the two upper segments represent the eyes, the one in the center represents the nose, and the lower one the mouth.

Here, we see clearly that the same elements play a different role according to the organization of the whole and the place they occupy in it. This is what Marx means when he writes, referring to the elements which form a part of the labor process:

... that whether a use-value is to be regarded as raw material, as instrument of labor, or as product, this is determined entirely by its function in the labor process, by the position it there occupies: as this varies, so does its character. (*Capital*, Vol. I, p. 178)

Nevertheless, the concept of structure in Marx goes beyond a simple organization of the elements in a whole which has been analyzed up to now.

What is fundamental in the Marxist concept of structure is the kind of relation which is established among the different elements of the whole. It is not the relation of one isolated element to the whole but the different relations that are established among the elements which determine, in the last instance, the type of organization of the whole. Already we have seen how the different elements of the labor process combine in two fundamental relations: the technical relations and the social relations of production.

These relations which articulate, in a determined manner, the distinct elements of the labor process, have a relatively stable character. The elements may change, but if the relations are maintained we can speak of the same structure. We can recall the case of manufacture. In this case, the structure was characterized by a combination of capitalist social relations of production (capitalist/wage laborer) and by technical relations in which the collective worker was formed through a combination of detail workers in such a way that their relation with the instruments of labor still formed an inseparable unity. While these relations existed, one had to speak of manufacture, although the kind of specialized labor and its number might also change (hammers, looms, hoes, etc.), and although the kind of specialized labor and its number might also change.

This structure only changes when the relations among the elements change with the introduction of the machine-tool. The relation of unity between the worker and means of labor is broken and a new unity is

constituted between the means of labor and the object of labor which, in turn, determines a change of character in the collective worker who becomes specialized.

These relations are not visible at first sight. Any superficial observer would say that the difference between manufacture and large industry is limited to the greater degree of technical development of the instruments of labor.

They are so difficult to see that they can only be brought to light by a serious scientific labor. We have already said that many writers before Marx had referred to the situation of exploitation of the working class under capitalism, but no one before him was capable of describing the profound relations which are the origin of that exploitation. The effects of the capitalist system were described, but its structure and internal relations remained unknown.

Finally, the concept of structure in Marx *is inseparable from the concept of process*. When Marx studied manufacture at the same time that he studied the relations of production which characterize it as such, he also studied the way in which, through the internal contradictions appropriate to that structure, the conditions were being prepared so that the highly specialized labor of the detail worker was transformed into the detail labor of a machine-tool. He showed, at the same time, how the physical, organic limit, implied by the unity of the detail worker and the means of labor, falls into contradiction with the drive of the capitalist for profits.

We would say that what Marx did in *Capital*, in general, was not a *structural analysis* of the capitalist mode of production which accents stable relations but, on the contrary, a dynamic analysis of development of this mode of production, of its internal contradictions, of the conditions for its disappearance. But, although we put the emphasis on the process, this process can only be studied beginning with its fundamental structural relations, which determine what is specific to this process and what differentiates it from any other process.

From what has been said above, we can define the concept of structure in the following way:

We call an articulated totality composed of a conjunction of internal and stable relations which determine the function which the elements perform within this totality, a structure<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>The concept of structure and the relation between the Marxist concept of structure and structuralism will be amply developed in the book *The Fundamental Problems*

Finally, it seems important to us to introduce a new concept to account for the complete economic cycle: production, distribution, exchange, and consumption.

For that we will begin by defining what we mean by organisation. An organization is also an articulated totality, but of visible elements. When the organization of these elements follows a determined internal order, when it is subject to a specific hierarchy, we call it a *system*.

It is in this sense that we refer to the economic system of a determined society. When we speak of an economic system, we are including in the concept all the phases of the economic cycle.

Therefore, we will distinguish between two concepts: economic structure and economic system.

*We call the conjunction of relations of production the **economic structure**. We call the complete economic process (production, distribution, exchange, and consumption) the **economic system**.*

However, contrary to structuralism, the Marxist concept of structure has nothing to do with a simple “combination” of relations. The social structure is not, according to Marxist thought, a simple combination of relations which could be constructed independently of concrete history, on the one hand, and, on the other, Marxism recognizes a certain hierarchy in these relations. There exist dominant relations and relations which have a determinant role in the final instance. As Althusser says, it is a question of a “structure in dominance,” determined in the final instance by the economic relations.

Neither is it proper to separate synchrony and diachrony. It is only a question of two points of view. When the stable character of these relations is emphasized and they are studied as such, this is thinking from the synchronic point of view. But this same structure, perceived as a process, implies putting into practice a diachronic point of view.

## 4.7 Summary

In this chapter, we have begun by examining the existing relations between distribution, consumption, exchange, and production in order to arrive at a definition of economic structure as the conjunction of relations of

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*of Dialectical Materialism*, now in preparation. For now, we only want to advance, following Althusser in his unpublished text, that “all structure in Marx must be understood as process” and that the failure to sufficiently point out this fundamental aspect of the Marxist concept of structure has led to the charge that the Althusserian trend presents a structuralist interpretation of Marx.

production. In order to clarify this concept, we have needed to dwell on the Marxist concept of structure.

We have seen here the following concepts of historical materialism:

- economic structure
- productive consumption
- individual consumption.

### **Questions**

1. What is meant by relations of production?
2. Why is it important to clearly distinguish these two relations?
3. What is meant by relations of distribution?
4. Why do we find distribution determined by production?
5. What is meant by individual consumption?
6. What is meant by productive consumption?
7. Why do we find consumption determined by production?
8. What is the origin of relations of exchange?
9. Why, when Marx defines the economic structure does he not refer to the processes of exchange, distribution, and consumption, which the different moments of the economic process?
10. What is meant by economic structure?
11. What is meant by economic system?

### **Themes for reflection**

1. Why is the notion of “industrial societies,” which is used to designate the United States as well as the Soviet Union, not a Marxist concept? What are the implications of its use?
2. Can a restructuring of incomes be realized without changing the existing relations of production? In this case, we mean a restructuring of income that is in accord with the interests of the workers.

# 5

## Base and Superstructure

### 5.1 Infrastructure and Superstructure

In Chapters One through Four, we have studied the concepts which enable us to understand the economic structure of society. The detailed and rigorous study of this structure is fundamental, since, by beginning with it we can understand the other levels of society.

Marx and Engels used the terms **infrastructure** or **base** for the economic structure of society, and **superstructure** for the juridico-political institutions, the state, the law, etc., and the “forms of social consciousness” which correspond to a determinant infrastructure.

In *Anti-Duhring*, Engels says:

... the economic structure of society always forms the real basis from which, in the last analysis, is to be explained the whole superstructure of legal and political institutions, as well as of the religious, philosophical, and other conceptions of each historical period<sup>1</sup>.

By means of the notions of infra- and superstructure, Marx and Engels expressed the relationship which exists between the economic level of society and the juridico-political and ideological (“forms of social consciousness”) levels.

In the same manner that the foundation is the base on which a building is constructed, the economic structure is the base of the entire

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<sup>1</sup>Frederick Engels, *Anti-Duhring* (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), p. 41.

social edifice.

One of Marx and Engels' great contributions is the discovery that to study society we should not start with what human beings say, imagine, or think, but with the manner in which they produce the material goods they need for their lives.

It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers – a relation always naturally corresponding to a definite stage in the development of the methods of labor and thereby its social productivity – which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state. This does not prevent the same economic basis – the same from the standpoint of its main conditions – due to innumerable different empirical circumstances, natural environment, racial relations, external historical influences, etc., from showing infinite variations and gradations in appearance, which can be ascertained only by analysis of the empirically given circumstances<sup>2</sup>.

The notion of **superstructure** designated, therefore, two levels of society: the juridico-political structure and the ideological structure. To the former corresponds the state and the law; to the latter the so-called “forms of social consciousness.”

## 5.2 Superstructure: a Problematical Notion

That we have employed the term “notion” in speaking about the superstructure is no mere accident, but is owed to the fact that it has not been studied in a finished form by Marxists.

Can we say, for example, that everything that occurs in a society which does not pertain to the economic instance must be considered as a phenomenon belonging to the superstructure?

Stalin, in his article, “Concerning Marxism in Linguistics,” affirms that language was a phenomenon that belonged neither to the superstructure nor to the base or infrastructure.

In a letter in which he refers to this article, he says:

Briefly, language cannot be ranked either among bases or among superstructures.

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<sup>2</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III (International, 1967), pp. 791-92.



Neither can it be ranked among “intermediate” phenomena between the base and the superstructure, as such “intermediate” phenomena do not exist<sup>3</sup>.

At the same time, Althusser, in criticizing Gramsci, maintains that science is a phenomenon which cannot be ranked under the category of superstructure.

To make science a superstructure is to think of it as one of those “organic” ideologies which form such a close “bloc” with the structure that they have the same “history” as it does<sup>4</sup>.

If the concept of superstructure does not account for all extra-economic phenomena, what should be the concept that does? This is a theoretical problem that Marxism has to resolve.

### **5.3 The Relations Between Infrastructure and Superstructure**

According to Marxist theory, we must look to the infrastructure for the “guideline” to explain the social phenomena which belong to the superstructure. But this statement does not imply that everything is a reduction to or a simple reflection of economics.

Nevertheless, many texts of Marx and Engels lend themselves to this type of interpretation, due to the excessive emphasis which they give to the role which the economic structure plays within society.

We must ask ourselves, therefore, what led Marx and Engels to employ this excessive emphasis.

It is necessary to recall that, in the historical moment in which they wrote, there was a strong idealist current which attributed the cause of social phenomena to the will and the thought of man, deprecating the role of material existence. Even the most advanced thinkers such as the French and English materialists of the 17th and 18th Centuries and the German materialist Ludwig Feuerbach continued to maintain idealist principles when they tried to explain the phenomena of social existence, the history of societies.

Idealist theologians and philosophers, bourgeois sociologists and historians, all the ideologues of the feudal aristocracy and of the grand and petty bourgeoisie saw in consciousness, reason, political, moral, and religious ideas the fundamental and determinant motor force of the

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<sup>3</sup>Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and Linguistics* (International, 1951), p. 34.

<sup>4</sup>Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital* (Pantheon, 1970), p. 133.

development of society.

Let us see how Marx criticizes this idealism in a letter to Annenkov of December 28, 1846, in which he talks about Proudhon's book, *The Philosophy of Poverty*:

M. Proudhon sees in history a definite series of social developments; he finds progress realized in history. . . . He cannot explain these facts, and the hypothesis of the universal reason manifesting itself is made out of whole cloth. Nothing is easier than to invent mystical causes, that is to say, phrases which lack common sense<sup>5</sup>.

In order to combat positions of this type, Marx and Engels, in certain texts, went to the opposite extreme. These texts, taken out of their context and the ideological struggle in which they were written, have led to false interpretations.

For example, the following passage from *The German Ideology*:

. . . conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour.

And later, on the same page:

. . . morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence<sup>6</sup>.

The uncritical, mechanical interpretation of texts such as these has given birth to a simplification of Marxism.

Certain Marxists, those whom Lenin called "vulgar Marxists," strain themselves to deduce directly from economy all the phenomena produced at the juridico-political and ideological level.

In the case of the ideology philosophy, for example, they try to deduce the concepts of matter and spirit from the social relations of production. The concept of matter would correspond to the proletariat (material labor) and the concept of spirit, would correspond to the capitalists (the work of organization and administration which is not labor of a material type).

Lenin energetically rejected such over simplification, pointing out that these concepts were produced more than 2,000 years ago by philosophers who belonged to entirely different classes.

This same "vulgar Marxism" is found at the root of the errors committed by the Mensheviks in the period before the October Revolution.

<sup>5</sup>Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Progress, 1965), p. 34.

<sup>6</sup>Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (International, 1939), p. 14.

According to Lenin, they:

had learned from memory that the democratic revolution has as its base the bourgeois revolution and took this to mean that it was necessary to reduce the democratic tasks of the proletariat to the level of bourgeois moderation.

What they could not see, given their economist deviation, was the fundamental role of the political aspect in the stage of transition, and for that reason they could not grasp the basic difference between a bourgeois democratic revolution carried out by the bourgeoisie and a democratic revolution of a new type, which is one that completes bourgeois-democratic tasks under the leadership of the proletariat and which has as its ultimate purpose the establishment of Socialism. Those Marxists reduced society to its economic structure. They lost sight of the other levels, and what is much more serious, lost sight of the necessity to organize a vanguard party which is capable of leading a revolutionary transformation of society on the surest road to socialism and then to communism.

We should repeat for the vulgar Marxists the phrase from Engels' letter of January 25, 1894, to Starkenburg: that there does not exist "an automatic effect" of the economic situation<sup>7</sup>.

It is necessary to show them that if Marx and Engels did accentuate the economic side, it was owing to the nature of their adversaries. They had to "emphasize the main principle" denied by their adversaries and they "had not always the time, the place, or the opportunity to give their due to the other elements involved in the interaction."<sup>8</sup>

Studying the political works of Marx and Engels is the clearest proof of the importance they attributed to the other levels of society, and above all to revolutionary action, the product of the class struggle.

With respect to the role of the economic level, Marx and Engels said the following:

... if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase<sup>9</sup>.

Economic conditions are the "finally determinant" conditions, but the other instances of society also play a role:

Political, juridical, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc., development is based on economic development. But

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<sup>7</sup> *Selected Correspondence*, p. 467.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 418.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417.

all these react upon one another and also upon the economic basis, . . . which ultimately always asserts itself.<sup>10</sup>

The elements of the superstructure are linked, directly or indirectly, to the changes taking place in the infrastructure, but they have a relative autonomy and their development is guided by specific laws.

Engels showed how the development of philosophy, for example, cannot be explained purely and simply from economic development:

The philosophy of every epoch, since it is a definite sphere in the division of labor, has as its presupposition certain definite thought material handed down to it by its predecessors, from which it takes its start. And that is why economically backward countries can still play first fiddle in philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

We can say, therefore, that certain ideological elements can exist which are transmitted from one social formation to another, but that these elements are always put at the service of the interests of the dominant classes, for whom they serve as instruments of struggle. The radical transformation of the superstructure and its replacement by a new one does not exclude the continuation of some elements.

If the economic level mechanically determined the entire superstructure and the development of society, then Marx and Engels would have fallen into an absurd contradiction: to call for class struggle and revolution when everything would have already been predetermined by the economy.

This is one of the points most frequently repeated by the critics of Marxism. They take pleasure in pointing out the “logical incoherence” of Marxist theory. On one hand, the affirmation of determination by the economic level, and on the other, the affirmation of the necessity of human action in history. This criticism only reveals the ignorance or bad faith of those who formulate it. They seem to forget the radical difference between Marxist determination and mechanical determinism.

Engels wrote the following to Franz Mehring about this problem:

Hanging together with this is the fatuous notion of the ideologists that because we deny an independent historical development to the various ideological spheres which play a part in history we also deny them any *effect upon history*. The basis of this is the common undialectical conception of cause and effect as rigidly opposite poles, the total disregarding of

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 467.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 424.

interaction. These gentlemen often almost deliberately forget that once an historical element has been brought into the work by other, ultimately economic causes, it reacts, can react on its environment and even on the causes that have given rise to it.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, Marx and Engels were not able to develop systematically and profoundly the problem of the determinism specific to Marxism. Althusser says in this respect:

The proposal to think the determination of the elements of a whole by the structure of the whole posed an absolutely new problem in the most theoretically embarrassing circumstances; for there were no philosophical concepts available for its resolution.<sup>13</sup>

## 5.4 Summary

The first part of this chapter, rather than developing the theme of infra- and superstructure, is more a warning concerning the precarious state of Marxist investigation about what is meant by “superstructure.” The second part tries to show that Marx and Engels never reduced the superstructure to the infrastructure. The juridico-political and ideological structures, which form part of the superstructure, have a relative autonomy in relation to the infrastructure and their own laws of operation and development.

### Questions

1. What is meant by infrastructure and superstructure?
2. Why does the concept of superstructure require further elaboration?
3. What is the relationship between infra- and superstructure?
4. Why did Marx and Engels emphasize to such a great extent the role of the economy?
5. What is the difference between mechanistic determinism and Marxist determinism in general?

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 460.

<sup>13</sup>*Reading Capital*, p. 187.

**Themes for Reflection**

1. In what sense can we say that science depends on the economy; and in what sense can we say that it does not? How can we combine these two statements?
2. Is it possible to speak of superstructure in the case of the transition from capitalism to socialism, where the superstructure appears to be moving ahead of the economic structure?
3. How can the non-contradiction between Marxist economic determinism and “human action in history” be precisely formulated?

# 6

## The Ideological Structure

### 6.1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In the previous chapters we have seen that Marxist theory holds that in all societies there are three levels: the economic level, the juridico-political level, and the ideological level. The articulation of these three levels among themselves is a complex set of relationships, with the economic level being determinant in the last instance.

If we use Marx and Engels' architectural metaphor of a building with a foundation or infrastructure and a superstructure which rests on this foundation, it can be said the ideology belongs to the superstructure. But ideology is not limited to being solely an instance of the superstructure, it exists in other parts of the social structure as well, **it is the cement hat holds the building together**. Ideology makes people adhere to their roles, their functions, and their social relations.

Ideology penetrates into all human activities, including the economic and political practices, It appears in their attitudes toward the requirements of production, the conception that the workers have of the mechanism of production. It is present in political attitudes and judgements, in cynicism, in honesty, in resignation, and in rebellion. It governs family behavior, relations with other persons and with nature. It is present in our judgements about "the meaning of life", etc.

Ideology is present to such a degree in all of people's acts and gestures

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<sup>1</sup>In this section we base ourselves entirely on the article, "Theory, Theoretical Practice and Theoretical Formation and the Ideological Struggle", by Louis Althusser (in Spanish) in *Casa de las Ameaicas* num. 34, Havana, Cuba pp. 19-20.

that it becomes *indiscernible from their lived experience* and, for this reason, all our immediate analyses of “life” are profoundly marked by the action of ideology.

When we think that we are faced with a clear and unobstructed perception of reality or with a pure practice, what we really have is a perception or practice which is “impure”, influenced by the invisible structures of ideology. Since one does not perceive his/her own actions, one tends to take one’s perceptions of things and of the world as perceptions of the “thing itself” without realizing that this perception only takes place under the distorting action of ideology.

## 6.2 The Content of the Ideological Level

The ideological level is, therefore, an objective reality, indispensable for the existence of every society, even a communist society. What is the content of this level? It is formed by two kinds of systems: *the system of ideas and social representations* (ideology in the strict sense) and the *system of attitudes and social behavior* (customs).

The **system of ideas and social representations** includes the political, juridical, moral, religious, aesthetic, and philosophical ideas of mankind in a given society. These ideas are given in the form of different views of the world and of man’s role in it. Ideologies are not objective, scientific representations of the world, but representations filled with imaginary elements; rather than describe reality, they express desires, hopes, nostalgia. Ideologies can contain elements of knowledge, but what predominate are those elements which have the *function of adapting to reality*. Human beings live their relations to the world within ideology.

It is this which transforms their consciousness, their attitudes and their conduct in order to adjust them to their duties and conditions of existence. For example: religious ideology which treats the issues and feelings around suffering and death gives the exploited the ideas that permit them to better endure their conditions of existence.

The **system of attitudes and social behaviors** is made up of all the habits, customs, and tendencies necessary to act in a certain way. It is easier for someone to change his view of the world, that is, his ideology in the strict sense, than to change his customary ways of living and dealing practically with crucial situations. For this reason ideology in the strict sense and system of attitudes and behaviors are not always identical. The dialectical relations that are established between them range from total or partial correlation to contradiction.



It is important to pay attention to the system of attitudes and behaviors, since through it are expressed specific ideological tendencies. Thus, for example, certain *customs*, “work habits” a certain “style of leadership and command” which can be contrary to proletarian ideology can be found in socialist militants or leaders. These work habits and styles of leadership can, if they are permitted become widespread, and hence become signs of social distinction (conscious or unconscious) in the ideological class struggle. The bureaucratic or technocratic behavior of some Marxist leaders reveals the penetration of bourgeois ideology into the ranks of the working class.

### 6.3 Ideology and the Social Classes<sup>2</sup>

We have seen that both in a classless society and in a class society ideology has the function of reinforcing a given relation of, human beings with each other and with their condition of existence, adapting individuals to the tasks that society sets for them.

In class society this function is dominated by the way human beings are divided into classes. Ideology, in this case, is supposed to *assure that people remain in the general structure of class exploitation*. It is supposed to assure the domination of one class over the rest, making the exploited accept the conditions of their exploitation as if they were based on the “will of God”, or “nature” or “moral duty”, etc.

But ideology is not simply a “pious lie” invented by the exploiters to trick the exploited. It serves them as a bond of social cohesion that they act as members of the same class, that of exploiters. The “pious lie” of ideology has, thus, a double purpose: it is exercised over the consciousness of the exploited to make them accept as natural their condition of being exploited and is exercised over the members of the dominant class to permit them to practice, in a natural way, their exploitation and domination.

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<sup>2</sup>In this section we base ourselves on the previously cited article by Althusser, pp. 20-22. The concept of social classes will be thoroughly treated in Chapter 10. Meanwhile we shall put forward the definition which we give there and which we shall study: “Social classes are antagonistic social groups in which one group appropriates the labor of the other because of the different places they occupy in the economic structure of a given mode of production, places which are fundamentally determined by the specific forms in which they are related to the means of production”. As examples of these antagonistic classes we give owners and slaves; landlords and serfs; and capitalists and workers.

## 6.4 Ideology and Structure

Ideology, like all of social reality, is only intelligible through its structure. Ideology brings with it representations, images, signs, etc., but these elements mean nothing in isolation. It is the system of ideology, its mode of combining its elements that give them meaning; it is its structure that determines its significance and its function. Since it is determined by its *structure*, ideology is greater than the sum of all the ways in which it is lived by one or another individual. Ideology, therefore, is not reducible to the individual forms in which it is Lived, and for this reason it can be the *object of objective study*. For this reason we can speak of the nature of ideology and examine it.

## 6.5 Ideological regions

The objective study of ideology enables us to see that, in spite of its being a reality that is diffused throughout the entire social body, it can be divided, into particular regions, centered around different themes. In this way we can distinguish relatively autonomous regions in the heart of the ideological realm for example: moral, religious, juridical, political, aesthetic, and philosophical ideology, etc.

Not all of these regions have always existed in history. It is possible to foresee that certain ones will disappear or be mixed with others in the course of the history of socialism and communism.

In relation to the social classes which exist in different societies, one or another region dominates the others. In this way we can explain, for example, the remarks of Marx and Engels about the dominant influence of religious ideology in all the movements of peasant rebellion from the XIVth century to the XVIIIth, and even in certain primitive forms in the workers' movement, Religious ideology seems to dominate as an ideological region in the history of certain oppressed races, as with black people in the US.

## 6.6 Practical Ideologies and Theoretical ideologies

In each of the previously mentioned regions, ideology can exist in two forms:

1. a more or less diffuse, unreflective form or as a *practical ideology*
2. a more or less conscious, systematized and reflective form, as a *theoretical ideology*.

We know that religious ideologies can exist which have rules, rites, etc. without having a theological system; the appearance of a theology represents a higher level of theoretical systematization of religious ideology. The same occurs within the other regions of ideology. They can exist under a non-theoretical, unsystematic form, the form of customs, tendencies, preferences, etc. Or, on the contrary, under a systematic and reflective form like moral “theory”, political “theory”, etc. The highest theoretical form of ideology is philosophy in the traditional sense of the word. It is important to clarify here that these “theoretical ideologies” can contain scientific elements, but since these elements are contained within an ideological structure, they can provide only partial knowledge which is distorted or limited by its location within this structure.

## 6.7 Ideological tendencies

Not only are there areas or regions of ideology, but there exist, in addition, different ideological tendencies.

By stating that “the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class,” Marx shows us how to study diverse ideological tendencies. In the same way that there are dominant classes and dominated classes, there are dominant and dominated ideologies.

Therefore, within the ideological level in general, we can observe the existence of *different ideological tendencies which express the “representations” of the different social classes*: bourgeois ideology, petty-bourgeois, and proletarian ideology.

But we should not lose sight of the fact that in, capitalist societies petty-bourgeois and proletarian ideologies are *subordinated* to those of the ruling class, which always win out despite the protests of the exploited. This scientific truth is of decisive importance in understanding the history of the workers’ movement and of communist practice. What does Marx mean when he says that bourgeois ideology dominates the other ideologies, particularly proletarian ideology? It means that worker protest against exploitation is expressed within the very structure of the system, and to a large degree, within the representations and frames of reference of dominant bourgeois ideology, for example the workers’ struggle for greater purchasing power for consumer goods. The pressure of bourgeois ideology is such that the working class cannot, by itself, free from that ideology. What it can do is to express its protests and hopes, using certain elements of bourgeois ideology, but it continues being its prisoner, locked into the dominant structure. In order for spontaneous worker

ideology to be transformed to a point of being liberated from bourgeois ideology, it is necessary that it receive from outside the aid of science and that it be transformed under the influence of this new elements, radically different from ideology.

The fundamental Leninist thesis of “importing”, or the necessary “fusion” of Marxist theory with the workers’ movement is neither, therefore, an arbitrary thesis nor the description of an accident of history. It is based, on the contrary, on the very nature of ideology and the absolute limits of the natural development of the spontaneous ideology of the working class.

## 6.8 The Origin of the Deformed and Distorted Character of Ideological Representations<sup>3</sup>

Ideologies contain an element of knowledge of reality, but this is always found integrated into a whole system of representation which, from its inception, is a deformed and distorted system of reality.

What is the origin of the necessarily deformed and distorted character of ideology?

Does it originate in the necessity of the ruling class to deceive the classes which it subordinates in order to maintain its domination over them?

In order to answer this question, let us first analyze the limits of all spontaneous consciousness of reality.

To do this we shall use one of Marx’s analyses from Volume III of *Capital*, Chapter IX, about the general rate of profit.

Let us briefly put in context the paragraphs that interest us. In this chapter Marx shows that originally the rates of profit of each branch of production differ greatly, one from another, but that, through the effect of competition, these rates tend to be equalized in an average rate of profit. The prices of production, in the capitalist system of production, are established by adding to the cost of production of commodities a percentage of profit calculated on the basis of the average rate of profit. This means that the individual capitalist does not receive exactly the surplus value which he produces. From the mass of surplus value

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<sup>3</sup>. Based fundamentally on Althusser’s article “On the Concept of Ideology” in Spanish in *Polemica sobre marxismo y humanismo*, Siglo XXI, Mexico, 1966, pp. 183-186 and in the article by Emilio Ipola “Lost Lenguajes del Marxismo en lo que se Refiere al Analisis de la Cuota de Ganancia Media Realizado por Marx en el libro III de *El Capital*” •

produced in a given period by total social capital, he receives only a quantity proportional to the capital he has invested.

This is, in brief, what Marx says in the following text:

The various different capitals here are in the position of shareholders in a joint-stock company, in which the dividends are evenly distributed for each 100 units, and hence are distinguished, as far as the individual capitalists are concerned, only according to the size of the capital that each of them has put into the common enterprise, according to his relative participation in this common enterprise, according to the number of his shares. While the portion of this commodity price that replaces the parts of the capital that are consumed in the production of the commodities, and with which these capital values must be bought back again - while this portion, the cost price, is completely governed by the outlay within each respective sphere of production, the other component of commodity price, the profit that is added to this cost price, is governed not by the mass of profit that is produced by this specific capital in its specific sphere of production, but by the mass of profit that falls on average to each capital invested, as an aliquot part of the total social capital invested in the total production, during a given period of time<sup>4</sup>.

A few pages later, Marx shows how this separation – between the surplus value produced by the capitalist and the profit received for the capital he has invested – affects the consciousness of the agents of production.

The actual difference in magnitude between profit and surplus-value in the various spheres of production... now completely conceals the true nature and origin of profit, not only for the capitalist, who has here a particular interest in deceiving himself, but also for the worker<sup>5</sup>.

And a few later he remarks:

the practical capitalist, imprisoned in the competitive struggle and in no way penetrating the phenomena it exhibits, cannot but be completely incapable of recognizing, behind the semblance, the inner essence and the inner form of this process<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, Penguin, pp. 258.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 268.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 269.

We can thus draw some important conclusions for the study of ideology from this analysis by Marx.

Marx indicates that the fundamental base of the capitalist economic structure (that is, surplus value, the true source of profit) is completely hidden from the consciousness of the agents of production (the capitalists and workers). From this we can conclude that the perception which the agents of production have of the production process, even those who form part of the ruling class, is a deformed and distorted perception. This deformation of reality does not, therefore, come from the will of the ruling class to deceive, but rather from the objective character of the economic system as such (that is to say, the difference in size between surplus value and profit).

We can, therefore, conclude that the distortion of reality property by ideological knowledge is not explained by a kind of “bad conscience” or “the will to deceive” of the ruling classes but rather is owed fundamentally to the *necessary opaqueness of social realities that are complex structures that can only be known through a scientific analysis of them.*

In effect, in their real lives, people find themselves effectively determined by *objective structures* (relations of production, class political relations, etc.). Moreover, their everyday life convinces them of the existence of these realities, it makes them perceive *some objective effects* of the action of these structures, but it conceals their essence. They cannot, through simple perception, arrive at a true *knowledge* of these structures. The knowledge of the mechanisms of the different social structures can only be the result of another activity different from the simple perception that comes from everyday life: *scientific* activity.

In the same way knowledge of the laws of nature cannot be the product either of simple, technical activity or of simple perception, which only provide observations, empirical knowledge and technical recipes. On the contrary, it must be the product of a distinct activity, different from immediate activities: *the scientific activity*. Thus knowledge of social realities cannot be the product of the simple perception or experience of said realities, but, on the contrary, the product of a *scientific activity, that perceives “behind the semblance, the essence and inner form” of these realities.*

This is the real reason for the existence of ideology as a deformed and distorted representation. This is the real reason which allows us to understand why, even in classless societies, ideology will continue to exist. The particular forms of ideology can vary tremendously, from the myths of primitive societies to the different ideological forms of modern

society, (moral, religious, aesthetic, juridical, political ideology, etc.) but in every society, class or not, ideology survives as necessarily deformed and distorted knowledge. The effect of this deformation can be greater or lesser, and it continues to exist so long as its cause exists: the structural nature of society which produces ideology as one of its organic effects.

It is erroneous, therefore, to believe that the deformed and distorted character of ideology is owed to pure and simple ignorance or to a myth totally cooked up by a group and a class, Marxism has broken with this conception of ideology, which was, basically, an idealist conception.

Now then, in class societies this first deformation is combined with a supplementary deformation which dominates the first. One of the fundamental attainments of Marxist theory is precisely the affirmation that in a class society ideology is always class ideology, whose content is determined by the class struggle, and in which society the dominant ideology is the ideology of the dominant class.

However, if this truth is considered in isolation, ones runs the risk of thinking that ideology is not just the instrument utilized by one class to exploit the other; the risk of thinking that ideological representation is a useful lie cooked up by the members of the ruling class to dominate the classes which it subordinates to itself, as if the members of the ruling class possessed the truth and were capable of escaping the deforming effects produced by all ideology. However, to state this is not to deny that the ruling class can consciously use the effects of deformation to strengthen its positions of domination.

There is no doubt that the deformation of ideology is dominated, in class society, by the specific effects of the division of classes, the role which these classes play in the social structure, etc. But this fact in no way changes the general principle, which explains in the last instance, the necessary deformation of all ideological representation by the structural character of every society.

## **6.9 Ideological Structure and Economic Determination**

We have seen that the ideological level is constituted by the joining of representation and social behavior. According to Marxism, the common thread that allows us to explain these ideas and behaviors is the form in which human beings produce material goods, that is to say, the economic structure of society. It is not, therefore, ideas that determine people's behavior, but the way in which people participate in the production of material goods which determines their thoughts and actions.

But by saying that the economy determines human ideas, are we not implying the reduction of the ideological level to a simple reflection of the economics?

Marxism does not contend that ideology can simply be reduced to economics. It asserts, on the contrary, that the ideological level has its own content, and its own laws of operation and development. As we saw above, this level is constituted by diverse ideological tendencies (bourgeois, petty-bourgeois, proletarian, etc.) of which one dominates the rest, and therefore determines to a certain degree their forms of existence. On the other hand, the dominant region (religious, moral, philosophical, etc.) is not directly determined by the economy but by the characteristics belonging to the ideological structure of a given society. According to the religious or lay traditions of a given society, the dominant bourgeois ideology will be transmitted through religious, moral, or philosophical expressions. The ruling class always knows to utilize the language that lets it achieve the greatest communication with the dominated classes. It gives a class content to the *ideological material* which presents itself as tradition – the habits and customs of that given society.

The ideological level is not a simple reflection of the economic level but a reality which has its own structure and its own laws of operation and development (pre-existing ideological material, a dominant tendency with a form of acting on the subordinate tendencies, etc.) Economic determination acts on this structure in its entirety. Therefore, the ideological product is the result of two kinds of determinations: one internal to the ideological structure itself and the other external (juridico-political and economic). *There is no such thing as direct, mechanical determination by the economy, but rather a complex, structural determination.*

Let us see what Engels has to say in this respect in a letter to Conrad Schmidt, October 27, 1890:

As to the realms of ideology, ... religion, philosophy, etc., these have a prehistoric stock, found already in existence and taken over in the historic period, of what we should today call bunk.<sup>7</sup>

That is, each new historical period (marked by a new economic determination) finds itself faced with material inherited from the previous historical period, and it is on this material that the new economic determination acts.

But it is not only a question of inherited ideological material, but also,

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<sup>7</sup>Engels to Conrad Schmidt



and above all in the case of ideologies which have come to acquire an elevated degree of systematization, along with “tools” or “instrumentation” for all of them, which permits this material to be developed: libraries, archives, research projects, educational structure, etc. The poverty or wealth of a country’s philosophy, for example, does not depend directly on the country’s economic poverty or richness but on the poverty or richness of the philosophical material and “instrumentation” inherited from the earlier period.

Engels says the following about this in the letter cited above:

Here economy creates nothing absolutely new, but it determines the way in which the existing material of thought is altered and further developed, and that too for the most part indirectly, for it is the political, legal and moral reflexes which exercise the greatest direct influence upon philosophy.

If we insist on the relative autonomy of the ideological structures with respect to the economic structure, it is not only for the desire to be theoretically precise, but also because of the *grave political repercussions which ignoring it can have*.

Many critics of Marxism try to deny the validity of this theory, asserting that Marx was incorrect with respect to the working class: “to the degree that capitalism has been developing, the working class – instead of growing and maturing in class consciousness – has been turning more bourgeois, adapting more and more to the system.”

If Marxism were to maintain that class consciousness or ideology is a simple reflection of economic conditions, one could doubtlessly assert that Marx was incorrect. But Marxism maintains something quite different: economic conditions create the objective material conditions (concentrations of great masses of workers in urban centers, technical division and organization of labor with the factories, which creates among the workers habits of cooperation and discipline, mobility of labor between areas which permits the discovery of new horizons, etc.) which serve as the base for reaching proletarian class consciousness, but these conditions *do not bring about or create anything directly*. In order for the proletariat to discover its true class interests, that is, to come to acquire proletarian class consciousness, requires the intervention of extra-economic factors. It is necessary to put Marxist theory in the hands of the proletariat, the only instrument capable of freeing the proletarian ideological tendency from economicist and reformist deformations, products of the dominant bourgeois ideology.

## 6.10 Summary

In this chapter we have studied the ideological structure. We have seen what place it occupies within society, what relations exist between it and the social classes, what is the origin of the necessarily deformed and distorted nature of ideological representations, and, finally, how economic determination acts on the ideological structure.

We have seen the following concepts of the general theory of historical materialism:

- ideological structure
- ideological regions
- ideological tendencies
- practical ideologies,
- theoretical ideologies.

## Questions

1. What is the place of ideology within the social structure?
2. What is the content of the ideological structure?
3. Why do attitudes and behavior form part of the ideological structure?
4. What is the relation of ideology to social classes?
5. Can the proletariat have an independent ideology?
6. In what sense is ideology a structure?
7. What is an ideological region?
8. Can you give an example of a practical ideology and a theoretical ideology?
9. What is an ideological tendency?
10. What is the origin of the necessarily deformed and distorted character of ideology?
11. What does it imply to assert that this character is owed solely to the interest of the ruling class to deceive?
12. Does the degree of maturity and richness of a society's ideology depend on a people's economic wealth?
13. How does economic determination act on ideology?

## 6.11 Themes for reflection

1. Can science be considered a theoretical ideology?
2. What are the causes of the reformist attitudes of many unions?

3. In what moment of the class struggle does the ideological struggle acquire a preponderant role?
4. What role can religious ideologies play in Latin America?



# 7

## The Juridico-Political Structure<sup>1</sup>

Every society, in addition to having given economic and ideological structures, possesses a combination of institutional apparatuses and norms designed to regulate the operation of society as a whole. These institutional apparatuses and norms constitute the juridico-political structure of the society, and form a part of the superstructure.

The forms of these institutional apparatuses, their importance and their normative principles, vary with the economic structure on which they are based.

In class societies, the juridico-political level is secured by an autonomous apparatus: the State, which monopolizes “legitimate violence” and whose major function is to maintain, under the domination of the ruling class, all the other classes which depend on it.

This explains one of the fundamental theses of Marxism: *the State is an instrument of the ruling classes’ coercion of the oppressed classes.*

### 7.1 The Double Function of the State

In the previous point we saw that every society needs certain institutional apparatuses and norms which allow it to regulate its internal operations. This necessity is ultimately based on the social division of labor. To the degree that this division increases, the need to have a body of individuals

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<sup>1</sup>This section is based on an article by Roger Establet Which appeared in the magazine *October* in December 1966 entitled, “The Juridical-Political Level.” *October* was the organ of the communist students of the circle of philosophy of the U.E.C of the Sorbonne.

capable of organizing and administering the society as a whole also increases.

To this technical function (organizational and administrative), characteristic of every society in which there is a minimal division of labor, a new function is added in class societies: that of political domination. The existing institutional apparatuses and norms are used to subject the different classes of the society to the interests of the ruling classes, and new apparatuses and institutions with fundamentally repressive purposes are created: armed detachments, jails, coercive institutions of every kind, etc.

This function appears, therefore, only when the division of society into opposing classes arises. That is, when the productivity of social labor produces a surplus which is monopolized by a group of individuals of that society.

This expresses with perfect clarity the basic idea of Marxism with regard to the historical role and the meaning of the state. The state is a product and a manifestation of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms. The state arises where, when and insofar as class antagonism objectively cannot be reconciled. And, conversely, the existence of the state proves that the class antagonisms are irreconcilable.<sup>2</sup>

Now then, this eminently political function is supported by the function that we have called technical-administrative, as is demonstrated in the following text of Engels:

But with the difference in distribution, *class differences*<sup>3</sup> emerge. Society divides into classes: the privileged and the dispossessed, the exploiters and the exploited, the rulers and the ruled; and the state<sup>4</sup> – which the primitive groups of communities of the same tribe had at first arrived at only for safeguarding their common interests (such as irrigation in the East) and providing protection against external enemies – from this stage onward acquires just as much the function of maintaining by force the economic and political position of the ruling class against the subject class.<sup>5</sup>

Thus only when, along with the technical-administrative function, the

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<sup>2</sup>Lenin, "State and Revolution," *Collected Works*, Vol. 25, p. 387.

<sup>3</sup>We should remember that if "in distribution, class differences emerge," it is in production that their origins are to be found.

<sup>4</sup>We would not be speaking of the state here, but of the juridico-political apparatus.

<sup>5</sup>Engels, *Anti-Duhring*, p. 165.

function of political domination arises can we speak of the appearance of the State as such.

To clarify this double character of the state, let us examine what Marx says about the double character of the function of supervision and management of production in class societies:

The labor of supervision and management is naturally required wherever the direct process of production assumes the form of a combined social process, and not of the isolated labor of independent producers. However, it has a double nature.

On the one hand, all labor in which many individuals co-operate necessarily requires a commanding will to co-ordinate and unify the process, and functions which apply not to partial operations but to the total activity of the workshop, much as that of an orchestra conductor. This is a productive job, which must be performed in every combined mode of production.

On the other hand... this supervision work necessarily arises in all modes of production based on the antagonism between the laborer, as the direct producer, and the owner of the means of production. The greater this antagonism is, the greater the role played by the supervisor. Hence, this reaches its peak in the slave system. But it is indispensable also in the capitalist mode of production, since, the production process in it is simultaneously a process by which the capitalist consumes labor power. Just as in the despotic states, supervision and all around interference by the government involves both the performance of common activities arising from the nature of all communities, and the specific functions arising from the antagonism between the government and the mass of people.<sup>6</sup>

We could say that, in the same way in which the technical division of labor within an enterprise gives rise to the function of supervision and management whose object is the coordination of all the work that goes on in it, the social division of labor requires a combination of institutional apparatuses and norms designed to regulate the functioning of society as a whole. This function of organization and management, of a technical-administrative nature, is overdetermined in both cases by the effects of the division of society into classes. On the level of the enterprise,

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<sup>6</sup>Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, pp. 383-84.

the function of organization and management acquires a character of exploitation of the workers by the owners of the means of production, and at the level of the state it is utilized to reproduce the political and economic conditions for the exploitation of one class by another.

To sum up: the State has a double function: a technical administrative function and a function of political domination. *The latter is what properly defines the state*, overdetermining the technical administrative function, that is, orienting it, putting it at the service of the function of political domination. There are not, therefore, technical-administrative state tasks that are neutral in character.

Why, then, insist on this function?

In fact, Marx Engels, and Lenin have fundamentally emphasized the function of political domination, rarely referring to the technical-administrative function. We think that this can be understood by the requirements of ideological struggle against the bourgeois thesis of the existence of a State above classes, that is, a state reduced entirely to its technical function.

We consider it important not to ignore this function for two reasons:

- a. In order to combat bourgeois ideology about the state, we must begin with what it lays out and show how the technical-administrative functions obscure the functions of political domination
- b. To confirm only the existence of the function of political domination has led to "voluntarist" errors, that is, to conceive of the state as a product linked exclusively to the will of the ruling classes to dominate. In fact, they do not create the state so that it serves their class interests, but they utilize an already existing juridico-political apparatus, modifying it to reach their class objectives. The social function (i.e., the technical-administrative function) which this apparatus performs, serves as a basis for the new function of political domination.

It is in this way that we interpret the following text of Engels:

... the exercise of a social function was everywhere the basis of political supremacy: and further that political supremacy has existed for any length of time only when it fulfilled its social functions.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Anti-Duhring*, pp. 198-99.



## 7.2 The Withering Away of the State

In addition, distinguishing these two functions helps us to understand the Marxist thesis about the *withering away* of the state, which is opposed to the anarchist thesis of the *suppression* of the state.

Marxists hold that, when the proletariat takes refuge in political power, the state will not be able to disappear the following day. It is necessary to destroy the old apparatus and construct a new one with a proletarian character, because the class struggle will continue and, therefore, an apparatus which fulfills the function of the repression of the classes which are opposed to the building of socialism will be needed. Anarchists maintain that, on the contrary, it is necessary to immediately dissolve the whole “bureaucratic” apparatus permitting the free organization of the population at the level of its mass fronts.

The Marxist thesis maintains, however, that this proletarian type of state will tend to disappear, will tend to wither away.

To the degree that it advances towards communism, towards the greater and greater suppression of class differences, the function of political domination, which defines the state as such, tends to disappear, letting survive only the technical-administrative functions. In this way the workers’ state will continue disappearing gradually. The government of individuals transforms into the “administration of things and the direction of the processes of production.”

When ultimately it becomes really representative of society as a whole, it makes itself superfluous. As soon as there is no longer any class of society to be held in subjection; as soon as along with class domination and the struggle for individual existence based on the former anarchy of production, the collisions and excesses arising from these have also been abolished, there is nothing more to be repressed which would make a special repressive force, a state, necessary. The first act in which the state really comes forward as the representative of society as a whole – taking possession of the means of production in the name of society – is at the same time its last independent act as a state. The interference of the state power in social relations becomes superfluous in one sphere after another, and then ceases of itself. The government of individuals is replaced by the administration of things and the direction of the processes of production. The state is not

“abolished,” it withers away.<sup>8</sup>

Now let us look at the way Lenin compliments this text:

... only communism makes the state absolutely unnecessary, for there is nobody to be suppressed – “nobody” in the sense of a class, of a systematic struggle against a definite section of the population. We are not utopians and do not in the least deny the possibility and inevitability of excesses on the part of individual persons, or the need to stop such excesses. In the first place, however, no special machine, no special apparatus of suppression is needed for this; this will be done by the armed people themselves, as simply and as readily as any crowd of civilized people, even in modern society, interferes to put a stop to a scuffle or to prevent a woman from being assaulted. And, secondly, we know that the fundamental social cause of excesses, which consist in the violation of the rules of social intercourse is the exploitation of the people, their want and their poverty. With the removal of this chief cause, excesses will inevitably begin to “wither away.” We do not know how and in what succession, but we do know they will wither away. With their withering away the state will also wither away.<sup>9</sup>

### 7.3 The State Apparatus and Political Power

One of the distinctive feature of every State is the existence of a particular group of individuals who work for the State apparatus. No one could call the state a community in which all the members of society assure, each in his turn, “the organization of order.”<sup>10</sup>

The *state apparatus* is the organism which carries out the technical-administrative tasks and the job of political domination belonging to the dual function of the state. Thus, although the technical-administrative function is as we saw in the previous pages, *overdetermined by the political function*, we think that it is important to distinguish it from this latter function since this permits us to distinguish within the State apparatus an apparatus fundamentally technical-administrative (corp of civil servants) and an apparatus that is fundamentally repressive (a standing army, police bureaucracy).

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 306-7.

<sup>9</sup>“State and Revolution,” op. cit., p. 464.

<sup>10</sup>Lenin, “The Economic Content of Populism.”

*Political power* is the capacity to utilize the apparatus of the State to carry out the political objectives of the ruling class.

It is important, therefore, not to confuse the apparatus of the state or the state machinery with political power. The *fundamental object of the class struggle concerns the political power of the State*. The class or classes that have obtained this power put the apparatus of the state at their service. It has been like this in all the non-proletarian revolutions. Nonetheless, the practical political experiences of the proletariat in the Paris Commune, convinced Marx that “the working class cannot simply take possession of the existing state machinery and put it to work for its own ends.” The working class must “smash,” “destroy” the military bureaucratic apparatus of the bourgeois state and replace it with an apparatus totally different with a proletarian apparatus which permits it to continue to, little by little, make the State, as such disappear, as an organ of repression and political domination.

Therefore we should not confuse the “destruction of the bourgeois state apparatus” with the “withering away of the proletarian state” or the dictatorship of the proletariat. The former is a prerequisite for the latter.

What characteristics should the new state apparatus created by the proletariat have? Marx answered this question by synthesizing the lessons of the Paris Commune:

1. The substitution of the bourgeois centralist form in which the state was above the nation, by a centralist form of a new type, in which there is the real and conscious democratic participation of the proletariat, and which has as a territorial base the whole commune.
2. The substitution of the standing army by the armed people
3. The transformation of the police into an instrument at the service of the commune, stripping it of its former political attributes.
4. Representatives of the people elected by universal suffrage and re-callable at any time.
5. The suppression of those privileges linked to public office (a salary equal to that of a worker)
6. The destruction of bourgeois parliamentarianism, transforming the representative institutions of the people into “labor legislative and executive corporations all at the same time.”

When Lenin refers to the destruction of the bourgeois state apparatus, he insists that its annihilation does not have the character of extinction but of its sudden disappearance through a revolutionary process.

The bourgeois state “cannot be replaced by the proletarian state [the dictatorship of the proletariat] through ‘extinction’ but only, as a general rule<sup>11</sup> through violent revolution.”

And when Lenin refers to the bourgeois state apparatus to be destroyed, he is thinking at the same time, of the military and the bureaucratic apparatus, as is very clear in *The State and Revolution*.

It is interesting to consider this point for a moment, since the position which Lenin held in 1917 was modified in an important way through the passage of time, at least the part that referred to the bureaucratic apparatus of the State.

In 1917, Lenin believed that the material conditions existed to be able to destroy the bureaucratic apparatus and realize, in its place, the ideals of the Paris Commune. In 1921 he had to recognize that things were not so easy, that they had to resort to the old bureaucrats, and, in order to do that, they had to put aside the ideas of a salary equivalent to a worker and of recall.

Thus, before looking directly at Lenin’s works in this era, we want to mention that it seems to us what is essential in the Marxist thesis is in the necessity of the destruction of the bourgeois state apparatus. But the creation of a new proletarian apparatus does not seem to be a task that can be completed immediately, although the proletariat ought to focus its efforts towards this goal.

In 1921 Lenin said:

Ours are class courts directed against the bourgeoisie. Ours is a class army directed against the bourgeoisie. The evils of bureaucracy are not in the army, but in the institutions serving it.<sup>12</sup>

Let us examine more closely what happened in this sector of the state in that epoch:

We took over the old machinery of state and that was our misfortune. Very often this machinery operates against us. In 1917 after we seized power, the government officials sabotaged us. This frightened us very much and we pleaded: ‘Please come back.’ They all came back, but that was our misfortune. We now have a vast army of government employees, but lack sufficiently educated forces to exercise real control over them. In practice it often happens that here at the top, where we

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<sup>11</sup>Marx mentioned England as an exception in this era.

<sup>12</sup>Lenin, “The Tax in Kind,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 32, p. 351.

exercise political power, the machine functions somehow; but, down below, government employees have arbitrary control and they often exercise it in such a way as to counteract our measures. At the top, we have, I don't know how many, but at all events, I think, no more than a few thousand, at the outside several tens of thousands of our own people. Down below, however, there are hundreds of thousands of old officials whom we got from the tsar and from bourgeois society and who, partly deliberately and partly unwittingly, work against us. It is clear that nothing can be done in that respect overnight. It will take many years of hard work to improve the machinery, to remodel it, and to enlist new forces. We are doing this fairly quickly, perhaps too quickly. Soviet schools and Workers' Faculties have been formed; a few hundred thousand young people are studying; they are studying too fast perhaps, but at all events, a start has been made, and I think this work will bear fruit. If we do not work too hurriedly we shall, in a few years time, have a large body of young people capable of thoroughly overhauling our state apparatus.<sup>13</sup>

## 7.4 Types of States and Forms of Government

The State as the totality of the institutions and norms is designed to regulate the functioning of society in such a way that it permits the constant reproduction of the economic, ideological, and juridico-political conditions which assure the reproduction of the relations of domination of one class over the rest.

Thus, the character of the state will vary according to the character of the relations of production. What determines, therefore, the *type of State* is the economic structure on which the state is built in the political superstructure. In this way we can distinguish different types of states in relation to the different relations of production: slave, feudal, capitalist, etc.

Within the framework of each of these types of States different forms of government can be found; for example, within the capitalist or bourgeois type of state there can be forms of government which range from republican "democracy" to military dictatorship.

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<sup>13</sup>Lenin, "IV Congress of the Communist International."

Thus, since the type of state depends on the economic structure of the society – i.e., on the class nature of the State – the forms of government depend on concrete, historical conditions.

Every person or group which operates within the narrow margins of the dominant ideology in a capitalist society, will tend to displace the problem of the nature of the state onto that of the forms of government, and in this way the class nature of the state, which is the essential and decisive problem, is hidden.

## **7.5 Economic Power and Political Power**

Frequently too strong a parallel is drawn between the hierarchy of power in the economic structure, on the one hand, and the hierarchy of the juridico-political structure on the other, as if the political power structure were limited to reflecting the economic power structure; as if the same classes always occupy the same places in both structures.

This is undoubtedly true as a general tendency. It is also correct in the long run, since an important and prolonged contradiction between the two hierarchies would make the situation untenable. But the concrete reality of history does not coincide with this oversimplified and schematic formula.

A typical case of the non-correspondence between economic and political power took place in France during the dictatorship of Louis Bonaparte. In this period the bourgeoisie, which occupied a dominant place in the economic structure, had to yield its place in the political structure in order to conserve its dominant position in the social structure, based, precisely, on its position within the economic structure.

Thus by now stigmatising as “socialistic” what it had previously extolled as “liberal,” the bourgeoisie confesses that its own interests dictate that it should be delivered from the danger of its own rule; that to restore tranquility in the country its bourgeois parliament must, first of all, be given its quietus; that to preserve its social power intact its political power must be broken; that the individual bourgeois can continue to exploit the other classes and to enjoy undisturbed property, family, religion and order only on the condition that their class be condemned along with the other classes to like political nullity; that in order to save its purse it must forfeit

the crown...<sup>14</sup>

Another typical case of non-correspondence between economic and political power is that of Germany in the modern epoch. The bourgeoisie was so frightened by the political importance which the proletariat had acquired that, in order to maintain its economic domination, it preferred to leave the Junkers, the feudal landlords, in their position of power. In this sense we have, therefore, feudal-absolutist political power which carries out an economic policy that serves the interests of the bourgeoisie.

## 7.6 The State in Capitalist Society<sup>15</sup>

In appearance the State does not intervene in capitalist exploitation, but rather it seems to let it develop according to its own laws. Further, it seems that the state could intervene by means of legislation in order to limit this exploitation. The idea of the State being above the classes finds support in the structure of the capitalist system of production, where the state does not intervene *directly* in exploitation. "Peaceful" exploitation is accomplished through the peaceful act of buying and selling: the labor contract.

Thus exploitation is managed without the intervention of state pressure. The individual relation of equality and liberty in the contractual act of buying and selling labor power becomes possible thanks to the prior dependence of the working class on the capitalist class, because of the separation of the worker from his means of production and their concentration in the hands of the capitalists. Individual liberty has as its basis the maintenance of the status quo with regard to the working class, which is obliged to accept the conditions which capital imposes upon it.

The invisible threads which tie the working class to the private property of the capitalist class would not hold up if the state did not guarantee that property, and with it, the freedom of capital. In this way the state preserves the general conditions of existence of the capitalist system of production, anticipating and repressing attempts against its freedom thanks to its army of civil servants in the juridico-political apparatus, and in the last instance thanks to its armed forces. Once the separation of the worker from his means of production is assured, the preservation of the general conditions of the capitalist mode of production

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<sup>14</sup>Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon."

<sup>15</sup>This section is mainly a translation of the most important ideas which are contained in the article about state capitalism which appeared in the #16 issue of *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes*.

necessitates the use of violent repression only in cases where violations of the right of private property occur, which feeds the illusion that the State does not participate in exploitation.

However, 1. In all those places where capitalism is little developed and where the workers are not separated from their means of production, to a great degree the State places itself directly at the service of capital to help exploit the workers (e.g., the Congo, English capitalism in India). 2. The non-intervention in direct exploitation appears as it really is – a permanent, repressive intervention to guarantee the conditions of exploitation – every time that the freedom of exploitation, guaranteed by capitalist ownership, is found to be threatened by the workers' struggle, every time that the free act of purchase and sale which assures the continuation of exploitation is threatened by a strike, or every time the workers try to secure for themselves control over production by occupying factories or land. Then the repressive judicial apparatus and the army of the state intervene. All those conflicts which threaten the capitalists' free disposition of the means of production unleash the intervention of the state in one way or another.

The capitalist class and its apologists try hard to convince us to believe in a new capitalism which has overcome its infantile disorder, anarchy of production. They try in vain to convince us of a new discipline, acquired thanks to fundamental reforms of the structure and to the new rule which the State plays in regularizing the cycles of capital. At the bottom of all these reformist illusions rests the idea that capitalist anarchy has ended, that the needs of society will prevail over the course of development. Finally, a central subject has appeared: the state which directs and regulates development, imposing the viewpoint of social necessity.

The bourgeois interpretation unilaterally places the accent on the socialization of the productive forces: if competition brings with it the centralization of capital, the elimination of the small by the large and the progressive socialization of the different branches of the economy, why cannot the same thing happen for the whole society? Are we not approaching the existence of one single trust, of one gigantic enterprise including every branch of production?

The general response to this illusion is that *unequal development is the absolute law of capitalist development*.

Capitalism lives by unequal development. It only reabsorbs one inequality in order to create another. It develops the productive forces in one branch in order to take advantage of the low level of development of the adjacent enterprises. It socializes an entire branch in order to take



advantage of the relative weakness of the branches from which it buys or to which it sells. According to the apologists of neo-capitalism, the appearance of gigantic enterprises which dominate the market has been a decisive factor in the planning of production and the elimination of crises. They do not see that if one enterprise succeeds in eliminating all its competitors and achieves a monopoly position, the development of the productive forces thereby realized does not serve to satisfy social necessities to the fullest by lowering prices as much as the low costs of production would allow. The monopoly position which they have achieved allows them to impose prices which permit them to make superprofits. In this struggle for the domination of the market, each capitalist force which seeks to achieve a monopoly constructs gigantic factories capable by themselves of supplying the market. That force which is able to obtain the lowest production costs and flood the market with the lowest prices wins the dominant position. The result is a considerable excess of unused production capacity, each giant company being able to supply the market on its own. This unused capacity is over 50% in the United States. The initial cost of over-equipping is amply compensated for by the monopoly prices acquired after victory.

Another monopoly strategy is possible when one company in one branch of industry succeeds in obtaining better production methods than its competitors for a significant period of time. For example, by monopolizing patents.

On the other hand, the monopolies which live on unequal development have an interest in letting weaker businesses survive alongside them. In this way when the state wants to fix prices, it must take into account the highest cost of production of these companies if it does not want to force them to disappear. The monopoly enterprise thus gains a superprofit, since its costs of production are lower than these other companies.

Therefore, the socialization of the productive forces and the knowledge of the market tend to reinforce the inequalities of capitalist development by stabilizing superprofits.

Under these conditions, how absurd the idea of social planning (that is, equal development) under a capitalist regime seems.

In fact, the most powerful capitals always seek not the normal profit but superprofits. Only the absolute equality of profits for all individual capitals would permit us to think, without being utopian, about a rational distribution of capital according to a plan. Clearly the law of capitalist development is inequality: different profits appeared in different branches during the era of free competition; the current transformation of the

capitalist structure, that is, the socialization of the productive forces, and the development of monopolies, mass production, financial centralization, the increasing application of science to production, now permit, not in a transient way, but for long periods, the achievement of positions of superprofits.

Capitalism, in the course of its development, has had to invent means to adapt its structures to the development of the productive forces. In this way, when the level of the productive forces make individual or family capital insufficient to put the productive forces in action, the narrow framework of individual ownership was enlarged through stock companies and replaced by the collective ownership of the capitalists. In the same way, today state ownership allows for such an adaptation which, nevertheless, does not go beyond the limits of capitalist relations. If the gigantic productive forces cannot be exploited with a normal profit, then measures for nationalization tend to intervene. Those sectors of a higher organic composition of capital are nationalized in such a way that the equality of the rate of profit is realized among capitals of a lower organic composition, which results in a higher rate of profit.

On the other hand, the nationalized spheres – energy, transportation, etc., – serve all the capitalist branches of production. Consequently, the capitalists have an objective interest that production in these spheres be abundant, regular, and cheap.

The purpose of such an intervention by the state is not to subject capital to a centralized direction, but to liberate its initiative even more, strengthening its autonomy to allow it to continue its search for maximum profits.

State capitalism, taken in its narrow sense of the nationalized sector, can, if it is abstracted from the relations it maintains with the rest of capitalism, give the illusion of being an embryo of a socialist sector. But in fact, State capitalism stands for a reality that includes in the same structure both the private capitalist sector and the state capitalist sector.

The nationalized sector, by the special function which it performs in present day capitalism, permits capital to take advantage of the social character of the productive forces, while nonetheless remaining within the limits of the capitalist mode of production.

State monopoly capitalism is not a socialist system of production which develops in the heart of a capitalist system of production, but is the actual form taken by the subordination of the State to the interests of capital.

Only knowledge of the general laws of the capitalist mode of production permits us to determine the exact limits within which variations can exist. The general laws fix the limits and it is, in the last instance, the repressive apparatus of the state that defends their being made manifest. Within these limits extends the field of bourgeois politics whose purpose is to play on all the possible variations within these limits, in order to maintain these very limits, to keep the confrontation of the classes within these limits. The politics of the proletariat, on the contrary, consist in accumulating forces in the struggle in order to prepare the conditions for the abolition of those limits imposed by the dictatorship of capital.

For example, the struggle for the limitation of the work day does not put into question the fundamentals of exploitation; it is inscribed, therefore, within the limits fixed by the laws of this system of production. Within these limits extends the field of politics which the bourgeoisie can accept. The state can intervene to sanction and stabilize a relation of forces. When the working class was weak and disorganized, the state intervened to prolong the work day through harsh legislation. When the working class became stronger, the capitalist class yielded and the state enacted legislation to limit the work day.

If the state can, thus, impose upon capital the point of view of society's interests in the form of a law, it is because this intervention takes place within limits acceptable to the system of production. In no way could it impose the point of view of society if it clashed with the fundamental laws of capital. For example, to impose equal development depriving capital of all freedom of movement.

Nonetheless, before finishing this section, it seems important for us to point out that although the achievements of the working class are enclosed within the framework of the capitalist system, they do create greater and greater contradiction, and therefore prepare the material and political conditions for its disappearance.

## **7.7 The State in Transition from Capitalism to Socialism: The Dictatorship of the Proletariat**

We have seen here that one of the fundamental theses of Marxism in respect to the state is the necessity for the revolutionary proletariat, when it seizes state power, to destroy the bourgeois state apparatus and to create a new type of state apparatus, some of whose characteristics we noted when studying the Paris Commune.

What should be the character of this state? What is it that essentially defines it, from the class point of view?

Before answering this question, let us briefly look at the general situation of the proletariat in the transition from capitalism to socialism, since on this will depend, to a large degree, the character that this new State ought to take.

During the transition from capitalism to socialism social classes still exist and, therefore, the class struggle has not disappeared but has taken other forms. The proletariat has become the ruling class, but its weakness is still very great.

This weakness is found fundamentally at two levels: 1) that of the economic infrastructure, 2) that of the ideological superstructure.

1. *The weakness at the level of the infrastructure* has its roots in the non-correspondence between the new socialist relations of production established in the most important sectors of the economy and the technical relations of production which are still somewhat backward. The social ownership of the means of production is not accompanied by a real appropriation of these means in a collective form; certain technicians and administrators formed in the former regime continue directing production. The essential problem of socialist construction, on the level of the economic infrastructure, is to resolve this contradiction.

While socialist relations of production have not been established in all the sectors of the economy and while the contradiction between social ownership and real collective appropriation has not been resolved (it will only be resolved by achieving a powerful development of the productive forces) the risks of the restoration of capitalism, of regressing towards the former regime continue to exist. The period of transition is, therefore, a period of merciless struggle to definitively implant socialism.

2. *Weakness on the level of the ideological superstructure.* Given the economic situation described by Lenin in the previous quotation, a struggle is renewed between two roads: socialism and capitalism. This struggle, which has an economic base, exists, above all, at the ideological level. The classes which have been dispossessed of a large degree of their economic power seek another front for the struggle: the ideological front. They try in thousands of ways to infiltrate their ideas into the new social organization. The weakness of the proletariat in the ideological field is very great. The weight of

tradition and of the customs of many generations cannot be changed overnight. In the same way that it is necessary to carry out a political revolution to seize State power, and an economic revolution to change the relations of production from capitalist to socialist, it is necessary to make a revolution on the ideological level. And in order that this revolution be truly effective, it must be realized with the participation of the masses; it is not enough to revolutionize the ideology of some intellectuals and artists; it is necessary that the entire people struggle against the old habits and individuals and selfish ideas bequeathed by the capitalist regime in order to acquire a new conception of the world: the socialist conception and the new habits of solidarity and collective cooperation.

In the text which follows, Lenin correctly defines the essence of the dictatorship of the proletariat starting with the task that arises to eliminate these two kinds of weaknesses:

But the essence of proletarian dictatorship is not in force alone, or even mainly in force. Its chief feature is the organisation and discipline of the advanced contingent of the working people, of their vanguard; of their sole leader, the proletariat, whose object is to build socialism, abolish the division of society into classes, make all members of society working people, and remove the basis for all exploitation of man by man. This object cannot be achieved at one stroke. It requires a fairly long period of transition from capitalism to socialism, because reorganization of production is a difficult matter, because radical changes in all spheres of life need time, and because the enormous force of habit of running things in a petty-bourgeois and bourgeois way can only be overcome by a long and stubborn struggle. That is why Marx spoke of an entire period of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the period of transition from capitalism to socialism.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, since the proletariat to complete these tasks, is faced with a fierce opposition from the bourgeoisie, the proletarian state must necessarily take the form of a dictatorship against the classes which are opposed to the construction of socialism:

The dictatorship of the proletariat is the most determined and most ruthless war waged by the new class against a *more powerful* enemy, against the bourgeoisie, whose resistance

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<sup>16</sup>Lenin, "Greetings to the Hungarian Workers."

is increased *tenfold* by its overthrow (even though only in one country) and whose power lies. not only in the strength of international capital, in the strength and durability of the international connection of the bourgeoisie, but also in the *force of habit*, in the strength of *small production*. For, unfortunately, very, a lot of small production still remains in the world, and small production *engenders* capitalism and the bourgeoisie continuously, daily, hourly, spontaneously, and on a mass scale. For all these reasons the dictatorship of the proletariat is necessary, and victory over the bourgeoisie is impossible without a long, stubborn and desperate war of life and death, a war which requires perseverance, discipline, firmness, indomitableness and unity of will.<sup>17</sup>

But this dictatorship against a privileged minority is a *democracy for the majority of the people*. How could the measures suggested by Marx after the experience of the Paris Commune not have an essentially democratic character?

*Bourgeois democracy* is a democracy for a minority and a *dictatorship for the majority of the people*. It is now transformed into a democracy for the majority and dictatorship for the small group which does not accept giving up its privileges.

The proletariat would prefer to create socialism under a regime of absolute democracy for everyone, but the reality of the class struggle, the character it necessarily takes when the proletariat proposes to destroy the privileges of the ruling classes, makes this dictatorship necessary.

One of the important contributions Marx makes to the theory of history is to have shown this necessity in a very clear way.

In the following text Lenin demonstrates the role which the dictatorship of the proletariat plays in Marxist theory.

It is often said and written that the main point in Marx's theory is the class struggle. But this is wrong. And this wrong notion very often results in an opportunist distortion of Marxism and its falsification in a spirit acceptable to the bourgeoisie. For the theory of the class struggle was created *not* by Marx, but by the bourgeoisie *before* Marx and generally speaking, it is acceptable to the bourgeoisie. Those who recognise *only* the class struggle are not yet Marxists; they may be found to be still within the bounds of bourgeois

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<sup>17</sup>Lenin, " 'Left-wing' Communism, an Infantile Disorder."

thinking and bourgeois politics. To confine Marxism to the theory of the class struggle means curtailing Marxism, distorting it, reducing it to something acceptable to the bourgeoisie. A Marxist is solely someone who *extends* the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the *dictatorship of the proletariat*. This is what constitutes the most profound distinction between the Marxist and the ordinary petty (as well as big) bourgeois. This is the touchstone on which the *real* understanding and recognition of Marxism should be tested.<sup>18</sup>

In conclusion, we want to say that, to the same degree that there exists different forms of the bourgeois state, the essence of which remains the same: *a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie*, in the same manner the transition from capitalism to socialism can produce different forms of the proletarian state, but its essence will remain the same: *the dictatorship of the proletariat*.

## 7.8 Summary

In this chapter we have defined what is meant by the juridical-political structure, and we then analyzed the most important institution of this level in a class society: the state. We have seen that it is necessary to distinguish two state functions: the technical function and that of political class domination. We have looked at the difference between the state apparatus and political power, between the destruction and the extinction of the state, between different kinds of states and forms of government. We have pointed out that political and economic power do not always coincide. Finally we have concentrated on the analysis of certain aspects of the present-day capitalist state and on the fundamental characteristic of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In this chapter we have seen the following concepts of historical materialism:

- juridico-political apparatus
- state apparatus
- political power
- the withering away of the state
- the destruction of the state
- the dictatorship of the proletariat

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<sup>18</sup>“State and Revolution.”

**Questions**

1. What is meant by the juridico-political structure?
2. What are the functions of the state?
3. What is the state apparatus?
4. What is meant by the withering away of the state.
5. What is meant by the destruction of the state?
6. What is political power?
7. What is meant by types of state?
8. What is meant by forms of government?
9. Why is it important not to confuse both concepts?
10. What are the different forms of government which exist today in the capitalist states of Latin America?
11. In what country or countries in Latin America does the economic power of the capitalist class not coincide with its political power?
12. Why do they assert that the capitalist state is above the class struggle?
13. Does the nationalization of certain sectors of production of a country harm or favor the bourgeoisie of that country?
14. What is the difference between nationalization and socialization?
15. Why is the dictatorship of the proletariat necessary?

**7.9 Themes for Reflection**

1. How do you analyze, from a Marxist viewpoint, the series of military dictatorships in Latin America.
2. What possibilities do the capitalist countries of Latin America have to maneuver in the face of North American imperialism?
3. What sectors of production can be nationalized in Latin America without injuring the interests of the bourgeoisie?
4. How do you destroy the bourgeois state apparatus after having succeeded in conquering political power?



# 8

## Mode of Production, Social Formation and Political Conjuncture

### 8.1 The Concept of Mode of Production

Now that we have studied the economic, juridico-political, and ideological levels of society, we can move on to those elements which will permit us to define the Marxist concept of mode of production.

Marx and Engels frequently used the expression “mode of production of material goods” or simply “mode of production” in order to *describe* the *manner*, the *form*, the *mode* by which material goods are produced.

Let us look at some texts:

The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. (Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*)

It is not what is made but how, and by what instruments of labour, that distinguishes different economic epochs. (*Capital*)

At first capital subordinates labour on the basis of the technical conditions within which labour has been carried on up to that point in history. It does not therefore directly change the mode of production. The production of surplus-value in the form we have so far considered, by means of simple extension of the working day, appeared therefore independently of any change in the mode of production itself. (*Capital*)

The materialist conception of history starts from the principle that production, and with production the exchange of its products, is the basis of every social order: that in every society which has appeared in history the distribution of the products, and with it the division of society into classes or estates, is determined by what is produced and how it is produced, and how the product is exchanged. According to this conception, the ultimate causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in the minds of men, in their increasing insight into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the mode of production and exchange; they are to be sought not in the *philosophy* but in the *economics* of the epoch concerned. (Engels, *Anti-Duhring*)

We should not confuse the expression “mode of production of material goods” with the concept *mode of production*. The former is a descriptive notion which only refers to the economic structure of society; the latter, on the contrary, is a theoretical concept which refers to the entire social totality, that is, both to the economic structure as well as to the other levels of the social totality: juridico-political and ideological.

Marx and Engels never defined the concept of mode of production which they so often use. The majority of Marxist writers use this term without defining it; and those who do define it, limit its significance to the economic level alone. We think, nevertheless, in accord with Louis Althusser, that the reduction of this concept to only the economic level limits the implicit sense which Marx gave it in his most finished work, *Capital*.

By studying the mode of production of material goods, that is, what we have called the production process, we have seen that, from the Marxist point of view, it is not enough to define it only as a technical process. This technical process takes place under determined social relations – the social relations of production – which, in the last instance, make the process possible. Moreover, we have seen that elements of the superstructure of society enter into the making of these relations. Without the explicit, or implicit consent of the members of society and its institutions, these relations could not remain in force.

Engels affirms this concerning class societies, in the following text:

Society thus far, based upon class antagonisms, had need of the state, that is, an organization of the exploiting class at each period for the maintenance of its external conditions of production; that is, therefore, for forcible keeping the

exploited class in the conditions of oppression corresponding with the given mode of production (slavery, serfdom, wage-labor). (*Anti-Duhring*)

In this text Engels shows the necessity for the existence of superstructural conditions to maintain a determined kind of social production.

Let us see now, what Marx says in one of the few explicit passages in *Capital* on this question:

It is evident, however, that in the aboriginal and undeveloped conditions on which this social relation of production<sup>1</sup> and the mode of production corresponding to it are based, tradition must play a predominant role. It is also evident here as always that it is in the interest of the dominant section of society to sanctify the existing situation as a law and to fix the limits given by custom and tradition as legal ones. Even ignoring any other factors, this happens automatically as soon as the constant reproduction of the basis of the existing situation, the relationship underlying it, assumes a regular and ordered form in the course of time; and this regulation and order is itself an indispensable moment of any mode of production that is to become solidly established and free from mere accident or caprice. It is precisely the form in which it is socially established, and hence the form of its relative emancipation from mere caprice and accident. It can attain this form in stagnant conditions of both the production process and the social relations corresponding to it, simply by reproducing itself repeatedly. (*Capital, Vol. III*)

If tradition and order are “indispensable elements of any mode of production,” as Marx clearly says in this text, this cannot be defined only as the economic structure of society, but includes the entire social totality.

The concept of mode of production is precisely the concept which gives us a scientific way to think about a social totality.

There is a great difference between *describing* – pointing out its visible characteristics – and *understanding* something. When a patient tells his doctor what he feels, he only is describing the symptoms of his illness. The doctor, with his understanding of the human organism, is able to diagnose a given illness starting from these symptoms, for example,

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<sup>1</sup>Here Marx is referring to pre-capitalist relations in which the landlord is the owner of the land and the direct producer is only a possessor. De jure all his surplus labor belongs to the landlord.

appendicitis. He sums up in one word the extensive description of the symptoms which the patient makes. This word implies a *understanding* of the illness. The application of the understanding is what enables him to cure the patient. In order to properly diagnose a given illness, it is necessary to grasp the unity which enables one to understand the different symptoms. Likewise, in order to define an object – understand it – it is necessary to discover the unity, or the form of organization of the elements which first served to describe it.

It is possible to describe a society; to say for example, that in every society there are industries, cultivated land, post offices, schools, an army, police, laws, ideological currents, etc. But the organization of these elements in different structures (economic, juridico-political, and ideological) and the determination of the role which each one of these structures plays in the society, permits us to pass from *the description* to *the understanding* of a social reality, to establish its laws of development and, therefore, the possibility of consciously guiding it. In Marx's time everyone *perceived* and *described* the symptoms of the "capitalist sickness": the poverty of the masses, the wealth of certain small groups, the exploitation of women and children, etc. Some rebelled; others sought to explain this situation by returning to fatalistic, divine laws: "there have always been poor people and there always will be." But Marx and Engels knew how to advance from the description to an understanding of the causes and the laws of capitalist development, an understanding which later permitted Marxist parties to make revolution and establish new social systems.

From what has been said above, it is possible to better understand the statement we have made: the concept of *mode of production* is the theoretical concept which gives us the ability to think about the social totality.

Every mode of production is defined by:

1. A global structure formed by three regional structures: the economic structure, the juridico-political structure (laws, the state, etc.), the ideological structure (ideas, customs, etc.).
2. One of the regional structures within this global structures which dominates the others.

It is important to point out here that it is not always the economic level or structure which plays the dominant role, as those who vulgarize Marxism frequently claim. Marx clearly tells us this in a footnote in the first volume of *Capital*:

I seize this opportunity of briefly refuting an objection made by a German-American publication to my work *Zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*, 1859. My view is that each particular mode of production, and the relations of production corresponding to it at each given moment, in short 'the economic structure of society', is 'the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness', and that 'the mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life.' In the opinion of the German-American publication this is all very true for our own times, in which material interests are preponderant, but not for the Middle Ages, dominated by Catholicism, nor for Athens and Rome, dominated by politics. In the first place, it strikes us as odd that anyone should suppose that these well-worn phrases about the Middle Ages and the ancient world were unknown to anyone else. One thing is clear: the Middle Ages could not live on Catholicism, nor could the ancient world on politics. On the contrary, it is the manner in which they gained their livelihood which explains why in one case politics, in the other case Catholicism, played the chief part. (*Capital*)

If we sum up the essentials of the note, we can see that Marx held that if economics dominates in capitalism, we cannot deny that in the middle ages Catholicism dominated (that is to say, an ideological structure) and in Athens and Rome it was politics which was dominant. But he says: "it is the manner in which they gained their livelihood that explains" why here politics and there Catholicism played the chief (or dominant) role.

3. In this global structure, the economic structure is always *determinant* in the last instance.

As the text we have just cited indicates, it is the economic conditions which determine which of the regional structures will have the dominant role.

The distinction between the *dominant* and *determinant* role in the last instance is a fundamental distinction which must be made, and to which Althusser has given full weight. It is difficult to find explicit formulations about this distinction in Marx and Engels since the object of their study was the capitalist mode of production

in which both determinants coincide. In this mode of production economics plays not only the determinant role in the last instance, but also the dominant role.

Let us define more precisely what we mean by a dominant structure. At the level of the mode of production we consider as dominant that regional structure which plays the fundamental role in the reproduction of a given mode of production.

In the case of the capitalist mode of production, its reproduction is assured by laws internal to the economic structure. This does not mean that superstructural elements are absent, but that their presence is not the fundamental element in the reproduction of the system. The laws of capitalist economic development (accumulation, extended reproduction, etc.) determine the form in which the system reproduces itself and give it its specific character. The superstructural factors, only intervene manifestly when obstacles arise which block the unfolding of these laws. This knowledge permits us to affirm that in the capitalist mode of production it is the economic structure which occupies the dominant place within the global structure of the mode of production.

In the case of the feudal mode of production, it is not the economic laws which assure the reproduction of the system. In order that the surplus continue to be appropriated by the landlords, the active and fundamental intervention of superstructural elements is required. Without a fundamental relationship of dependence linked to ideological and juridico-political factor, the serfs would not work the land of the lord, nor would they turn over a part of their labor in other forms of rent (in kind or in money). In this mode of production therefore, it is the ideological or juridico-political superstructure which is dominant, since it is through them that the reproduction of the mode of production is assured.

4. Finally, what characterizes every *mode of production* is its dynamism, that is, the continuous reproduction of its conditions of existence. The capitalist mode of production, for example, at the same time that it reproduces material goods in a form which requires the division of labor in that social totality into capitalists and workers, and which creates an entire ideology that favors this kind of production and a form of power that defend and stimulates it, also continuously reproduces its conditions of reproduction.

At the same time that it produces material goods, it reproduces capitalist relations of production. And at the same time that it re-

produces these relations, it reproduces its superstructural condition of existence; that is, the ideological conditions and the power relations, as well as the role that they play within the social structure.

**Mode of production** is the theoretical concept which gives us the ability to think about the social totality as a “structure in dominance”, in which the economic level is determinant in the last instance<sup>2</sup>.

To conclude, we must insist that the structural nucleus or matrix of the mode of production is the relations of production. These relations explain the characteristic type of articulation of the different regional structures in each mode of production; they determine which of the structures will occupy the dominant role. Let us recall that Marx explicitly says that “the direct relationship which exists between the direct producers and the owners of the means of production” reveals to us “the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure.”<sup>3</sup>

## 8.2 The Concept of Social Formation

The concept of *mode of production* refers to an abstract object, a pure social totality, an “ideal” in which the production of material goods is carried out in a homogeneous form. But in the great majority of historically given societies, the production of material goods is not carried out in a homogeneous way. In the same society it is possible to find different kinds of relations of production.

Russia as analyzed by Lenin in his article on “The Tax in Kind” (which corresponds more or less, to the period between 1917 and 1929) is

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<sup>2</sup>The concept of a structure in dominance used here was introduced by Louis Althusser in his article, “On the Materialist Dialectic,” in *For Marx*. In the introduction to the Spanish edition (*La revolución teórica de Marx*) we gave the following definition of this concept: “the structure in dominance defines the Marxist totality as a complex whole which possesses the unity of a coordinated structure, in which there is one element which plays the dominant role and others which are subordinated to it; a dynamic unity in which there is an exchange of roles, the economic level being what determines in the last instance the element of the social structure which will play the dominant role.”

<sup>3</sup>We think that it is not correct to state, as Poulantzas does in his book, *Poder político y clases sociales en el Estado capitalista* (“Political Power and Social Classes”), that the matrix of the mode of production is the type of coordination of its different levels. If, as Poulantzas himself points out (p. 22), it is the relations of production (property, real appropriation) which determine the type of coordination of the levels of the mode of production, this type of coordination is only an effect of that which really sets up the matrix of this mode: the relations of production. We think this conception of Poulantzas is the strategic nodal point of his theoretical errors about the concept of social classes.

an example of the combination of different economic systems. Let us see how Lenin enumerated them:

1. Patriarchal peasant economy. That is to say, to a great degree, a natural economy
2. Small commodity production. This category includes the majority of the peasants who sell wheat.
3. Private capitalism.
4. State capitalism.
5. Socialism.

Russia was so large and varied that all these different economic and social forms were mixed in it. In this consisted the novelty of the Russian situation.

Another example is France as analyzed by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. There we had the combination of different modes of production of material goods: feudal, patriarchal, small commodity, and capitalist.

These diverse relations of production which co-exist in a historically given society do not do so in an anarchic way, nor are they isolated from one another; one of them occupies a dominant position, imposing on the rest its own laws of operation.

In the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* Marx says the following:

There is in every social formation a particular branch of production which determines the position and importance of all the others, and the relations obtaining in this branch accordingly determine the relations of all other branches as well.

If we study, for example, the diverse countries of Latin America we find there diverse relations of production which range from highly developed capitalist relation to those which characterize an economy of near autarchy in certain regions; with capitalist relation of production dominating in the majority, if not in all of them. The capitalist relations subject to their law of development the other relations, which are subordinated to them.

Therefore, in the majority of historically given societies, we encounter a variety of relations of production. But in this diversity there is always one set of relations of production which is dominant and whose laws of operation have a decisive influence over the rest.

From what has been said above we can deduce that the domination



of a given type of relations of production does not automatically make all the other relations of production disappear; these can continue to exist, although modified and subordinated to the dominant relations of production.

We can point out, for example, that since the epoch of the *conquista*, the countries of Latin America have been subjected to the capitalist world system, at first under the form of commercial capitalism and later through properly capitalist relations of production (in the majority of countries). But to say that this capitalist world system dominates does not deny that there were and still are, in a very widespread form, pre-capitalist relations of production: relations of production which approach primitive communism in some isolated places, semifeudal relations in many peasant areas, and a quite a large spread of small, artisan production<sup>4</sup>.

Now then, the dominant relations of production not only impose their laws of operation on the other relations of production that are subordinated to them, but they also determine the general character of the superstructure of the given society.

The complexity of the economic structure and the dominant character of one of the sets of relations of production that co-exist in it, explains the complex character of the ideological and juridico-political structures of every historically given society.

To refer to this historically given social reality, we use the concept of a *social formation*. This concept refers, as we have seen, to a concrete, complex, impure reality – like all reality. This is in distinction to the concept of *mode of production* which refers to an abstract, pure, “ideal” object.

A *social formation* is a concrete, historically given, social reality.

This concrete, historically given, social totality can correspond to a given country, or to a series of countries which have more or less similar characteristics and a common history. Thus, we can speak of the Chilean, Mexican, etc., social formation, as well as the Latin American social formation.

As with every social totality, this concrete, historically determined social totality is composed of an economic structure, an ideological

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<sup>4</sup>It seems to us that the serious error which Andre Gunder Frank makes in his first books and articles on Latin America is to believe that in order to assert the domination of the world capitalist system it is necessary to deny the existence of any type of pre-capitalist relations. The domination of capitalism in relations of exchange is confused with the domination at the level of relations of production. This error prevents the correct analysis of social classes in Latin America.

structure, and a juridico-political structure. But at this level, they have a much more complex character. Therefore, in every social formation, with very few exceptions, we find

1. A *composite economic structure*, in which diverse sets of relations of production co-exist. One of these sets of relations occupies a dominant place, imposing its laws of operation on the other, subordinated sets of relations.
2. A *composite ideological structure* formed by different ideological tendencies. The dominant ideological tendency, which subordinates and deforms the other tendencies, generally corresponds to the ideological tendency of the ruling class, that is, to the ideological tendency belonging to the exploiting pole of the dominant relation of production;
3. A *composite juridico-political structure* which fulfills the function of domination by the ruling class.

The social formation is, therefore, a composite structure, composed of composite structures in each region which are articulated starting from the structure of the relations of production. It is necessary to study each regional structure in its relative autonomy in relation to the rest and in accordance with its own characteristics.

The concept of mode of production refers to an abstract social totality (capitalist, feudal, slave, etc.). The concept of social formation refers to a concrete social totality. This is not a combination of modes of production, of abstract or ideal social totalities; it is a concrete, historically given reality, structured beginning with the form in which the different sets of relations of production which co-exist at the level of the economic structure are combined<sup>5</sup>.

Therefore, to study a social formation, to study a given country, we must always begin by diagnosing what kind of relations of production exist, how they are combined, what is the dominant set of relations of production, and how it exercises its influence over the subordinated relations of production.

We know that the fundamental thesis of historical materialism consists in explaining the ensemble of the historical processes which are produced in a society, beginning with its economic infrastructure and, therefore, beginning with a composite economic structure in which different sets of relations of production are combined. This thesis does not imply

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<sup>5</sup>The definition of a social formation as a simple combination of modes of production is given by Poulantzas in his book, *Poder político y clases sociales en el Estado capitalista* ("Political Power and Social Classes in the Capitalist State"), pp. 13-14.

that Marxism denies the importance of the other levels of society. The economic structure determines, in the last instance, social development; but it does not automatically produce anything. The ideological and juridico-political levels have a relative autonomy, within the margins which the economic structure allows them, that is, within their own laws of development. Their development can be more advanced, or it can lag behind with respect to the economic structure.

The study of a social formation is fundamentally an empirical study. It requires concrete data, statistics or other such data, which must be subjected to critical study. The other structures of the society can *never* be *deduced* from the economic infrastructure. The economic level serves only as a “guiding thread” in the detailed and specific investigation of the ideological and juridical-political structures.

Finally, at the level of the social formation, the historically given, social totality takes the form of a “concrete individuality,” which maintains a certain identity through all its transformations. One country or a group of countries is distinguished from another country or group of countries by its individual characteristics and its history. Different phases of development can be distinguished in this history; that which determines the passage from one phase to another is a change in the way in which the varied relations of production which co-exist within it fit together. The relations of production which occupy the dominant place in the economic structure determine the character of the phase, and, moreover, they lend it its name. When we speak of capitalist countries, or semi-feudal countries, we are referring to the dominant relations of production in the social formation; but this does not preclude the existence of other relations of production which occupy a subordinate place.

If one were to use rigorous terminology, one would really have to say: a capitalist-dominated social formation and a semifeudal-dominated social formation.

### 8.3 What is the Object of *Capital*?

With these two concept – *mode of production* and *social formation* – we can answer this question concerning the object of *Capital*. We can formulate the question more precisely as follows: is the object of *Capital* the study of the capitalist mode of production (an abstract object) in its entirety, or is it only the study of the economic structure of this mode of production; or is it the study of a social formation, that is, a historically given social reality: England in the second half of the 19th century?

Let's see what Lenin had to see about this: "The only object of Capital is the precise study of capitalist society. This study implies a materialist analysis of that society and of its superstructures."<sup>6</sup>

And in a note a few pages further on, he adds that if other features of the economic system of the middle ages have been left out, it is because they belong to feudalism, whereas Marx only was studying the capitalist system of production.<sup>7</sup>

In these texts, Lenin points out precisely the limits of Marx's study: it deals with the regime, system, and social organization of capitalism, that is, a pure, abstract object. We ought to mention here that Lenin uses the term "social formation" in the sense of mode of production.<sup>8</sup>

The following text makes the abstract character of Marx's object clearer:

we are only out to present the internal organization of the capitalist mode of production, its ideal average, as it were.<sup>9</sup>

The theory of capital assumes that the worker receives the full value of his labor power. This is the ideal of capitalism, but by no means its reality. The theory of rent presupposes that the entire agrarian population has been completely divided into landowners, capitalists and hired laborers. This is the ideal of capitalism, but by no means its reality. The theory of realization presupposes the proportional distribution of production. This is the ideal of capitalism, but by no means its reality.[<sup>8.9.b</sup>]

[8.9.b]: Lenin, "Once More on the Theory of Realization", *Collected Works*. Vol. 4, pp. 86-87.

Now let's see what Marx himself says about the capitalist mode of production and about England: "What I have to examine in this work is the capitalist mode of production, and the relations of production and forms of inter- course [*Verkehrsverhältnisse*] that correspond to it. Until now, their *locus classicus* has been England. This is the reason why England is used as the main illustration of the theoretical developments

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<sup>6</sup>Lenin, *What the "Friends of the People" Are and How They Fight the Social-Democrats*.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Lenin uses the term "social formation" in an undifferentiated sense both to refer to an abstract social totality (what we have called "mode of production") and to refer to a concrete social totality (what we have called "social formation"). Therefore, it is necessary to determine in what sense Lenin uses the term, whenever it appears in one of his texts.

<sup>9</sup>*Capital*, Vol. III, p. 970.

I make.”<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, in *Capital*, Marx studied an abstract object: *the capitalist mode of production*. England in the second half of the nineteenth century figures in this work only as an example which serves to illustrate his theoretical statements, since it was the country in which capitalism was most advanced.

But can we say that *Capital* is a study of the entirety of the capitalist mode of production?

Before answering this question, let's see what Lenin says, after having schematically analyzed the characteristics of the economic structure of the capitalist system of production:

Such is the skeleton of Capital. The whole point, however, is that Marx did not content himself with this skeleton, that he did not confine himself to “economic theory” in the ordinary sense of the term, that, while explaining the structure and development of the given formation of society exclusively through production relations, he nevertheless everywhere and incessantly scrutinised the superstructure corresponding to these production relations and clothed the skeleton in flesh and blood. The reason Capital has enjoyed such tremendous success is that this book by a “German economist” showed the whole capitalist social formation to the reader as a living thing—with its everyday aspects, with the actual social manifestation of the class antagonism inherent in production relations, with the bourgeois political superstructure that protects the rule of the capitalist class, with the bourgeois ideas of liberty, equality and so forth, with the bourgeois family relationships.<sup>11</sup>

In this text, Lenin affirms that in *Capital* Marx does not limit himself to studying the economic structure of the capitalist mode of production but he also refers to the corresponding superstructural elements.

What's really going on is that *Capital*, as we know it, is an unfinished work. It represents the scientific study of the “economic level” of the capitalist mode of production, and for that reason it's generally considered a work of economics. Marx also intended to analyze the law, State, and ideology of the capitalist mode of production – as he lets us see in the in the work plan he presents in the *Introduction to a Critique of Political*

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<sup>10</sup> *Capital*, Vol. I, Preface to the First Edition.

<sup>11</sup> Lenin, *What the “Friends of the People” Are and How They Fight the Social-Democrats*.

*Economy* – but, he didn't manage to get it done. However, it is necessary to point out that this theory of the “economic level” of the capitalist mode of production necessarily presupposes, if not a developed theory, at least certain theoretical elements that refer to the other parts of this mode of production: the ideological and juridico-political. Lenin refers to these elements in the text cited above.

Therefore, *Capital* is not limited only to economics. It goes far beyond the economy, fitting with the Marxist conception of economic reality, which can only be understood as a level, a part, a regional structure organically inscribed within the totality of a mode of production. It is for this reason, in spite of the fact that Marx's analysis remains fundamentally at the level of the capitalist economy, that important theoretical elements can be found in his work for elaborating the theory of the other levels of this mode of production, elements which to this day have not been elaborated.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, it is necessary to point out that *Capital* is limited to the complete and scientific study of the economic level of the capitalist mode of production in its competitive phase, which is fundamentally characterized by the free competition of individual capitalists.

Despite the fact that Marx discovered the tendency of the concentration of capital and the formation of monopolies, he could not carry on a scientific analysis of this stage in the development of capitalism, since, as a thinker, he was limited in his deliberations by the problematic of his own epoch.

## 8.4 The Concept of Political Conjuncture

At this point we have seen the concepts of *mode of production* and *social formation*. The former refers to an abstract social totality, the latter to a historically given social totality. Now we are going to study the concept which refers to the most concrete level of analysis of a social formation, the concept of *political conjuncture*.

The ***political conjuncture*** is the “current moment” of the class struggle in a social formation or a system of social formations.<sup>13</sup>

The political conjuncture is the “current moment” of a social for-

<sup>12</sup>Althusser, “Theory, Theoretical Practice...”, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup>The concept of “political conjuncture” can refer both to a given social formation and to the global situation which frames relations between systems of social formations. For example, the global conjuncture which produced the victory of the socialist revolution in Russia, etc.

mation. This “current moment” is characterized by a synthesis of the contradictions of a formation (or of a system of social formations) in a given moment in its development. It is expressed fundamentally as an opposition between different social forces.

The great contribution of Mao Zedong to the study of the conjuncture has been to provide us with a scientific method for analyzing it in his claim that every political conjuncture is a system of contradictions.

In this system, one contradiction occupies the principal position and the others a secondary position.

There are many contradictions in the process of development of a complex thing. Among them, one is necessarily the principal contradiction: the one whose existence and development determines or influences the existence and development of the others.

For instance, in capitalist society the two forces in contradiction, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, form the principal contradiction. The other contradictions, such as those between the remnant feudal class and the bourgeoisie, between the peasant petty bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie, between the proletariat and the peasant petty bourgeoisie, between the non-monopoly capitalists and the monopoly capitalists, between bourgeois democracy and bourgeois fascism, among the capitalist countries and between imperialism and the colonies, are all determined or influenced by this principal contradiction.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, each of these contradictions has two aspects: a principal aspect and a secondary aspect.

But, in any given contradiction, whether principal or secondary, should the two contradictory aspects be treated as equal? Again, no. In any contradiction the development of the contradictory aspects is uneven. Sometimes they seem to be in equilibrium, which is however only temporary and relative, while unevenness is basic. Of the two contradictory aspects, one must be principal and the other secondary. The principal aspect is the one playing the leading role in the contradiction. The nature of a thing is determined mainly by the principal aspect of a contradiction, the aspect which has gained the dominant position.

But this situation is not static; the principal and the non-

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<sup>14</sup>Mao Zedong, *On Contradiction*

principal aspects of a contradiction transform themselves into each other and the nature of the thing changes accordingly.<sup>15</sup>

After studying the principal and secondary contradictions, and their principal and secondary aspects, it is important to study the particularities of each aspect. For example, in the case of the proletariat we would study the level of political consciousness of the militant, revolutionary worker, the level of consciousness of the working masses, the existence or non-existence of a labor aristocracy, the degree of belief in the system of “democratic government,” etc.

Finally, it is not enough to know the particular characteristics of each aspect; it is important to analyze what kind of relation is established between the two aspects. “We know, for instance, that the exploitative forces, which always have more ‘experience’ than the exploited forces, use two general forms of struggle: violence and deceit, bullets and ‘sugar coated bullets’, the gun and the pen.”<sup>16</sup> Their political domination permits them to use the repressive force of the state against the exploited; their ideological domination gives them the means of information and propaganda to perpetrate collective deception. In a given moment, the bourgeoisie primarily relies on deceit, in other moments it resorts to violence, depending on the degree of organization, consciousness, and combativeness of the masses.

Concrete analysis involves the study of the specific form of the struggle taking place between the two aspects of one contradiction.

Any change in the system of contradictions which defines a given conjuncture, be it at the level of the principal and secondary contradictions, or at the level of the principal and secondary aspects of these contradictions, produces a corresponding change in the current moment: a change in the political conjuncture.

Only a correct analysis of the political conjuncture – that is, of the current moment – lets us put forward adequate slogans of struggle, that is, slogans which can advance the revolutionary forces.

In Russia, there was a fundamental difference between the contradictions resolved by the February Revolution and the contradictions resolved by the October Revolution, as well as between the methods used to resolve them. The principle of using different methods to resolve different contradictions is one which Marxist-Leninists must strictly observe. The dogmatists do not observe this principle. They ignore the

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>“La pensée de Mao Tse-tung”, en *Cahiers Marxistes-Leninistes*, núm.14, p.28



differences between distinct revolutionary situations, and therefore do not understand that one has to use different methods to resolve different contradictions. They instead uniformly adopt a formula which they imagine to be inalterable, and mechanically apply it everywhere. This practice only leads to setbacks for the revolution.<sup>17</sup>

## 8.5 The Concept of Transition<sup>18</sup>

In studying the concept of mode of production, we saw that it refers to a dynamic structure which continuously tends to reproduce its conditions of existence. In this part we'll study the conditions which determine the change from one mode of production to another.

According to traditional Marxist thought, the material basis of the transition from one mode of production to another is characterized by a mismatch between the old dominant relations of production which come into contradiction with the degree of development reached by the productive forces. It is a matter of replacing the old relations of production by new ones which correspond to the level reached by the development of the productive forces.

The growth of the productive forces and the embryonic rise of new relation of production have a spontaneous and unforeseen character. The agents of production, by perfecting the old means of production and creating new ones, thereby developing the productive forces, do not realize the social consequences which they produce. Their thinking, their consciousness, does not go beyond the immediate benefit that this process gives them.

But the development of the productive forces and the change produced in the relations of production operate spontaneously only up to a certain limit. When the new productive forces and the social relations of production which correspond to them, which have been born within the old infrastructure, come into conflict with the old social relations of production which had dominated them, spontaneous development is replaced by conscious activity. This is the struggle of the most advanced classes, that is, those which arise from the new relations of production by creating at the economic, juridico-political and ideological levels conditions which

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<sup>17</sup>Mao Zedong, op. cit. In Lenin's writings from the period between the February Revolution and the October Revolution, we find excellent analyses of the distinct conjunctures which were arising and of the new political slogans which had to be put forward in each situation.

<sup>18</sup>We want to warn the reader that this section is one of the weakest in the book.

favor the development of the new relations of production.

Now then, the old relations of production are defended by the old ruling classes which have at their disposal the state and all the means of ideological influence over the masses. They are interested in maintaining the old relations of production, and they use whatever methods they have at their disposal to resist the advanced social forces which aspire to put an end to the old forms of property in order to open the way for the full development of the productive forces.

Only through the class struggle – through revolution – is it possible to destroy the power of the old ruling classes and the economic consequences of that power.

The revolutionary classes create new power, revolutionary power, and by relying on it they destroy the obstacles which prevent the full development of the productive forces and the new relations of production corresponding to them. In this way the spontaneous process of social development first laid at the level of the infrastructure, is replaced by the conscious activity of the masses guided by the class most interested in breaking with the old system.

The economic basis and cause of social revolutions was explained by Marx in his *Preface to a Critique of Political Economy*:

At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. *Then begins an era of social revolution.* (Our emphasis, M.H.)

Now, using the concepts of *modes of production* and of *social formation*, we can say that this “transition from one mode of production to another” always takes place within a given social formation.

What happens first is this: within the composite economic structure of the aforementioned social formation, in which coexist various modes of production of material goods (that is, different sets of relations of production), one of the sets of relations of production which had up to this point been subordinate, begins to acquire a more and more important role. This continues until it becomes the dominant set of relations of production at the level of the economic structure. Now, since the juridico-political and ideological structures of the social formation haven’t changed

– tending to favor the old dominant relations of production – it becomes necessary that the class representing the new relations of production take over the state apparatus in order to change the ideological and juridico-political conditions which are curbing the development of the new relations of production.

The conscious and violent process of destroying the old relations of production, that is the *revolution*, is the general law which characterizes the change of dominance of one social relation of production to another in a given social formation.

What is particular to the transition from capitalism to socialism is that *it is not possible for socialist relations of production to arise* in the middle of capitalist society – that is, a social formation in which capitalist relations of production predominate – as has been the case in all previous societies in which the new relations of production were born within the social formation in which other relations of production predominated.

For example, in France, the transition (in terms of the economic structure) from the feudal mode of production dominant until that time, to the capitalist mode of production, essentially took place before the Revolution of 1789. That is, not only the productive forces but also capitalist social relations of production already existed. From this point, the Revolution of 1789, a revolution at the juridico-political level, took place after the (spontaneous) revolution on the economic level. The taking of power by the bourgeoisie only served to consolidate and stimulate the productive forces and their corresponding relations of production.

On the other hand, if in the very heart of a social formation dominated by capitalism productive forces are born and developed of a more and more social character that could serve as the basis of socialist relations of production, these relations cannot be established without a revolution which would give political power to the working class.

Establishing social relations of production does not simply involve transforming the factories in such a way that capital is suppressed and that the workers administer the enterprise. If the problem could be reduced to this, the seeds of socialism could arise within a capitalist society, like the case of the kibbutzes in Israel. But since socialist relations of production do not refer to only the factories but to the entire economy of the country – the ways in which different sectors of production must be coordinated, etc. – they cannot be born within capitalist society, whose law of development implies precisely a certain anarchy of social production.

Till now we have seen that historical materialism shows us that to

a certain degree of development of productive forces correspond certain social relations of production, and how on the base of these relations certain juridico-political and ideological relations are established. If the relations of production change, then sooner or later the other relations change too.

But this thesis of historical materialism, which seems to establish a certain order – step one, changes in the infrastructure, step two, change in the superstructure – must be critically studied.

Which modes of production is Marx referring to when he asserts this in the Preface to the Critique?

He is referring to the modes of production in which “bourgeois society” is the “last antagonistic form”. He says that with this bourgeois society – or capitalist mode of production – “the prehistory of human society accordingly closes.”

Therefore, if until the establishment of the capitalist mode of production it is possible to say, in general, that the juridico-political and ideological relations only arise to confirm and support the relations of production which have arisen spontaneously from the infrastructure, this statement is no longer valid for the transition from capitalism to socialism.

The transition from capitalist relations of production to socialist relations of production does not happen spontaneously.

In the transition from capitalism to socialism, the juridico-political relations are the first to be established. The taking of political power by the working class (or by the working class and its allies) creates the conditions which permit the establishment of socialist relations of production and new ideological relations which permit the full development of the productive forces. This full development is the necessary basis for the final establishment of communism: “to each according to their needs.”

Let’s see now how Engels describes this process:

With the seizing of the means of production by society production of commodities is done away with, and, simultaneously, the mastery of the product over the producer. Anarchy in social production is replaced by systematic, definite organisation. The struggle for individual existence disappears. Then for the first time man, in a certain sense, is finally marked off from the rest of the animal kingdom, and emerges from mere animal conditions of existence into really human ones.

The whole sphere of the conditions of life which environ man, and which have hitherto ruled man, now comes under the dominion and control of man who for the first time becomes the real, conscious lord of nature because he has now become master of his own social organisation. The laws of his own social action, hitherto standing face to face with man as laws of nature foreign to, and dominating him, will then be used with full understanding, and so mastered by him. Man's own social organisation, hitherto confronting him as a necessity imposed by nature and history, now becomes the result of his own free action. The extraneous objective forces that have hitherto governed history pass under the control of man himself. Only from that time will man himself, with full consciousness, make his own history — only from that time will the social causes set in movement by him have, in the main and in a constantly growing measure, the results intended by him. It is the humanity's leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom.<sup>19</sup>

The transition from capitalism to socialism is, therefore, a transition in which revolutionary political action leads the relations of production. The “spontaneist” deviation of Marxism does not see the radical difference between the transition from capitalism to socialism and the other previous transitions. It applies the same model to all transitions and remains waiting for the capitalist social formation to evolve spontaneously towards socialism.

## 8.6 Summary

In this chapter we have studied the concepts of mode of production, social formation, and political conjuncture. We have seen that the first refers to an abstract social totality, the second to a concrete, historically given social totality, and the third to the “current moment” of a social formation.

Using the concepts of mode of production and of social formation we have been able to show what is the object of Marx's *Capital*. Finally, we have looked at the concept of transition from one mode of production to another. Therefore, in this chapter we have defined the following concepts of the general theory of historical materialism:

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<sup>19</sup>Engels, *Anti-Duhring*, Part 3, Chapter 2.

- mode of production
- social formation
- political conjuncture.

### Questions

1. What are the two senses in which the concept mode of production is used?
2. What does mode of production mean?
3. Why is it important to be able to have a theoretical concept in order to analyze reality?
4. Why does the concept of mode of production refer to an abstract totality?
5. What does social formation mean?
6. Why can we not use country as a synonym for social formation?
7. What is the object of *Capital*?
8. Can we say that *Capital* is out of date?
9. What is a political conjuncture?
10. What is the scientific method to study a political conjuncture?
11. Why is it important to study a political conjuncture?
12. What is meant by transition?
13. What differentiates the transitions prior to capitalism from the transition from capitalism to socialism?

### Themes for reflection

1. Is it possible to speak of a social formation dominated by capitalism if, at the level of the economic structure, it is not capitalist relations of production that dominate?
2. How does one determine when a mode of production of material goods and its corresponding relations of production come to occupy the dominant role in the economic structure of a social formation?
3. Why is it important to carefully limit the object of *Capital*?
4. Could you make an analysis of the current conjuncture of your country by applying the method of the system of contradictions?

# 9

## Social Classes

### 9.1 Translator's preface

German intellectual Johann Goethe said “Mathematicians are like Frenchmen: whatever you say to them they translate into their own language and forthwith it is something completely different.”

It turns out Marxists are also like Frenchmen, especially French Marxists like Althusser who Harnecker builds on.

In this chapter, Harnecker defines what a “class” is inside a mode of production. I think it is important to think of this as a definition of an abstract concept inside a formal model that we will happen to use the word “class” for, and not an all-encompassing description of how people use the existing term “class”.

It is like in math. Mathematicians love to define words. For example, there is the word “normal”. Of course it has a meaning outside of math, It also has many meanings inside math. If we are talking about a surface inside of space, it means “perpendicular to”, if we are talking about probability, it means a specific bell-shaped distribution. And there about 100 other mathematical contexts in which it has yet other definitions.

In each context one is free to redefine the word “normal”, scoped to that context, and everyone understands what you are referring to inside of that context given the definition you gave to the word. In other words, everyone plays along, agreeing to give the word the precise meaning you gave it for the purposes of discussion.

That is how I would recommend understanding “class in a mode of production” as described in this chapter. In previous chapters, Harnecker

described a certain abstract object called “mode of production” (which something like a mathematical object) and now she is going to describe other abstract objects called “classes” which relate to it.

## 9.2 Introduction

Marx died before he was able to write the chapter of *Capital* dedicated precisely to this topic. Many authors have tried to reconstruct it, but the methods used have not always been the best ones. Here we shall cite only one of them: Dahrendorf, who in his book *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*, tries to reconstruct the last chapter of *Capital* in the form of a compendium of quotations from different texts of Marx, which belonged to different periods and which are developed at different levels of abstraction. These are then arranged according to a previously established scheme. His effort is valuable as a presentation of quotations, but absolutely worthless as a contribution to the understanding of the Marxist “problematic” regarding social classes.

The correct approach is not to construct the missing concepts through a compilation of quotations or a selection of the best of them, but to try to construct them through an understanding of the problematic on which they are based, which is found fundamentally in *Capital*. This is the approach that we have followed.

The concept of social class can be defined at an abstract level: at the level of mode of production. But if it is to be a tool of political analysis, it must be made concrete, studying the new properties it acquires in a concrete social formation and in a given political conjuncture.

We will first define the concept of social class at the level of mode of production in order to later move on to the particular properties it acquires at the levels of social formation and political conjuncture.

## 9.3 Social Classes and Mode of Production

In every mode of production in which relations of exploitation exist, we find two antagonistic social groups. The exploiters and the exploited: slaves and masters, serfs and feudal lords, workers and bosses.

The existence of these classes or antagonistic groups was not discovered by Marx. Many historians and economists had already spoken of them before him.

Marx wrote to J. Weydemeyer on March 5, 1852:



...And now as to myself, no credit is due to me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them. Long before me bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this class struggle and bourgeois economists, the economic economy of the classes. What I did that was new was to prove: (1) that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with *particular historical phases in the development of production* (historische Entwicklungsphasen der Production), (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat, (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes and to a classless society*<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, Marx *did not discover* classes or class struggle. Economists like Smith and Ricardo, historians like Thierry, Guizot, and Niebuhr, from the beginning of the 19th century had already addressed this problem. Marx's point of departure was the point of arrival of those economists and historians.

Historical knowledge, in its most advanced form, already in Marx's time showed the succession of "civilizations", of "political regimes", of cultures, etc., to be the result of struggle between social groups: slaves and free citizens, patricians and plebeians, serfs and feudal landlords, etc.

Therefore, when Marx begins the *Communist Manifesto* with the celebrated phrase "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles", he is merely summarizing the conclusions which his predecessors had reached. These conclusions comprised the raw material on which he would work theoretically in order to construct a scientific theory of classes and their struggles.

If we return to the first contribution mentioned by Marx to Weydemeyer, we can express it as putting into relation the concept of class with the concept of mode of production ("historical phases in the development of production").

In one of the texts which is most cited by Marxists, Lenin defines social classes in the following way:

Classes are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organisation of labour, and, consequently,

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<sup>1</sup>"Marx to J. Weydemeyer in New York".

by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it. Classes are groups of people one of which can appropriate the labour of another owing to the different places they occupy in a definite system of social economy.<sup>2</sup>

In many other texts, Lenin emphasizes the relation between one's location in social production or their relation to the means of production, and one's social class. The great contribution of Marxism to the study of social classes has been precisely to establish this relation.

The Marxist definition of social class would therefore be the following:

**Social classes** are antagonistic social groups in which one appropriates the labor of the other due to the different location they occupy in the economic structure of a given mode of production. These locations are fundamentally determined by the specific form in which the corresponding classes relate to the means of production.

This specific relation has classically been considered as a relation of ownership or non-ownership of the means of production, generally identifying *ownership* with effective *possession* of them. But we have already seen that both words are not the same, that ownership does not always coincide with effective possession. This confusion has its origin in *Capital* itself, since in the pre-monopolistic capitalist mode of production studied by Marx both relations coincide in the same person. The capitalist is the *owner* of the means of production and a "*effectively*" *possesses* them at the same time, since without his intervention or that of his delegate, the complex process of production cannot proceed. However, in the only section of *Capital* where Marx refers to pre-capitalist forms of production, he clearly distinguishes these two relations: ownership and effective possession.

The correspondence or non-correspondence of these relations produces different effects on the different groups involved. Let's look at two types of effects which may be produced according to the way in which these two relations are put together.

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<sup>2</sup>Lenin, *A Great Beginning*.

Class A	Class B	Effect
Ownership and effective possession of all means of production.	Neither ownership nor effective possession	In order to produce its means of subsistence, class B must work for class A.
Ownership of the most important means of production: the land	Possession of the land, ownership of the instruments of labor, control of the production process, effective possession.	Class B does not need to work for class A in order to produce its means of subsistence. If it does, it will be for extra-economic reasons.

In the second situation, it is precisely the non-correspondence between ownership and effective possession which would necessitate the use of extra-economic factors to establish and maintain the relation of exploitation.

It is clear, too, that in all forms where the actual worker himself remains the 'possessor' of the means of production and the conditions of labour needed for the production of his own means of subsistence, the property relationship must appear at the same time as a direct relationship of domination and servitude, and the direct producer therefore as an unfree person - an unfreedom which may undergo a progressive attenuation from serfdom with statute-labour down to a mere tribute obligation. The direct producer in this case is by our assumption in possession of his own means of production, the objective conditions of labour needed for the realization of his labour and the production of his means of subsistence; he pursues his agriculture independently, as well as the rural-domestic industry associated with it. This independence is not abolished when, as in India for example, these small peasants form a more or less natural community, since what is at issue here is independence vis-a-vis the nominal landlord. Under these conditions, the surplus labour for the nominal landowner can only be extorted from them by extra-economic

compulsion, whatever the form this might assume.<sup>3</sup>

The relations of production, therefore, are the most important element for defining social classes. The character of the relationship between the exploiting class and the exploited class will be defined by the character of these relations.

The correspondence between legal ownership and real ownership of the means of production in the capitalist mode of production, which establishes the complete separation of the worker from their means of production, is what forces the worker to “voluntarily” offer their labor power to the capitalist in order to survive. This theoretically makes the intervention of extra-economic factors unnecessary to produce these class relations. That’s not to say that these factors are totally absent. We know that the capitalist relations of production rest on a given legal conception of property and employment contract and in the presence of an army ready to act in those moments where the class struggle becomes particularly intense, as the history of killings in the workers’ movement confirms. To explain this we would say that although superstructural relations are present in capitalism, they intervene only when there exists a threat to the system which tends to spontaneously reproduce itself through the capitalist economic laws themselves.

Something quite different occurred in the feudal mode of production. Here, the non-correspondence of legal ownership and effective possession make it so that the owning class (the landlords) have to resort to force, to tradition, to religion, etc., in order to successfully reproduce the relations of exploitation, to keep the serf under their yoke.

In the period of transition from capitalism to socialism, there is a non-correspondence between ownership and effective possession of the principal means of production. The ownership of the principal means of production is held by the proletarian state (i.e., the proletariat as the class represented by the state). Effective possession, however, is still in the hands of those who by their prior knowledge are able to operate them (ex-capitalists who have become administrators, the whole gamut of specialists of the old system, and later the new specialists, still trained with the old mentality). It is this mismatch which necessitates the intervention of extra-economic forces: political (this is one of the reasons for the dictatorship of the proletariat) and ideological, in order to fight against the habits inherited from the old system. These extra-economic factors must intervene to prevent the labor of workers from being hoarded

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<sup>3</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3, p. 926.

and accumulated, in one way or another, by the group that has effective possession of the means of production.

Only the development of new productive forces (including the workers and their technical training) will allow the workers to realize full possession of the means of production, and thereby the abolition of class itself.

Clearly, in order to abolish classes completely, it is not enough to overthrow the exploiters, the landowners and capitalists, not enough to abolish their rights of ownership; it is necessary also to abolish all private ownership of the means of production, it is necessary to abolish the distinction between town and country, as well as the distinction between manual workers and brain workers. This requires a very long period of time. In order to achieve this an enormous step forward must be taken in developing the productive forces; it is necessary to overcome the resistance (frequently passive, which is particularly stubborn and particularly difficult to overcome) of the numerous survivals of small-scale production; it is necessary to overcome the enormous force of habit and conservatism which are connected with these survivals.<sup>4</sup>

## **9.4 The Capitalist Mode of Production: Two or Three Classes?**

In the previous section it was stated that only two antagonistic classes exist in every mode of production. How do we explain, then, that Marx, in referring to capitalism in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and in various chapters of *Capital* speaks of three classes: capitalists, landowners, and workers?

To be able to respond to this question we must ask ourselves: at what level of abstraction was Marx working when he spoke of these three classes? At the abstract level of the pure capitalist mode of production or at the more concrete level of a social formation dominated by capitalism?

If we rigorously study the texts, we realize that when Marx speaks of the “three classes” he always refers to “modern society,” to “modern bourgeois society,” or to “modern society based on the capitalist regime,” and not to the capitalist mode of production.

On the other hand, if we carefully examine the chapters on ground rent which are found in part 6 of *Capital* (Vol. III) and especially chapter

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<sup>4</sup>Lenin, op. cit.

37: "Introduction," we see that Marx studied the problem of rent because "the monopoly of landed property is a historical precondition for the capitalist mode of production and remains its permanent foundation, as with all previous modes of production based on the exploitation of the masses in one form or the other." Therefore Marx was obligated to study rent because it constitutes a fundamental historical fact in the constitution of the capitalist mode of production and not because of some abstract logical necessity.

Lenin tells us that "logically we can quite easily imagine a purely capitalist organization of agriculture in which private property in land is entirely absent" and therefore without landlords.<sup>5</sup>

Let us now look at the most explicit texts of Marx about the *problem of the three classes*:

Assuming the capitalist mode of production, then the capitalist is not only a necessary functionary, but the dominating functionary in production. The landowner, on the other hand, is quite superfluous in this mode of production. Its only requirement is that land should not be common property, that it should confront the working class as a condition of production, not belonging to it, and the purpose is completely fulfilled if it becomes state-property, i.e., if the state draws the rent. The landowner, such an important functionary in production in the ancient world and in the Middle Ages, is a useless superfetation in the industrial world. The radical bourgeois (with an eye moreover to the suppression of all other taxes) therefore goes forward theoretically to a refutation of the private ownership of the land, which, in the form of state property, he would like to turn into the common property of the bourgeois class, of capital. But in practice he lacks the

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<sup>5</sup>It seems to me that Harnecker (and Lenin) are leaving out something important here. Marx's quote is in full "the monopoly of landed property is a historical precondition for the capitalist mode of production and remains its permanent foundation, as with all previous modes of production based on the exploitation of the masses in one form or the other." He is saying that *every* class society needs there to be a monopoly on land. Why? One reason is that otherwise people can simply opt-out of exploitation by going to some land which is not owned by the exploiters. *The Dawn of Everything* by Graeber and Wengrow gives historical examples of this dynamic at work in societies with less pronounced class structures. In precise language, landowners are not part of the definition of capitalist relations of production, but a separation of workers from land ownership is a logically necessary part of any social formation in which capitalist relations of production predominate, and a landowning class is one way to accomplish this.

courage, since an attack on one form of property—a form of the private ownership of a condition of labour—might cast considerable doubts on the other form. Besides, the bourgeois has himself become an owner of land.<sup>6</sup>

This other quotation is even more clear.

Capitalist production is based on the antithesis of two factors, materialised labour and living labour. Capitalist and wage-labourer are the sole functionaries and factors of production whose relationship and confrontation arise from the nature of the capitalist mode of production.

The circumstances under which the capitalist has in turn to share a part of the surplus-labour or surplus-value which he has captured, with a third, non-working person, are only of secondary importance. It is also a fact of production, that, after the part of the value which is equal to constant capital is deducted, the entire surplus-value passes straight from the hands of the worker to those of the capitalist, with the exception of that part of the value of the product which is paid out as wages. The capitalist confronts the worker as the direct owner of the entire surplus-value, in whatever manner he may later be sharing it with the money-lending capitalist, landowner etc. As James Mill observes, production could therefore continue undisturbed if the landed proprietor disappeared and the state took his place. He – the private landowner – is not a necessary agent for capitalist production, although it does require that the land should belong to someone, so long as it is not the worker, but for instance, the state. Far from being an error on the part of Ricardo etc., this reduction of the classes participating directly in production, hence also in the value produced and then in the products in which this value is embodied, to capitalists and wage-labourers, and the exclusion of the landowners (who only enter post festum, as a result of conditions of ownership of natural forces that have not grown out of the capitalist mode of production but have been passed on to it) is rooted in the nature of the capitalist mode of production – as distinct from the feudal, ancient etc. This reduction is an adequate theoretical expression of the capitalist mode of production<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, chapter 8.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., chapter 9.

These texts allow us therefore to conclude that in the capitalist mode of production, as in every mode of production, there are only two fundamental antagonistic classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. When Marx speaks of three classes, he not to a pure mode of production but to a given social formation: modern English society or another dominated by the capitalist mode of production.

## **9.5 Social Classes and the Reproduction of the Mode of Production**

In order to be able to satisfy the consumption needs of the people who live in a society, the process of production of material goods cannot grind to a halt, nor can it be interrupted: it has to reproduce itself continuously. And this process tends to reproduce itself according to its mode of production and without breaking up the social relations of production which its functioning presupposes. For this reason, it is important to bring the concept of “reproduction of a mode production” into the definition of classes.

Let’s see what Marx says in reference to the capitalist mode of production:

Capitalist production therefore reproduces in the course of its own process the separation between labour-power and the conditions of labour. It thereby reproduces and perpetuates the conditions under which the worker is exploited. It incessantly forces him to sell his labour-power in order to live, and enables the capitalist to purchase labour-power in order that he may enrich himself. It is no longer a mere accident that capitalist and worker confront each other in the market as buyer and seller. It is the alternating rhythm of the process itself which throws the worker back onto the market again and again as a seller of his labour-power and continually transforms his own product into a means by which another man can purchase him. In reality, the worker belongs to capital before he has sold himself to the capitalist. His economic bondage is at once mediated through, and concealed by, the periodic renewal of the act by which he sells himself, his change of masters, and the oscillations in the market-price of his labour.

The capitalist process of production, therefore, seen as a total, connected process, i.e. a process of reproduction, produces not



only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces and reproduces the capital-relation itself; on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer.<sup>8</sup>

But it is not enough to see the importance of reproduction in the establishment of classes; it is necessary to study the specific form which this process of reproduction assumes according to the mode of production.

The reproduction of the capitalist mode of production, for example, not only implies the reproduction of its two social classes – capitalists and workers – but also their reproduction according to a certain tendency: the numerical strengthening of the working class by the growing proletarianization of those capitalists unable to beat the competition, and, therefore, the shrinking of the capitalist class.

The study of the class of petty agricultural producers as a transitional class from pre-capitalist forms to capitalist forms shows us that, on the contrary, its tendency of development involves a drop in the number of peasants, some of whom come to form a part of the capitalist system of production.

It is this dynamic aspect of the functioning of classes, essential to Marxist theory, which many of its followers have forgotten, transforming the study of classes into a formalistic, static study.

## 9.6 Social Group, Class and Class Fraction

### Translator's warning

Many of the claims in this section are both controversial and easy to misinterpret. We will add lots of footnotes to point out things we think are controversial or to add our own understandings.

Class is both a scientific concept within Marxist sociology as well as a political concept which can be used to create a political identity capable of motivating people to action. This section is dealing with the former (although there is of course a political impact of claiming such a definition). In political or rhetorical contexts, different senses of class are used that differ from the one laid out here.

In the previous pages we have stated that there are only two antagonistic classes in every mode of production. We have shown, for example,

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<sup>8</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol I, pp. 723-724.

that the landholding class is not, in the strict Marxist sense, a class of the capitalist mode of production.

When we say that in every mode of reproduction there are only two antagonistic classes do we mean that all the individuals living under a given mode of production must be part of one of the two antagonistic classes?<sup>9</sup> Not at all. Not all the individuals of a society, nor even all the social groups, belong to a definite class.

Among all the social groups that exist in a society, only the groups that directly participate in the production process, forming antagonistic poles (exploiters and exploited) constitute social classes<sup>10</sup>. There are other groups which cannot be defined as social classes, either because at the level of production they represent intermediary groups between the two antagonistic classes – as is the case with specialists and administrators – or because they are not directly linked to production since they serve the institutions of the superstructure: professors, lawyers, functionaries of the state apparatus, etc.

On the other hand one must not confuse the concept of class with the concept of class fraction, which refers to the subgroups into which a class can be broken down. For example, the bourgeoisie as a class breaks down into the industrial bourgeoisie, the commercial bourgeoisie, and the financial bourgeoisie. What matters is to determine the scientific criterion which enables us to distinguish the different fractions within a given class.

In *Capital*, Marx points the way toward how one can divide the classes

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<sup>9</sup>Translator: To us, the restriction to exactly two, even for the definition of an abstract object, seems unnecessary. It is possible to conceive of abstract systems of surplus extraction which involve three groups, for example one could imagine a system of groups *A*, *B* and *C*, in which *A* exploits *B*, *B* exploits *C*, and *C* does not exploit anyone. I would guess this is an intellectual artifact of the idea that “dialectics” should refer only to dyads of opposing forces, and not more complex arrangements of more than two opposing forces.

<sup>10</sup>Translator: To be clear, those who “directly participate in the production process” must be understood in a broad sense to correctly understand what the working class is. This includes both those who work for a wage in capitalist firms and those who perform unwaged work like domestic labor, which is necessary to produce the labor power used in all productive processes. I think this should also include the unemployed (Marx’s “reserve army of labor”) but here we may run up against limits of the definition as given. The presence of the unemployed helps drive down the price of labor-power, which plays a role in the process of producing labor-power, although I’m not sure whether this fits with the definition as given here. Another wrinkle is the fact that an individual’s role in production may change over their lifetime (they may even perform different roles at different times of the day) and so membership of an individual in a class is a time-dependent or multi-valued property, rather than something binary.

of the capitalist mode of production into fractions.

Marx goes from the abstract concept of surplus value to the more concrete concepts of industrial profit, commercial profit, and interest – which are nothing but the developed forms of surplus value – that is, the forms in which it appears on a more concrete level of analysis of capital. In the same way, we should pass from the two classes of the capitalist mode of production, considered at the level of the production process of surplus value – capitalists and workers – to the class fractions which arise in the circulation process of capital.

Actually, Marx follows this process when he analyzes the developed forms of surplus value: to industrial profit corresponds the industrial bourgeoisie; to commercial profit, the commercial bourgeoisie; and to interest, the financial bourgeoisie.

Does the same thing occur with the analysis of the proletariat?

Marx is less explicit on this point. This has led many Marxist theorists to exclude from the concept of the proletariat people who work in banks and commercial establishments, who are then considered as “employees” (a social group which would be embraced by the ambiguous concept of the “middle classes”).

What is the basic argument of these Marxist theorists? According to them, a person can be considered a worker only if they *directly* produce surplus value, that is, a “productive” worker. Let us compare Marx’s analysis to this argument. Why does he consider the representatives of commercial financial capital as fractions of the bourgeoisie *if they do not participate directly* in the extraction of surplus value but only in its realization (that is, in the sale of products and the financial operations which enable the industrial capitalist to recoup the capital invested in the production process in the form of money)?

Following this, one would think that in the same way that there exists a “non-productive” bourgeoisie – that is, not directly connected to the production of surplus value – there would exist a “non-productive” proletariat corresponding to this fraction of the bourgeoisie. Let’s see what Marx says about the commercial wage-earner.

The question now arises as to the position of the commercial wage-labourers employed by the merchant capitalist. . . From one point of view, a commercial employee of this kind is a wage-labourer like any other. Firstly, in so far as his labour is bought with the merchant’s variable capital, not with money that he spends as revenue; it is bought, in other words, not for

a personal service but for the purpose of valorizing the capital advanced in it. Secondly, in so far as the value of his labour-power, and therefore his wage, is determined, like that of all other wage-labourers, by the production and reproduction costs of this particular labour-power and not by the product of his labour.

But there is necessarily the same difference between him and the workers directly employed by industrial capital as there is between industrial capital and commercial capital, and consequently between the industrial capitalist and the merchant. Since the merchant, being simply an agent of circulation, produces neither value nor surplus-value (for the additional value that he adds to commodities by his expenses is reducible to the addition of previously existing value, even though the question still arises here as to how he maintains and conserves the value of this constant capital), the commercial workers whom he employs in these same functions cannot possibly create surplus-value for him directly.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, let's see what is the dynamic of development of this fraction of the proletariat as the capitalist mode of production reproduces itself in expanded form:

The commercial worker proper belongs to the better-paid class of wage-labourer; he is one of those whose labour is skilled labour, above-average labour. His wage, however, has a tendency to fall, as the capitalist mode of production advances, even in relation to average labour. Firstly, because the division of labour within the commercial office means that only a one-sided development of ability need be produced and that much of the cost of producing this ability to work is free for the capitalist, since the worker's skill is rather developed by the function itself, and indeed is developed all the more quickly, the more one-sided the function becomes with the division of labour. Secondly, . . . The general extension of popular education permits this variety of labour to be recruited from classes which were formerly excluded from it and were accustomed to a lower standard of living. This also increases supply, and with it competition. . . The capitalist increases the number of these workers, if he has more value

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<sup>11</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, pp. 406-407.

and profit to realize. The increase in this labour is always an effect of the increase in surplus-value, and never a cause of it.<sup>12</sup>

To accept our earlier approach implies questioning the theoretical usefulness which some Marxists have given to the concept of productive labor in the definition of social classes. If we use this concept in the sense that Marx uses it in some analyses, we reach the absurd conclusion that everyone from the unskilled worker to the manager of a factory would be included in the concept of the industrial proletariat.

To accept the above idea implies questioning the theoretical utility which certain Marxists have attributed to the concept of productive labor in the definition of social classes. If this concept is employed in the sense in which Marx used it in certain analyses we would be led to the absurdity of including in the concept of the industrial proletariat workers ranging from the unskilled up to the manager of a company, that is, from direct workers who are exploited in the flesh to those indirect workers who are nothing more than representatives of the capitalist in the process of extracting surplus value. Nonetheless, even if the concept of productive labor is not adequate to define the two antagonistic classes in the capitalist mode of production, it is useful, at the political level, to determine the class and the class fraction capable of carrying out and directing a socialist revolution. It is the productive proletariat, the proletariat, characteristic of advanced capitalism, which, because of its situation in production (the very organization of complex, collective labor, level of education, etc.), is the fraction of the proletariat best prepared to direct a socialist revolution, which is the vanguard of the proletariat<sup>13</sup>.

## 9.7 Class Interest

Before moving to a more concrete level of analysis – the level of the historically given social formation – and studying, at this level, the new properties which the concept of social class acquires there, we shall

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<sup>12</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, pp. 414-415.

<sup>13</sup>Harnecker is mixing a lot of concepts here and the overall claim is politically dubious. Historically speaking, it is often factors not directly perceptible through these economic categories which provide both the spark of revolution and the social cohesion necessary for a group to carry it through. For example, the Women's Day march in Petrograd in 1917 kicked off the February Revolution. Also, productive workers do not necessarily participate in complex collective labor. There are always labor processes which have been formally subsumed into capitalism but not really subsumed, and so have not been developed into complex social forms.

examine two concepts frequently used but very rarely defined: the concept of class interest and of class consciousness.

Is class interest the collection of the spontaneous aspirations of a given social class? Can a strike which is limited to expressing immediate grievances, without calling into question the capitalist system, be considered the expression of the class interest of the proletariat?

To answer these questions we must first distinguish between two kinds of interests: immediate, spontaneous interests, and long-term strategic interests.

*Immediate, spontaneous interests* are the aspirations which classes or social groups have motivated by the current problems of their existence. Their objective is generally attaining an immediate improvement in well-being, a larger share in the distribution of social wealth. For example: the immediate, spontaneous interest of a group of low-salaried workers is to get an increase in pay to compensate for a rise in the cost of living. The immediate interest of a group of peasants is that their products be bought at a suitable price. In both cases one tries to ameliorate a current ill, without seeking its deeper source. It is important to keep in mind that these immediate, spontaneous interests are always influenced by the ruling ideology. It is for this reason that they never reach the point of calling into question the system itself.

Thus the proletariat, left to its own immediate, spontaneous interests would not succeed in going beyond a purely reformist struggle: struggles for better salaries, a better family allowance<sup>14</sup>, more time off, etc., aspirations with which there is nothing wrong, but which cannot become the final goal of the class struggle of the proletariat since they do not call into question the system of exploitation itself.

The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore:

all worship of the spontaneity of the working class movement,  
all belittling of the role of "the conscious element", of the role  
of Social-Democracy, *means, quite independently of whether*

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<sup>14</sup>Translator: In Chile, *asignación familiar* ("family allowance") refers to a government subsidy given to families depending on how many dependents they have.

<sup>15</sup>Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*, ch. 2.

*he who belittles that role desires it or not, a strengthening of the influence of bourgeois ideology upon the workers.*<sup>16</sup>

As a result, the immediate, spontaneous interests cannot be considered, in the strict sense, class interests.

What, then, is meant by class interests?

Let's look at what Marx says in *The Holy Family*:

It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment *regards* as its aim. It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is visibly and irrevocably foreshadowed in its own life situation as well as in the whole organization of bourgeois society today.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, the long-term, strategic interests are the interests which arise from the very location of each class within the economic structure of the society.

The long-term, strategic interest of the ruling [*dominante*] class is to perpetuate its domination, that of the dominated class is to destroy the system of domination. The strategic interest of the proletariat, for example, is to destroy the capitalist system of production, the root cause of its exploited condition, destroying its foundation: the private ownership of the means of production.

It is important to point out that, owing to the distorting influence of the ruling ideology, consciousness of these long-term, strategic interests cannot arise in a spontaneous way; it is necessary that the members of the exploited classes learn to recognize them. The necessity of spreading Marxist theory throughout the workers' movement stems, precisely, from the inability of the proletariat to immediately recognize its long-term, strategic interests.

Social-Democracy<sup>18</sup> is the combination of the working-class movement and socialism. Its task is not to serve the working-class movement passively at each of its separate stages, but to represent the interests of the movement as a whole, to point out to this movement its ultimate aim and its political tasks, and to safeguard its political and ideological independence.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, ch. 4.

<sup>18</sup>Translator: At this time, "social democracy" was the general name of the main-stream current of Marxist socialism, rather than the name of a type of welfarist capitalism.

Isolated from Social-Democracy, the working-class movement becomes petty and inevitably becomes bourgeois.<sup>19</sup>

There may be contradictions between the immediate, spontaneous interests and the strategic, long-term interests which reflect the dialectical duality of the short range objective and the ultimate objective. For example, the attainment of high salaries, if not accompanied by correct ideological education, can serve to lull the proletariat to sleep, draining it of its energy to struggle for its long-term, strategic interests – that is, the struggle for the destruction of the capitalist system and the establishment of the socialist system. The ruling classes are very good at cleverly using these contradictions to perpetuate their rule.

We can conclude from the above that in the rigorous sense, only the long-term, strategic interests represent true *class interests*.

On the other hand, it is only by beginning with immediate interests that we can eventually get the proletariat to understand its true class interests.

Lenin was very clear and precise on this point. Leading the proletariat in the political struggle against the servants of capital,

requires that the struggle be bound up with definite everyday interests. . . But if these separate interests are obscured by bare political demands that only the intelligentsia understand, will this not mean again turning back, again confining everything to the struggle of the intelligentsia alone, whose impotence has only just been admitted?<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, it is necessary to combat two errors:

1. Thinking of the immediate, spontaneous aspirations of a class as *class interest*.
2. Forgetting that *it is necessary to begin with the immediate interests* of a class to lead it to understand its true class interests.

## 9.8 Class Consciousness and Class Instinct

The other term that we should define is *class consciousness*.

Class consciousness should not be confused with the psychological consciousness of the individuals who comprise part of a given class. It is neither the sum nor the average of what the individuals of a given class

<sup>19</sup>Lenin, *The Urgent Tasks of Our Movement*.

<sup>20</sup>Lenin, *What the "Friends of the People" Are and How They Fight the Social-Democrats*.



think, feel, etc., at a given moment.

Class consciousness is directly linked to the concept of class interest.

An individual or a social group has class consciousness when it is conscious of its true class interests.

Class consciousness, therefore, is an objective piece of information related to an objective situation: the place which each class occupies in social production. This distinguishes it absolutely from empirical notions, from the psychologically recognizable and explainable notions which people construct from their life situation.

Given all this, we should ask ourselves one last question: Is class consciousness something that happens spontaneously?

To respond to this question, we should distinguish first *class consciousness* and *class instinct*.

Every social class, owing to its objective location within social production, tends to react in a characteristic manner. *Class instinct* is precisely those unconscious schemas which generate those reactions, products of the class's location, which underlie all spontaneous expressions of class. Class instinct is subjective and spontaneous, class consciousness objective and rational.

It is Lenin who most frequently employs the term class instinct.

The peasantry has proletarian "instinct"... The workers instinctively aspire to socialism... it is the instinct of the exploited which brings them to fraternize at the front..., etc.

Now then, is there a direct path from instinct to consciousness? Clearly not, at least in reference to the exploited classes of any mode of production.

The ruling ideology inserts itself between instinct and consciousness, distorting instinct and limiting it to those actions in the world which do not call the system into question, and for this reason proletarian class consciousness *is never* the mere expression of its location in the economic structure of society.

If the proletariat of a given country does not have class consciousness, but merely a consciousness limited to the protesting of grievances, this cannot be blamed exclusively on the lack of ripeness of the objective conditions. Conditions will never be sufficiently ripe for the proletariat to acquire by itself its class consciousness. The task of the workers' party consists precisely in "introducing" class consciousness into the proletariat, that is, in demonstrating it and by helping the class to be consistent with its true class interests.

## 9.9 Social Classes and Social Formation<sup>21</sup>

*Class structure* is the assemblage or structured combination of the different classes and class fractions at different levels (economic, political, ideological) relationship of the different classes and class fractions at different levels (economic, political, ideological) of a social formation. I.e., the data of how these classes and class fractions all fit together at different levels. This class structure does is not a simple juxtaposition of the typical classes of each of the sets of relations of production which are found in a social formation, but an original combination of these classes which are thus the subjects of long-term strategies.

In this assemblage of a certain number of classes in a given social formation, we always find one ruling class or class fraction and the ruled classes or class fractions.

A class structure at the level of the social formation establishes certain facts due only to the combination of the different sets of relations of production (which support the different antagonistic classes) from each mode of production which the class structure contains. In addition to these though, the class structure implies other facts which explain the rise of new, temporary or “transitional” classes. For example, there is a class of petty agricultural producers which rises with the suppression of the regime of production based on serfdom and which tends to disappear through the development of capitalism in the countryside, turning the majority them into an agricultural proletariat or leading them to emigrate to cities.

Therefore, in order to make a thorough analysis of the class structure of a given social formation, we must consider the transitional classes in addition to the classes typical of the current relations of production. At the same time we should not forget that each of these classes undergoes modifications due to how it is connected to the others, and by playing a dominant or subordinate role in this connection.

Let’s apply what has been said to a social formation dominated by capitalism, that is, a social formation in which the capitalist system of production dominates at the level of the production of material goods, subordinating in one way or another the co-existing modes of production of material goods as well as serving as the base of a political and ideological structure.

The ruling class in the capitalist mode of production becomes the

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<sup>21</sup>This section is fundamentally based on an unpublished text of Joubert.

class which dominates in the social formation. It sees to it that its class interests prevail over the interests of all the other classes. The very nature of dominance produces new facts which are absent at the level of the pure mode of production. This ruling class will, in effect, have to maintain relations of exploitation, collaboration, political struggle, etc., not only with the proletariat but also with the other classes of the social formation. This implies that it must have, in the very heart of the class structure, new instruments (economic, political, and ideological) which enable it to secure and perpetuate its domination.

In a social formation dominated by capitalism, the ruling capitalist class must:

- reproduce the original relation of exploitation (capitalist/proletariat)
- extend this domination to other classes or strata of the class structure (capitalist/petty producer)
- prevent all interference by or make alliances with the old dominant class (landlords/capitalists).

It is this set of relations which enable it to reproduce itself as a ruling class and carry out its domination. Let's see how these relations manifest in the three levels of the social formation.

At the *economic level*, the artisan, for example, tends to disappear as an effect of the market economy and the development of the productive forces within capitalist enterprises, having afforded the capitalist a previous superexploitation. The peasantry, except for a few exceptions, tends to be transformed into an agricultural proletariat or to emigrate to the city since their petty exploitation is no longer profitable compared to large scale capitalist exploitation, etc.

On the *political level*, the need arises for a political intervention in order to reproduce the conditions of exploitation, something which formally, at the level of pure mode of production, did not appear to be necessary.

The bourgeoisie, while rising but before triumphing over all, still need and use the *power of the state* to "regulate" wages. That is, to force them within the limits suitable for surplus value creation, to lengthen the working day and to keep the workers themselves at the normal level of subordination<sup>22</sup>.

On the other hand, the domination of one class in the class structure does not always imply that this same class dominates politically.

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<sup>22</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 382

Sometimes shifts happen. A class which, by its situation in the economic structure, dominates in the class structure of a given social formation, can abandon political power to another class to conserve its domination in the economic structure, which in turn establishes its domination in the social structure.

Marx analyzes this phenomenon in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*.

Thus by now stigmatizing as “socialistic” what it had previously extolled as “liberal,” the bourgeoisie confesses that its own interests dictate that it should be delivered from the danger of its own rule; that to restore tranquillity in the country its bourgeois parliament must, first of all, be given its quietus; that to preserve its social power intact its political power must be broken; that the individual bourgeois can continue to exploit the other classes and to enjoy undisturbed property, family, religion, and order only on condition that their class be condemned along with the other classes to like political nullity; that in order to save its purse it must forfeit the crown. . . <sup>23</sup>

Finally, on the *ideological level*, the ideology of the ruling class tends to defend the social order which is nothing more than the order which it has established to reproduce its rule. It is not uncommon to observe throughout history that ideas which had been rejected by the bourgeoisie in a given era – like birth control – are accepted and promulgated years later, to avoid the population explosion which, by increasing the number of people dissatisfied with the regime might even get to the point of endangering it.

## 9.10 Transitional Classes

***Transitional classes*** are classes which only appear at the level of the social formation, as the effect of the breaking down of old relations of production. They tend to decompose as the new relations of production develop.

The petty bourgeoisie, that is, the independent, petty producer (artisan or peasant) is a typical example of a transitional class.

First, let us look at the agrarian petty bourgeoisie or the *peasantry* in the strict sense.

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<sup>23</sup>Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, ch. 4.

In places where a regime of production based on serfdom existed historically, the abolition of the bonds of serfdom liberated the old serfs, turning them into more or less independent petty producers. But the disappearance of serfdom is not due to chance or to the good will of the “lords”, but due to the pressure exerted by an incipient capitalism, which after a certain degree of development in the city begins to penetrate the countryside.

The penetration of capitalism into the countryside produces a disintegrating effect on this class, which little by little goes on decomposing into a rural proletariat and a rural bourgeoisie. *The peasantry* as a class tends, therefore, to disappear. Unable to compete with capitalist production in the market due to its higher costs of production, it goes to ruin and either turns into a rural proletariat or emigrates to the city, except for a few rare cases who manage to hold on and turn into rich peasants, passing into the ranks of the rural bourgeoisie.

This decomposition of the peasantry is an irreversible process as long as the capitalist laws of production dominate. No “wish” to maintain petty production can halt this process, although measures can be taken to slow it down.

The same thing happens to the independent petty producers. That is, the producers who are are simultaneously the owners of their means of production. The impossibility of competing with capitalist firms in the market reduces them, bit by bit, to the proletarian condition.

Therefore, the petty bourgeoisie (petty peasant producers and artisans who produce under an mercantile economic regime) does not exist as a class at the level of the pure mode of production, but only appears as such at the level of the social formation, as a transitional class which arises from the disintegration of the relations of production based on serfdom and tends to disappear as capitalist relations of production spread.

The isolation of its members, owing to the independent form of their production, their transitional character, and their intermediate character between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie determine their characteristics and the different levels of the social formation.

From the economic point of view, the petty bourgeoisie is an exploited class, subordinated to the dominant capitalist system. But precisely due to its isolation – caused by its very conditions of production, attached to one place and to a single instance of exploitation – it is not in a condition to understand the class character of the exploitation and oppression which it suffers, at times, no less than the proletariat. Nor is it in a

condition to understand that the state in bourgeois society cannot help but be a class state<sup>24</sup>.

From an ideological point of view, because of their transitional nature, the petty producer has a dual situation; On the one hand, they are a progressive element insofar as they represent liberation from the prior regime of dependency. On the other hand, they are a reactionary element insofar as they struggle to maintain their place as an independent petty producer, putting obstacles in the way of economic development.

The intermediate location a petty producer occupies, between the bosses and the workers, leads them to fluctuate between the interests of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

Moreover, this class is the most susceptible to the ruling ideology, with which it establishes relations that prevent it from perceiving the objective conditions of its servitude and future destruction.

To close, we quote this excellent passage from Lukacs about the petty bourgeoisie:

This class lives at least in part in the capitalist big city and every aspect of its existence is directly exposed to the influence of capitalism. Hence it cannot possibly remain wholly unaffected by the *fact* of class conflict between bourgeoisie and proletariat. But as a “transitional class in which the interests of two other classes become simultaneously blunted. . .” it will imagine itself “to be above all class antagonisms”. Accordingly it will search for ways whereby it will “not indeed eliminate the two extremes of capital and wage labour, but will weaken their antagonism and transform it into harmony”. In all decisions crucial for society its actions will be irrelevant and it will be forced to fight for both sides in turn but always without consciousness.<sup>25</sup>

## 9.11 Class Location

In the previous pages we have examined the concept of social class at two different levels: at the level of the mode of production and at the level of the social formation, that is, of a historically given society.

On both levels the classes are defined by their *location* in the social

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<sup>24</sup>Lenin, *What the “Friends of the People” Are and How They Fight the Social-Democrats*.

<sup>25</sup>Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 70.

structure, a location which depends on the specific relations which the social groups maintain with the means of production.

Class location is, therefore, determined by the place which individuals occupy in the process of social production. We call *class location* the location which individuals have in the social structure, which is determined in the last instance by the role they play in the process of social production.

This concept should not be confused with the concept of *class origin*, which does not refer to the current location of the individual in the social structure, but to the class location in which this individual was formed; for example, the class location of their parents.

Finally, this concept of *class location* should not be confused with *class position*, which we develop in the following section.

## 9.12 Social Classes and the Political Conjuncture

Our first phase was to define classes at the level of mode of production. Later we defined them at the level of social formation. Now, we must move onto the most concrete level: the level of the “political conjuncture” or “present moment”, which constitutes the synthesis of all the contradictions of a given society in a given moment of its development. At this level, new factors come into play, overdetermining the classes defined above.

We will analyze two of these factors: the problem of *class position* and the difference between a class and a *social force*.

### Class position

When we studied the social classes at the level of mode of production, we saw that not all individuals in a society belong to one of the two antagonistic classes. There exist social groups that cannot be defined as social classes either because they represent intermediate groups between the antagonistic classes at the level of production, or because they do not participate directly in production, being in the service of superstructural institutions. These groups do not constitute classes as such, but tend to adopt positions which favor one or the other of the antagonistic classes.

On the other hand, not all the members of a class will defend the interests of their class in a given political conjuncture. For example, the labor aristocracy – the privileged sector of the working class of the imperialist capitalist countries – have in many political conjunctures not defended the interests of the working class, but instead the interests of

the bourgeoisie.

Therefore, just being a member of a class – having a given class location – is not enough to adopt political attitudes consistent with that class location.

We call **class position** the “taking of sides” by a class in a given political conjuncture.

This “taking of sides” by a given class implies defending and struggling for the other’s class interests; adopting its point of view, joining its ranks, representing its interests.

For example, in reference to the “middle strata”<sup>26</sup>, the petty industrialist,” the petty merchant, the artisan, the peasant, Marx affirms that “If by chance, they are revolutionary, they are only so in view of their impending transfer into the proletariat; they thus defend not their present, but their future interests, they desert their own standpoint to place themselves at that of the proletariat.”<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, Lenin says it is not impossible under certain conditions for this or that stratum of workers to place itself on the side of the proletariat. Later, he points out that the whole problem resides in determining these conditions, and he holds that the words “making the point of view of the proletariat their own” express these conditions in a precise form: that these words draw a clear line demarcating true Marxists from other groups who claim to be socialists.

In another text, in reference to intellectuals, Lenin says that despite working toward an objective analysis of reality, they “can [not] help taking the side of one class or another (once he has understood their interrelationships)”<sup>28</sup>

In a text on “The Tasks of the Revolutionary Youth”, Lenin makes clear how students cannot be considered as a homogeneous mass, since they tend to reflect the interests of all classes and political groups in society. Only some among them “adopt a revolutionary position,” dedicating their strength to the working class.

In the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, Marx speaks of the “representatives” of the petty bourgeoisie who

According to their education and their individual position  
they may be as far apart as heaven and earth. What makes

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<sup>26</sup>The term “middle strata” is descriptive. The scientific term used by Marx which encompasses these groups is “petty bourgeoisie”.

<sup>27</sup>Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

<sup>28</sup>Lenin, *The Heritage We Renounce*



them representatives of the petty bourgeoisie is the fact that in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not get beyond in life, that they are consequently driven, theoretically, to the same problems and solutions to which material interest and social position drive the latter practically. This is, in general, the relationship between the political and literary representatives of a class and the class they represent.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, class position is a concept which belongs to the analysis of the political conjuncture. It is in the “current movement” of the political struggle that individuals group themselves into defined class positions. Of course the basis of this class position is class location, but it is not restricted to this. Isolated elements or groups belonging to other classes can join with and struggle for a class which is not their own.

Class location creates, as we have seen, a class instinct which causes the members of that class to tend to take the side of the class to which they belong.

In order to arrive at a proletarian class position, the class instinct of the proletariat only needs to be educated; contrariwise, for the petty bourgeois intellectuals to succeed in reaching a proletarian class position, their class instinct must be revolutionized.

As a result, for them to attain a proletarian class position requires a long process. Often petty bourgeois intellectuals join the proletarian party because they have become convinced of the truth and the political efficacy of Marxist analysis, but in difficult political conjunctures, they fall into petty bourgeois positions. That is why Marxism gives such profound importance to the social composition of a proletarian party. The greater the number of members of the party with a proletarian class situation, the easier it will be to avoid leftist or rightist deviations which are the expression of petty bourgeois ideology in the ranks of the proletariat.

## Social Forces

Much confusion about the concept of class comes from certain texts of Marx which have been interpreted in such a way as to deny the class character of a social group which, in spite of being in a determined situation in the economic structure of a social formation, has not participated in a unified way in the political struggle.

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<sup>29</sup>Karl Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, ch 3.

In other texts Marx does not deny the class character of a group which has not participated in the political struggle, but he refers to it as a “class in itself” as opposed to a “class for itself” – that is, a class which participates in the political struggle.

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself.

The terminology used by Lenin and Mao seems more adequate to us. They speak of *social class* when speaking at the level of the mode of production and social formation, and introduce the term *social force* to analyze the action of these classes at the level of the political conjuncture.

A social group can constitute a class and not a social force, as, for example, do the petty peasant producers of certain countries.

Conversely, some social groups can constitute a social force without belonging to any of the classes of a social formation, like revolutionary intellectuals for example.

For a class or social group to constitute a social force, it need not be organized into a political party per se, as some have seemingly taken away from some of Marx’s texts. It is enough that its existence be reflected in some way in the correlation of forces at the level of the conjuncture. That is, that it produce “relevant effects”, to use the Poulantzas’ terminology. This is the case for the small-holding peasants analyzed by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. In the concrete conjuncture of Bonapartism, Marx recognized the role that the small-holders had played despite having neither their own organization nor their own ideology. They constituted a social force due to the existence of as a class which was reflected in that concrete conjuncture by the historical phenomenon of Bonapartism, which would not have existed without the small-holding peasants.

Louis Bonapartism considered himself the representative of the small-holding peasants, even though he was in reality the “representative” of the bourgeoisie. Despite that, the economic existence of the small-holding peasants was reflected on the political level by “relevant effects” which were the *particular form of the state* of Bonapartism as a historical phenomenon. Here we are dealing with a new element, easily perceived, which is the particular form of the state in the Second Empire, a form which cannot be fit within the frame of the parliamentary state which

preceded it<sup>30</sup>.

If this had not occurred, if the existence of the peasantry as a class had not been reflected in the phenomenon of Bonapartism, this class doubtlessly would have had some kind of presence on the political level

if only for the simple fact that the political organization of other classes, as well as the institutions of the state, would have had to take into account the existence of small-holding peasants, in the case of suffrage, for example. However, in this case, their presence would not have constituted a new element – it would not have had “relevant effects” – but would only have been inserted as a variation into the boundaries circumscribed by the relevant effects of other elements – for example, into the framework of constitutional democracy.<sup>31</sup>

Now then, in a revolutionary process, it is necessary to distinguish three kinds of forces:

- *motor forces*
- *the principal force*
- *the directing force.*

*The motor forces* are those constituted by the social groups which actively participate in the revolutionary process.

*The principal force* is constituted by the social group which represents the numerically largest motor force.

*The directing force* is constituted by the group that directs the revolutionary process. It is not necessary to be the numerically largest motor force to direct the revolutionary process. What makes something as a directing force is not its number, but its political role. That is, its capacity to take the initiative, to formulate appropriate goals at each stage, and to find the right ways to lead the situation. In this way, it gains the confidence of the revolutionary masses who then follow its leadership unwaveringly.

The case of the Chinese Revolution illustrates these three kinds of forces very clearly. The motor forces were constituted by the peasantry, the proletariat, and the urban petty bourgeoisie (sometimes managing to incorporate certain sectors of the national bourgeoisie). The principal force was, without a doubt, the peasantry. The proletariat, despite its small numbers, succeeded in making itself the directing force of the revolution due to the political role it played in the Chinese Revolution.

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<sup>30</sup>Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (NLB, 1973), p. 79.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 80.

It is very important not to confuse the principal force with the directing force of a revolution.

In certain Latin American countries for example, the conditions of extreme poverty of the peasantry, its great revolutionary potential, and the specific large weight which it has within the total population of the country, makes it without a doubt the principal force of the revolution in those countries. But to state this is not to deny the proletariat its directing role in the revolutionary process. It is *objectively* the only class, due to its class location (i.e., its location in social production), which is capable of leading the revolutionary process to its conclusion: the suppression of every kind of exploitation.

### 9.13 Conclusion: The Social Classes as Bearers of Definite Structures

After what has been said in the previous sections, we can understand what kind of relationship exists between the social structure and social classes.

Social classes are not the *creative subjects* of social structures. They are, on the contrary, as Marx says, the “bearers” [*Träger*] of definite structures, the actors in a drama they have not written.

Let’s pause for a moment to consider this concept of “bearer” which Marx used in *Capital* to give an account of the relation we aim to study here.

In the first place, we should note that the German word *Träger* has two very different meanings in English (as in Spanish and French): “support” and “carrier”/“bearer”. The first term (support) points at the idea of maintaining or holding something up, of being the base of something, of buttressing or serving as support for something. It is in this sense that Marx uses it when he states “material conditions are the supports [*Träger*] of social relations”<sup>32</sup>

The second term (carrier/bearer) denotes, contrarily, taking something upon oneself, bringing it with you. Marx uses it in this sense when he says “As a capitalist, he is only capital personified”<sup>33</sup> and “only acts in the production process as a bearer [*Träger*] of capital.”<sup>34</sup>

Through its affirmation that *classes are the bearers of definite struc-*

<sup>32</sup>TODO, needs citation from English edition of *Capital*.

<sup>33</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, p. 342.

<sup>34</sup>TODO: needs citation from English edition of *Capital*.

tures, Marxism rejects all voluntaristic conceptions about social classes.

It is not the classes that *create* the structures. For example, it is not enough for a class to propose changing a structure for it to be able to do it. Although the proletariat might want to implement communism immediately after destroying capitalism, it would not be able to since such a social regime requires a very advanced development of the productive forces as a precondition.

But to state that classes do not *create* the structures does not imply that they cannot *act on* those structures, modifying them within certain limits. These limits depend on particular material conditions, which form the basis for the level of development reached by the productive forces. Without the active participation of the classes, the social structures tend to reproduce themselves, overcoming the crises generated by their internal contradictions. Radical changes to the structures only take place when the revolutionary classes are capable of taking advantage of the crises of the system to produce deep structural changes, that is, revolutionary changes. This is what explains the fundamental role which Marxism attributes to class struggle as the motor of history.

Returning now to our definition, saying that the classes are *bearers* of definite structures is the same as saying that they are *effects* of these structures.

Thus we can come to define the social classes as effects that the global social structure has on the individuals participating in social production in one way or another.

Have we thus abandoned the use of the concept of relations of production to define the classes?

We think this would be the case if we were to conceive of the global social structure as a simple combination of levels (economic, ideological, and political), as does Poulantzas. In that case, it is theoretically impossible to study this effect as an effect of the global structure, and one is forced to analyze it as a series of partial effects at the level of each regional structure.

If instead we think of the combination of the different levels of the social structure beginning with the *relations of production*, everything changes. For Marx, these relations serve as the structuring center or as the matrix of the social totality, as we have seen in studying the concept of mode of production. And, therefore, it is these relations which serve as the foundation for the constitution of social classes. To deny this, labelling it as an economistic deviation, is to deny the fundamental

contribution of Marxism to the study of the social classes, and is therefore a regression for Marxist thought.

Finally, we want to clarify that it's one thing to speak of the classes as *effects* of the global social structure, which ultimately just means they are fundamentally an effect of the relations of production. It's another thing to speak of *the effects that classes can produce* at the different of society: ideological effects, political effects, or economic effects. When we refer to these effects, we are referring to the concrete practice of these classes. This practice will be studied in the next chapter.

## 9.14 Summary

In this chapter we discussed the Marxist concept of social class. We first defined it at the level of mode of production in order to later examine the new attributes it acquires at the level of social formation and at the level of political conjuncture. Finally, we made precise the definition of classes as “bearers” of definite structures.

We have seen the following concepts of the general theory of historical materialism:

- social class
- class fraction
- class interest
- class consciousness
- class instinct
- class structure
- transitional class
- class location
- class position
- social force
- motor force
- principal force
- directing force

## Questions

1. What state did Marx leave his study of the social classes in when he died?
2. What was Marx's innovation with respect to the social classes?
3. How are the social classes defined at the level of the mode of production?

4. Why does Marx speak of three classes when he refers to the capitalist system?
5. How many classes exist in each mode of production?
6. What is the relation between the reproduction of the mode of production and the social classes?
7. Do all the individuals in a society belong to a given class?
8. What is a class fraction?
9. What is immediate, spontaneous interest?
10. What is class interest?
11. What is class consciousness?
12. What is class instinct?
13. Can the proletariat spontaneously acquire a proletarian class consciousness?
14. What is class structure?
15. Why do the social classes acquire new attributes at the level of the social formation? What kinds, for example?
16. What is a transitional class?
17. Can you explain why the word “bearer” is used to define the role of the classes?
18. What is class location?
19. What is class position?
20. What is a social force?
21. What are the motor forces?
22. What is a principal force?
23. What is a directing force?
24. Does Marxism reduce the social classes to merely economic categories?
25. Why does Marx not define the social classes by using income differences as criteria?

### Themes for Reflection

1. What prior knowledge is needed to make a scientific analysis of the social classes in Latin America?
2. Why is the criterion of greater or lesser exploitation not a Marxist criterion for the definition of the revolutionary possibilities of a class?
3. What are the effects of the action of imperialism on the Latin American class structure?





# 10

## Class Struggle

### 10.1 The Concept of Class Struggle

At the level of the political conjuncture the social classes can only be conceived through their “class practices”, and since classes are groups with opposing interests, these class practices have the character of class struggle. And it is precisely this *class struggle*, going on within the limits fixed by the social structure, which, in class societies, is the motor of history.

Of course Marx did not discover either classes or class struggle. His great contribution was to pass from the description of the existence of social classes to knowledge of the origin of these classes, and, therefore, he was able to give us the **law** *which rules the class struggle*.

This is what Engels tells us in the following text:

It was precisely Marx who had first discovered the great law of motion of history, the law according to which all historical struggles, whether they proceed in the political, religious, philosophical or some other ideological domain, are in fact only the more or less clear expression of struggles of social classes, and that the existence and thereby the collisions, too, between these classes are in turn conditioned by the degree of development of their economic position, by the mode of their production and of their exchange determined by it. This law, which has the same significance for history as the law of the transformation of energy has for natural science.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Engels, *Preface to the Third German Edition of The Eighteenth Br-*

Let us see now what is meant by class struggle. Is class struggle the confrontation which takes place between the workers of one factory or trade and their bosses? Let us look at how Lenin responded to this question:

No, this is only a weak embryo of it. The struggle of the workers becomes a class struggle only when all the foremost representatives of the entire working class of the whole country are conscious of themselves as a single working class and launch a struggle that is directed, not against individual employers, but against the entire class of capitalists and against the government that supports that class. Only when the individual worker realises that he is a member of the entire working class, only when he recognises the fact that his petty day-to-day struggle against individual employers and individual government officials is a struggle against the entire bourgeoisie and the entire government, does his struggle become a class struggle<sup>2</sup>

*Class struggle is the confrontation which is produced between two antagonistic classes when they are struggling for their class interests.*

The class struggle appears when one class opposes another in *action*, and, therefore, it only appears in a given moment in the development of a society. In other phases of its evolution the class struggle can only appear in embryonic forms as in the case of the isolated struggles between the workers of some factories and their bosses, or in the struggles which, although they mobilize the whole class, do not succeed in raising the struggle to the level of its true class interests; or as in *hidden, latent* struggles when there is not open struggle but latent discontent, silent opposition.<sup>3</sup>

The class struggle takes place on three levels, which correspond to the three levels or regional structures which form part of the overall social structure.

- a. *Economic struggle* (at the level of the economic structure).
- b. *Ideological struggle* (at the level of the ideological structure).
- c. *Political struggle* (at the level of the political structure).

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maire of Louis Bonaparte.

<sup>2</sup>Lenin, *Our Immediate Task*.

<sup>3</sup>Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism*.

## 10.2 The Different Kinds of Class Struggle

- (a) *The economic struggle* is the confrontation which is produced between the antagonistic classes at the level of the economic struggle. This confrontation is characterized by the resistance which the exploited classes put up at this level against the exploiting classes.

Lenin defines the economic struggle of the proletariat in the following way:

The economic struggle is the collective struggle of the workers against their employers for better terms in *the sale of their labor power*, for better living and working conditions. This struggle is necessarily a trade-union struggle, because the working conditions differ greatly in different trades, and, consequently, the struggle to *improve* them can only be conducted on the basis of trade organizations <sup>4</sup>

- (b) *The ideological struggle*. The class struggle is also present at the ideological level as a struggle between the ideology of the exploited class and the ideology of the exploiting class.<sup>5</sup>

In capitalist society, this struggle is a struggle between *bourgeois ideology* in all its manifest forms and *proletarian ideology* based on the Marxist theory of history.

This struggle, to be successful, must, in contrast to the other forms of struggle, attack the enemy where he is strongest, that is, where the best exponents of ruling class ideology are to be found. Often this ideology is criticized by oversimplifying it or choosing its weakest supporters. This frequently allows the enemy to advance rather than forcing him to retreat.<sup>6</sup>

- (c) *The political struggle*. The political struggle is the confrontation which is produced between the classes in their struggle for political power, that is, in the struggle to make state power their own.

This is what Lenin says:

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<sup>4</sup>Lenin, *What is to be Done?*, Section III, part A.

<sup>5</sup>In the chapter on ideology we saw the existence of different ideological tendencies corresponding to the different social classes.

<sup>6</sup>"In the ideological struggle... the defeat of auxiliaries and lesser figures has an almost insignificant importance; here it is vital that ones most eminent opponents be combatted.... A science obtains proof of its effectiveness and vitality when it demonstrates that it knows how to confront the great champions of opposing tendencies, when it resolves, by its own means, the vital problems which they have posed, or otherwise shows that these problems are false ones." Antonio Gramsci, *Historical Materialism and the Philosophy of Benedetto Croce*.

Every class struggle is a political struggle. We know that the opportunists, slaves to the ideas of liberalism, understood these profound words of Marx incorrectly and tried to put a distorted interpretation on them. Among the opportunists there were, for instance, the Economists, the elder brothers of the liquidators. The Economists believed that any clash between classes was a political struggle. The Economists therefore recognised as “class struggle” the struggle for a wage increase of five kopeks on the ruble, and refused to recognise a higher, more developed, nation-wide *class* struggle, the struggle for *political aims*. The Economists, therefore, recognised the embryonic class struggle but did not recognise it in its developed form. The Economists recognised, in other words, only that part of the class struggle that was more tolerable to the liberal bourgeoisie, they refused to go farther than the liberals, they refused to recognise the higher form of class struggle that is unacceptable to the liberals. By so doing, the Economists became liberal workers’ politicians. By so doing, the Economists rejected the Marxist, revolutionary conception of the class struggle.

To continue. It is not enough that the class struggle be comes real, consistent and developed only when it embraces the sphere of politics. In politics, too, it is possible to restrict oneself to minor matters, and it is possible to go deeper, to the very foundations. Marxism recognises a class struggle as fully developed, “nation-wide”, *only* if it does not merely embrace politics but takes in the most significant thing in politics—the organisation of state power.

On the other hand, the liberals, when the working-class movement has grown a little stronger, dare not deny the class struggle but attempt to narrow down, to curtail and emasculate the concept of class struggle. Liberals are prepared to recognise the class struggle in the sphere of politics, too, but on one condition—that the organisation of state power should *not* enter into that sphere. It is not hard to understand which of the bourgeoisie’s class interests give rise to the liberal distortion of the concept of class struggle.<sup>7</sup>

From what has been said above we can conclude that there are three

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<sup>7</sup>Lenin, *Liberal and Marxist Conceptions of the Class Struggle*.

fundamental kinds of class struggle: economic, ideological and political.

However, these different kinds of struggle do not exist separated from one another, but are fused into a single unity which constitutes the class struggle as such or the confrontation of one class with another.

Thus, in every conjuncture there is a certain form of fusion of these different kinds of struggle, in which one plays a dominant role. In a given historical moment the ideological struggle can be the strategic nodal point of the class struggle, in other cases it can be the political or economic struggle. How, then, should we interpret Marx's statement that all class struggle is a political struggle?

We think that this statement must be understood in the sense that the definitive confrontation of the antagonistic classes is only produced when the oppressed class comes to question the system of power which makes its condition of exploitation possible. In order for there to be a real class confrontation neither the economic nor the ideological struggle alone is sufficient. It is necessary to advance to the level of political struggle, of the struggle for power. It is only in this moment that the class struggle acquires its full meaning. Until then it is only a question of partial confrontations which do not question the system which allows for the reproduction of the antagonistic classes such as they are. For this reason, Lenin says that the:

struggle of the workers becomes a class struggle only when all the foremost representatives of the entire working class of the whole country are conscious of themselves as a single working class and launch a struggle that is directed, not against individual employers, but against the *entire class* of capitalists and against the government that supports that class.[^10.8] [^10.8]: Lenin, *Our Immediate Task*.

But to affirm that the political struggle is the class struggle *par excellence* does not imply denying the importance of the economic struggle. The necessity of this struggle has been recognized from the beginning by Marxism.

Marx and Engels criticized the utopian socialists for deprecating this kind of struggle. In the resolutions of the Congress of the International Working Men's Association in 1866 they warned against two deviations: exaggerating its importance and underestimating it. Before going on to the next point, let us clarify two concepts that are commonly confused: "the political" and "politics".

We understand "the political" to mean the juridico-political structure

of a society. In this sense, the political struggle is a struggle on the field or level of “the political”.

We mean by “politics” the terrain of political action. That is, the class struggle in a given political conjuncture.

### 10.3 The Forms of Class Struggle

Each one of these kinds of struggle which develops in a given front or level can take different forms: legal or illegal, peaceful or violent.

For example, on the economic front: strikes, hunger marches, slow-downs, factory takeovers, etc.

On the ideological front: publications, radio and television broadcasts of a revolutionary orientation; revolutionary utilization of political concentrations and electoral campaigns, etc.

On the political front: electoral struggle, armed insurrection, popular war (with its different forms: guerilla war, wars of position, and war of movement, etc.).

Now let us look at what, according to Lenin, are the fundamental requirements which every Marxist must meet when examining the question of the forms of struggle.

In the first place, Marxism differs from all primitive forms of socialism by not binding the movement to any one particular form of struggle. It recognises the most varied forms of struggle; and it does not “concoct” them, but only generalises, organises, gives conscious expression to those forms of struggle of the revolutionary classes which arise of themselves in the course of the movement. Absolutely hostile to all abstract formulas and to all doctrinaire recipes, Marxism demands an attentive attitude to the *mass* struggle in progress, which, as the movement develops, as the class-consciousness of the masses grows, as economic and political crises become acute, continually gives rise to new and more varied methods of

defence and attack. Marxism, therefore, positively does not reject any form of struggle. Under no circumstances does Marxism confine itself to the forms of struggle possible and in existence at the given moment only, recognising as it does that new forms of struggle, unknown to the participants of the given period, *inevitably* arise as the given social situation, changes. In this respect Marxism *learns*, if we may so express it, from mass practice, and makes no claim what ever to teach the masses forms of struggle invented by “systematisers” in the seclusion of their studies. We know – said Kautsky, for instance, when examining the forms of social revolution – that the coming crisis will introduce new forms of struggle that we are now unable to foresee.

In the second place, Marxism demands an absolutely *historical* examination of the question of the forms of struggle. To treat this question apart from the concrete historical situation betrays a failure to understand the rudiments of dialectical materialism. At different stages of economic evolution, depending on differences in political, national-cultural, living and other conditions, different forms of struggle come to the fore and become the principal forms of struggle; and in connection with this, the secondary, auxiliary forms of struggle undergo change in their turn. To attempt to answer yes or no to the question whether any particular means of struggle should be used, without making a detailed examination of the concrete situation of the given movement at the given stage of its development, means completely to abandon the Marxist position.

These are the two principal theoretical propositions by which we must be guided.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, Marxism holds that the class struggle can take different forms. It maintains that the role which a given form of struggle can play can only be judged according to the political conjuncture of that moment, and, finally, that it is the Marxist-Leninist party which must “generalize, organize, and give a conscious character to the revolutionary class struggles.” The party must decide in each moment which form of struggle should occupy the principal role, and how the other forms ought to be subordinated to the principal form. To proclaim that Marxism

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<sup>8</sup>Lenin, *Guerrilla Warfare*.

accepts all forms of struggle does not exempt the revolutionary party from deciding which of these forms should be preponderant and how to organize the rest of the forms to support this.

## 10.4 Strategy and Tactics in the Class Struggle

But a Marxist-Leninist party cannot limit itself to following the forms of struggle which arise spontaneously from the working masses. It must raise these forms of struggle so that they are transformed into the most adequate means to meet their class interest.

Class interests cannot always be realized immediately. Often it is necessary to go through a first stage where you can only prepare the groundwork for fulfilling those interests. In a first stage, for example, the proletariat could unite with the peasantry and certain popular sectors to complete bourgeois-democratic tasks. Later, in another stage, after having demonstrated its capacity as the leading force in bourgeois-democratic tasks, the proletarian party based in the popular masses could begin to carry out the tasks of the definitive suppression of social exploitation. This was the case, for example, of the Chinese and the Cuban revolutions.

Therefore, assuming the necessity for a first stage of struggle, a stage which probably would not be necessary in the advanced capitalist countries, every revolutionary part) must establish a *minimum program*<sup>9</sup> in which the goals of the first stage would be represented and a *maximum program* which would aim at finally bringing about the suppression of all exploitation.

The ideal would be to liberate all the zones at the same time, but when the ideal does not correspond to the reality of the balance of forces, to try to do it, no matter the cost, becomes, in the last analysis, the principal obstacle to victory. Only by advancing through stages can the final objective be reached: to liberate all the zones in the enemy's hands.

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<sup>9</sup>A minimum program which is the best program for that stage and, therefore, the only truly revolutionary program since it is the only one which lets the process advance. Many programs more revolutionary on paper can become a brake for the revolution if they try to be carried out immediately. To clarify what we mean, we shall pose an example: if a patriotic army still not sufficiently strong is trying to liberate its country from a very powerful enemy army which has invaded it, it must concentrate all of its forces to win. It would be incorrect to try to liberate the whole country all at once, dispersing its scarce forces. To truly liberate the whole territory and not face defeat in the first battle, the army must first liberate certain strategic zones, which permit it to most rapidly weaken the enemy, while still leaving, for the time being, other zones in its hands.



This in no way implies that it is necessary to demobilize the non-strategic zones, so that they wait with arms folded for their final liberation. Quite the contrary, these zones must be mobilized, but their actions must be coordinated with and subordinated to the principal objective.

After having established the minimum program appropriate to the first stage of development of the class struggle, it becomes necessary to devise a *general strategy of struggle* to achieve the program's objectives.

But it is not enough to formulate a general strategy. In order to achieve these strategic goals, it is necessary to be able to mobilize the masses, since *without the participation of the masses there can be no revolution*. And to mobilize the masses it is necessary to begin with their spontaneous, immediate interests. You cannot offer abstract formulas to the masses, you must provide concrete proposals for action that correspond to the political conjuncture of each moment.

These concrete proposals for action constitute the different *tactics* of a party. *Political slogans* are only short phrases in which the party synthesizes these concrete proposals for action. Only a party which has contact with the masses, which recognizes their immediate interests, which recognizes their revolutionary potential and which knows where it must lead them can establish adequate slogans for each historical moment. The correctness of the tactical positions of a revolutionary party leads the masses to recognize it as its vanguard.

The parties which lack contact with the masses tend to put forth *abstract slogans* which can be correct from a strategic point of view but which lack meaning for the masses since they do not appear related in any way to their immediate, spontaneous interests.

*It is, therefore, in struggle and not in declarations where the true revolutionary vanguard is recognized.*

## **10.5 The Social Revolution: the Ultimate Form of the Class Struggle**

To the degree to which the contradictions of a society develop the class struggle acquires a sharper character, until the moment comes when the oppressed classes succeed in seizing political power and begin to destroy the old relations of production.

The conscious and violent process of destruction of the old relations of production and, therefore, of the social classes which are their bearers,

is what Marxism calls *social revolution*.<sup>10</sup>

Every social revolution is the result of a combination of subjective and objective factors. The objective factors are the objective changes taking place in the national and international conjuncture. They are the material base of the revolution. The totality of objective factors necessary for the unleashing of a revolution constitute what Lenin called the **revolutionary situation**.

Let us see what he says in respect to this point in his article, "The Collapse of the Second International," written two years before the October Revolution:

To the Marxist it is indisputable that a revolution is impossible without a revolutionary situation; furthermore, it is not every revolutionary situation that leads to revolution. What, generally speaking, are the symptoms of a revolutionary situation? We shall certainly not be mistaken if we indicate the following three major symptoms: (1) when it is impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule without any change; when there is a crisis, in one form or another, among the "upper classes", a crisis in the policy of the ruling class, leading to a fissure through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed classes burst forth. For a revolution to take place, it is usually insufficient for "the lower classes not to want" to live in the old way; it is also necessary that "the upper classes should be unable" to live in the old way; (2) when the suffering and want of the oppressed classes have grown more acute than usual; (3) when, as a consequence of the above causes, there is a considerable increase in the activity of the masses, who uncomplainingly allow themselves to be robbed in "peace time", but, in turbulent times, are drawn both by all the circumstances of the crisis *and by the "upper classes" themselves* into independent historical action. Without these objective changes, which are independent of the will, not only of individual groups and parties but even of individual classes, a revolution, as a general rule, is impossible. The totality of all these objective changes is called a revolutionary situation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>This has nothing in common with the simple process of achieving political independence (the independence of Latin American countries) nor with a simple change in government through a military takeover.

<sup>11</sup>Lenin, *The Collapse of the Second International*.

This revolutionary situation is defined by Louis Althusser as “an accumulation and exacerbation of historical conditions”<sup>12</sup> which fuse into a ruptural unity. But history has known numerous cases of revolutionary situations which were not turned into victorious revolutions, for instance in Germany in the 1860s, in Russia in 1905, in the first year of the first imperialist world war in various countries in Europe, etc. This shows us that objective conditions are not enough. In order to move from a revolutionary situation to a victorious revolution it is necessary to add the *subjective conditions* to the objective conditions:

it is not every revolutionary situation that gives rise to a revolution; revolution arises only out of a situation in which the above-mentioned objective changes are accompanied by a subjective change, namely, the ability of the revolutionary *class* to take revolutionary mass action *strong* enough to break (or dislocate) the old government, which never, not even in a period of crisis, “falls”, if it is not toppled over.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to point out that these objective and subjective conditions which were for Lenin the necessary conditions for the triumph of a general insurrection cannot be used, therefore as a criterion to decide at what moment a prolonged popular war ought to begin, which has as one of its objectives, precisely, the creation of the conditions for a social revolution.

## 10.6 Summary

In this chapter we have looked at what we mean by class struggle, the different kinds of class struggle ( economic, political, and ideological), the different forms in which these struggles can take place: legal or illegal, peaceful and violent, what should be the attitude of a Marxist-Leninist party towards them, and the strategy and tactics of the class struggle, concluding with an analysis of the objective and subjective conditions of the social revolution, the highest form of class struggle.

### Questions

1. What is class struggle?
2. What is economic struggle?
3. What is ideological struggle?

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<sup>12</sup>Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 95.

<sup>13</sup>Lenin, op. cit.

4. What is political struggle?
5. What is the “political structure”?
6. What do we mean by ‘political’?
7. What do we mean by kinds of struggle?
8. What do we mean by form of struggle?
9. What is the Marxist thesis about forms of struggle?
10. What is a minimum program?
11. What is a maximum program?
12. Is only a maximum program revolutionary?
13. When is a political party carrying out a correct tactic?
14. What are the considerations which we must take into account in order to put forward a correct political slogan?
15. What is a social revolution?
16. What is a revolutionary situation?
17. What are the objective conditions of a revolution?
18. What are the subjective conditions of a revolution?

### **Themes for Reflection**

1. Is it possible to combine electoral struggle with armed struggle?
2. When is a minimum program a revolutionary program?
3. What elements should you take into account to formulate the strategy which the revolution in your country ought to follow?
4. What are the minimum conditions necessary to successfully launch a prolonged popular war?

# 11

## The Marxist Theory of History

### 11.1 Introduction

Since the first historians that emerged in the Greek world, the great majority have limited themselves to making chronologies of past events. The most significant events were used as periodization criteria (for example, the battles, the conquests, the birth of Jesus, etc.). The great contribution of the few philosophers of history, like Hegel, was to have sought a principle with which to render the stages of history intelligible.

Let's see what Engels has to say:

the philosophy of history, particularly as represented by Hegel, recognizes that the ostensible and also the really operating motives of men who act in history are by no means the ultimate causes of historical events; that behind these motives are other motive powers, which have to be discovered. But it does not seek these powers in history itself, it imports them rather from outside, from philosophical ideology, into history. Hegel, for example, instead of explaining the history of ancient Greece out of its own inner interconnections, simply maintains that it is nothing more than the working out of "forms of beautiful individuality", the realization of a "work of art" as such. He says much in this connection about the old Greeks that is fine and profound, but that does not prevent us today from refusing to be put off with such an explanation, which is a mere manner of speech<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/ludwig->

Let's briefly explain the Hegelian conception of history so that we can determine what is novel in Marx with respect to Hegel.

## 11.2 The Hegelian theory of history

Because the categories of history and time are intimately related to each other, let us study the essential characteristics of Hegelian historical time in order to understand the foundation of his theory of history.

The characteristics of Hegelian historical time are

- a. Homogeneous continuity
- b. Contemporaneity

**Homogeneous continuity:** For Hegel, time has the character of homogeneous continuity. It is like water in a river that runs continuously, passing through different landscapes. Each of these landscapes would be a stage of history. This continuity of time is based on the dialectical continuity of the development process of the Absolute Spirit. The ultimate cause of the apparent motives of people's actions in history should be sought in the development of the Absolute Spirit, the Idea. There is a type of soul in history that appears differently in the distinct historical stages (the abstract personality in Rome, beauty in Greece, subjectivity in medieval christianity, etc.).

If history is constituted by homogeneous time, the entire problem of the historian consists of cutting up this continuum according to the periodization corresponding to the succession of stages of the development of the Idea.

### **Contemporaneity or the category of the historical present.**

The necessary condition for making historical divisions, following the different stages of the evolution of the Idea, is to be able to capture, in each division, the global social totality. The social totality must be set up in such a way that all of its elements coexist at the same time. This characteristic is typical of a totality which has a spiritual unity. That is, a totality in which each part expresses the central nucleus of the whole.

The reduction of all those elements that form the concrete life of a historical world (economic, social, political, and legal institutions, customs, morality, art, religion, philosophy, and even the historical events: wars, battles, defeats, etc.) to a principle of internal unity, this same reduction is not possible except under the absolute condition of considering the entire concrete life of a people as the exteriorization/alienation of an

internal spiritual principle. That is, not of its material reality but of its most abstract ideology<sup>2</sup>

The idea of historical time elaborated by Hegel is nothing but a reflection of the lived experience of time. We believe in one-and-only-one time where we see a past, a present, and a future. We believe we distinguish different periods in our own personal history, periods that we determine according to the most important events of our lives.

Hegel's notion of historical time is an ideological notion, taken from lived experience, and it is directly related to Hegel's conception of the social totality. The existence of homogeneous time and the possibility of making historical divisions that permit us to see the essence of the social totality are directly tied to the Hegelian conception of the totality as a whole, which possesses a spiritual unity.

### **11.3 The Marxist theory of history**

What is the novelty of Marx with respect to the theory of history? Does it consist in having described a new criterion of periodization (the criterion of "modes of production")?

To hold that the novelty of Marx resides in the description of a new periodization of history – that of "modes of production" – is to remain within the Hegelian conception of history. Inside one-and-only-one homogeneous historical time, which now, instead of being divided according to the development of the idea, is divided according to a material criterion: the mode of production of material goods and the juridico-political and ideological consequences thereof.

Unfortunately, the few texts of Marx and Engels about their conception of history lend themselves to this kind of interpretation.

Engels tells us, for example, that "The traditional conception, to which Hegel, too, pays homage, saw in the state the determining element, and in civil society the element determined by it." And he adds that appearances undoubtedly justify this idea. For Marxism, on the other hand, "the state – the political order – is the subordination, and civil society — the realm of economic relations — the decisive element."<sup>3</sup>

In this text, Engels identifies civil society with economic structure, and the state with the juridico-political and ideological superstructure. The inversion is clear: while in Hegel it is the political-ideological (the

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<sup>2</sup>Althusser, *La revolución teórica de Marx*, pp. 83-84

<sup>3</sup>Engels, *op. cit.*

self-consciousness of an era) which is the essence of the economic, in Marx it would be the economic which is the essence of the political-ideological. The juridico-political and ideological superstructure would be, therefore, a mere economic phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>

The theory of history would pass from the spiritualist evolutionism of Hegel to the materialist evolution of Marxism. And the criteria for periodization of history would come not out of the dialectical evolution of the Idea, but out of the dialectical evolution of the economy.

The novelty of Marx would remain reduced to the inversion of Hegel's conception. Following the formulation of Marx himself, he would say of Hegel, "With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again."

Now then, as we have seen throughout this work, it is not enough to stay at the level of the letter of these texts. It is necessary to study them in a critical way and to try to discover, through a global study of the works of these authors, what their true approach to history was.

Marx and Engels did not systematically and rigorously elaborate an explicit approach for their theory of history<sup>5</sup>, but their study of the capitalist mode of production has given us the theoretical instruments which allow us to elaborate this theory.

To elaborate the Marxist concept of history, it is necessary to begin with the Marxist concept of social totality.

In chapter 8, we saw that the abstract concept that lets us understand the social totality is the concept of *mode of production*: the dynamic global structure, composed of three regional structures: economic, ideological, and juridico-political. Now then, each of these structures has a relatively autonomous existence and its own laws of operation and development, while still being determined in the last instance by the economic structure. The levels of the superstructure are not, therefore a simple expression of the economic level. They have their own relatively independent reality. To say that a level of society has its own existence and its own laws of

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<sup>4</sup>One should not confuse the theory of Hegel with the judgement Marx made of him. See, on this point, Althusser, *La revolución teórica de Marx*, pp. 168-169, note 43.

<sup>5</sup>In reality, in 1845-46, Marx and Engels had started a work of a theoretical nature about history. It was written but not published while they were alive: it is about "The German Ideology." Later, in referring to it, Engels writes: "The section dealing with Feuerbach is not completed. The finished portion consists of an exposition of the materialist conception of history which proves only how incomplete our knowledge of economic history still was at that time." (Foreword to the pamphlet "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy".)



development is to affirm that it has its own relatively autonomous “time”; relatively independent, in its very dependence, from the “times” of the other levels.

If we study, for example, the transition from feudalism to capitalism, we see that the time of the economic structure was not the same as that of the juridico-political structure. The capitalist social relations of production established themselves spontaneously within the feudal social formation – the first capitalist manufacturers coexisted with feudal agricultural exploitation – but the state and rights continued to be in the service of the old ruling class. The bourgeois revolution synchronized these two times to each other.

In the case of the transition from capitalism to socialism, the capitalist economic structure and its laws of development block all possibility of the emergence of socialist relations of production. This necessitates the taking of political power by the proletariat to begin establishing said relations. This “anticipation” of the economic relations by the political relations, in the transition to socialism, is determined by the precise articulation of these relations.

Therefore, each structure in a given mode of production has its own time, time which is not immediately visible but must be constructed in each case.

To explain the last point we’ll take an example from psychology: a biography does not tell the life of a person following time as a clock marks it (hours, days, months, years, etc.), but strives to point out the important occurrences which have marked their life: meetings, discoveries, accidents, etc. The time of biography is a time which is visible in the events which have taken place in that personal life. But Freud has showed us that to remain in this visible time, in the time of biography, it to remain on the surface of a human life. It is to remain on the level of description. To know a person is necessarily to know the fundamental structure of their personality. Freud’s great contribution is having produced the concept which lets us know this fundamental structure: *the concept of the unconscious and its different phases of development* (oral, anal, phallic, oedipal, the period of latency, etc.).

The deep meaning of the facts of a biography is only intelligible by starting from their position within a certain phase of psychic development.

The death of their father, for example, has a very different meaning for a child that is in the oedipal phase (conquest of the love of the mother), than for a child that has not yet reached that stage, or which has already

passed it. The first may suffer strong feelings of guilt, thinking it was they who killed their father, as they unconsciously desired in their imagination.

The time of biography is a time which is visible, vivid, linear. The time of the unconscious is a time which is not visible, which must be constructed for each stage of development of psychic life, each of these stages being what allows us to pass from the simple enumeration of facts to their understanding.

We can, therefore, conclude that neither the Freudian theory of the development of the psyche nor the Marxist theory of history of the society are absolutely situated at the level of visible empirical history, which develops in a time that is unitary, linear, simply "chronological."

Let us now take another example properly belong to the field of history: the time of the history of philosophy.

The time of the history of philosophy is also not immediately legible: certainly one sees, in the historical chronology, philosophers follow one another, and one can this sequence as the history itself. But here again it is necessarily to renounce the ideological prejudices of the succession of the visible and start *constructing the concept of the time of the history of philosophy*.<sup>6</sup>

It is necessary therefore to construct to the concept of the time of philosophy starting from the succession of different philosophical problematics. That is, from the typical systematic structures that unify the different elements of a thought.

Within a single problematic we can find multiple philosophers.

We can note radical changes of problematic (Marx in relation to Hegel), but we can also note secondary changes (Feuerbach with respect to Hegel).

The history of philosophy, to acquire the character of scientific history, should therefore, abandon the chronological study of the different philosophers and move on to the study of the different philosophical problematics which have existed, locating the philosophers within their respective problematics.

Marx does not limit himself, therefore, to offering a new criterion of periodization. The very nature of this criterion implies a complete transformation in the way of posing of the problem. It is no longer about a linear, homogeneous, historical temporality of the Hegelian type, but about certain specific structures of historicity.

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<sup>6</sup>Althusser "El objeto de El capital", en Para leer El capital, ed. Francesa, 2, p.49

In the same way that “production in general” does not exist, “history in general” does not exist, but specific structures of historicity.<sup>7</sup>

These *specific structures of historicity are the different modes of production*, based, in the last instance, on a certain mode of production of material goods.

**The Marxist theory of history is, therefore, a scientific study of the discontinuous succession of the different modes of production.**

The Marxist theory of history, that has as its object the study of the different modes of production, must be put in the service of the study of concrete realities. It must serve to produce historical understandings that are situated at another level, at the level of social formations and their political conjunctures.

At this level, what differentiates a Marxist historian from a non-Marxist one is the use of the Marxist theory of history – that is, the body of concepts of historical materialism – in the study of a historically given, concrete object.

One should not confuse, therefore, *the theory of history* with the *scientific, empirical knowledge* about a given historical reality.

## 11.4 Historical materialism, general theory and regional theories

In the chapter about the concepts of *mode of production and social formation* we saw that *Capital*, the most finished work of Marx, has as its object the study of the capitalist mode of production. That is, an abstract object which is never found in a pure state in reality. We have also seen the limits of this study: it gives us scientific knowledge of the economic level of the capitalist mode of production in its pre-monopoly phase. Marx was not able to complete his initial project: the study of all of the levels of the capitalist mode of production.

But what is it that guides Marx in the scientific study of the capitalist mode of production? What is his “guiding thread”?

His “guiding thread” is the *theory of historical materialism* articulated by him in a systematic form in the preface to the *Critique of political economy*. In the previous chapters we have studied the *main concepts* of this scientific theory of history.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid, pag.52, ed. Francesa.

Now then, the *general concepts* of historical materialism employed in *Capital* are different than the *specific concepts* developed in that work which constitute the theory of the economic level of the capitalist mode of production. These *specific concepts* – abstract labor and concrete labor, the relation between exchange-value and use-value, constant capital and variable capital, etc. – are concepts that only serve to study the economic level of the capitalist mode of production. The scientific study of the economic level of the feudal mode of production or of the socialist mode of production requires other specific concepts.

Marx clearly distinguishes these two categories of concepts when referring to his plan of study about capitalist society in the *Introduction to the critique of political economy*:

The disposition of material has evidently to be made in such a way that (section) one comprises general abstract definitions, which therefore appertain in some measure to all social formations, but in the sense set forth earlier. Two, the categories which constitute the internal structure of bourgeois society<sup>8</sup>

Which are these general definitions for Marx?

We think that they can be by 1), carefully reading the “general result” which Marx arrived at and which, once acquired, serves as the guiding thread in “his studies”, exposed by him in the preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* and 2), studying the fourth point of the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*.

Marx begins this fourth point with a series of general concepts: “Production, means of production, relations of production and relations of circulation, forms of the state and of consciousness in relation to the conditions of productions and circulation, legal relations, family relations”.

We can, therefore, conclude that in order to study the capitalist mode of production scientifically, one needs a body of concepts that are more general, more abstract, than those concepts specific to that mode of production.

We must, therefore, distinguish in historical materialism a *general theory* – or body of concepts used in the study of distinguishing each mode of production – and *regional theories* of the different modes of production (slavery-based, feudal, capitalist, socialist, etc.) and of the transition from one mode of production to another.

If we want, for example, to place in a precise way the Marxist theory

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<sup>8</sup><https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/appx1.htm>

of the dictatorship of the proletariat, we must indicate that it does not pertain to the general theory of historical materialism but to a regional theory: the theory of the transition from the capitalist mode of production to the socialist mode of production, and more precisely, to the subregion of the juridico-political part of that era of transition.

### **11.5 Levels of “realization” of the theory of historical materialism: the science of the social formations and the science of the political conjuncture**

Historical materialism is a scientific theory. As a scientific theory, it does not give us knowledge of concrete realities. *Capital*, for example, does not give us knowledge of a historically given concrete society, but knowledge of an abstract object: the pure capitalist mode of production.

Historical materialism, like all *theory*, does not give us any concrete knowledge, but gives us the means (instruments of intellectual labor) which permit us to obtain scientific knowledge of concrete objects. Therefore, as we saw in the introduction, if historical materialism is not used in the analysis of concrete realities, it can be considered an amputated theory which has not fulfilled its objective, like an arrow that is spun between ones fingers without ever being shot.

We will call, following Althusser, *theoretical concepts* those concepts which, by forming part of a scientific theory, do not give us knowledge of any concrete reality. Namely, the concepts of the general theory and the regional theories of historical materialism. We will call *empirical concepts* those concepts which give us knowledge of concrete reality<sup>9</sup>.

These *empirical concepts* are not a pure and simple copy of reality, a pure and simple immediate reading of it. However, they cannot exist without using data from observation and experience.

An inquiry or an observation is never a passive effect; it is only possible if it is driven and controlled by theoretical concepts that act on it, either directly or indirectly, through its rules of observation, choice, and classification, in the technical setup that constitutes the field of observation or of experience. Therefore, an inquiry or an observation, or, even more, an experience, provides but the material which is later processed into the fundamental elements through a subsequent effort of transformation which will produce, finally, the empirical concepts. By the “empirical concepts”, then, we do not mean the starting material,

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<sup>9</sup>Althusser, “Sur le travail théorique”, en *La Pensée*, núm. 132, abril de 1967, p. 6.

but the result of that material after undergoing successive stages of processing. We therefore have in view the result of a process of complex knowledge, in which the initial material, and later the fundamental elements obtained therefrom, are transformed into empirical concepts thanks to the involvement of the theoretical concepts, sea en persona, sea presentes, y en acción, en esta elaboración bajo la forma de montajes experimentales, reglas de método, reglas de crítica y de interpretación.

Therefore, the relation of the theoretical concepts to the empirical concepts is not, in any case, a relation of outward appearance (the theoretical concepts are not reduced to the empirical data), nor a relation of deduction (the empirical concepts are not deduced from the theoretical concepts), nor a relation of subsumption (the empirical concepts are not the complementary particular part of the generality of the theoretical concepts, simply as particular cases.) One should better say (in a sense close to an expression of Marx when he speaks of the “realization of surplus value”) that empirical concepts “realize” theoretical concepts in the concrete knowledge of concrete objects. The dialectic of such a “realization” will require comprehensive clarification which can only be produced on the base of a theory of the practice of science and its history<sup>10</sup>.

There are two levels of “realization” in the Marxist theory of history (i.e., historical materialism). The first is the level of the social formation, that is, the level of a historically given social structure that takes the form of a concrete individuality, which maintains a certain identity through its transformations. This is in the same way that Peter has a personality structure which keeps a certain identity throughout his life, despite going through different stages of development.

The second is the level of the political conjuncture, or the “present moment” of said social structure. That is, the particular forms which that individuality takes in the various historical moments.

Summarizing what we just said, we can distinguish two levels of “realization” of historical materialism:

1. The science of social formations
2. The science of the conjuncture.

Now then, before moving onto the next point, we want to stress here something which we comprehensively developed in the introduction. The Marxist theory was created to change the world, and therefore, its true, final realization is in its use in a truly revolutionary political practice.

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

## 11.6 Historical materialism: science which opposes dogmatism and revisionism<sup>11</sup>

Historical materialism is a science. Because it is a science, it is against dogmatism and revisionism.

To know that something is a science is, at the same time, to know that it cannot live without the condition of *developing itself*. A science that repeats itself without discovering anything is a dead science; it is no longer a science, but a fixed dogma. A science only lives through its development, that is, through its discoveries. This point is equally important, since we may be tempted to believe that we have in historical materialism and dialectical materialism, as they are given to us today, finished sciences, and that we should distrust, on principle, any new discovery. Certainly, the workers' movement has reasons for staying alert against the revisionists who have always dressed themselves in titles of "innovation" or "updating"; but this necessary defense has nothing to do with suspicion toward the discoveries of a living science.

Marx, Engels, and Lenin expressed themselves unambiguously on this point. When Marx, in a celebrated display of humor, said that he was "not a Marxist", he wanted to say that he considered what he had done as a mere beginning of a science, since a finished knowledge would be an absurdity that would lead sooner or later to a non-science.

Engels said the same when wrote, for example, in 1877:

These two great discoveries, the materialistic conception of history and the revelation of the secret of capitalistic production through surplus-value, we owe to Marx. With these discoveries socialism became a science. The next thing was to work out all its details and relations.<sup>12</sup>

Lenin proclaims the same fact more strongly, in 1899:

There can be no strong socialist party without a revolutionary theory which unites all socialists, from which they draw all their convictions, and which they apply in their methods of struggle and means of action. To defend such a theory, which to the best of your knowledge you consider to be true,

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<sup>11</sup>This section title is taken word for word from the Althusser's article "Teoría práctica, teórica y formación teórica. Ideología y lucha ideológica", in Casa de las Américas, num. 94, February 1966, pp. 14-15.

<sup>12</sup>Engels, introduction to *Anti-Duhring* (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/introduction.htm>) [11.13]: Lenin, *Our Programme* (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1899/articles/arg2op.htm>)

against unfounded attacks and at tempts to corrupt it is not to imply that you are an enemy of all criticism. We do not regard Marx's theory as some thing completed and inviolable; on the contrary, we are convinced that it has only laid the foundation stone of the science which socialists must develop in all directions if they wish to keep pace with life. We think that an independent elaboration of Marx's theory is especially essential for Russian socialists; for this theory provides only general guiding principles, which, in particular, are applied in England differently than in France, in France differently than in Germany, and in Germany differently than in Russia.[<sup>11</sup>13]

Althusser points out the main points of this text:

1. Marx has given us, in the theoretical field, the "cornerstones", the "guiding principles". That is, the theoretical principles of the basis of a theory which is *absolutely necessary to develop*.
2. This theoretical development is for all socialists a *duty* to their science; if they do not carry it out, they fail in their duty to socialism.
3. It is necessary not only to develop the general theory, but also to develop its *particular applications*, the nature of each concrete case.
4. This defense and this develop of the Marxist science supposes, at the same time, two things. First, the greatest firmness against all those who want to drag us back, further away from the scientific principles of Marx. Second, a true freedom of criticism and scientific investigation carried out on the basis of the theoretical principles of Marx by those who are able and willing to go further, a freedom indispensable for the life of Marxist science and for any other science<sup>13</sup>.

Finally, to finish, we want to quote from the following text of Mao Zedong:

Dogmatic formulas, empty and dry, destroy our creative possibilities. Not only that, they destroy Marxism. A dogmatic "Marxism" is not Marxism, it is anti-Marxism.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Until this point, quoted from Althusser's article.

<sup>14</sup>Mao Zedong, *Talks at the Yen'an forum on literature and art*



## 11.7 The Marxist theory and the role of human beings in history

Is there an internal contradiction in the importance that Marxism places on the class struggle – that is, on people's action on history – and its affirmation of historical determinism.

Already in 1843 Marx wrote the following in a letter to Ruge:

We shall not say: Abandon your struggles, they are mere folly; let us provide you with true campaign-slogans. Instead, we shall simply show the world why it is struggling, and consciousness of this is a thing it must acquire whether it wishes or not.<sup>15</sup>

Commenting on these words of Marx, Lenin said: > This slogan was found by Marx, “not a utopian, but a strict and, in places, even dry scientist”. . . [and it was found] by a scientific analysis of the present bourgeois regime, by an elucidation of the necessity of exploitation under this regime, by an investigation of the laws of its development.<sup>16</sup>

In this text we see how the *necessity* of the laws which govern the capitalist society do not imply that people will be passive before these laws.

Let us once again give Lenin the floor:

. . . this is one of the favorite themes of the subjective philosopher: the idea of conflict between determinism and morality, between historical necessity and the significance of the individual. On this theme he has left ink-stained a mountain of papers, filling an abyss with his absurd, sentimental, Philistine chatter, in order to resolve this conflict in favor of morality and the role of the individual. In reality such a conflict does not exist. . . the idea of historical necessity [does not] lessen the role of the individual in history; all history is comprised precisely of individuals' actions . . . The real question which arises when evaluating the activity of an individual in society consists in knowing what conditions would ensure the success of this activity. What guarantees that this activity will not result in an individual act which will drown in a sea of opposing ones?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>[https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43\\_09-alt.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09-alt.htm)

<sup>16</sup><https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1894/friends/01.htm#v01zz99h-131-GUESS>

<sup>17</sup>TODO

Therefore, in the face of the rejection of Marxism by spiritualist philosopher, which accuses it of being an exponent of absolute material determinism – that which annuls all possibility of the creative participation of human beings in history – Marxism responds: in reality it is human beings who make history, but they make it under certain given conditions. And for that reason the Marxist researcher will analyze first of all those conditions of existence. Especially the material conditions: the form in which people produce material goods and the social relations under which they carry out this productive activity.

In general, Marxism does not speak of history as the work of “living individuals”, insofar as it sees this phrase as empty. In analyzing the real social relations and their *real* development, it analyzes precisely the product of individuals’ activity. Conversely, spiritualist philosophy speaks without a doubt of individuals, of man, but in reality does not take them as its starting point in its study. This is because it does not study the conditions which constitute them (their effective conditions of existence, the system of relations of production) but thinks of them “as puppets whose heads they fill with their own thoughts and feelings”[11.todo.181mh]

The actions of human beings, which appear infinitely varied and difficult to systematize, were generalized by Marxism and related to the actions of groups of individuals which differ from each other by the location they occupy within social production. That is, they were connected to the actions of certain social classes. It is *class struggle and not the action of isolated individuals* which determines the course of progression of history.

In this way, we refute the purely mechanical and childish conception of the subjectivists who vainly content themselves with saying that history is the work of living individuals, without bothering to investigate what social environment determines the actions of individuals and how it functions.

Let’s see now how Lenin studies the action of a particular individual in Russian History, Father Gapon, starting with the famous “Bloody Sunday” of January 9th, 1905:

Here, in Russia, too, a priest found himself at the head of the movement; one day he appealed for a march with a peaceful petition to the tsar himself, and the next day he issued a call for revolution. . . . “We no longer have a tsar. Today a river of blood divides him from the Russian people. It is time for the Russian workers to begin the struggle for the people’s freedom without him. . . .”

This is not Father Georgi Gapon speaking. This is the voice of those thousands upon thousands, of those millions upon millions of Russian workers and peasants who until now could believe naively and blindly in the Tsar Father and seek alleviation of their unbearable lot from Our Father the Tsar "himself", who put the blame for all the atrocities and outrages, the tyranny and plunder, only on the officials that were deceiving the tsar. Generation after generation of down-trodden, half-civilised, rustic existence cut off from the world tended to strengthen this faith. Every month of life of the new, urban, industrial, literate Russia has been undermining and destroying this faith. The past decade of the working-class movement has produced thousands of advanced proletarian Social-Democrats who have consciously broken with this faith. It has educated scores of thousands of workers in whom the class instinct, strengthened in the strike movement and fostered by political agitation, has shattered this faith to its foundations. Behind these scores of thousands, however, stood hundreds of thousands, millions, of toiling and exploited people, proletarians and semi-proletarians, suffering every insult and indignity, in whom this faith could still survive. They were not ready for revolt, they could only beg and plead. Their feelings and their mood, their level of knowledge and political experience were expressed by Father Georgi Gapon; herein lies the historic significance of the role played at the beginning of the Russian revolution by a man who, but yesterday unknown, has today become the hero of the hour in St. Petersburg and, as a result, in the entire European press.[<sup>9</sup>

The history of this person shows us how the action of an individual became a historic action due to the fact that it was the expression of a social force, which is in turn situated within the objective limits of the structure.

Now we can better understand the claim of the Marxist theorist who in speaking of history, distinguishes between the terms "person" or "individual" and the terms "mass" and "class."

Marxism holds that in class societies, *it is not the individual or individuals in general who make history*, but the masses. That is, the *social forces involved in the class struggle* are the motor of history.

By not understanding the true sense of the Marxist theory of his-

tory and the role that class struggle plays in it, one often falls into two errors that are disastrous for the revolutionary movement. The first is *economism* or *spontaneism*, which advocates surrender to the laws of economic development, and the second is *voluntarism*, which ignores the minimal objective conditions necessary to undertake victorious revolutionary action.

## **11.8 Two deviations of the Marxist theory of history: economism and voluntarism**

### **Economism**

# A

## Surplus Value

### A.1 Value in the Simple Commodity Economy

In this appendix<sup>1</sup>, we've endeavored to present the concept of surplus value both clearly and rigorously. It is only through this concept that we can make it clear to ourselves the causes of capitalist exploitation in a scientific way, and therefore see what must be done to eliminate them.

In creating this appendix, we have intended it principally to be useful to working comrades. Hopefully we've achieved this objective.

#### **The division of labor and private property: the main preconditions of an economic system based on exchange**

In the most remote places of Latin America, we still find groups of people, the greater part being indigenous, who satisfy their basic needs only through their own activity: they make their bread with the wheat which they planted themselves, they dress themselves with fabric woven by hand with the wool of their sheep, they build their houses with the wood of the forests and mud from the area they live in, etc.

This is in complete contrast with the scene of the great Latin-American cities. In them, no one can satisfy their needs without turning to many

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<sup>1</sup>In writing this appendix we've used – in addition to Marx's *Capital* – the text of Lapidus and Ostrovitianov: *Manual of Political Economy* (Moscow, 1929). We strongly recommend their reading for its great simplicity without sacrificing scientific rigor. This text will be published in *Editorial Universitaria*, from Santiago, Chile, under the title of *Conceptos fundamentales de El Capital de Carlos Marx*, with a presentation of ours and a plan for studying *Capital*.

others: their food, their house, their clothes, depend on the labor of many other people.

In these great cities, each person has their specific work: metalworker, textile worker, bakery worker, etc. And therefore, one can live by being connected in some way to the other workers who go on providing the things which one does not produce, but which one needs to live.

In the great cities there therefore exists, on the one hand, a great division of labor[<sup>sv.191</sup>], and on the other hand, a great interdependence between the workers who work in the different branches.

As the division of labor develops, the interdependence of the different sectors grows.[<sup>sv.192</sup>]

But how is the connection between the different lines of work achieved in capitalist society?

In capitalist society, where businesses belong to individual capitalists, where the capitalists are owners of their businesses and organize them in accordance with their own interests and not with those of society, the connection between different lines of work, or between different businesses, cannot be achieved through a global planning of the society's economy (through a single management which would organize production and the distribution of goods), but only through the exchange of products on the market.

Therefore, when you have private ownership of the means of production, the only form of relating the different isolated economic units is through exchange of products on the market.

In economies in which exchange predominates, each isolated producer (or group of producers) produces not to satisfy their own needs, but to sell their products in the market and thereby to buy the products which they need to live.

These products, which are use-values for others in the market, are called *commodities* by Marx.

Now then, it is important to clarify that basing the economy on exchange is not only a feature of the capitalist regime of production, but can be found in different regimes of production. During slavery for example, the objects produced by a group of slaves on a plantation (*hacienda*) were exchanged by objects produced by other groups of slaves or by small artisans.

What is the difference between a simple commodity economy and the capitalist economy?

A commodity economy is characterized by the fact that the producer

of the commodity is at the same time its owner and has the right to dispose of it as they like. In the capitalist economy, the direct producers – the workers – are not the owners of the commodities they produce, which belong to the factory-owners, the owners of the means of production, who force the workers (who have neither means of production nor means of consumption) to work for them.

### **Price, the apparent regulator of the exchange-based economy**

Now then, although the final objective of this appendix is to understand the capitalist system of exploitation more deeply, we will need to start by analyzing the features of the simple commodity economy, as only then will we later be able to fulfill our final objective in the easiest way possible.

In every simple commodity economy, as in all economies based on exchange, the possessors of commodities appear in the market as equal owners of their commodities and do not part with them unless they receive others in exchange.

Now then, as individual owners of their commodities, they pursue individual ends, always seeking to sell for the highest price possible.

But can the individual owners satisfy their desire to sell as dearly as possible?

Although the individual owner seems to be the lord and master of their commodities (and they can do whatever they want with them), whether their will is carried out is not up to him.

The buyer is also an owner, who has money and who wants to buy at the lowest possible price. Moreover, next to our seller of commodities stand many others, and it may happen that there are fewer buyers than sellers, leaving the merchants at risk of not selling all their goods.

This gives rise to competition between the owners of the commodities. They begin to fight against each other, competing for buyers and trying to sell at a lower price than their rivals.

In this way, the market becomes the scene of a double fight between the sellers and the buyers on the one hand, and amongst the sellers themselves on the other.

When the producer goes to the market with their commodities, they do not know if they have produced too much or too little, nor do they know how popular their goods will be. Only through the price which their commodity obtains in the market are they made aware of the importance that it has within social production.

If, for example, the price of shoes goes way up, that means that fewer shoes were produced than are necessary to meet the needs of buyers. If, conversely, the price of shoes falls, that means that more shoes than necessary were produced.

Individual producers will take into account these signals that the market sends them. In the first case, they'll produce more shoes, and in the second case, fewer.

In this way, an economy based on exchange finds itself directed and regulated by the movement of prices. They act as spontaneous regulators of the economy. The individual commodity producer has no choice but to submit to this blind law, outside of their control.

But what do prices depend on? What makes one thing worth a certain amount of money, and another thing a different amount?

Let's see what happens if we go to buy a shirt at a shop. The seller offers us several kinds of shirts at different prices. If we ask them why one shirt costs more than another they'll tell us that it's due to the better quality of the first, and therefore, its longer lifespan.

But can prices be explained by things' better quality and longer lifespans?

Let's see if this is the case when comparing a shirt to another object, for example to a plate. This object costs much less than a shirt, but no matter whether it's made of plastic or metal, will last much longer than a shirt.

Perhaps then price depends on the usefulness of a thing?

The following example makes clear that this cannot be the explanation either: bread is much more useful and necessary to a human being than diamonds, but diamonds are infinitely more expensive.

Additionally, the utility of a thing is different for each buyer. A worker who can only buy one pair of pants per year and a lawyer who can buy several per year will see the utility of a given pair of pants differently.

Therefore, it is difficult to determine the utility which a given product has. But, you might say, even if that's not possible, we can still easily determine instead how many people would want to buy a given object and how many others would want to sell it.

It's impossible to determine how many more times useful bread is than shoes, but it is possible to determine how many people came today to buy size 40 shoes for example. If there are 10 pairs and 20 people came, that means that demand is greater than supply. If, conversely, there are 20 pairs and only 10 people came, then supply is greater than



demand.

So wouldn't it be through supply and demand that prices are set in the market?

Don't onions go up in price when they're scarce? Isn't fruit more expensive at the start of the season, and later much cheaper?

We cannot deny that supply and demand influence prices, but does this sufficiently account for the price of a commodity?

If it did, two things which had the same demand would have the same price.

For example, suppose there are 100 pounds of sugar on the market and the demand is 50 pounds. Suppose further there are 10 pairs of shoes and the demand is only 5. It's clear that in both cases the demand is 50% of the supply, but that doesn't mean a pair of shoes will have the same price as a pound of sugar.

The law of supply and demand can explain small fluctuations in price: why a pound of sugar today is 1,000 pesos more than it was a few days ago, why shoes are cheaper at the end of the season. But it does not explain why sugar is worth a certain amount of money – a certain number of dollars – and why shoes are worth another amount, calculated not in dollars but in hundreds of dollars.

Therefore, the law of supply and demand can explain to us the rise or fall of prices over short periods of time, but it cannot explain why one commodity costs more than another, or why I can buy many pounds of sugar with the money with which I could buy only one pair of shoes.

### **The cost of production**

If a commodity producer has to sell their commodities at a loss because there are not enough buyers, they'll stop making them and start making commodities which have a higher demand.

But how do they realize that the production of certain commodities is no longer advisable?

If we ask a merchant of chairs to lower the price for us, what will they say? That they can't lower it because it cost them more than the price we're asking for.

Does that mean that the price of commodities is determined by the cost of production?

To answer this question let's look at a concrete example: a dressmaker who makes dresses at home to sell. What is the cost of production of

these dresses?

They spend money to buy: fabric, thread, buttons. They spend money on the rent for the room where they sew, on light and heat, and finally, for replacing the machine, which wears out with use. If the sewing machine costs 500 dollars and only lasts to sew 500 dresses, the dressmaker would have to account for 1 dollar in replacement costs for each dress in order to be able to replace the machine when it's been used up.

Now then, is the price of a product determined by the sum of these costs?

If that were so, that would mean that the dressmaker was paid nothing for their work, and they would die of hunger. If the dressmaker takes a whole day to make a dress, they must receive for their work an amount of money which would enable them to buy the commodities which they couldn't produce while working on the dress, but which they need to live.

To be able to live, they therefore need to exchange the products of their labor for the products of others' labor.

In this way, the price of the dress must take into account the following elements:

Cost (dollars)	Goods purchased	Type	Means of production
60	fabric	Raw material	Yes
5	buttons	Raw material	Yes
5	thread	Raw material	Yes
1	wear-and-tear on sewing machine	Means of labor	Yes
1	electricity	Means of labor	Yes
1	heat	Means of labor	Yes
1	rent for the room	Means of labor	Yes
65	labor of the dressmaker	Labor power	No
140	<b>Total</b>		

Now, the dressmaker will try to sell the dress for more than it cost to make. Sometimes they will manage to do so, in those cases when the demand for dresses is greater than the supply. However, if that does happen, all of the dressmakers will start making dresses, and later there will be more dresses on the market than there is demand for, at which

point prices will fall again.

Therefore, we see that there exist changes in price which depend on changes in supply and demand, but we also see that these changes do not deviate much from the cost of producing the objects in question.

Can we then say that the price is determined by the cost of producing objects?

No, because if we analyze each of the elements which go into the cost of production, without counting the labor of the dressmaker, we notice that they can also be reduced to their own elements. For example, fabric can be reduced to expenditure on wool, wear-and-tear on looms, etc., plus a certain number of labor hours for the weaver. It's like this for all the other elements as well. And if we continue reducing what we just broke down, we will see that it is reduced at last to the labor of the shepherd.

If we reduce each of the elements until the end, we will see that the cost of production reduces to the labor applied by various workers to goods produced by nature.

### **Labor: the basis of value**

In the previous sections, we have seen how the price of a commodity can vary according to supply and demand, but we have also seen that supply and demand do not explain the number around which prices oscillate. We have seen that this number is ultimately explained only by the amount of labor necessary for the creation of the corresponding commodity.

Our analysis has led us, therefore, from the natural properties of commodities (shoes, plates, diamonds, etc.), from the market and exchange, to human labor.

Human labor is, therefore, the basis of all social life. Humans need material objects to satisfy their needs, and these objects do not fall from the sky. They are the product of the labor of human beings on nature.

But a human being neither lives nor labors alone. They live and labor in society. In the labor process, people start to depend on each other, and in that way create certain relations of production between themselves.

Thus, the work of an individual becomes a quantum of social labor and the relations of labor must ensure that the social labor is distributed in such a way that society as a whole can satisfy its needs. In our discussion of simple commodity production, we saw how this distribution of social labor works in that case, through the laws of the market.

We saw, moreover, that prices fluctuate, but that they fluctuate around a level which is determined in the last instance by the amount of labor incorporated in that commodity. We call the level around which prices of a commodity fluctuate its **value**.

The **law of value** is the law which governs the exchange of commodities. It holds that the exchange of commodities in the market is governed in the last instance by the amount of labor incorporated in them. If one commodity is worth twice as much as another, it is because it contains twice as much labor.

This law of value is the law which spontaneously regulates commodity economies based on the existence of individual producers who only enter into relations between each other through the market. When, one day, society is able to totally plan the economy so that the distribution of social labor is not done blindly – through the market – but done consciously and planned in advance, the law of value will disappear; it will no longer make sense.

Now, we have stated that the value of a commodity is determined by the amount of labor which has been incorporated in it.

Does that mean that the value of a commodity is determined by the individual labor, and that the commodity would be worth more or less depending on the efficiency of the individual labor that produced it?

If that were the case, there would be as many values as there are levels of efficiency in working. If one dressmaker makes a dress in 12 hours, another in 16, and another in 18, there would be 3 values for the dresses.

But let's see what happens if these 3 dressmakers go to sell their dresses in the market. The one who worked for 18 hours will try to sell it at a price which will pay for those 18 hours. Now, the others in seeing her try to sell at such a high price will try to sell at that same price – earning more money with less labor. However, what will then happen in the market? Many other dressmakers, attracted by the high price of dresses, will start making more, but then as there will be an oversupply of dresses on the market, will find they are forced to lower prices. Now then, supposing that supply and demand coincide, what price will dresses be sold for? At the price implied by the largest amount of labor or at the price implied by the smallest amount of labor?

The value which regulates prices does not depend on an individual labor, but on the labor performed by the whole society on producing a given product. Value is not calculated based on the largest amount of

labor, or on the smallest, but on the average amount labor. The work done using an average level of technology and an average efficiency of labor power.[^sv.izzy]

[sv.izzy]: This is a simplification which assumes that all value is realized (i.e., that no one is forced to take losses) or in other words that the producers on the whole will sell all their product and be accurately compensated for their total labor. Even when supply and demand meet, this is not true in reality, where extra-economic mechanisms may be applied to pay for less than the actual price.

The value of a product therefore depends not on individual labor but on the labor socially necessary to produce it.

We'll give an example:

Let us see how the socially necessary time to produce a given kind of shirt is determined:

Sewer	Shirts made by each	Total shirts	Time/labor per shirt	Total labor hours
20	20	400	2	800
30	10	300	1200	
60	50	300	1800	
Total	-	1000	-	3800

Therefore, producing 1000 shirts that are necessary for society implies the expenditure of 3800 hours, that is, 3.8 hours per shirt on average ( $3800/1000 = 3.8$ ).

This time of 3.8 hours, i.e., 3 hours and 48 minutes, is the socially necessary time.

One shouldn't make the mistake of calculating the socially necessary time by taking an average of the hours needed in the businesses of the lowest and the highest efficiency. In that case, the lowest performing businesses produce a shirt every 6 hours and the highest performing ones every 2 hours. The average would be 4 hours ( $(6+2)/2 = 4$ ) which differs from the result we obtained in the above example.

What accounts for the difference?

This is because society as a whole produces a greater number of shirts which require the shorter labor-time. If there had been twice as many shirts produced in 6 hours than in the example, the socially necessary labor time would have been greater.

Socially necessary labor therefore depends on the average technology used, on the average skill of workers, and on the average conditions of labor.

None of these attributes is static. They continue to vary over time, producing change in the socially necessary labor time, which tends to decrease as these elements are perfected.

The introduction of a new machine only affects socially necessary labor time if the innovation spreads rapidly through society.

If a sewer starts to use a sewing machine which allows them to sew a shirt in one hour and everyone else keeps using the old machines, the innovation will not have much influence on the socially necessary labor time. On the contrary, it will allow this sewer to earn more since the value which regulates prices will still be calculated using the average social time, which is greater than the time needed by that sewer), and then in selling the shirt, they will get more money in relation to their costs than other sewers. This is why in economies based on exchange (including the capitalist economy), individual owners are forced to introduce new machinery and to keep their technical advances secret.

Now then, to the extent that the use of a given machine is generalized, it tends to lower the socially necessary time to produce a commodity, and therefore its value as well as its price, which is nothing but an expression of its value.

Finally, before explaining how this all goes in the capitalist system, let's point out that it's necessary to distinguish between simple labor and work which is more complex or specialized. One hour of simple labor is not worth the same as an hour of complex labor. The value produced by the labor of a specialized lathe operator is much greater than that produced by simple labor like transporting material from one place to another, packing boxes, etc.

## **A.2 Surplus Value in the Capitalist Economy**

### **The impossibility of obtaining surplus value through exchange**

Exchange in a capitalist society is much different from exchange as we just analyzed it in a simple commodity economy.

If one goes into a shop in a capitalist city and tries to negotiate down the price of a product, the first argument given by the seller will not be the same as that given by the chair merchant: that it cost them more than what you're offering. This time, the seller will say that the sale of

this object doesn't make them much profit; that they cannot sell it at cost because they need to make something off the sale.

In the simple commodity economy, what interests the small independent producer is obtaining, through the sale of their products, the money necessary to buy the products which they need to live. In the capitalist economy, what interests the capitalist is selling their products so that they get more money than the products cost them to produce. Exchange does not make sense for the capitalist unless it brings them more money than they used.

Before one tried to sell commodities (C) to obtain money (M) in order to be able to buy other commodities (C); now one tries to have money which allows one to buy commodities, which then allow one to obtain more money.

Therefore the simple-commodity formula of exchange would be:

$$C - M - C$$

And the capitalist formula of exchange would be

$$M - C - M$$

Now, the first question which arises is, where does the capitalist draw this greater amount of money from?

Does it come from a super-increase in prices, i.e., from the sale of commodities above their value?

If the capitalists were a group that only sold and never had to buy, as long as there existed another group with enough money to continuously buy without producing anything, perhaps the issue could be explained in this way. But reality is different. The capitalist, at the same time as they sell their products, has to buy other products to be able to produce. They have to buy raw materials and instruments of labor from other capitalists. Now, if these others raise their prices to, there would be a kind of compensation at the societal level: what they would gain as buyers, they would lose as sellers.

Therefore, the profit obtained by the capitalist cannot be explained through exchange. That is, by saying that they sell their products for more than they're worth.

How then can we explain how, selling goods at their value, capitalists can obtain a profit margin?

This problem can only be resolved if we find a commodity which can be bought by the capitalist, and produce value through its use.

What is the commodity which at the same time as it's being used, produces more value?

If, as we saw earlier, the ultimate origin of value is human labor, than this commodity can be none other than human labor power. It is the owner commodity capable of creating value.

### **Labor power as a commodity, and its value**

Now, labor power<sup>2</sup> is not a commodity in every society. Neither in slave-based societies, nor in the feudal mode of production, nor in simple commodity production do workers freely sell their labor power. In the first case, all of their being belongs to the slave-owner; in the second, there was a specific kind of relationship of dependence which forced the serf to do a certain amount of work for the lord; in the final case we have independent producers who work for themselves.

What are the conditions necessary for labor power to emerge as a commodity?

*First:* the existence of a free laborer who has the right to sell their labor power.

*Second:* the existence of a free laborer who is lacking any means of production. In this way, in order to be able to live they need to sell their labor power to whoever possesses the means of production: the capitalist.

Now, what is it that determines the value of this commodity called *labor power*?

If the value of a commodity depends on the socially necessary labor time to produce it, how should this statement be applied to labor power?

It seems hard to apply to labor power since it isn't produced in factories but born in life through natural reproduction.

However, a careful examination of the capitalist system leads us to see that the commodity of labor power is neither an exception nor a special case of a commodity.

Let's see what the capitalist's use of labor power consists of.

The worker must work for the capitalist for a time determined by their labor contract. Now, while working, acting on nature, the worker expends a certain amount of muscular, nervous, and mental force; that is, a certain amount of energy.

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<sup>2</sup>See chapter 1.



But, to maintain their labor power, the worker must reconstitute the expended energy each day. And for this, they must consume a certain amount of consumer goods: food, clothing, a house, etc.

Moreover, labor power must constantly flow into the market and for that it's necessary to ensure workers' natural reproduction. Therefore, the worker must have the means necessary to sustain their family. If a worker has a spouse and five children, and the salary which they receive only allows them to buy means of subsistence for themselves, it's clear that they will share their means of subsistence among the whole family and will be unable to reproduce all the energy they've expended. Thus, the cost of supporting a family must be included in the value of labor power.

In addition to the foregoing, the worker has a certain number of necessities corresponding to their cultural standard and the general level of development of their country which also have to be taken into account. This is one of the reasons that explain the differences in salary in different countries. The European and North American worker earn much more than the Latin American worker.

Finally, let's see what happens with specialized workers.

For one, owing to their higher cultural standard, they feel more things to be needs. Moreover, the socially necessary labor time which was spent during their education in the specialization must be kept in mind, as with the things needed to maintain and increase their level. Here we find the explanation for the higher salaries given specialized workers.<sup>3</sup>

The value of labor power is therefore equal to the value of all the products necessary for its maintenance and reproduction in a given society.

With respect to this value the following points must be considered:

- a. The basic needs of the worker and their family.
- b. Cultural needs.
- c. Level of specialization.

In general, the capitalist finds himself forced to pay for labor power at more or less its value, as if they don't they have inferior results in production. The capitalist knows that a well-fed worker produces much more than a hungry worker.

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<sup>3</sup>Translator's note: I find this explanation dubious.

### **The formation of surplus value**

Now, supposing that a capitalist buys labor power at its value – which does not always happen, especially in countries such as ours where the number of unemployed workers grows day by day ensuring the capitalist reliable replacement of the workforce which they need – how do they use that labor power to obtain their profit?

The capitalist and the worker meet in the labor market. The latter offers their labor power as a commodity. The capitalist buys it for a certain amount of money in order to make it to work over a certain period of time, e.g., 8 hours.

Having bought it, the capitalist may use labor power as a use value. That is, they may make it work, and indeed this is what they do.

Now, if the capitalist has bought the labor power for 20 dollars, and if these 20 dollars represent 4 hours of labor in money form, the worker will have paid back the capitalist the money which they paid through 4 hours of labor. But, since labor power has the property of producing more labor than is necessary to reproduce it (and the capitalist knows this), the capitalist makes the labor power work for 8 hours. The value created in the final 4 hours constitute a net profit for the capitalist.

We call **surplus value** the value which the worker creates in excess of the value of their labor power.

We call **necessary or paid labor time** the labor time in which the worker reproduces the value of their labor power.

We call **extra or unpaid labor time** the time in which surplus value is created for the capitalist.

The concept of surplus value is the key concept for explaining capitalist exploitation. It is the source of capitalist profit.

### **Capital as a factor of production**

Labor power is not the only thing that participates in the capitalist production process. Means of production (raw materials, machines, buildings, etc.) are also necessary.

If the capitalist doesn't monopolize into their own hands these means of production, the worker wouldn't be forced to work for them.

The capitalist therefore gathers up in their hands the means of production, just as with labor power.

We the different elements of the labor process **capital** when they destined to produce surplus value for their owner.

It is important to insist on the fact that things come to be capital not through their natural conditions, but through the specific relations of production into which they are inserted. That is, through the exploitation of the wage worker by the capitalist.

Labor power, in the case of simple commodity production, cannot be considered capital. Nor can the wool with which a mother knits for her child.

Therefore, capital is not a category that can be applied to every society.

The means of production and labor power can only be considered capital under capitalist production regime, when they are destined to produce surplus value.

Let's now examine how the means of production participate in the capitalist production process, and what the role they play in this process is.

Let's start with what happens with machines.

A machine, a mechanical loom for example, can participate in various production processes for fabrics. But it does not have an infinite lifespan; it's used up as it's used. If we suppose that it lasts some 10 years, we may say that each year it loses a tenth of its value, which means that each year it transfers that amount of value to the commodities produced.

If the machine is worth \$100,000 – i.e., if it embodies that amount of labor – then each year it would transfer \$10,000 to the commodities produced. And if 5,000 products per year are produced with that machine, then each produce will have \$2 ( $\$10,000/5000$ ) incorporated in it, which express the amount of labor that the machines would transfer to them.

*Machines do not produce any new value*, but transfer their own value to commodities bit by bit, that is, in a partial form.

Let's now see what happens with raw materials.

Raw materials (both principal and auxiliary ones<sup>4</sup>) completely disappear; some forming a part of products and others, as with fuel, in order to provide the energy and heat needed for the production process. They therefore transfer their value completely to the product.

But despite the different forms in which they transfer their value to the product, machines and raw materials have something in common. *Neither of them can create value*, and can only transfer their value insofar as they're put into action by human labor.

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<sup>4</sup>See chapter 1.

*Therefore, human labor does not just have the capacity to create value, but also the capacity to make the means of production transfer their value to products.*

Without human labor, the capitalist would get nothing out of having enormous factories, full of modern machines.

We should distinguish in this way two forms of capital.

We will call **constant capital** capital invested in means of production, because its value does not change in the production process.

We will call *variable capital* capital invested in labor power, because it produces more value, and therefore, makes value vary (change).

The creation of surplus value is impossible without constant capital, as labor power can only bear its fruits by putting the means of production into action. But, despite constant capital being a condition for the creation of surplus value, it cannot create it on its own. *Surplus value is only created by labor.* Therefore, the amount of constant capital in existence does not affect surplus value either. The same amount of surplus value can be produced with very different constant capitals. For example, a factory with highly advanced technology – and therefore with a large amount of constant capital – and employing 20 workers, and another with much cheaper technology and also employing 20 workers, will produce the same amount of surplus value if both manage to pay for the labor power with only 4 hours of the working day. Thus the capitalists of the two factories produce the same amount of surplus value in the unpaid hours of labor.

Therefore, to determine the level of exploitation of the working class, we are not at all interested in examining how high the level of constant capital rises, but only in what is the relationship between the value of labor power (or variable capital) and the surplus value produced.

Let's give an example. If the value of some machinery is \$100,000, that of the raw material \$10,000, that of the labor power \$20,000, and the surplus value \$20,000, the rate of exploitation would be \$20,000 (surplus value) divided by \$20,000 (variable capital). That is, 100%. This means that for each hour the worker works, they are working half of that hour for free for the capitalist.

As long as the relationship between surplus value and variable capital does not change, the rate of exploitation will not change – despite great changes in the amount of money that the capitalist invests in constant

capital.

### **Absolute and relative surplus value**

We've already seen how the production of surplus value is what interests the capitalist, since the more surplus value they obtain, the higher their profits will be.

But how can they manage to produce more surplus value?

The first way the capitalist has of doing so is prolonging the working day as much as possible, so that after the worker produces value equivalent to the value of their labor power, they can continue working to produce surplus value for the capitalist.

If a worker produces value equivalent to that of their labor power in 4 hours, and works for an additional 4 hours, they'll produce a surplus value of 100%. But if the capitalist manages to lengthen the working day to 12 hours, it's clear that the worker will produce double the surplus value, and the rate of exploitation will rise to 200%.

This way of obtaining more surplus value is very convenient for the capitalist, as they don't have to increase their costs in terms of machines or space and they get a much larger yield from the labor power employed.

This was the method used in the beginning of capitalism. But the working day cannot be prolonged indefinitely. There are physical and historical limits.

*Physical*, since if the worker works for a long time, they will not be able to rest enough to replenish their labor power in the proper way and there will be an intense exhaustion with a corresponding drop in performance.

*Historical*, since as capitalism develops, the working class develops as well, and it becomes organized and starts to put up an aggressive resistance toward capitalist exploitation. Through arduous struggles it will continually manage to reduce the working day, forcing the capitalist to look for other methods of increasing surplus value.

The capitalist can no longer increase surplus value by lengthening the working day. On the contrary, due to pressure from the working class, they often must shorten it.

How then can the capitalist can obtain the surplus value without which his existence would make no sense?

There are two ways of obtaining it: one, by intensifying labor, and two, by reducing necessary labor time. That is, the time in which the

worker works to replenish their labor power.

Intensifying labor power means making it so that labor power yields the maximum possible. Studies are done to see which movements are absolutely necessary for performing a given kind of work, trying to eliminate all superfluous movements. Music is put in, better lighting, etc., not because of humanitarian sentiments but because it contributes to greater production.

Now, as the intensification of labor has a limit, since at some point working at a greater intensity produced physical and mental exhaustion, the capitalist must finally choose to try to reduce the necessary labor time.

How can he do that?

Assuming that labor power is paid for at its value, the only way to reduce the part of the working day dedicated to paying for its value is by decreasing this value.

And how can its value be decreased?

By decreasing the value of the things that the worker consumes.

And how can the value of these things be decreased?

By producing them with less labor.

And how can the labor necessary to produce them be decreased?

By increasing the efficiency of labor through, fundamentally, the perfecting of the means of labor. A modern loom produces many more meters of fabric in an hour of labor than a primitive one. In this way, each meter of fabric is cheapened as they have fewer hours of labor incorporated in them.<sup>5</sup>

This is the reason why capitalists are so interested in lowering the costs of the things which play a role in the maintenance of labor power, and often, they seek out other measures in addition to those indicated, such as subsidies for basic necessities so that workers can buy them more cheaply. They do this not out of philanthropy but in order to increase their profits.

If the value of consumer goods falls, the value of labor power falls too and it therefore needs less time to repay its value.

If in the past 100% of surplus value was produced by making the worker work 16 hours each day to produce the value corresponding to their labor power – in 8 hours – and the other 8 for the capitalist, now, the working day being reduced to 8 hours, it's possible to obtain the

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<sup>5</sup>See chapter 3.

same 100% of surplus value, managing to reduce the necessary labor to 4 hours. And if they manage to reduce it to fewer hours, the rate of surplus value would grow.

Now, from what has been said prior we can understand the reasons why the capitalist system as such is interested in the continuous perfection of machines. The increase in the productivity of labor which they make possible allows them to obtain more surplus value without needing to lengthen or intensify labor.

But, in addition to these reasons which are due to the system as such, we can add the motivation of the individual capitalist, who by introducing a new machine manages to produce at a lower cost than his competitors, obtaining an extraordinary profit which arises from the difference between the individual value of his products and the social value which these kind of products have in the market.

Let's give an example: if a capitalist introduces a loom which allows him to produce each hour twice the fabric as before, the value of that product would be much reduced, but since the rest of the capitalists still work with older looms, the social value – or value properly said – of the fabric is greater than the individual value. And as it is this value which controls the price at which fabric is sold, our capitalist will sell at the same price as the others while having a much lower production cost and will therefore obtain an extraordinary profit.

Additionally, capitalists find themselves forced to continuously perfect their machinery, since if they didn't, they wouldn't be able to compete with the other capitalists in their branch of production. If one capitalist lags behind, if he does not manage to increase the productivity of his labor at the same rate as the others, his costs of production will be higher. And since he must sell at the price that is driven by value, he will earn less, until the day comes when he earns nothing at all, finding himself forced to close his factory.

All the reasons stated here allow us to see why the capitalist system needs to continuously perfect the instruments of labor, machines.

This need is precisely the major stimulus for development of the productive forces. No prior economic regime had so stimulated their development.

We call **absolute surplus value** surplus value which is obtained by lengthening the working day or intensifying the use of labor power.

We call **relative surplus value** surplus value which is ob-

tained by reducing the necessary labor time.

### **The reserve army: the effect of capitalism on the working class**

Machines, at the same time as they enormously increase the productivity of labor (modern automatic looms produce way more fabric per hour than primitive artisanal looms), also displace a huge part of the workforce. (The work which was earlier done by 20 textile workers with individual primitive looms is now done with just one machine which employs only two or three workers.) The workers thereby displaced are left unemployed.

But are they left unemployed forever?

No, since it's necessary to create factories to produce these machines, to produce their parts, to produce the energy with which they work, etc. At the same time as certain sources of work close, others open in other sectors. Therefore, the workers who leave one factory, after a certain amount of time, normally should find work in others.

Capitalist development therefore establishes, and at the same time requires to be able to function, the perennial presence in the labor market of a certain amount of workers available for the workforce needs which the capitalist class might have. This is why Karl Marx called these unemployed workers, continuous changing from one factory to another, the *reserve army of the capitalists*.<sup>6</sup>

The existence of this army of workers is very convenient for the capitalists, and they know how to use it well. They use it to pressure workers, so that they don't demand too high salaries. Workers know that they can be replaced at any moment by their unemployed colleagues who are often willing to accept starvation wages in order to have a job. The capitalists use this struggle to get labor to break workers' unity, diverting the struggle of the workers against the bosses into a struggle between themselves.

As a conclusion of everything said prior, we may state that the workers will only liberate themselves from the chains that bind them

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<sup>6</sup>In the dependent capitalist countries, this reserve army which Marx spoke of in reference to the capitalism of developed countries, finds itself swollen with a growing number of unemployed people, which is due to the introduction in these countries of the technology of the more advanced countries. That technology which, instead of producing a gradual technological development which would allow, in the same way, the reabsorption of the employed into other factories producing machines, leaves a huge segment of the population without hope of finding work, displaced from the petty factories of the artisanal sort by the great modern factories whose machines come from abroad.



to the capitalists, and of all the ills that they cause, by destroying the capitalist ownership of the means of production in order to transform it into the property of all the workers through their state: the proletarian state.

### A.3 Summary

In this appendix we have tried to explain in a simple yet rigorous way the origin of capitalist exploitation: the production of surplus value. We have had to start by analyzing the simple commodity production process in order to later pass to the capitalist production process. We have left behind appearances to discover what is the explanation at the heart of the question. We have therefore left prices to arrive at value. After having carefully examined the concept of value and socially necessary labor, we have gone on to define surplus value based on an analysis of the value of labor power. Later, so as to be able to distinguish between absolute and relative surplus value, we have defined the concepts of constant capital and variable capital. Finally, we have spent some time with one of the effects of capitalism on the working class: the reserve army.

In this appendix we have seen the following concepts:

- value
- socially necessary labor time
- surplus value
- absolute surplus value
- relative surplus value
- capital
- value of labor power
- constant capital
- variable capital
- reserve army.

### Questions

1. What relationship exists between exchange and the division of labor?
2. Does a commodity economy only exist under the capitalist regime of production?
3. What is the difference between a simple commodity economy and the capitalist economy?
4. Why are prices only an apparent regulator of an exchange-based

economy?

5. Can an individual producer set the price of their products as they like? I.e., in accordance with their interests?
6. What struggles take place in the market?
7. Why can't prices depend on the utility of objects?
8. Why can't the law of supply and demand explain the essence of prices?
9. Why can't the costs of production explain prices?
10. How is the production cost of an object calculated?
11. What explains the value of an object?
12. What do we mean by "law of value"?
13. What do we mean by "socially necessary labor time"?
14. Why can't surplus value be obtained through exchange?
15. What is the commodity which through its use produces more value?
16. What social conditions are required for the existence of a market for labor power as a commodity?
17. How is the value of labor power calculated?
18. What do we mean by "necessary labor time"?
19. What do we mean by "extra or unpaid labor time"?
20. What do we mean by "capital"?
21. What do we mean by "constant capital"?
22. What do we mean by "variable capital"?
23. What do we mean by "absolute surplus value"?
24. What do we mean by "relative surplus value"?
25. What do we mean by "reserve army"?