CHAPTER 5

Rethinking the "Base and Superstructure" Metaphor

Of the many problems which perforce Marx left in an "undeveloped" state, none is more crucial than that of "base and superstructure." The manuscript of the third volume of *Capital* breaks off at the opening of the tantalizing passage on "classes." The promised volume on the state, which appears in several of the schemes for *Capital* which he prepared, was left unwritten. Both, if completed, would have thrown the light of his mature reflection on the base/superstructure question. As it is, we have a very substantial part of his mature thought on the "laws of motion" of the capitalist mode of production, but nothing from the same period which takes as its theoretical object a capitalist social formation as a whole, encompassing all its levels and the relation between them, including the "superstructures."

There is a view that everything that Marxism needs is already there in *Capital*: and that, if you stare hard enough at it, it will—like the hidden books of the Bible—yield up all its secrets, a theory of everything. I don't subscribe to this thesis in its literal form. Apart from anything else, it denies one of the central premises of *Capital*—that the capitalist mode of production is constantly developing, and this in turn requires a continuous labor of theoretical development and clarification. "There is no royal road to science," Marx warned the French.[1] Besides, it smacks too much of the religious attitude. Of course, Marx's work on the laws of the capitalist mode of production contain many profound hints and pointers which await further theoretical development. What is more, *Capital* unravels the essential movements of that level

which precisely Marx insisted was "determining." Hence, the problem of base/superstructure must be "thought" within the terrain of concepts elaborated in that fundamental work. But it is a different proposition to imagine that it will be resolved by slavishly repeating the "logic of *Capital*." This too often results in an exercise which may be logically elegant but is, in the larger theoretical sense, abstract: reducing everything to "political economy." To rethink the base/superstructure problem, within the framework of Marx's problematic as evidenced in *Capital*, requires difficult theoretical labor. This paper addresses itself, of necessity, to some starting points only.

What is fundamentally at issue here is: how does Marxism enable us to "think" the complexities of a modern capitalist social formation? How can we conceptualize the relationships between the different levels which compose it? Further, can we "think" this problem in such a way as to retain a key premise of historical materialism: the premise of "determination in the last instance," by what is sometimes misleadingly referred to as "the economic"? Can this be done without losing one's way in the idea of the *absolute* autonomy of each of its levels? For Marx insists that we must think the "*ensemble* of relations," its complex unity. He quoted with unqualified approval, in a text which Althusser unwarrantably defines as "gestural," his Russian reviewer, who pointed to Marx's concern with "that law of movement . . . which governs these phenomena, in so far as they have a definite form and mutual connexion within a given historical period."[2] Can it be done without succumbing to the notion of a capitalist social formation as a functional "whole," without antagonism or contradiction? "The contradictions inherent in the movement of capitalist society . . . ," comments Marx, "whose crowning point is the universal crisis."[3] Can it be done without falling back into the essentially relativistic sociological notion of a social formation as composed of a multivariate interaction-of-all-sides-on-one-another, without primacy of determination given or specified at any point? Can *determination*—one of the central themes of Marx's theoretical work—be thought without simplifying what it is that "determines" (the economic?), when (in the last instance?), or how that determination operates (one-directionally?)? In essence these are the problems posed by the central position in Marxism occupied by the topographical metaphor of base/superstructure.

I want to look, briefly, at some of the key formulations in Marx and Engels's own work, which throw light on the base/superstructure question: noting not only the hints they throw out, but also at the developments in them and

the shifts between them. Secondly, I examine one or two key developments in recent theoretical work which mark significant moments of further clarification; and attempt to estimate how far they take us, and what remains to be done.

The German Ideology

The first texts are taken from formulations offered in and around the period of *The German Ideology*. It is important to situate this text itself, and thus the conceptual field and the theoretical problematic in which the formulations are offered. This is the text where the "species-being" perspective of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* is replaced, in often a simple but thoroughgoing manner, by a historical, often an evolutionary *genetic* materialism. It registers the "break" with the problematic of Feuerbachean sensuous-materialism. It constitutes a "settling of accounts," by Marx and Engels, with German "critical criticism"—the speculative philosophy of the Left Hegelians. Its whole thrust—including its "materialism"—is *polemical*. This polemical thrust, reasonably simplifying, of the text must be borne in mind if we are properly to situate the reductive simplifications which sometimes appear to intrude.

> The production of life, both of one's own by labour and of fresh life by procreation, appears at once as a double relationship, on the one hand as a natural on the other as a social relationship. By social is meant the cooperation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner or to what end. It follows from this, that a determinate mode of production, or industrial stage, is always bound up with a determinate mode of cooperation or social stage, and this mode of cooperation is itself a "productive force." It also follows that the mass of productive forces accessible to men determines the condition of society, and that the "history of humanity" must therefore always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange. (*The German Ideology*)

There are two key points to note here: both are restated in only a slightly different form at several other points in the text. The first is the proposition—the reverse of the Hegelian premise—that it is "the mass of productive forces accessible to men" which "determines the condition of society." The second point is slightly more complex, but just as important. It just concerns the

"double relationship." For Marx and Engels, "men" (this is the general, historically undifferentiated, way in which people are referred to in this text) intervene in Nature in order to produce and reproduce their material conditions of life. This "intervention" is accomplished through human labor and the use of tools. Human labor, ever since its first rudimentary historical appearance, is only possible through social cooperation between men: these "relations," which develop between men and constitute the "determinate mode of co-operation," result from the historically specific mode of men's social intervention in Nature—their mode of production. The basis of all history is the successive modes of production, including the modes of social cooperation dependent on them. As Marx puts it in another similar passage: "we are bound to study closely the men of the eleventh century and those of the eighteenth, to examine their respective needs, their productive forces, their mode of production, the raw materials of their production, and finally the relations of man to man which resulted from all these conditions of life" (*The Poverty of Philosophy*). Each "mode of production," each "mode of cooperation" is "determinate": historically specific. The latter "results from" or "is bound up with" the former. The premise of historical specificity in this relation between the two relations—the "double relationship"—is insisted on throughout: but always in a very general, epochal, way. One way of measuring the distance—and the difference—between the Marx of this period and the Marx of *Capital* is precisely by comparing these general formulations with the chapters on "Co-operation" and "The Division of Labour and Manufacture" in *Capital*, *Volume I* (chs. 13 and 14) to see how far the concept of historical specificity could itself be further specified.

The premises which inform these ways of attempting to "expound" the relations between the different levels of a social formation are stated in an admirably simple and clear way, elsewhere in the same text. They constitute the working analytic principles of Marx's "historical materialism," as this was developed by this point in time:

> This conception of history, therefore, rests on the exposition of the real process of production, starting out from the simple material production of life and on the comprehension of the form of intercourse connected with and—created by this mode of production, i.e. of civil society in its various stages as the basis of all history, and also in its action as the State. From this starting point, it explains all the different theoretical productions and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, ethics, etc., and

> traces their origins and growth, by which means the matter can of course be displayed as a whole (and consequently, also the reciprocal action of these various sides on one another). Unlike the idealist view of history, it does not to have look for a category in each period, but remains constantly on the real ground of history; it does not explain practice from the idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice, and accordingly comes to the conclusion that all the forms of and products of consciousness can be dissolved, not by intellectual criticism, not by resolution into "self-consciousness," or by transformation into "apparitions," "spectres," "fancies," etc., but only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which gave rise to this idealist humbug; that not criticism but revolution is the driving force of history, as well as religion, philosophy, and all other types of theory. (*The German Ideology*)

The passage is too well known to require much comment. It contains the easily recognized anti-Hegelian "inversion": "not practice from the idea but . . . the formation of ideas from material practice." It begins to identify the different levels of a social formation. Note that these—constituting the germ of the base/superstructure metaphor—appear, if anything, as *three* levels, not two. The difference is important, even though the text, in its compression, tends to run them together. First, the "material production of life . . . and the form of intercourse connected with and created by this mode of production." Then—at, as it were, a different though related level of representation—- "i.e. civil society . . . and also its action as the State." Then—another half distinction worth remarking: "all the different theoretical productions and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, ethics, etc." Note, here also, the variety of ways in which the principle of "determination" is rendered: "connected with"; "created by"; "in its action as"; etc.

The classic formulation, in its tightest and most succinct form, and clearly resting on the same conceptual terrain, appears again in the often quoted passage (but written nearly a decade later, and by a Marx already into his second draft, at least, of what is to become the first book of *Capital*): from the "1859 Preface" to *The Critique of Political Economy*, replacing the longer, more complex, more theoretical and difficult "1857 Introduction" to the *Grundrisse*.

> In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The totality of these relations of production

> constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which legal and political superstructure arise and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness. (Preface to *The Critique of Political Economy*)

This clarifying but over-condensed paragraph contains all the elements of the base/superstructure problem as Marx formulated it in the middle, transitional period of his work up to the verge of the preparation of the first volume of *Capital*. Here, not only is material production and its relations the determining factor, but the "corresponding" social relations are *given*—definite, indispensable, and independent of men's will: objective conditions of a social mode of production. These, under determinate conditions, constitute a *stage*. This—material mode, relations of production—is what is designated as "the economic structure." It forms the base, the "real foundation." From it arise the legal and political superstructures. And *to this* correspond theoretical productions *and* definite forms of social consciousness.

Marx's "Historicism"

The formulations in both *The German Ideology* and the "1859 Preface" clearly exhibit what would now be identified as the traces of Marx's *historicism*. That is to say, a determining primacy is given to the base—basis, real foundation—and the other levels of a social formation are seen to develop in close correspondence with it: even if this is not phrased uni-directionally ("and consequently, also, the reciprocal action of these various sides on one another"); and even if changes at one level are subject to a time-lag at the other levels ("the entire immense superstructure is *more or less rapidly* transformed"). The "matter which is displayed as a whole" is thought in terms of a broad determination; changes in the economic structure of society will, "more or less rapidly," produce consequent and determinate changes in the legal and political superstructures and in the "ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out"—that is, also, at the ideological level.

Althusser would argue that, here, the social totality is conceptualized, essentially, as an "expressive totality," in which, despite its apparent levels and differentiations, contradictions in the "base" appear to unroll, evenly, and

to be reflected sooner or later through corresponding modifications in the superstructures and the ideological forms. This, then, is still an "essentialist" conceptualization of a social formation. It is also "historicist," in Althusser's view, because it makes little if any separation between "theoretical productions" and "ideological forms"; it makes the theoretical level appear also as a "correspondence" or a reflection of the material base.

We shall return at a later point to the weight and force of this critique of the "historicist" Marx. But in Althusser's *For Marx*, *The German Ideology* is presented as the work of a "break" and "transitional" period in Marx's work; to be superseded, in *Capital*, by a transformed dialectic, which produces an altogether different manner of conceptualizing a social formation. It is therefore worth noting *where* and *how* this earlier formulation (which, appearing as it does in the "1859 Preface," comes relatively very late in the so-called epistemological rupture between the early and middle Marx, and the "late") reappears again in Marx's mature work.

In a passage in *Capital, Volume III*, Marx offers an interesting and important gloss, which is, however, different, from *The German Ideology*, above all in the tightness of its formulation:

> The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relation of domination and servitude, as it emerges directly out of production itself and in its turn reacts upon production. Upon this basis, however, is founded the entire structure of the economic community, which grows up out of the conditions of production itself, and consequently its specific political form. It is always the direct relation between the masters of the conditions of production and the direct producers which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden foundation of the entire social edifice, and therefore also of the political form of the relation between sovereignty and dependence, in short, of the particular form of the State.

Here it is the relations of "domination and servitude," defined far more specifically in terms of the way surplus value is extracted in capitalist production, which "reveals the innermost secret, the hidden foundation of the entire social edifice"; hence, its political forms, and thus the forms of the state itself. In another, more significant, passage, Marx quotes his own words from the "1859 Preface" in a long and important footnote in the chapter on "Commodities" in *Capital, Volume I*. He quotes it without modification—and clearly with approval. The context and development is also significant. A

German critic had quoted Marx's "1859 Preface": and, while acknowledging the primacy of "the economic" in the capitalist epoch, denied its determining role for the feudal period or for classical antiquity, "where politics reigned supreme." Marx, in reply, restates the basic premise: it is "the economic structure" which is "the real basis." (We must remember, however, that whereas this "structure" is treated in a very reduced and simple form in the original formulation, it is now recalled in the context of a work which is devoted to an extremely comprehensive and elaborate consideration of just what the forms and relations of this "structure" are). The Middle Ages, he continues, could not live on Catholicism nor ancient Rome on politics.

However, he adds, "it is the mode in which they gained a livelihood which explains why here politics and there Catholicism played the chief part" (*Capital*, *Volume I*). Thus, while the mode of production plays a determining role in all epochs, its role appears here as that of assigning to some *other* level of practice (politics, religion—i.e., ideology) the "chief role" (the *dominant* role, as it has come to be designated). This is a new way of formulating the problem of "determination by the economic," and one which, incidentally, gives far greater reflectivity to the "superstructures" (which can now, in some epochs, be dominant). The argument is already anticipated in the "1857 Introduction," where Marx argues that "in all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. . . . It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialised within it" (*Grundrisse*).

These are, of course, two of the principal sources for the Althusserean distinction between "determining" and "dominant" instances: and thus for the thesis that, in his later work, Marx ceased to think a social formation as a simple expressive totality. We will return to this important turn in the argument later.

The crucial formulations of the base/superstructure problem first occur, and are given at least one decisive, and quite consistent form, in the period between the consignment of *The German Ideology* to the "gnawing criticism of the mice" and the replacement of the "1857 Introduction" by the "1859 Preface." Whether later superseded and transformed or not, these formulations give a radical impetus to the whole body of Marxist thought on the question of how to conceptualize a social formation and how to "explore" the nature of its unity. Let us sum it up.

The texts here are reformulated in the problematic of a broad, epochal historical sweep. In this sweep, mode of production is given, first, its initial definition; secondly, its position of determination over the whole social edifice and structure. Mode of production is already conceptualized as consisting, neither of economic relations *per se*, nor of anything so vulgarly material as "level of technology": but as a combination of relations—of productive forces and the social relations of production. These, in each epoch, form the determining matrix, in which social life and material existence are produced and reproduced. The structures raised on this foundation, which embody and articulate the social relations stemming from the productive matrix, correspond to it. Indeed, in the "double relationship," both material and social reproduction are simultaneously founded. As men, through the division of labor, progressively combine to intervene by means of the developing forces of production in Nature to reproduce their material life, so they in the same moment reproduce the structure of their social relations, and reproduce themselves as social individuals. The two cannot be separated, even if, in the last instance, it is the former which determines the form of the latter. Indeed, this "double relation" is conceptualized as *asymptotic*: since, in production, the social relations themselves progressively become "a productive force." As these social relations, rooted in and governed by production, develop, they achieve a distinct articulation: they are embodied in political and legal relations. They give rise to determinate forms of the state ("The existing relations of production must necessarily express themselves also as political and legal relations"). They define the character of civil society ("Only in the 8th Century, in 'civil society,' do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as external necessity": "1857 Introduction"). They produce their corresponding theoretical fields and discourses (religion, ethics, philosophy, etc.) and "determinate forms of social consciousness." "That these concepts are accepted as mysterious powers is a necessary consequence of the independent existence assumed by the real relations whose expressions they are." This is, indeed, the point toward which the whole trajectory of *The German Ideology* tended—the setting of the feet of German idealist speculation in the soil of man's "profane history."

No simple or reductive reflexivity of the superstructures is assumed here, though the *thrust* behind the many reformulations is consistent, and unmistakable. And perhaps it is worth stressing that, if Marx's thought on the subject subsequently developed, what changed is *how* he came to understand

determinacy by a mode of production, not whether it determined or not. When we leave the terrain of "determinations," we desert, not just this or that stage in Marx's thought, but his whole problematic. It is also worth noting that, though the determinacy of "the economic" over the superstructures is the prevailing form in which this is expressed here, it is sometimes overlaid by a second template: the tendency to reduce determination, not to "the economic" but to History itself—to *praxis:* to an undifferentiated *praxis* which rolls throughout the whole social formation, as its essential ground. Some passages of *The German Ideology* are not all that far from the more humanist-historicist assertion of *The Holy Family* that "History is nothing but the activity of men." Succinct as are its formulations, then, *The German Ideology* remains, at one and the same time, a key early text of historical materialism *and* a text haunted or shadowed by the trace of more than one conceptual problematic.

Engels's Letters on Historical Materialism

One of the best ways of seeing what the problems were for Marxism of "*The German Ideology*" way of conceptualizing the base/superstructure question is to watch Engels wrestle with its consequences in his lengthy correspondence with a number of Marxist veterans of his and the next generation, in the two decades after Marx's death, reproduced in the Marx-Engels *Selected Works*. In addition to editing and bringing together Marx's vast unpublished work, Engels found himself both the guardian of his and Marx's joint legacy and its most privileged interpreter. This was a key moment, and role, for it "marked the transition, so to speak, from Marx to Marxism and provided the formative moment of all the leading Marxist interpreters of the Second International and most of the leaders of the Third" (Stedman Jones). Marx had laid the foundations, above all in his work on the capitalist mode of production. But he left "no comparable political theory of the structures of the bourgeois State, or of the strategy and tactics of revolutionary socialist struggle by a working-class party for its overthrow" (Anderson 1976). Nor did he provide any systematic general statement of historical materialism as a "world view." Engels attempted to repair both omissions—a task which gives the general sense "of a completion, more than a development, of Marx's heritage" (Anderson 1976).

Marx had established that the economy is determinant in the last instant, but that the superstructures had their own "effectivity" which could not be

simply reduced to their base. But "the precise structural mechanism connecting the two is always left unclear by Marx" (Stedman Jones). The clarification of this problem was one of Engels's most urgent and important tasks: the more so since Marxism was fast becoming absorbed into the dominant field of "positive science," which reduced it to a simple economic determinism in which the superstructures were a pale and automatic reflex of the base—a tendency which was destined to be disastrously installed as the official version in the Second International. Engels struggled vainly to combat this reductionism. But he struggled to do so on the ground, essentially, of his and Marx's formulations of *The German Ideology* period: and the development and clarification he undertook were sustained by precisely those conceptual tools and instruments which had produced the formulation in this form in the first place. That is, *essentially* as an inversion of the idealist premises left intact in Left Hegelianism—by setting the Hegelian dialectic right-side up, and working from its "revolutionary" aspect. In the letters, Engels wrestles with this inheritance valiantly, courageously, and often elegantly. But the conceptual chickens are fast coming home to roost.

The German Ideology proposed a general historical scheme: but now that this threatened to harden into a rigid and abstract orthodoxy, Engels was obliged to insist that "all history must be studied afresh" and that Marx's materialism is "not a lever for construction à la Hegelianism" (Engels to Carl Schmidt, 8/5/1890). Face-to-face with "determination by the economic," Engels has to win some space for the "interaction of all these elements," and for the "endless host of accidents" through which "the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary" (Engels to J. Bloch, 9/21–22/1890). He accepts some blame ("Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame") for the tendency to reduce everything to the economic, and to disregard the effect of the superstructures and the ideological forms in "exercising their influence upon the course of the historical struggles." The play between contingency and necessity, the "infinite series of parallelograms of forces which give rise to one resultant," the intersection of many individual wills into "a collective mean, a common resultant," are bold attempts to circumvent some of the problems implicit in the original problematic (Engels to Bloch). There are some useful and provocative advances made in Engels's long, detailed letter to Schmidt (10/27/1876), which deal specifically with the superstructural instances of the law and the state, which are worth pursuing in a later context.

But we cannot depart far from Althusser's judgment on this correspondence, in the lucid "Appendix" to his "Contradiction and Overdetermination"

essay in *For Marx*, which suggests that, despite their many strengths, Engels's attempts to find a theoretical solution in his correspondence principally have the result of declaring that a solution is not yet to hand, and of reminding us how difficult it is to find. The problem, Althusser suggests, is: how to think the specific relations between the relations of production and the political, juridical, and ideological forms in such a way as to grasp, simultaneously, the "determination by the economic in the last instance" and the "relative autonomy" or effectivity of the superstructures. Engels knows what the question is. But he does not produce a satisfactory solution to it.

We have traced the "after-life" of *The German Ideology* formulations beyond Marx's death, partly as a way of registering the continuing theoretical power and resonance which they still—and in a sense, must—carry within the Marxist tradition. But the fact is that they were beginning to be superseded and transformed, implicitly if not explicitly, in terms of the bringing into use of the elements of an alternative paradigm, even if not "fully theorized," within Marx's own lifetime and within the scope of his later work. We can identify three ways or directions in which this modification is taking place.

The first is to be found in the political writings—above all, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, *The Class Struggles in France*, and the more incidental notes on Britain—which Marx wrote after it became clear that the revolutions of 1848 were not destined to produce a swift resolution to the emerging proletarian struggles. (I draw here from the papers collected in *Surveys from Exile* and from David Fernbach's excellent introduction.) In these writings Marx is not only dealing with concrete social formations at a specific historical moment, but his attention is focused on one level of the superstructure—the *political* instance. Hence, though these writings contain no general theoretical reformulations, they contain essential insights into how, in detail, Marx thought of the "effectivity of the superstructures."

Second, there are Marx's cryptic notes at the end of the "1857 Introduction," tantalizingly headed "Forms of the State and Forms of Consciousness in Relation to Relations of Production and Circulation. Legal Relations. Family Relations." These are too epigrammatic and condensed to help us much. But they point to Marx's recognition of the difficulty; and they contain the crucial, if cryptic, identification of the "law of uneven development."

Third, there is, of course, the whole monumental theoretical edifice of *Capital* itself. There is no extensive passage, as we have said, in *Capital* in which

the "laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production" are extended into the other levels of a social formation. But there are absolutely pivotal indications and traces of how this might be done, on the basis of Marx's decipherment of capital's secret. These do not add up to a thorough reworking of the base/superstructure problem. But they do, in sum, constitute an important, if incomplete, reflexive theoretical clarification.

The Eighteenth Brumaire

Before briefly looking at each of these moments, in turn, we can usefully sum up here the direction in which this incomplete clarification points. Crudely put, the relation of base to superstructure is thought, in *The German Ideology*, as some kind of fairly direct or immediate correspondence—i.e., within the framework of an *identity* theory. Marx progressively criticizes and departs from identity theory. Essentially, two things provoke this "break." Historically, the antagonisms multiplying at the economic level fail, in the revolutions of 1848, to produce their "corresponding" political resolutions. Marx is therefore forced, not only to abandon the perspective of "immediate catastrophe" which had been ringingly tolled out in *The Communist Manifesto*, but to look again at the much more complex interplay between the political and the economic; and to consider the ways in which "solutions" could be found, at the political level, which thwarted, modified, or even displaced the contradictions accumulating at the economic level—taking them forward, in their contradictory form, to a higher level of development.

The Eighteenth Brumaire is the classic instance of such an analysis of the "effectivity" and specificity of the political instance in relation to the economic. "Here Marx began, for the first time, to develop a systematic set of concepts for coming to grips with the phenomena of a politics which is certainly that of class struggle—the struggle of groups and interests are defined by the relations of production—but which is nevertheless *politics*, practised in the field of ideology and coercion that gives it its specific character" (Fernbach). This is the direct result of a longer and more complex perspective, born in the failed denouement of 1848. Gwyn Williams has recently brilliantly expounded, from an *internal* reading of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, precisely how and where this historical "break" registers as an analytic "break" inside Marx's text. Engels subsequently remarked that in 1848, he and Marx had mistaken the *birth-pangs* of capitalism for its *death-throes*.

But the break is also provoked theoretically. For the more Marx examined in depth the capitalist mode of production, the more he observed the internal complexities of its laws and relations: and the less he thought this complex whole could be expounded in terms of the immediate correspondence between one of its circuits and another, let alone one of its levels and all the others. This major revision is of course practically exemplified in the conceptual structure of *Capital* itself. But it is also stated, as a matter of theory and method, in the "1857 Introduction," which contains a thorough critique of "identity theory" and begins to sketch out a Marxist alternative—a theory of *articulations* between relations which are in no sense immediately corresponding. We cannot examine this here, but it provides, so to speak, the pivotal transitional point between *The German Ideology* and *Capital* itself. (See here Hall.)

Thus, in this period, Marx's "clarification" turns our attention in a new direction. He is concerned, now, with the *necessary complexity* of the social formations of advancing capitalism and of the relations between its different levels. He is concerned with the "unevenness," the non-immediate correspondences, between these levels which remain, nevertheless, connected. He is concerned with the functions which, specifically, the superstructures "perform" in relation either to the maintenance and reproduction, or to the retardation of the development, of capitalist social relations: and with the fact that these functions not only appear in ever-more complex forms, but that, at a certain stage of their development, may actually *require* the non-immediacy—the "relative autonomy"—they exhibit. This is a different problematic from that of *The German Ideology* period. It is also different from Engels's attempts to extend the chain of reflexivity between base and superstructures, in a simple, linear way (in his correspondence especially: elsewhere, as we shall suggest, Engels contributes some useful insights for Marx's new problematic).

Before looking, briefly, at *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, his most "worked" example, we can pinpoint from a number of sources the problems which constitute the field of Marx's new problematic.

When Marx examined British politics in the series of articles for the *New York Daily Tribune* which he commenced in 1852, he had to confront the stubborn fact that, though the capitalist mode of production was fast developing, and with it an emergent industrial bourgeoisie, the latter appeared to "rule" either through a Tory party, representing the large landed proprietors, or through the Whig party, consisting of "the oldest, richest, and most

arrogant portion of English landed property," "the aristocratic representatives . . . of the industrial and commercial middle class." To them, apparently, the bourgeoisie had abandoned the "monopoly of government and the exclusive possession of office." How capital advanced through this complex political configuration—giving rise to a distinction between an "economically ruling class" and, at the level of the political superstructures, a "politically governing caste"—was a fundamental problem; for the dynamic of British politics (and the politics of the working class, which remained tied to the tail of the Whig-Radical alliance) was constantly mediated—deflected—through its structure (*Surveys from Exile*). In fact, as Fernbach notes, Marx understood Britain politically far less well than France. He never grasped the deep compromise on which, after the settlement, British political life was stabilized; and he believed that ultimately, the industrial bourgeoisie would transform everything in its wake and assume power directly, "battering Old England to pieces." In fact, "the industrial bourgeoisie managed to integrate itself politically and culturally into the old ruling bloc and the aristocratic 'mask' was to remain for at least a further half-century to camouflage and mystify the rule of capital" (Fernbach). But, if Marx mistook the line of development, he was not wrong in locating the issue: an issue, essentially, of non-identity between the classes in dominance at the economic level and the class factions in power at the level of politics and the state.[4]

Take another superstructural domain. In his *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* Marx noted that the Law served "to perpetuate a particular mode of production"; yet insisted that "the influence exercised by laws on the preservation of existing conditions of distribution, and the effect they thereby exert on production, has to be examined *separately*." Engels echoed this sentiment when, in *Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, in a long and interesting section on the state, law, and ideology, he shows how England retained the forms of the old feudal law, while giving them a bourgeois content: how Roman Law provided the foundation for the evolution of bourgeois legal relations elsewhere; how this "working up into a special code of law" proved to be a poor basis for the development of Prussia, but—transformed into the *Code Civil*—an extremely favorable one for France. Thus, though "bourgeois legal rules merely express" the economic life conditions of society in legal form, they can do so well or ill according to circumstances. In the same passage, Engels notes how to achieve articulation as a sphere of the superstructure, economic facts must "assume the form of juristic motives," thereby leading on to the formation of a fully-fledged

juridical sphere, a set of complex legal ideologies, with an efficacy of their own. "It is indeed among professional politicians, theorists of public law and jurists private law that the connection with the economic facts, gets really lost" (Engels, *Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*). It is, then, not surprising that it is in relation to legal relations that Marx states his "law of uneven development." "But the really difficult point to discuss here is how relations of production develop *unevenly* as legal relations. Thus, e.g. the relation of Roman private law . . . to modern production" (*Grundrisse*). There seems little doubt that, had this point been expanded by Marx at the length of, say, Book One of the first volume of *Capital*, the one thing it would *not* have exhibited is a simple law of *correspondence* between the material base and the forms of the superstructure.

The Eighteenth Brumaire is, then, relatively simple to set in this context of problems—though its argument is not simple either to follow or resume. It concerns, essentially, the relation of the politics of the 1851 crisis in France, the forms of political regime and of the state which emerge, the nature of the Bonapartist "solution," and, more incidentally, the basis of ideology—"Napoleon's ideas"—in the accumulating contradictions generated by the development of an industrial capitalist mode of production. The latter is, however, here refracted through the former: it is the political instance which is in the foreground, just as, in 1851, it was politics which "took command." The French mode of production is beginning to develop, throwing up its antagonisms: the class fractions related to this development are already, politically, on stage: but so are those fractions which represent continuing, if declining modes of production still coexisting with industrial capital in the French social formation. The fact that the political complexity of the moment of 1851 is related to the coexistence of modes of production, with no single mode as yet in full dominance, is a crucial step in the argument. In one sense, then, the political crisis of 1851 is *given* at the level of mode of production. It may even be seen that, in a long-term sense, the stage of development (i.e., underdevelopment) of the capitalist mode of production is what prescribes—determines, in an epochal sense—the *range* of "solutions" to the *crisis* possible at this stage of development (i.e., no clear resolutions, one way or another). What it certainly does *not* do is to prescribe, in detail, either the content or forms of the political conjuncture. The December crisis runs through a succession of different regimes, each representing a shifting coalition of class fractions. Daily, the political content of the Napoleonic state shifted, forming and dissolving. Each coalition temporarily gave rise to a suc-

cession of forms of regime; social republic, democratic republic, parliamentary republic. It is only as each exhausts its possibilities of hegemony, and is dissolved, since none can rule the whole social formation on its own, that the Bonapartist "solution" is prepared: the *coup d'état*. This is a regressive moment, from the point of view of capital, arresting its development. France "seems to have escaped the despotism of a class only to fall back beneath the despotism of one individual" (*The Eighteenth Brumaire*). The falling of France on its face before the rifle butt of Louis-Napoleon's troops corresponds to the "backwardness" of the French mode of production—and ensures that backwardness dominates for a period. The lack of resolution—the situation of almost perfect equilibrium between the various contending fractions, leaving room for none definitively to prevail—provides the conditions in which the state itself appears, as a neutral structure "above the contending classes," and enormously expands its range and "autonomy." Finally, Louis-Napoleon's regime—which appears in the form of a single despotism—in fact is seated on the back of a particular class interest: that of the "most numerous" class in France at that moment, though one destined to decline: the small-holding peasantry. This class fraction cannot rule in its own name. It rules *through* Napoleon and through his ideas. It is this class which temporarily gives content to the expanding state—for the state is not "suspended in mid-air": but Louis-Napoleon, revivifying spirits, names, battle cries, and costumes from the past (the past of another and greater Napoleon), is the *conductor* of the power of this class to the political level. Capital settles for a "postponement." "Bonapartism" is its name and form.

Without examining this argument in any further detail, it should be sufficient to see from this and the related essays of this period that the domain of the political/juridical superstructures and the forms of the state itself are no longer thought by Marx as in any simple reflexive or expressive sense corresponding to their base. In the development of a Marxist theory of the superstructures, this essay must occupy a *pivotal position*—as it did for Gramsci, one of the major contributors to such a theory.

Rereading *Capital*

We have suggested that, properly understood, there are hints in the structure of the argument in *Capital* about how this new problematic of base and superstructure can be developed, as well, of course, as a major exposition of the necessary conceptual ground on which this theoretical development

should be undertaken. There is no space to take this very far here. One way is to take the law and tendencies of "the self-expansion of capital," not as specifying in detail the content and forms of the superstructures and thereby "determining," but as providing the governing movements (including the contradictions and crises in that self-expansion, and the "solutions" which permit capital to continue to accumulate while reproducing its antagonisms at a more advanced level of composition), dictating the tempo and rhythms of development in the other parts of the social formation: setting limits, as it were, to what can or cannot be a solution adaptable to capital's self-expanding needs, and thus as determining through the *repertoire* of solutions (political, social, ideological) likely to be drawn on in any particular historical moment of conjuncture.

This involves a "reading"—some would say *another* "reading"—of *Capital*, treating it neither as the theoretical analysis of a "pure" mode of production (whatever that is), nor as a history of British capitalism in the nineteenth century, which seem at this point in time to be the two prevailing alternatives on offer. We would have to try, instead, to understand, for example, as Marx does, the shift from the extraction of absolute to the extraction of *relative* surplus value as one of the key dynamics of the developing capitalist mode of production; as not merely a theoretical distinction but one which can be made concrete and historically specific in, say, the capitalist mode in England after the factory legislation of the mid-century. We can then see this shift as providing the baseline of solutions to the contradictions to which capitalism, as a fully established mode of production, is progressively exposed. If we then attempt to think all that is involved—politically, socially, ideologically, in terms of the state, of politics, of the reproduction of skills, of the degree of labor and the application of science as a "productive force," as a consequence of the uneven development toward this second "moment" in the unfolding of capitalist accumulation (i.e., as the inner spark which prompts many of the transformations in capitalism which we now sum up as the "transition from laissez-faire to monopoly")—then we begin to see how *Capital* provides a foundation for the development of a Marxist theory of the superstructures within the framework of "determination in the last instance," without falling back into the identity-correspondence position outlined in *The German Ideology*.

That is, so to speak, re-examining the base/superstructure problem from the perspective of "the base." But it is also possible, within the framework of *Capital*, to reconstruct certain key mechanisms and tendencies of the superstructures from distinctions Marx is always drawing between the "base" lev-

els of production and exchange. And this helps us to understand how it can be possible to insist that, within Marxism, the superstructures are at one and the same moment "determined" and yet absolutely, fundamentally necessary and required: not empty ideological forms and illusions. This relates to what is now sometimes called the theory of *Darstellung* or "representation" in Marx.[5] Without taking on a complex account of this theory here, we may try to approach it more easily through Marx's notion or concept of *appearances*, and thus to the theory of "fetishism" as outlined in the first part of *Capital* I—though there is considerable argument as to whether the theories of *Darstellung* and the theory of "fetishism" are in fact the same.

Often, though by no means exclusively, the question of appearances or of "real relations"/"phenomenal forms" is linked, in *Capital*, with the distinction between production and exchange. In the "1857 Introduction" and throughout *Capital* Marx insists on the necessary relation between the circuits of exchange (where value is realized) and the conditions pertaining to it, and the circuits of capital through production and the conditions pertaining to that. These, he says, must not be thought of as "identical." They are complementary but different, articulated with each other, but each still requiring its own conditions to be sustained. Hence the "unity" which these processes exhibit is not a unity of identity, but "unity of the diverse"—the "concentration of many determinations." Now, though these processes remain linked in their differences, and each is necessary for the "self-expansion and realization of value," production is the determining level: "consumption appears as a moment of production." The sphere of exchange is, however, what *appears* to dominate, to provide the "real" level of social relations under capitalism. It is also the sphere in which the myriad everyday "exchanges" of capitalist market relations take place, dictated only by the hidden but miraculous hand of the market. It is thus the sphere of capitalism's "common sense"—that is, where our spontaneous and everyday commonsense perceptions and experiences of the system arise. It is also the starting point of bourgeois theory, both vulgar political economy and, after that, marginal economics which deals principally with the domain of circulation.

Now, all the relations of the sphere of exchange really exist—they are not figments of anyone's imagination. Value could not be realized without them. There is a labor market, where labor-power is bought and sold—the form of the contract being the wage. There are markets in which commodities exchange against money—the form of the contract being prices. This sphere of "free exchange," where labor appears to exchange against its "due price" (a

"fair wage") and where goods appear to exchange at their equivalences (real prices), is the domain of private, egoistic exchanges which political economy named "civil society." To put it briefly, and in a very simplified form, Marx argues two things about this sphere of capitalist society. Looking—to use a special metaphor—"downward," this sphere conceals the real, but highly unequal and exploitative relations of production. The concentration on—indeed *the fetishization* of—the sphere of exchange *masks* what founds it and makes it possible: the generation and extraction of the surplus in the sphere of capitalist production. Thus, at the level of exchange, the agents of the process appear as one individual confronting another: whereas, of course, this epoch of egoistic individuals "which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed *social* . . . relations" (*Grundrisse*). Thus, when the production relations of capitalism *appear as*—and are treated, conceptually, as consisting of nothing except—exchange relations, the effect of this re-presentation is to mask and occlude what the "real relations" of capitalism are. This is the theory of representation, and it is also part of the theory of "fetishism." It indicates why Marx is so insistent throughout *Capital* on the difference between "real relations" and their "phenomenal forms"—without his entertaining for a moment the idea that the "phenomenal forms" are imaginary or do not exist.

However, looking—to use the spatial metaphor again—"upward," Marx then notes that it is these phenomenal relations which constitute the basis of civil society and the politico-juridical relations: that is, the superstructures. And from that level, also, arise the various forms of ideological consciousness. "*On the surface* of bourgeois society," Marx writes, "the wage of the labourer *appears as* the price of labour, a certain quantity of money that is paid for a certain quantity of labour. . . . This phenomenal form which makes the actual relation invisible and indeed shows the direct opposite of that relation forms the basis of all the *juridical notions* of both labourer and capitalist, of all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production, of all its illusions as to *liberty*, of all the apologetic shifts of the *vulgar economists*. . . . The exchange between capital and labour at first *presents itself to* the mind in the same guise as the buying and selling of all other commodities," he adds a little further on. Finally, he concludes, "The former [the 'phenomenal form'] appear directly and spontaneously *as current modes of thought:* the latter [the real relations] must first be discovered by science." (All these quotes from chapter 19 on "Wages," in *Capital* I. Our italics. The formulations are

recapitulated again and again through this volume.) Thus, he says elsewhere, in a famous passage at the end of part 2 of *Capital*,

> we . . . take leave for a time of this noisy sphere where everything takes place on the surface and in view of all men, and follow them . . . to the hidden abode of production. . . . This sphere that we are deserting, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say, labour power, are constrained only by their free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will.

Those who would like to found a theory of the superstructures, and the ideological discourses and spontaneous commonsense notions which fill out and help to organize the terrain of the superstructures, and who wish nevertheless to know how *and why* these emerge, in determinate forms, from the level of a mode of production, have, it seems to me, little or no alternative but to begin to work outward from this essential starting point at the heart of the argument in the mature Marx in *Capital* itself.[6]

Gramsci

The problem of base/superstructure has been the subject of considerable further development and theorizing, especially within "Western Marxism"—though it must be said that few appear to try to work *outward* from the terrain of the mature Marx in the way tentatively formulated above. Most attempts have preferred to go back to the less adequate formulations of *The German Ideology* period. What is more, many of these attempts have been concerned with the specifically *ideological* dimensions of the superstructures. We have neglected this aspect here, not only because it has been much written about, and because it constitutes a difficult area of theorizing in itself, but also because the concentration on the problems of ideology has, until recently, obscured the fact that when Marx refers to the superstructures, he is discussing the forms, relations, and apparatuses of the state and civil society, *as well as* the ideological forms and forms of social consciousness corresponding to them. Since Lenin and Gramsci—until Nicos Poulantzas and Louis Althusser placed the problem once more squarely on the agenda—the

superstructures in the true Marxian sense, including the absolutely critical question of the nature of the capitalist state, have been woefully neglected.

In the space left at our disposal, only two positions can, even cursorily, be considered. They constitute, however, in our view, the really significant contribution, post Marx, Engels, and Lenin, to the development of a Marxist "theory of the superstructures" and of the base/superstructure relation.

The first contributor here is Gramsci. Gramsci's work was undertaken first in the very center of the great upsurge of proletarian struggle in Italy in the immediately post–First World War period, and then continued, under the most difficult circumstances of imprisonment. Gramsci was forced to ponder long and hard the difficult question of how Marxism could inform revolutionary political practice. He was also forced, by the "exceptional" nature of the Italian state, to consider deeply the question of the nature of the capitalist state in both its "normal" and its exceptional forms (it was one of those exceptions, after all—the fascist state of Mussolini—which put him behind bars). He was also, as a result of his Crocean early training, peculiarly alerted to the enlarging or (as Benedetto Croce himself put it) "ethical" functions of the state, and what this concept would mean when translated into Marxist terms. And he was involved, as one of the leading militants in the international communist movement, directly with the same problems which had precipitated Lenin's fundamental text, *State and Revolution*.

It is not possible to recapitulate Gramsci's formulations about the state and the superstructures here. All that we can do is to indicate the *direction* of Gramsci's thinking in this domain. Much of Gramsci's work is directed in polemic against economic reductive theories of the superstructures. Hence he argued that the proper posing of the relation between base and superstructures was the seminal issue in a Marxist theory of politics. (See particularly "The Modern Prince," which composes part of the *Prison Notebooks*.) Fundamental class relations always, under conditions of developing capitalist relations, extend themselves in and through the "complex spheres of the superstructures"; for only thus could the reproduction of the social relations of capitalism be carried through in such a way as, progressively, to draw civil, social, political, and cultural life into a larger conformity with capital and its needs. In developed capitalist social formations, this *enlargement* of capital's sway throughout the social formation as a whole depended, precisely, on the development of the state and of civil society. Here, Gramsci paid close attention to the "ethical" function of the state, by which he meant the "work" which the state performs on behalf of capital in establishing a

new level of civilization, creating a new kind of social individual appropriate to the new levels of material existence accomplished by the development of capitalism's base. It was through the state, through its work in and with the family, the law, education, the multiplicity of private associations, the cultural apparatus, the church, the formation of new strata of the intelligentsia, the formation of political parties, and the development of public opinion—in short, in the complex sphere of the superstructures—that capitalism ceased to be simply a system of production and became a whole form of social life, conforming everything else to its own movement. This expansion of the conception of what it is the superstructures "do" for capital is Gramsci's first contribution.

The second is the manner in which he generates those critical intermediary concepts which enable us to think the *specificity* of a superstructural level. Here we have in mind Gramsci's development of the political instance, and the critical (if often provisional and cryptic) concepts he elaborates there of "relations of force," hegemony, historical bloc, corporate and subaltern classes, class fractions, Caesarism, Bonapartism, etc. Once again, in Gramsci's concept of "hegemony," for example, we discover the beginnings of a way of conceptualizing how classes, constituted at the fundamental level of production relations, come to provide the basis of the social authority, the political sway and cultural domination of a "class alliance on behalf of capital," without reducing the idea to what Marx once called the "dirty-Jewish" question of class interest, narrowly conceived. This latter form of economic reductionism, Gramsci argues, conceives of history as "a continuous *marché de dupes*, a competition in conjuring and sleight of hand. 'Critical' activity [i.e., Marxism] is reduced to the exposure of swindles, to creating scandals, and to prying into the pockets of public figures" (*Prison Notebooks*). Which of us cannot quickly recall *that* brand of Marxism of exposure?

Gramsci's third contribution in this area is the attention he paid to the nature, specifically, of the *capitalist* state, its role in the generation of ideological consent, and thus to how class power secured itself in its "decisive passage from the structure to the sphere of the complex superstructures," while at the same time providing, at the level of the superstructures and of ideologies, that "cement" which welded the social formation together under the hegemonic sway of an alliance founded on the fundamental class of capital. "In reality, the State must be conceived of as an 'educator,' in as much as it tends precisely to create a new type or level of civilization. Because one is acting essentially on economic forces reorganizing and developing the apparatus

of economic production, creating a new structure, the conclusion must not be drawn that the superstructural factors should be left to themselves to develop spontaneously, to a haphazard and sporadic germination. The State, in this field too, is an instrument of rationalization, of acceleration and of Taylorization. It operates according to a plan, urges, incites, solicits, 'punishes'; for once the conditions are created in which a certain way of life is 'possible,' then criminal action or omission must have a punitive sanction, with moral implications, and not merely be judged generically as 'dangerous.' The Law is the repressive and negative aspect of the entire, positive, civilizing activity undertaken by the State" (*Prison Notebooks*).

A Marxist grasp of the nature of the state and its functions and processes under capitalism, especially in its classical "liberal" or laissez-faire form, and the complementary discussion of "consent" and "coercion," of the role of ideology and common sense, etc., which fill out Gramsci's subtle and perceptive thought on this question, has rarely if ever been surpassed. Gramsci's work remains, of course, theoretically underdeveloped: the concepts are often in what Althussereans would call their "practical" state: they are hardly ever "pure"—never thoroughly or radically dismembered from their location within specific conjunctures. But if Lenin was correct to argue that what a Marxist analysis pointed to as its proper conclusion was the "concrete analysis of a concrete situation"—in other words, precisely, the analysis of conjunctures—then it is Lenin himself, first, and Gramsci immediately behind who—in so far as such an analysis embraces the superstructures—lead the way.

Gramsci is the one "historicist" whose work continues to haunt, and can never be expunged from, the starting points which the structuralists, like Althusser and Poulantzas, the other major contributors to a Marxist theory of base and superstructure, adopt. Both Althusser and Poulantzas criticize Gramsci's starting position within a "philosophy of praxis." (See particularly Althusser's "Marxism Is Not a Historicism" in *Reading Capital*; and Poulantzas's "The Capitalist State and Ideologies" in his *Political Power and Social Classes*.) Both are *massively* indebted to Gramsci, in seminal not just in marginal or incidental ways. Poulantzas's work on the political instance and on the state is conceptually impossible without Gramsci. And, as Althusser has revised his more "theoreticist" earlier positions and moved toward a more substantive, less epistemological approach to the object of Marxist analysis (as for example in his seminal and extremely influential essay "Ideology and the State" in *Lenin and Philosophy*), so his debt to Gramsci, already handsomely acknowledged, becomes both more explicit and more pronounced. The con-

cept of "Ideological State Apparatus," which has become a generative idea in the post-Althusserean analysis of the capitalist state, is a direct reworking of a few seminal passages on apparatuses of consent and Gramsci's "State and Civil Society" essay (*Prison Notebooks*), though, of course, translated—with effect—into a more structuralist Marxist language.

Althusser

The contribution of Althusser and his followers, especially Poulantzas, in elaborating a Marxist theory of base/superstructure is too complicated a matter to undertake here. We can only note three significant aspects which, taking up in his customarily rigorous fashion, Althusser has deeply transformed; thereby making a contribution of considerable theoretical significance to the problem of base and superstructure.

First, let us note that, in the manner in which a social formation is "thought" by Althusser—beginning with the formative and classic essay "Contradiction and Overdetermination," in *For Marx*, and developed in *Reading Capital*—there is more than a hint that the topographical metaphor of "base/superstructure" ought to be superseded altogether. For Althusser conceives a social formation as composed of different *practices*—essentially the economic, political, and ideological (with, perhaps, a fourth: theoretical practice?)—each of which is required for the production and reproduction of the relations of the capitalist mode: and each of which has its own inner constitution, its own specificity, its own dynamic and "relative autonomy" from the others. Some of Althusser's most effective polemical passages are indeed reserved for taking the base/superstructure metaphor *literally*: and thus showing the absurdity of waiting for a historical moment when the determining level—His Majesty, the Economy—could detach itself from its more incidental and epiphenomenal superstructural forms, and exert its "determination" over a social formation on its own! Neither in time nor history can "determination in the last instance by the economic" be so read as to suggest that the level of economic practice could stand free and appear denuded of political and ideological practices.

This theory of the necessity, as well as of the "relative autonomy," of the practices formerly consigned to the "superstructures" as we have already seen—constitutes one end of the double chain of a Marxist theory of a social formation. But then, what of the other end of the chain? How, then, is determinacy to be understood?

It is not, in Althusser's view, to be understood in terms of what produces a particular conjuncture, especially a revolutionary conjuncture. Such moments of fundamental rupture are no more exclusively produced by the single determinacy of "the economic" than any other moment. Such moments are constituted, rather, by the accumulation of the different contradictions, peculiar to each of the levels or practices, in one space or moment: hence, such conjunctures are, like Freud's symptoms (from whom, indeed, the metaphor is adopted), not determined, but "*over*-determined." Determinacy, then, for Althusser, is thought principally in terms of the economic level (determining) having, as one of its effects, the deciding which of the levels of the social formation—economic, political, or ideological—will be "dominant."

Each level or practice is, thus, conceived, not as autonomous but as part of a "complex, structured whole, structured in dominance." Determinacy consists in the combination or articulation (the *Darstellung)* of instances and effects in and through this complex structure. "The fact that each of these times and each of these histories is relatively autonomous does not make them so many domains which are independent of the whole; the specificity of each of these times and each of these histories—in other words, their relative autonomy and independence—is based on a certain type of dependence with respect to the whole" (*Reading Capital*). This is a conception of "determination" rigorously reinterpreted in the form of what Althusser calls a "structural" rather than a sequential causality. The whole point of *Reading Capital* is indeed to establish, via a "symptomatic reading" of Marx's work, that this is indeed the form of "causality" which the mature Marx employed.

The theoreticism, the "straightening out" of Marx in the interests of proving his structuralist lineage, which is characteristic especially of Althusser's work in the period of *Reading Capital*, has been widely criticized; not least by some of his former collaborators (important in this respect is Jacques Rancière), and by Althusser himself (Althusser 1976). But this should not detract from the seminal advance which the base-superstructure problem has undergone in his hands. This is brought forcefully forward in the now-famous "Ideological State Apparatuses" essay (published in his *Lenin and Philosophy* and widely referred to as the "ISAs" essay) in which Althusser puts forward some "Notes" on the nature of ideology and the state, and restores some of the problems he had previously addressed to the more classical terrain of the "class struggle"—although actually, both here and in Poulantzas, more often invoked than present as a concept performing

knowledge. Again, the "ISAs" essay cannot be resumed here. It requires careful and critical reading. It falls very much into two parts. The first—which examines the locating of ideology in the apparatuses and structures of the state—is far more convincing than the second, which, following the sinuous path of a Lacanian revision of Freud, enters, it seems to us, another problematic which—however important—is as yet hardly within hailing distance of any which can be attributed to Marx without straining credibility.

What is most significant from our point of view here, however, is the manner in which the "effectivity" of the superstructures is posed in this essay. Althusser recapitulates the central position in Marxism occupied by the base/superstructure metaphor. It is, he suggests, a metaphor: a "metaphor of topography." It "makes something visible"—namely "that the upper floors could not 'stay up' alone, if they did not rest precisely on their base." Despite Althusser's probing irony here at the expense of this topographical depiction, he acknowledges that it has a function: "the great theoretical advantage of the Marxist topography . . . is simultaneously that it reveals that questions of determination (or of index of effectivity) are crucial: that it reveals that it is the base which in the last instance determines the whole edifice; and that, as a consequence, it obliges us to pose the theoretical problem of the type of 'derivatory' effectivity peculiar to the superstructure, i.e. it obliges us to think what the Marxist tradition calls conjointly the relative autonomy of the superstructures and the reciprocal action of the superstructure on the base" (*Lenin and Philosophy*). Thus, while retaining the classical metaphor, Althusser proposes to go beyond its purely descriptive limitations, and rethink the problem "on the basis of reproduction." What he means, broadly, by this is that the specific "effectivity" of the superstructures is to be understood in terms of their role in *the reproduction of the social relations of production*; or what has come to be terms on the basis of the problematic of "social reproduction."

Althusser makes, at best, a tentative start in this essay with this concept. The idea of regarding the superstructures in terms of social reproduction has, however, already proved innovative and productive conceptually, not least in those areas of Marxist theory (for example, in relation to the family, the sexual division of labor, and the role of so-called "unproductive labor") which have hitherto hardly survived the reductive thrust of the originating topographical metaphor. It is true that the notion of "social reproduction" tends to produce in its wake its own distortion: that of an endlessly successful, functionally unfolding, reproduction of capitalist social relations

without either end, contradiction, crisis, or break. But then, the one question which Althussereans, in their peremptory haste to dismantle empirical and historicist-humanism forever ("Marxism is not a Humanism," "Marxism is not Historicism"), have not deeply enough considered is whether, in declaring that Marxism is a "structuralism," they have sufficiently satisfied themselves—or us—that Marxism is *not a functionalism*. However, while bearing this crucial but difficult theoretical issue in view, it must be said that the attempt to reconceptualize the base/superstructure problem in terms of "social reproduction," and thus in much closer conceptual touch with the starting point of Marx's mature work (production, reproduction), has done a great deal to revivify theoretical work on the problem, and to set work on it moving in what may well prove to be a fruitful direction.

To take this conceptual opening further—both to modify and to extend it, critically—is, at the same time, to advance Marxism as a critical science and as a theoretically informed revolutionary practice. Only when we can grasp and comprehend the dense, opaque integument of capitalist societies—their base and their complex superstructures—through the former are we likely to be able to develop a sufficiently informed practice to transform them.

NOTES

1 Preface to the French edition of *Capital*, *Vol. I*, 1872: Marx 1961.
2 Afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*, *Vol. I*, 1872: Marx 1961.
3 Afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*, *Vol. I*, 1872: Marx 1961.
4 See Anderson, "Origins of the Present Crisis"; Nairn, "The English Working Class," "The British Political Elite," "The Anatomy of the Labour Party I," and "The Anatomy of the Labour Party II"; and Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English."
5 See Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*; Geras, "Fetishism in Marx's *Capital*"; Mepham, "The Theory of Ideology in *Capital*"; Glucksmann, "The Althusserian Theatre"; Callinicos, *Althusser's Marxism*; and Hall, "Marx's Notes on Method."
6 See here particularly Geras, "Fetishism in Marx's *Capital*"; Mepham, "The Theory of Ideology in *Capital*"; and Hall, "Marx's Notes on Method."

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