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**Self Criticism:
Answer to Questions
from
'Theoretical Practice'**

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Self Criticism: An Answer to Questions from 'Theoretical Practice'

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Allow me to thank you for your letter and for the interest you have brought to my text of 1965. I am particularly grateful to you for having so vigorously emphasized a number of the weaknesses or contradictions that appeal in it. It is the greatest service I could have wished for, and one that experience shows is not always easy to obtain. I shall try to answer you on the main points, not because I wish to 'defend' my text, which certainly is confused or wrong in several essential points, but because these very errors are highly instructive.

I. ON THE THEORY OF FETISHISM

I broadly subscribe to your criticism of my formulations on 'fetishism' and 'determination in the last instance by the economic (Chapter 1, Section 3 in my text in Reading Capital). It is indisputably a bad passage although on one essential point I draw opposite conclusions from this to your own.

To get things clear, three aspects of the problem must be very carefully distinguished:

- what Marx thought about these two themes, which should be considered separately;
- What I was trying to do in the passage from Reading Capital;
- lastly what we should think about these themes, or the questions they suggest, in the current state of the problematic of historical materialism.

Just a few words on the question of fetishism.

In fact, in my text in Reading Capital, the question of fetishism has an accessory role: I simply wanted to use Marx's formulations as indices enabling me to ascend to the structural characteristics of 'determination in the last instance'. Thus I certainly did not think that the examination of the latter point had necessarily to proceed via a theory of fetishism. I made use of the fact that, precisely in the section of Capital on the 'fetishism of commodities', Marx proceeds to draw up a comparative table of the manifestation of social relations in different real or even merely possible modes of production. I did not intend to include the phenomenon of 'fetishism' in the very mechanism of 'determination in the last instance'.

On reflection, and here you are perfectly right not to be satisfied by such an empirical position, this proximity is, however, not completely the result of accident in Marx himself. Nor in consequence the considerable part played by the whole question of fetishism in the history of investigations into the dialectic after Marx. It is not by accident that it intervenes simultaneously with a characterization

of the capitalist mode of production as a historical structure compared with other possible ones in a kind of typology. And first of all because it is essential to the definition of the 'economic' in its relationship with the 'commodity-form' (the 'commodity categories'): i.e., insofar as the 'representation' of the economic is essential to the economic itself, to its real functioning and hence to its conceptual definition.

The theory of 'fetishism' (and with it all the theory of Part I of Capital Volume One) thus really is the index of a fundamental problem, one which will only become clear when we go further into the historical study of the different aspects of the reproduction of capitalist relations of production (since the commodity-form is realised at the level of the circulation of the products of labour and of the functioning of the legal and ideological 'superstructures').

Only, as a theory (I insist on this specification), it is totally idealist. On this particular, but decisive point, the rupture with idealism has not taken place. In fact there has only been a change in the form of idealism, the discovery of a form which is, certainly, 'critical' and has played a necessary part in the process of constitution of historical materialism, but which remains ideological and thereby demonstrates to us the dialectical, i.e., contradictory, uneven and uninterrupted character of this process, as is the case for every scientific theory.

Why totally idealist? Because it prevents a materialist theory of ideology, it is an obstacle to it precisely where that theory is required: in the explanation of an ideological effect. As we are now beginning to realise, an ideological

effect (i.e., an affect of allusion/illusion, of recognition/misrecognition in social practice) can only be explained by a positive cause, the existence and functioning of ideological social relations historically constituted in the class struggle. Specific social relations really distinct from the relations of production although they are determined by the latter 'in the last instance'. Really distinct means realised, materialised in specific practices, depending on special ideological apparatuses, etc.[1] Of course, such a theoretical representation finds its verification in practice, the practice of the class struggle, in which the proletariat discovers the existence, the necessity of ideological social relations, the necessity and the means to transform them. Moreover, such a representation is already outlined in Marx, not so much in Capital, but as a function of certain conjunctures of the political struggle (cf. already the third section of the Communist Manifesto). But it does not begin to take a general form (and it cannot become a theory strictly speaking) until Mao Tse-tung or his period (on the practical basis of the 'cultural revolution').

The 'theory' of fetishism has a completely different character:

- on the one hand it makes the misrecognition/recognition a 'structural effect' (or 'formal effect') of the circulation of commodities, a (subjective) effect of the place occupied by individuals in the structure of exchange with respect to the commodity.
- on the other hand it makes the commodity itself the 'object' of this misrecognition (in so far as the 'substance' of value is social labour) the source or subject of its own

misrecognition, which results from the 'auto-development' of its-form. This is a direct consequence of the way, throughout Part One, Marx has 'logically' developed the abstract (universal) and simultaneously concrete (immediately present in 'no matter what' everyday exchange of 'no matter what' product of labour) form of the commodity, represented as a subject.

It is thus a genesis of the subject, comparable to others that can be found in classical philosophy but with the following 'critical' variant: it is a genesis of the subject as an 'alienated' subject (a genesis or theory of cognition as misrecognition).

That is why, after having been stated by Marx in a Hegelian-Feuerbachian problematic, it has been possible for this theory to be adopted and developed enthusiastically in a structuralist or formalist problematic (as in Godelier, the editors of Cahiers pour l'Analyse, etc.). For 'structuralism' is the strict theoretical equivalent of this Hegel-Feuerbach combination, very precisely, as Althusser suggests, 'Hegel in Feuerbach', elaborated by Marx at the time of the constitution of historical materialism – 1844-6 – and which in this case he did not renounce in this philosophical combination, 'Hegelianism' does mean process, but process of the manifestation of a subject, in this case an alienated subject – in Feuerbach's sense – in which the 'real' relation between essence and attribute is 'inverted'. That is why ultimately structuralism equals humanism: for the question of the (structural) place is equivalent to the question of the (human) subject, if the fact of occupying a place in the system of social relations in-

stitutes in addition a point of view, a representation, a consciousness of this system, and explains it of itself alone.

In consequence, not only does the theory of the fetishism of commodities prevent the scientific explanation of the special ideological effects implied by commodity circulation, it also prevents our thinking their revolutionary transformation: it makes it seem that the 'transparency' of social relations is an automatic effect (even if not immediately, which is anyway not very easy to explain) of the suppression of 'commodity categories', i.e., of the commodity. It is a theory of ideology in general, of the historically transitory role of ideology in general: if it is to be believed, one fine day not only will there no longer be class ideologies, but, as there will no longer be any commodities, there will no longer be any ideology at all. Alienation, then suppression of alienation.

I do not think that fundamentally one leaves this ideological circle by replacing the structure of the 'commodity form' with the more general structure of systematically varied modes of production, i.e., the 'place' in commodity circulation by the place in the structure of the 'whole' and with respect to that whole, and by thus introducing the possibility of allowing the point of application of 'fetishism' to vary. For what then remains unintelligible (and fundamentally useless) is a social practice of the material transformation of ideological relations (as a specific revolutionary practice), and hence the distinct reality of these relations. If the effect of illusion is the effect for the individual of the place in the 'whole' that constitutes him as a subject, then the lifting of the illusion is still no more

than a subjective, individual matter, however much it is socially conditioned by the structure of the whole, and however much it is repeated 'millions of times over' for millions of individuals occupying similar places it is only the effect of a different place or of a coming to consciousness in one place

In other words, the theory of fetishism can never truly think that subject is an ideological notion (elaborated first of all within juridical ideology). On the contrary, it seems to make the notion of 'subject' the scientific' concept of ideology. Assuming that these schematic suggestions are correct. It is on this point, too, that Althusser's text cited above should be examined, for in it the problem is not perhaps solved in an absolutely clear fashion.

II. DETERMINATION IN THE LAST INSTANCE

I now return to the question of 'determination in the last instance' and to your question. About my text in Reading Capital, the following can be schematically said the direct object of the section in question was not fetishism, but it was 'determination'. And the leading idea was to take up and generalize an argument already expounded by Althusser, in his article 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' (in For Marx) on the subject of the historical conjuncture. This article is the source of my terminology: determination, domination, displacement of domination. In this reference there is something correct that we should try to retain: this is the fact that Althusser's text, however provisional the character of some of its formulations, does show the following: the 'dialectic' of history is not the pseudo-dialectic of development (linear, despite all the 'negations'

you like, and teleological, i.e., pre-determined, despite all the 'materialist inversions' you like), it is the real dialectic of the 'class struggle', the material forms of which are irreducible to the form of linear development, progress and teleology. It is thus the dialectic of the different aspects of the class struggle, really distinct from one another in their unity, as the practice of the workers' movement teaches (and not apparently distinct, like an essence' and its 'phenomenon' or 'phenomena'). The economic aspect (the 'economic' class struggle) is only one of these aspects, unevenly developed, unevenly decisive according to historical conjunctures, and never capable of producing revolutionary effects by itself. Which by no means rules out, but on the contrary demands, that in all historical periods, whatever the dominant mode of production and whatever the conjuncture, the ensemble of the class struggle is still determined by its economic material conditions. For social classes themselves, or rather the class struggle in and by which alone classes exist, have no historical reality except as presuppositions and results of the process of material production and reproduction of the material conditions of production. Thus to define and study, for each historical period, the specific way in which each really distinct aspect of the class struggle ('economic', 'political' and 'ideological') depends on its material conditions, is precisely the object of historical materialism.

I insist on the role of this text of Althusser's (and of the next 'On the Materialist Dialectic' which complements it), for, reading it closely, one can derive from it an essential (perfectly correct) thesis: the only real his-

torical dialectic is the process of transformation of each concrete 'social formation' (implying the real interdependence of the different social formations); in other words, the 'social formations' are not the 'concrete' site (or environment) in which a general, abstract dialectic is 'realised' (for example the transition from capitalism in general to socialism in general, or from one stage to another in general in the 'development' of capitalism), in reality they are the only object that is transformed, because they are the only one that really contains a history of class struggles. This point is decisive. I add that it is by no means an accident that Althusser was able to advance in this direction on the basis of an analysis at the texts and practice of Lenin, for not only is Lenin clearer on this point than Marx, he even makes a true and as time passed more and more conscious rectification of certain of Marx's formulations. It is on this basis that we in our turn must take up, develop and possibly rectify the whole ensemble of the theory of historical materialism. I shall return to this.

To get back to my text, it is clear that in my attempt to 'generalize' Althusser's idea, I incautiously changed its point of application: what he had used to deal with the historical 'conjuncture', I applied to the comparison of modes of production; I made the variation or displacement of the 'dominant' the principle of a comparative analysis (even a theory) of the forms (even the types of modes of production. This displacement has serious consequences: not only does it introduce an ambiguity which is from then on found in every use of the 'topographical' concepts introduced by Althusser (the topo-

graphy of the instances of the 'complex' social 'whole'), but also it transforms anew the object whose dialectic this topography should make it possible to analyse. Instead of social formations, it is now (and anew) a question only of modes of production, i.e., of a still 'abstract' generality, of which, in practice, the social formations will appear only as particular and concrete 'realizations'.

Is there a 'General Theory of Modes of Production' ?

First of all, indeed, the idea emerges that the theory of modes of production itself derives from a general theory of modes of production, which can only be a theory of the mode of production in general and of its possible 'variations': in short, a theory of typologicistic or structuralist inspiration, however consistent.

Naturally, this idea of 'theory' (this temptation of theory) must be taken in its strongest sense: i.e., in the sense of a theory providing real explanations of real history (so as not to revert to a positivist position). It must be understood that in such a perspective, the variation (the varied combination) of the play of the 'elements' is capable by itself of explaining historical effects. Such is undoubtedly one of the main ambiguities of the highly unsatisfactory expression 'structural causality'. The article by Badiou to which you refer ('Le (Re)commencement du Matérialisme Dialectique,' Critique, May 1967) avoids a whole series of intellectual confusions or slides

because it takes this tendency consistently as far as it will go, quite rightly thinking that a formalist theory of this type should be capable of formalization. At least this extreme attempt has the advantage of showing how one might (and how one obviously should not) transform historical materialism into a totally idealist 'theory of historical sets'. [2] But the same thing is just as present, though less apparent, in others (not to speak of myself) who discuss 'concrete' historical examples, for example Poulantzas. Each time the principle is the same: to endow the 'topographic' characterizations of the social formation with a real historical effectivity: for example, to explain the functioning of the capitalist State and its role in the reproduction of the relations of production by its 'relative autonomy' as an instance or else to explain the transformation of the social formation insofar as it is a 'transition from one mode of production to another' by the very 'displacement' or variation in the relationship of the instances which serves to compare them (to define them differentially). Or even, if this were not enough, to repeat this operation with elements 'of a higher order' – the modes of production themselves – merely by thinking the social formations as 'complex wholes in dominance' of several modes of production. In short, the idea of structural difference, suitably elaborated, is supposed to function ipso facto as the origin of the historical differentiation: a formula which, I think, shows well enough the idealism of the 'theory' in question.

You are quite right to emphasize and criticize the appearance in this chapter of the idea of analogy. This

idea is confused from the standpoint of historical materialism (in which it is useless: historical materialism cannot but encounter relatively persistent social forms – e.g., Roman' law, money, certain aspects of the State apparatus, etc. – despite the transformation of the dominant mode of production, and it will then try to explain such a persistence by the very characteristics of the unique historical process in which the mode of production has changed). From a theological or structuralist viewpoint, on the contrary, it is perfectly logical, or at least can hope to obtain a precise formulation. In this vein, the idea of analogy appears in my text not only vis-à-vis the place and nature of 'fetishism' but also vis-à-vis the structure of the modes of production as a whole (cf. the rather risky comparison between the forms of the appropriation of the surplus product in the capitalist mode of production and in the so-called 'Asiatic' mode of production, the craze of French Marxism at the time).

Do not Confuse the Real Object and the Formal Concepts of its Analysis

But there is something more basic and serious: from such a viewpoint, the very denomination of the 'instances' in the social formation cannot but tend to designate anew essentially invariant elements of historical analysis, contradicting what was postulated at the beginning of that part of my text. In clear language, this means that there is an essence of 'economic' phenomena and also essences

of 'political' and 'ideological' phenomena, pre-existing the process of their historical transformation (and thus of their historical definition). In other words, pre-existing the process of the determination by the action of the class struggle, itself having a determinant overall historical structure. That means that at a sufficient level of generality, but one capable nonetheless of explaining a historical causality, and definite effects, 'economic' has the same meaning in the feudal mode of production and in the capitalist mode of production, and in fact in any mode of production. In short, it is a return to the ideological presuppositions of bourgeois political economy and history, in the very sense that Marx called it 'metaphysical'. There is no doubt that this temptation was induced in our work by our concern to avoid any 'historicist' interpretation of Marx's criticism, and in consequence, in Lenin's words, to 'bend the stick in the other direction'. But the stick cannot be bent indiscriminately, or, if you like, the space in which it is bent is not a mere plane. Of course, this relapse is no accident, and I think that I am able to state that, in this and other analogous forms, it is the index of a real difficulty. I shall return to it.

Finally, the result of all this is that the section in question here partly contradicts the theses of the two preceding divisions ('Mode of Production: Manner of Producing' and 'The Elements of the System of Forms') and of the following Chapter Two ('The Elements of the Structure and their History'). Or at any rate, it helps to orient their interpretation in a direction which is not the only possible one, and precisely not the right one. As I

recalled a moment ago, my own text suggests that the 'general' concepts it is dealing with are not 'the atoms of a history', the given elements out of which varying combinations are to be constructed, but only the 'pertinent' categories of the differential analysis of social forms. These concepts only indicate and in some sense formally orient the general problematic (I say problematic and not theory) of 'historical materialism' at work in certain definite theoretical analyses of Marx's. They cannot anticipate their content. Logically this means that at most I can suggest the following, when the (social) form of the combination that characterizes the mode of production in the strict sense (a combination of determinate 'relations of production' and 'productive forces') changes, then the conditions in which an 'economic', 'political' or ideological' instance intervenes historically, i.e., the conditions in which effects, themselves combined, of specifically 'economic', 'political' and 'ideological' class struggles are constituted and occur, necessarily change too in a determinate manner. That is why, in opposition to all economism, the concept of mode of production in Marx, even at an abstract level, really designates a complex unity of determinations that derive from the base and from the superstructure. But we can in no way deduce the mode of this constitution, the process of functioning and the historical tendencies of the social relations considered, nor the laws of the combination of the different aspects of the class struggle, from the mere presentation of this combination in its formal characteristics, i.e., on the basis of a comparison between the different possible forms. That is why it is

impossible to invent 'possible' historical modes of production.

To the question, what is responsible for a theoretical slide on this point (which I made myself), it can be answered that it is notably the double sense in which the term 'combination' (Verbindung) is taken here, on two quite different levels.

In a first sense, it has to be said that the object of historical materialism when it is analysing a determinate mode of production is first to define and explain a particular combination (better: process of combination) of the social 'factors' of production, which can be described as a 'combination of the relations of production and the productive forces' so long as it is pointed out - better than I did at this time - that this combination is always made, on a given basis, in the (social) form and under the influence of the relations of production themselves. In other words, that the 'productive forces', although they have to be distinguished from the relations of production to which they cannot be reduce, do not however exist as such (as a system of the material transformation and appropriation of nature) except under the influence of their own combination with (in) determinate relations of production.[3] Such, abstractly and briefly, is the object of Capital, notably in Volume One.

But alongside this first sense there is a second, quite different one: this is the idea that the theory of historical materialism proceeds, in different circumstances, as much vis-à-vis the mode of production itself, as, later, is-à-vis concrete social formations, via a combination

of distinct aspects ('a synthesis of many determinations' said Marx). Strictly speaking, this last formulation, if it is correct, can only be provisional, precisely because this formal characteristic of the theory is not independent of the characteristics of the material object of which it gives us the knowledge. At any rate the two senses cannot be confused without playing on words, or rather without surreptitiously moving from historical materialism to a kind of 'meta-history'. Here too what has to be respected is the rigorous distinction between the real object and the concept, or object of knowledge, so as to stay on the razor's edge, without leering off 'to the left' into empiricist or 'to the right' into formalism.

III. IDEOLOGICAL PROBLEMATIC OR SCIENTIFIC PROBLEMATIC OF 'PERIODIZATION'

But by saying this I am touching on something much more profound that is capable of clarifying us as to the root, in the history of Marxism, of the preceding confusions and difficulties. You are quite right to stress that the concept of 'mode of production' as used in two practically distinct senses, as a historical 'unit of periodization' and as a 'particular combination of elements', two senses which seem to be confused later. One might say squarely: the only object of part of the text was precisely to identify the two senses, deliberately

This position should be modified. But, to my mind, not at all for the reason you suggest: not because there is

any question of a fallacy, of a confusion between two levels of the discourse. If this confusion exists, it is only an effect. Besides, the movement of the argument was in fact as follows: to show how the construction of the concept of 'mode of production' by Marx in fact transforms radically the not specifically Marxist problematic of historical 'periodization'. Marx thus transforms a formal ideological a priori into a scientific problem whose solution is precisely the knowledge of tendencies implied in definite systems of social relations, and of equals definite processes of transition or transformation of the social relations. There are therefore two notions of 'periodisation' or rather two uses of the notion of 'periodization', one ideological and the other Marxist and scientific. But that is not the fundamental mistake, which lies in the very way 'mode of production' is considered as a 'basic concept' of historical materialism.

Matters are especially delicate here: great care must be taken not to fall back behind what was correct. And above all care must be taken not to fall back behind what is indeed in Marx a theoretical revolution on which depends the whole construction of historical materialism: the definition, vis-à-vis capitalism, of the concept of mode of production (material mode of production in the necessary form of exploitation) and of its historical tendencies.

Schematically, let me put it as follows: taken as a whole, my text contains a curious paradox. Leaving on one side the section devoted to the critical examination of the notion of 'productive forces', the main objective, which

only appears in the fourth chapter, can be said to be to show that 'transition' (speaking plainly, social revolution) cannot be explained in an evolutionist way, even by translating an evolution into the language of the 'negation of the negation', 'qualitative change', etc. It is easy to understand what practical, political reasons (reasons that are more actual than ever) drove us to work in this direction and to demonstrate that transition is not, is never, for reasons of principle, mere supersession, an 'internal' results of 'tendencies' observable in the mode of production itself and responsible for the development of its characteristic relations of production, even if this development is simultaneously a development of contradictions.[4] Hence, from the theoretical point of view, it was essential to demonstrate that transition requires the analysis of other material conditions and other social forms than those implied in the concept of mode of production alone (in this case: of the capitalist mode of production alone). Or else the analysis of the material results and social forms (re)produced by the development of the capitalist mode of production in another respect than the capitalist relation of production alone.

But paradoxically, this 'demonstration' consisted essentially of accepting for the mode of production itself, and at the same stroke, to coin a phrase, for periods of 'non-transition', a purely 'internal', linear and hence predetermined development or dynamic. In other words, if it was essential to recognize in 'transition' the characteristics of a history' in the strongest sense (unforeseeable in the reality of its concrete forms), this was in the event because 'non-transition', for its

part, was not to be a history (in the strongest sense).

Let me say that this conception inevitably remained captive to the very ideology that underlies the ordinary practice of 'periodization' which, according to my initial project, was what was to be superseded. Indeed, it comes down to identifying the notions of history and 'transition'; simply, instead of saying: everything is always transition or in transition since everything is historical (ordinary historicism), I said more or less: there is only real history if there is (revolutionary) transition, and every period is not a period of transition. Which, let it be said in passing, is a fine example of the setting to work of the empiricist-linear representation of time as an a priori form presupposed by periodization.

The Persistent Ambiguity of the Concept of 'Reproduction'

But above all this means that, despite certain epistemological subtleties, I did not succeed in escaping from a basic ambiguity in the notion of the 'reproduction' of social relations (of course, I was neither the first or the last in this). I still thought within this concept both the social form of the (re)production of the conditions of production modified and partly destroyed by production itself, and on the other hand the identity with themselves, the persistence of the given relations of production. To sum up, I said: since, in Marx's analysis, the tendency towards the accumulation of capital (and all the secondary tendencies resulting from it, including the tendency for the rate of profit to fall) is identical with the process of the reproduction of the relations of production itself, this means that, on the one hand, this tendency exists

of itself so long as the capitalist relations of production 'remain unchanged', and, on the other, that this tendency cannot of itself exceed, 'explode' the very limits of its existence.

Behind this 'argument' there is an old philosophical representation, and it is no accident that throughout this work I was guided approximately by certain reminiscences of Spinozist formulae.^[5] There is the idea that identity with itself, persistence (including in the form of the persistence of relations implied in a cyclical process) needs no explanation since it explains itself by itself, needs no cause (or production) since it is its own cause. Only 'change', as 'real' change, i.e., abolition-transformation of the essence, could need a cause and an explanation. Let me say that this is a survival of the philosophy of the 'principle of inertia', of substance and the ontological argument. . . . But what also explains my 'relapse' is the power of an old economic idea, an old idea of the economists, which enabled them to define their object as a set of natural laws, against narrowly 'political' and institutional representations, and which is preserved even in the 'Marxist' thesis of the so-called autonomy of the 'economic' process (with respect to the 'rest' of the social practices, institutions, etc.).^[6] I mean the old idea that the economic process can be assimilated to an automatic, 'self-regulating' mechanism, assuming, of course, that it remains within the 'natural' limits of its functioning. An idea that the economists have attempted to verify, with temporary successes, at the level of the market, of price equilibrium, etc. But it must also be said an 'economistic' idea which Marx

seems never quite to have escaped, even when he shifted his object from the 'superficial' sphere of the market to the sphere of the production and reproduction of the conditions of production 'as a whole'. In Capital this is revealed by the fact that the 'economic' theory of Volume Two, which is the site at which the scientific concept of the reproduction of social relations emerges from the 'critique of political economy', can and must nevertheless, if it is isolated, inevitably appear incorrectly as a complete theory of the reproduction of the conditions of production 'as a whole'. And as the theory of Volume Two does nothing but show how the different immediate production processes 'intertwine' at the social level and through the intermediary of the commodity circulation of their products, this means that the process of production does not reproduce only a part (means of production, means of consumption) of the conditions of production (which is indeed one of Marx's fundamental discoveries), but also reproduces the totality of them or reproduces them all 'in potentia'. Which is manifestly false, if only because the reproduction of the means of consumption is not yet, of itself alone, the reproduction of labour power (the process of which obligatorily includes the practices of the superstructure), but only its pre-conditional basis.[7] In other words, this means that the form of the immediate process of production is thus not only held to be what materially determines the ensemble of the process of reproduction of the social relations, but also what constitutes it completely, by the mediation of the market (a point with far-reaching consequences which unfortunately I cannot develop here, and in con-

sequence that all the other (non 'economic') social processes can only be expressions or inessential phenomena of that form.

Let it be said in passing that a close examination of the texts shows convincingly that this residual 'economism' of certain isolated formulations of Marx's is directly linked to the idea he had of the object of Capital, which gave us so many problems from the beginning because of its plainly empiricist-formalist character: the idea that Capital studies 'the capitalist system in its ideal average', i.e., ultimately, the model of the capitalist system. An idea that must be totally abandoned in order to think the object of historical materialism as the process of transformation of concrete social formations, which are unique as such and in consequence absolutely incapable of appearing as the variants of a single 'model', even if, what is very different, the history of social formations in the modern period is basically the history of the development and of the effects of their transformation by a single dominant mode of production, first constituted 'locally' but necessarily extending itself globally.

There is no 'General Theory' of Historical Transition

I return to my text in Reading Capital. In it it is visible that the paradoxical attempt I have been discussing, and for which, I repeat, Marx (or at least the isolated reading of certain of Marx's texts) is partly responsible, had one rather 'logical' effect, come to think of it, where the 'theory of transition' is concerned.

After having posed the problem in this way, I had to ask

myself whether Marx himself had, in Capital, broached the problems of 'transition', given that it was insufficient for its analysis to 'extend' the tendency defined in the body of the work. What presented itself naturally enough was the set of texts on primitive accumulation, the genesis of ground rent, the origins of merchants' capital, etc. I have no reason to modify the essential orientation of this analysis. It is fundamental to compare these different texts and to draw conclusions from their comparison. One specification only, since you raise it, concerning the expression 'genealogy': obviously I did not mean that the transition process was itself a 'genesis' or 'genealogy' (which anyway would not be very meaningful), but that Marx had had, and could not but have had to treat this problem in the (provisional) theoretical form of a genealogy, i.e., of a series of retrospective historical 'soundings' starting from the elements of the capitalist mode of production taken one by one. Which led me to state simultaneously:

- that it is precisely this theoretical form that enabled him to discover and expound to us the relative independence and real distinctness of the historical processes in which the elements of the capitalist structure (labour power as a commodity on the one hand and money-capital on the other in the hands of a mercantile bourgeoisie) are constituted. Hence the fact that the constitution of capitalist relations of production is not pre-determined, i.e., that the constitution process is not teleological.
- and at the same time that it is precisely this form (or rather the precondition that imposed it on Marx: his incomplete theory of the reproduction of capital) that

prevented Marx from treating the transition from capitalism to socialism in the same mode. It is precisely this form that thus led him (in Capital, let me make it clear) to treat the transition from feudalism to capitalism in a 'historical' mode, though incompletely, and the transition from capitalism to communism in a 'logical' mode, i.e., not to treat it at all. And this even though the necessary historical connection between the development of capitalism and the proletarian revolution is from beginning to end the very object of Marxist theory.

What, for my part, did I do to remedy this state of affairs? I postulated that these two problems were, ought to be, formally the same in nature. And as the 'genealogy' can only be a provisional theoretical form I sought to conceptualize what it involved. Now to explain the necessity and the causality of a historical process the only concept I had at my disposal was that of 'mode of production'. I therefore suggested that the analysis of transition consists of the definition of a new mode of production, different from the capitalist mode of production itself, although 'complex', or 'contradictory', and therefore 'unstable' (characterized by a fundamental 'non-correspondence'). But by this fact not only did I cancel out part of my own earlier presuppositions, since, logically, a new 'mode of production' cannot be anything but a new tendential process of reproduction, like the capitalist mode of production itself. But above all, (1) I introduced the germ of an insoluble problem: what is the specificity of the relations of production defining such a mode of production'? – a problem that is unavoidable once one has recognised the primacy of the relations of

production over the productive forces in their 'combination'; (2) I introduced an indefinitely renewable aporia concerning the formation of this new mode of production, or, if you like, the 'transition' to this 'transitional mode of production': (3) I introduced the possibility of a 'general theory of transition' or 'transitions', itself conceived as an aspect of a 'general theory of the combination – or articulation – of modes of production'. Such a theory is in fact the substitute for a real elaboration of the dialectic of the history of social formations in the sense in which Althusser had outlined it in his text 'Contradiction and Overdetermination'. But this could not be clearly perceived so long as we did not think distinctly the two concepts of 'social formation' and 'mode of production', and the nature of their relationship (which is still far from having been perfectly worked out). That is why it is particularly interesting that some of us initially attempted, following the line of Reading Capital, definitions of the social formation as a 'combination of several modes of production', or as an articulation of modes of production', i.e., as a 'complex' mode of production, or else as a 'higher ranking' mode of production in a kind of scale of types.[8]

I cannot here go into great length on the difficulties of such a theory, of which the idea of a 'general theory of transition' is a particular application. Let me say that such a theory is substantially equivalent, though more complicated in detail, to the formulations of the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859) (which are themselves a reprise of themes from The German Ideology), which have been a very heavy

burden in the history of Marxism in that they suggest, by different means, the existence of a universal mechanism of the transformation of social formations, deducible from the structural schema of 'the' social formation in general (cf. the famous 'narrowness' of the envelope of relations of production with respect to the development of the productive forces). This comparison simultaneously illuminates a basic epistemological fact, the necessary solidarity and even interdependence of evolutionist representations and relativist representations (typological or structuralist representations) of history, which seem to be opposed but are both non-dialectical. These two representations both arise from the fact of posing separately (1) the analysis of the historically relative character of a mode of production (the capitalist mode of production is not a mode of production of wealth 'in itself', but only, 'neither more nor less' than feudalism or slavery, a mode of appropriation of the unpaid labour of others which is only distinguished by a 'different way' of extorting it), and (2) the analysis of the role of the class struggle in history (arising on the basis of very ancient material conditions – the 'scarcity of products, the 'non-development' of the productive forces – and destined to be abolished on the basis of new conditions: the 'impetuous development' of the productive forces, 'abundance'). Once these two problems are separated, it is no longer possible to pose in scientific terms the question of why no new form of relations of exploitation is possible beyond capitalist relations of production: the social revolution that destroys capitalist relations of production appears merely as a particular

case of the general mechanism of contradiction/readjustment between the relations of production and the productive forces, and its specific result, the abolition of all the forms of class rule, remains inexplicable. It is then possible to leave the field, together or separately, to relativism in the definition of the relations of production and to evolutionism in the analysis of the development of the productive forces.[9]

To go right to the point, let me say that one of the basic theses of historical materialism seems to me to be the following: there is a general problematic (to borrow an expression of Duroux's) of 'transition' in social formations, i.e., of 'revolution in the relations of production'. This pertains to the fact that the concept of 'class societies', resting on modes of production which are at the same time modes of exploitation, cannot be constituted without reference to the historical transformation of modes of exploitation (in other words, there is no such thing as exploitation in general, only determinate forms of exploitation). But for all that there is no such thing as a general theory of transition, in the strong sense of an explanation of the causality of a process. On the contrary, it emerges that each historical 'transition' is different, materially and therefore conceptually. This point is of fundamental political importance if it is true that Marxist theoreticians, starting with Engels himself, have occasionally tended to consider the 'transition' from feudalism to capitalism and the 'transition' from capitalism to socialism as analogous processes, e.g., by representing the modern proletariat as the 'representative' of the movement of the productive forces in the same way

as the bourgeoisie 'represented' that movement within feudal society, or by explaining that at a certain period the bourgeoisie becomes a 'superfluous' class because it is a class 'outside production', in the same way as the feudal aristocracy had become a 'superfluous' class of rentiers, etc.[10] It is essential to pose the general thesis that historical materialism is not only a theory of the necessity of the (revolutionary) transformation of the social relations, but also a theory of the transformation of the mode of transformation of social relations. Such that two revolutions' never have the same concept.

In order to Analyse the Real History of the Capitalist Mode of Production, all Evolutionism must be Removed from the Concept of 'Tendency'

Finally it turns out that this thesis is closely linked to a rectification of what I have thought elsewhere as the development or evolution of a mode of production (in particular capitalism). In order to explain this, it is enough to say the following: that it is impossible to account for the specificity of each revolutionary 'transition' unless it is related not only to the specific general form of the preceding social relations (e.g., the form capital/wage-labour, and the type of combination of the relations of production and the productive forces it implies), but also to the specific history of the preceding mode of production i.e., to the history of the social formations that depend on the development of that mode of production.

In fact, the first person to realise all the theoretical importance of this fact, as a result of the constraint of circumstances, was not Marx, but Lenin, and this discovery implies ultimately a rectification of certain of Marx's formulations. It was Lenin, insofar as he demonstrated that the process of 'socialist' revolutionary 'transition' was not linked to the existence of capitalist relations of production in general, but to the existence of a determinate stage in the history of capitalism: imperialism, i.e., of determinate 'transformed forms' of capitalist relations of production (and not only, of course, of productive forces inside the 'framework of unchanged relations of production). Such that the problem of an analysis of the socialist (proletarian) revolution and of what 'socialism' itself is as a historical epoch becomes inseparable from the problem of the analysis of imperialism, and hence of the determinate historical phases (or periods) of the history of capitalism. It has to be stated that one of the orientations of my text in Reading Capital led precisely to making these phases, i.e., these historical transformations, strictly unthinkable, except in the economistic-evolutionistic sense of developmental phases, linear stages in the realisation of a tendency unchanged in itself.

Still very schematically, it is clear therefore that the examination of the problem of the socialist transition presupposes among other things an overall critical review of the problem of the history of capitalism, and a recasting of our 'reading' of Capital as a function of this problem, a review and a recasting made all the more difficult by the fact that Marx himself partly mis-

recognized its nature. In particular it presupposes going back, even at the most abstract level, to the question of reproduction and of the 'tendencies' of the capitalist mode of production. From this point of view, I should no doubt invert my normal formulation: it should not be said that there is in the mode of production a tendency to reproduction of the relations of production, or rather a tendency (to accumulation, the concentration of capital, a rising organic composition, etc.) which realises the reproduction of the relations of production. On the contrary, it should be asked how a 'single' tendency can turn out to be reproduced as a tendency, in a repetitive fashion, such that its efforts are cumulative according to an apparent continuity. It should be asked in what form a tendency can be realized (produce historical effects), taking into account the conditions of its own reproduction. It should be asked how this reproduction is possible even when in the social formation, the sole real 'site' of the process of reproduction, its material conditions have been historically transformed.

In other words, it is essential to break once and for all with the ideological illusion I have been discussing according to which the existence of a historical 'tendency' seems simultaneously to be the tendency of this 'tendency' to persist, hence to be realised, etc. And for that it is essential to understand that it is not the mode of production (and its development) that 'reproduces' the social formation and in some sense 'engenders' its history but quite the contrary, the history of the social formation that reproduces the mode of production on which it rests and explains its development and its trans-

formations. The history of the social formation, i.e., the history of the different class struggles of which it is composed, and of their 'resultant' in successive historical conjunctures, to use a metaphor frequently employed by Lenin. That is, the history of class struggles and of their results in successive materially determined historical conjunctures. In this I shall perhaps be able to make an effective contribution to Marxism-Leninism: not to Marxism followed by Leninism, but, if I may say so, to Marxism in Leninism.

January - October 1972

NOTES

1 Cf. on this point Louis Althusser: 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,' June 1970, in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, NLB, London 1971, pp. 121-73.

2 Let me make it clear that here I am aiming at this particular point in Badiou's work and absolutely not at all its aspects. None of us, particularly at this period, succeeded in being perfectly 'consistent'.

3 I have attempted to make this materialist thesis of the primacy of the Relations of Production inside the combination of relations of production and productive forces more clearly explicit in my forthcoming article: 'Capitalisme et theorie des formations sociales' in L'Economie, dir. A. Vanoli, coll. 'Les Sciences de l'Action', CEPL Paris.

4 Given that it is absolutely excluded that it could be a matter of an 'external' effect, since there is no exterior to the historical process. As Mao Tse-tung explains in On Contradiction: 'The fundamental cause of the development of a thing is not external but internal' (Selected Works, Vol. I, p. 313). But it is precisely the structural modality of this internal contradiction that has to be made explicit. From the Communist Manifesto on Marx took as his object its principal aspect: the 'internal/external' position of the proletariat as a class in the structure of capitalist relations of production.

5 I say formulae, for Spinoza's materialist dialectic is quite the opposite of this bad application of it.

6 Note that this 'autonomy' could also be stated in our jargon as 'the economic is both determinant and dominant', or at least this is one of the possible interpretations of that obscure formula.

7 Cf for the time being on this point Althusser's article 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', op. cit.

8 This was the case for myself, for Althusser, for Terray (Le marxisme devant les sociétés "primitives", Maspero, Paris 1969) and above all for Pierre-Philippe Rey whose text Sur l'articulation des modes de production has been published in Problèmes de Planification, dir. Charles Bettelheim, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, VIe Section, no. 13-14. Note that in the same issue there is an already old and unfortunately very elliptical 'note' by Duroux, who had seen these difficulties very clearly.

9 This ideological complementarity of relativism and evolutionism, which is only apparently surprising, has been clearly pointed out recently by Claudia Mancina:

'Strutture e contraddizione in Godelier', Critica Marxista, 1971 no.4.

10 Marx pronounced such formulae in determinate conjunctures as a reminder of the fact that the proletariat had in its turn to make 'its' revolution, as the bourgeoisie had made its. But Engels almost theorized this analogy, or rather made this analogy the very basis for the exposition of historical materialism, notably in Socialism utopian and scientific and more clearly still, if that is possible, in his article 'Social Classes – Necessary and Superfluous', (The Labour Standard 6th August 1861, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Articles on Britain, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1971 pp. 384, ff.), which provided Kautsky with much of his inspiration. Lenin, though, never said it.

I have recently attempted to analyse Marx's formulations on the analogy between the bourgeois revolution and the proletarian revolution where the State is concerned from the Communist Manifesto to The Civil War in France ('La rectification du Manifeste Communiste', La Pensée, August 1972).