

Putting Dialectics to Work: The Process of Abstraction in Marx's Method

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The Problem: How to Think Adequately About Change and Interaction

Is there any part of Marxism that has received more abuse than his dialectical method? I am not just thinking about enemies of Marxism and socialism, but also about scholars who are friendly to both. It is not Karl Popper but George Sorel in his Marxist incarnation who refers to dialectics as “the art of reconciling opposites through hocus pocus” (1950, 171), and the English socialist economist, Joan Robinson, who on reading *Capital* objects to the constant intrusion of “Hegel’s nose” between her and Ricardo (1953, 23). But perhaps the classic complaint is fashioned by the American philosopher, William James, who compares reading about dialectics in Hegel—it could just as well have been Marx—to getting sucked into a whirlpool (1978, 174).

Yet, other thinkers have considered Marx’s dialectical method among his most important contributions to socialist theory, and Lukács goes so far as to claim that orthodox Marxism relies solely upon adherence to his method (1971, 1). Though Lukács may be exaggerating to make his point, it is not, in my view, by very much. The reasons for such widespread disagreement on the meaning and value of dialectics are many, but what stands out is the inadequate attention given to the nature of its subject matter. What, in other

words, is dialectics about? What questions does it deal with and why are they important? Until there is more clarity, if not consensus, on its basic task, treatises on dialectics will only succeed in piling one layer of obscurity upon another. So this is where we must begin.

First and foremost, and stripped of all qualifications added by this or that dialectician, the subject of dialectics is change, all change, and interaction, all kinds and degrees of interaction. This is not to say that dialectical thinkers recognize the existence of change and interaction while nondialectical thinkers do not. That would be foolish. Everyone recognizes that everything in the world changes, somehow and to some degree, and that the same holds true for interaction. The problem is how to think adequately about them, how to capture them in thought. How, in other words, can we think about change and interaction so as not to miss or distort the real changes and interactions that we know, in a general way at least, are there (with all the implications this has for how to study them and to communicate what we find to others)? This is the key problem addressed by dialectics; this is what all dialectics is about, and it is in helping to resolve *this* problem that Marx turns to the process of abstraction.

The Solution Lies in the Process of Abstraction

In his most explicit statement on the subject, Marx claims that his method starts from the “real concrete” (the world as it presents itself to us) and proceeds through “abstraction” (the intellectual activity of breaking this whole down into the mental units with which we think about it) to the “thought concrete” (the reconstituted and now understood whole present in the mind) (1904, 293-94). The real concrete is simply the world in which we live, in all its complexity. The thought concrete is Marx’s reconstruction of that world in the theories of what has come to be called “Marxism.” The royal road to understanding is said to pass from the one to the other through the process of abstraction.

In one sense, the role Marx gives to abstraction is simple recognition of the fact that all thinking about reality begins by breaking it down into manageable parts. Reality may be in one piece when lived, but to be thought about and communicated it must be parcelled out. Our minds can no more swallow the world whole at one sitting than can our stomachs. Everyone then, and not just Marx and Marxists, begins the task of trying to make sense of their surroundings by distinguishing certain features, and focusing on and organizing them in ways deemed appropriate. “Abstract” comes from the Latin, “*abstrahere*,” which means “to pull from.” In effect, a piece had been

pulled from or taken out of the whole and is temporarily perceived as standing apart.

We “see” only some of what lies in front of us, “hear” only part of the noises in our vicinity, “feel” only a small part of what our body is in contact with, and so on through the rest of our senses. In each case, a focus is established and a kind of boundary set within our perceptions distinguishing what is relevant from what is not. It should be clear that “What did you see?” (What caught your eye?) is a different question from “What did you *actually* see?” (What came into your line of vision?). Likewise, in thinking about any subject we focus on only some of its qualities and relations. Much that could be included—that may in fact be included in another person’s view or thought, and may on another occasion be included in our own—is left out. The mental activity involved in establishing such boundaries, whether conscious or unconscious—though it is usually an amalgam of both—is the process of abstraction.

Responding to a mixture of influences that include the material world and our experiences in it as well as to personal wishes and social constraints, it is the process of abstraction that establishes the specificity of the objects with which we interact. In setting boundaries, in ruling so far and no further, it is what makes something one (or two or more) of a kind, and lets us know where that kind begins and ends. With this decision as to units, we also become, as we shall see, committed to a particular set of relations between them—relations made possible and even necessary by the qualities that we have included in each—a register for classifying them, and a mode for explaining them.

From what has been said so far, it is clear that “abstraction” is itself an abstraction. I have abstracted it from Marx’s dialectical method, which in turn was abstracted from his broad theories, which in turn were abstracted from his life and work. The mental activities that we have collected and brought into focus as “abstraction” are more often associated with the processes of perception, conception, defining, reasoning, and even thinking. It is not surprising, therefore, if the process of abstraction strikes many people as both foreign and familiar at the same time. Each of these more familiar processes operates in part by separating out, focusing on, and emphasizing only some aspects of that reality with which they come into contact. In “abstraction,” we have simply separated out, focused on, and emphasized certain common features of these other processes. Abstracting “abstraction” in this way is neither easy nor obvious, and therefore few people have done it. Consequently, though everyone abstracts, of necessity, only a few are aware of it as such. This philosophical impoverishment is

reinforced by the fact that most people are lazy abstractors, simply and uncritically accepting the mental units with which they think as part of their cultural inheritance.

A further complication in grasping “abstraction” arises from the fact that Marx uses the term in three different, though closely related, senses. First, and most important, it refers to the mental activity of subdividing the world into the mental constructs with which we think about it, which is the process that we have been describing. Second, it refers to the results of this process, the actual parts into which reality has been apportioned. That is to say, for Marx, as for Hegel before him, “abstraction” functions as a noun as well as a verb, the noun referring to what the verb has brought into being. In these senses, everyone can be said to abstract (verb) and to think with abstractions (noun). But Marx also uses “abstraction” in a third sense, where it refers to a suborder of particularly ill-fitting mental constructs. Whether because they are too narrow, take in too little, focus too exclusively on appearances, or are otherwise badly composed, these constructs do not allow an adequate grasp of their subject matter.

Taken in this third sense, abstractions are the basic unit of ideology, the inescapable ideational result of living and working in alienated society. “Freedom,” for example, is said to be such an abstraction whenever we remove the real individual from “the conditions of existence within which these individuals enter into contact” (Marx 1973, 164). Omitting from the meaning of “freedom” the conditions that make freedom possible (or impossible)—including the real alternatives available, the role of money, the socialization of the person choosing, and so on—leaves a notion that can only distort and obfuscate even that part of reality which it sets out to convey. A lot of Marx’s criticism of ideology makes use of this sense of “abstraction,” as when he says that people in capitalist society are “ruled by abstractions” (1973, 164). Such remarks, of which there are a great many in his writings, must not keep us from seeing that Marx also abstracts in the first sense given above and, like everyone else, thinks with abstractions in the second sense, and that the particular way in which he does both goes a long way in accounting for the distinctive character of Marxism.

Despite several explicit remarks on the centrality of abstraction in Marx’s work, the process of abstraction has received relatively little attention in the literature on Marxism. Serious work on Marx’s dialectical method can usually be distinguished on the basis of which of the categories belonging to the vocabulary of dialectics is treated as pivotal. For Lukács (1971), it was the concept of totality that played this role; for Mao (1968), it was contradiction; for Raya Dunayevskaya (1982), it was the negation of the negation;

for Scott Meikle (1985), it was essence; for the Ollman of *Alienation* (1976), it was internal relations; and so on. Even when abstraction is discussed—and no serious work dismisses it altogether—the main emphasis is generally on what it is in the world or in history or in Marx’s research into one or the other that is responsible for the particular abstractions made, and not on the process of abstraction as such, on what exactly he does and how he does it.¹ Consequently, the implications of Marx’s abstracting practice for the theories of Marxism remain clouded, and those wishing to develop these theories, and where necessary revise them, receive little help in their efforts to abstract in the manner of Marx. In what follows, it is just this process of abstraction, how it works and particularly how Marx works it, that serves as the centerpiece for our discussion of dialectics.

How Marx’s Abstractions Differ

What then is distinctive about Marx’s abstractions? To begin with, it should be clear that Marx’s abstractions do not and cannot diverge completely from the abstractions of other thinkers both then and now. There has to be a lot of overlap. Otherwise, he would have constructed what philosophers call a “private language,” and any communication between him and the rest of us would be impossible. How close Marx came to falling into such an abyss and what can be done to repair some of the damage already done are discussed in the longer work of which this essay is a part. Second, in depicting Marx’s process of abstraction as a predominantly conscious and rational activity, I do not mean to deny the enormous degree to which what results from this activity accurately reflects the real world. However, the materialist foundations of Marx’s thinking are sufficiently (though by no means “adequately”) understood to be taken for granted here while we concentrate on the process of abstraction as such.

Keeping these two qualifications clearly in mind, we can now say that what is most distinctive about Marx’s abstractions, taken as a group, is that they focus on and incorporate both change and interaction (or system) in the

1. Possible exceptions to this relative neglect of abstractions in discussions of Marx’s method include E. V. Ilyenkov (1982), where the emphasis is on the relation of abstract to concrete in *Capital*; A. Sohn-Rethel (1978), which shows how commodity exchange produces abstractions; D. Sayer (1987), which concentrates on the ideological products of the process of abstraction; and L. Nowak (1980), which presents a neo-Weberian reconstruction of some aspects of this process. Insightful, though limited, treatments of abstraction can also be found in articles by A. Sayers (1981), J. Allen (1983), and R. J. Horvath and K. D. Gibson (1984). An early philosophical account of abstraction, which Marx himself had a chance to read and admire, is found in the work of Joseph Dietzgen (1928).

particular forms in which these occur in the capitalist era. It is important to underline from the start that Marx's main concern was capitalism. He sought to discover what it is and how it works, as well as how it emerged and where it is tending. We shall call the organic and historical processes involved here the double movement of the capitalist mode of production. Each movement affects the other, and how one grasps either affects one's understanding of both. But how does one study the history of a system, or the systemic functioning of evolving processes, where the main determinants of change lie within the system itself? For Marx, the first and most important step was to incorporate the general form of what he was looking for—to wit, change and interaction—into all the abstractions he constructed as part of his research. Marx's understanding of capitalism, therefore, is not restricted to the theories of Marxism, which relate the components of the capitalist system, but some large part of it is found within the very abstractions with which these theories have been constructed.

Beginning with historical movement, Marx's preoccupation with change and development is undisputed. What is less well known, chiefly because it is less clear, is how he thought about change, how he abstracted it, and how he integrated these abstractions into his study of a changing world. The underlying problem is as old as philosophy itself. The ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, provides us with its classic statement when he asserts that a person cannot step into the same river twice. Enough water has flowed between the two occasions so that the river we step into the second time is not the same river that we walked into earlier. Yet our common sense tells us that it is, and our speech practice reflects this view. Heraclitus, of course, was not interested in rivers but in change. His point is that change goes on everywhere and all the time but that our manner of thinking about it is sadly inadequate. The flow, the constant alteration of movement away from something and toward something else, is generally missing. Usually, where change takes place very slowly or in very small increments, its impact can be safely neglected. On the other hand, depending on the context and on our purpose in it, even such change, because it occurs outside our attention, may occasionally startle us and have grave consequences for our lives.

Even today few are able to think about the changes they know to be happening in ways that do not distort, usually by underplaying, what is actually happening. From the titles of so many works in the social sciences, it would appear that a good deal of effort is being directed toward studying change of one kind or another. But what is actually taken as "change" in most of these works? It is not the continuous evolution and alteration that goes on in their subject matter, the social equivalent of the flowing water in

Heraclitus's river. Rather, almost invariably, it is a comparison of two or more differentiated states in the development of the object or condition or group under examination. As the sociologist, James Coleman, who defends this approach, admits, "the concept of change in science is a rather special one, for it does not immediately follow from our sense impressions...It is based on a comparison, or difference between two sense impressions, and simultaneously a comparison of the times at which the sense impressions occurred." Why? Because, according to Coleman, "the concept of change must, as any concept, itself reflect a state of an object at a point in time" (1968, 428-29). Consequently, a study of the changes in the political thinking of the American electorate, for example, gets translated into an account of how people voted (or responded to opinion polls) in 1956, 1960, 1964, and so on, and the differences found in a comparison of these static moments is what is called "change." It is not simply, and legitimately, that the one, the difference between the moments, gets taken as an indication of or evidence for the other, the process; rather, it stands in for the process itself.

In contrast to this approach, Marx set out to abstract things, in his words, "as they really are and happen," making how they happen part of what they are (Marx and Engels 1964, 57). Hence, capital (or labor, money, etc.) is not only how capital appears and functions but also how it develops; or rather, how it develops, its real history, is also part of what it is. It is also in this sense that Marx could deny that nature and history "are two separate things" (Marx and Engels 1964, 57). In the view which currently dominates the social sciences, things exist *and* undergo change. The two are logically distinct. History is something that happens to things; it is not part of their nature. Hence the difficulty of examining change in subjects from which it has been removed at the start. Whereas Marx, as he tells us, abstracts "every historical social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature *not less* than its momentary existence" (1958, 20, emphasis added).

But history for Marx refers not only to time past but to future time. Whatever something is becoming—whether we know what that will be or not—is in some important respects part of what it is along with what it once was. For example, capital, for Marx, is not simply the material means of production used to produce wealth, which is how it is abstracted in the work of most economists. Rather, it includes the early stages in the development of these particular means of production, or "primitive accumulation," indeed whatever has made it possible for it to produce the kind of wealth it produces in just the way it does (namely, permits wealth to take the form of value, something produced not because it is useful but for purposes of exchange).

Furthermore, as part of its becoming, capital incorporates the accumulation of capital that is occurring now, together with its tendency toward concentration and centralization, and the effect of this tendency on both the development of a world market and an eventual transition to socialism. According to Marx, the tendency to expand surplus-value and with it production, and therefore to create a world market, is “directly given in the concept of capital itself” (1973, 408).

That capital contains the seeds of a future socialist society is also apparent in its increasingly socialized character and in the growing separation of the material means of production from the direct control of capitalists, making the latter ever more superfluous. This “history” of capital is part of capital, contained within the abstraction that Marx makes of capital, and part of what he wants to convey with its covering concept. All of Marx’s main abstractions—labor, value, commodity, money, and so on—incorporate process, becoming, history in just this way. Our purpose here is not to explain Marx’s economics but simply to use some of his claims in this area to illustrate how he integrates what most readers would take to be externally related phenomena—in this case, its real past and likely future—into his abstraction of its present form.

Marx often uses the qualifying phrase “in itself” to indicate the necessary and internal ties between the future development of anything and how it presents itself at this moment. Money and commodity, for example, are referred to as “in themselves” capital (1963, 396). Given the independent form in which they confront the worker in capitalist society, something separate from him but something he must acquire in order to survive, money and commodity ensure the exchange of labor-power and their own transformation into means of production used to produce new value. Capital is part of what they are becoming, part of their future, and hence part of them, just as money and commodity are parts of what capital was, parts of its past, and hence parts of it. Elsewhere, Marx refers to money and commodity as “potential capital,” as capital “only in intention, in their essence, in what they were destined to be” (1971, 465; 1963, 399-400). Similarly, all labor is abstracted as wage labor, and all means of production as capital, because this is the direction in which they are evolving in capitalist society (1963, 409-10).

To consider the past and likely future development of anything as integral to what it is, to grasp this whole as a single process, does not keep Marx from abstracting some part or instant of this process for a particular purpose and from treating it as relatively autonomous. Aware that the units into which he has subdivided reality are the results of his abstractions, Marx is able to re-

abstract this reality, restricting the area brought into focus in line with the requirements of his current study. But when he does this, he often underlines its character as a temporally stable part of a larger and ongoing process by referring to it as a “moment.” In this way, commodity is spoken of as a “moment in exchange,” money (in its aspect as capital) as a “moment” in the process of production, and circulation in general as a “moment in the system of production” (1973, 145, 217). Marx’s naming practice here reflects the epistemological priority he gives to movement over stability, so that stability, whenever it is found, is viewed as temporary and/or only apparent, or as he says on one occasion, as a “paralysis” of movement (1971, 212). With stability used to qualify change rather than the reverse, Marx, unlike most modern social scientists, did not and could not study why things change (with the implication that change is external to what they are, something that happens to them). Given that change is always a part of what things are, his research problem could only be *how*, *when*, and *into what* they change and why they sometimes appear not to change (ideology).

Before concluding our discussion of the place of change in Marx’s abstractions, it is worth noting that thinking in terms of processes is not altogether alien to common sense. It occurs in abstractions of actions, such as eating, walking, fighting, and so on, indeed whenever the gerund form of the verb is used. Likewise, event words, such as “war” and “strike,” indicate that, to some degree at least, the processes involved have been abstracted as such. On the other hand, it is also possible to think of war and strike as a state or condition, more like a photograph than a motion picture, or if the latter, then a single scene that gets shown again and again, which removes or seriously underplays whatever changes are taking place. And unfortunately, the same is true of most action verbs. They become action “things.” In such cases, the real processes that go on do not get reflected, certainly not to any adequate degree, in our thinking about them. It is my impression that, in the absence of any commitment to bring change itself into focus in the manner of Marx, this is the more typical outcome.

Earlier we said that what distinguishes Marx’s abstractions is that they contain not only change or history but also some portion of the system in which it occurs. Since change in anything only takes place in and through a complex interaction between closely related elements, treating change as intrinsic to what anything is requires that we treat the interaction through which it occurs in the same way. With a static notion of anything, it is easy to conceive of it as also discrete, logically independent of, and easily separable from its surrounding conditions. They do not enter directly into what it is. Viewing the same thing as a process makes it necessary to extend the

boundaries of what it is to include at least some part of the surrounding conditions that enter into this process. In sum, as far as abstractions are concerned, change brings mutual dependence in its wake. Instead of a mere sequence of events isolated from their context, a kind of one-note development, Marx's abstractions become phases of an evolving and interactive system.

Capital, which we examined earlier as a process, is also a complex relation encompassing the interaction among the material means of production, capitalists, workers, value, commodity, money, and more—and all this over time. Marx says, “the concept of capital contains the capitalist”; he refers to workers as “variable capital” and says capital is “nothing without wage labor, value, money, price, etc.” (1973, 512; 1958, 209; 1904, 292). Elsewhere, the processual character of these aspects of the capital relation is emphasized in referring to them as “value in process” and “money in process” (1971, 137). If capital, like all other important abstractions in Marxism, is both a process and a relation, viewing it as primarily one or the other could only be a way of emphasizing either its historical or systemic character for a particular purpose.

As in his abstractions of capital as a process, so too in his abstractions of capital as a relation, Marx can focus on but part of what capital contains. While the temporally isolated part of a process is generally referred to as a “moment,” the spatially isolated aspect of a relation is generally referred to as a “form” or “determination.” With “form,” Marx usually brings into focus the appearance and/or function of any relation, that by which we recognize it, and most often it is its form that is responsible for the concept by which we know and communicate it. Hence, value (a relation) in its exchangeable form is called “money”; while in the form in which it facilitates the production of more value, it is called “capital”; and so on. “Determination,” on the other hand, enables Marx to focus on the transformational character of any relational part, on what best brings out its mutual dependence and changeability within the interactive system. Upon analysis, moments, forms, and determinations all turn out to be relations. So that after referring to the commodity as a moment in wealth, Marx immediately proceeds to pick it apart as a relation (1973, 218). Elsewhere, Marx refers to interest, profit, and rent as forms which through analysis lose their “apparent independence” and are seen to be relations (1971, 429).

Earlier, we saw that some abstractions that contain processes could also be found in what we called common sense. The same is true of abstractions that focus on relations. Father, which contains the relation between a man and a child, is one. Buyer, which contains the relations between a person and

something sold or available for sale, is another. But compared to the number and scope of relations in the world, such relations are few and meager in their import. Within the common sense of our time and place, most social ties are thought about in abstractions that focus on the parts one at a time, separately as well as statically. Marx, however, believed that in order to adequately grasp the systemic connections that constitute such an important part of reality one has to incorporate them, along with the ways in which they change, into the very abstractions in and with which one thinks about them. All else is make-do patchwork, a one-sided, lopsided way of thinking that invites the neglect of essential connections together with the distortion of whatever influence they exert on the overall system.

Where have we arrived? Marx's abstractions are not things but processes. These processes are also, of necessity, systemic relations in which the main processes with which Marx deals are all implicated. Consequently, each process serves as an aspect, or subordinate part, of other processes grasped as clusters of relations, just as they do with respect to that process. In this way, Marx brings together what we have called the double movement of the capitalist mode of production (its history and organic movement) in the same abstractions, uniting in his thinking what is united in reality. And whenever he needs to focus on but part of this complex, he does so as a moment, a form or a determination.

Marx's abstractions seem to be very different, especially as regards the treatment of change and interaction, from those in which most people think about society. But if Marx's abstractions stand out as much as our evidence suggests they do, it is not enough to display them. We also need to know what gives Marx the philosophical license to abstract as he does. Whence comes his apparent facility in making and changing abstractions? And what is the relation between his abstractions and those of common sense? It is because most readers cannot see how Marx could possibly abstract as he does that they continue to deny, and perhaps not even notice, the widespread evidence of his practice. Therefore, before making a more detailed analysis of Marx's process of abstraction and its place and role in his dialectical method and broader theories, a brief detour through his philosophical presuppositions is in order.

The Philosophy of Internal Relations

According to Marx, "the economists do not conceive of capital as a relation. They cannot do so without at the same time conceiving of it as a historically transitory, i.e., a relative—not an absolute—form of produc-

tion" (1971, 274). This is not a comment about the content of capital, about what it is, but about the *kind* of thing it is, to wit, a relation. To grasp capital, as Marx does, as a complex relation that has at its core internal ties between the material means of production and those who own them, those who work on them, their special product, value, and the conditions in which owning and working go on, is to know capital as a historical event, as something that emerged as a result of specific conditions in the lifetime of real people and that will disappear when these conditions do. Viewing such connections as external to what capital is—which, for them, is simply the material means of production or money used to buy the means of production—the economists fall into treating capital as an ahistorical variable. Without saying so explicitly and certainly without ever explicitly defending this position, capital becomes something that has always been and will always be.

The view held by most people, scholars and others, in what we have been calling the common-sense view, maintains that there are things and there are relations, and that neither can be subsumed in the other. This position is summed up in Bishop Butler's statement that G. E. Moore adopts as a motto, "Everything is what it is, and not another thing," taken in conjunction with Hume's claim, "All events seem entirely loose and separate" (1903, title page; 1955, 85). On this view, capital may be found to have relations with labor, value, and so on, and it may even be that accounting for such relations plays an important role in explaining what capital is. But capital is one thing and its relations quite another. Marx, on the other hand, following Hegel's lead in this matter, rejects what is, in essence, a logical dichotomy. For him, as we saw, capital is itself a relation, in which the ties of the material means of production to labor, value, commodity, and so on are interiorized as parts of what capital is. Marx refers to "things themselves" as "their interconnections" (Marx and Engels 1950, 488). Moreover, these relations extend backward and forward in time, so that capital's conditions of existence as they have evolved over the years and its potential for future development are also viewed as parts of what it is.

On the common-sense view, any element related to capital can change without capital itself changing. Workers, for example, instead of selling their labor-power to capitalists as occurs in capitalism could become slaves or serfs or owners of their own means of production, and in every case their instruments of work would still be capital. The tie between workers and the means of production here is contingent, a matter of chance, and therefore external to what each really is. In Marx's view, a change of this sort would mean a change in the character of capital itself, in its appearance and/or functioning no matter how far extended. The tie is a necessary and essential

one; it is an internal relation. Hence, where its specific relationship to workers has changed, the means of production become something else, and something that is best captured by a concept other than "capital." Every element that comes into Marx's analysis of capitalism is a relation of this sort. It is this view that underlies and helps to explain his practice of abstraction and the particular abstractions that result, along with all the theories raised on them.

It appears that the problem non-Marxists have in understanding Marx is much more profound than is ordinarily thought. It is not simply that they do not grasp what Marx is saying about capital (or labor or value, etc.) because his account is unclear or confused or that the evidence for his claims is weak or undeveloped. Rather, the basic form, the relation, in which Marx thinks about each of the major elements that come into his analysis is unavailable, and therefore its ideational content is necessarily misrepresented, if only a little (though usually it is much more). As an attempt to reflect the relations in capitalist society by incorporating them into its core abstractions, Marxism suffers the same distorting fate as these relations themselves.

In the history of ideas, the view that we have been developing is known as the philosophy of internal relations. Marx's immediate philosophical influences in this regard were Leibniz, Spinoza, and Hegel, particularly Hegel. What all had in common is the belief that the relations that come together to make up the whole get expressed in what are taken to be its parts. Each part is viewed as incorporating in what it is all its relations with other parts up to and including everything that comes into the whole. To be sure, each of these thinkers had a distinctive view of what the parts are. For Leibniz, it was monads; for Spinoza, modes of nature or God; and for Hegel, ideas. But the logical form in which they construed the relation between parts and whole was the same.

Some writers on Marx have argued for a restricted form of internal relations that would apply only to society and not to the natural world (Rader 1979, chap. 3). But reality does not allow such absolute distinctions. People have bodies as well as minds and social roles. Alienation, for example, affects all three, and in their alienated forms each is internally related to the others. Likewise, capital, commodities, money, and the forces of production all have material as well as social aspects. To maintain that the philosophy of internal relations does not respect the usual boundaries between nature and society does not mean that Marx cannot for certain purposes abstract units that fall primarily or even wholly on one or the other side of this divide. Whenever he speaks of "thing" or, as is more frequent, of "social relations," this is what occurs, but in every case what has been momentarily put aside is internally

related to what has been brought into focus. Consequently, he is unlikely to minimize or dismiss, as many operating with external relations do, the influences of either natural or social phenomena on the other.

What is the place of such notions as “cause” and “determine” within a philosophy of internal relations? Given the mutual interaction Marx assumes between everything in reality, now and forever, there can be no cause that is logically prior to and independent of that to which it is said to give rise and no determining factor that is itself not effected by that which it is said to determine. In short, the common-sense notions of “cause” and “determine” that are founded on such logical independence and absolute priority do not and cannot apply. In their stead we find frequent claims of the following kind: the propensity to exchange is the “cause or reciprocal effect” of the division of labor; and interest and rent “determine” market prices and “are determined” by it (1959a, 134; 1971, 512). In any organic system viewed over time, each process can be said to determine and be determined by all others. However, it is also the case that one part often has a greater effect on others than they do on it; and Marx also uses “cause” and especially “determine” to register this asymmetry. Thus, in the interaction among production, distribution, exchange, and consumption—particularly though not exclusively in capitalism—production is held to be more determining (1904, 274ff.). A good deal of Marx’s research is devoted to locating and mapping whatever exercises a greater or special impact on other parts of the capitalist system, but, whether made explicit or not, this always takes place on a backdrop of reciprocal effect (another complementary sense of “cause” and “determine” will be presented later).

Returning to the process of abstraction, it is the philosophy of internal relations that gives Marx both license and opportunity to abstract as freely as he does, to decide how far into its internal relations any particular will extend. Making him aware of the need to abstract—since boundaries are never given and when established never absolute—it also allows and even encourages re-abstraction, makes a variety of abstractions possible, and helps to develop his mental skills and flexibility in making abstractions. If “a relation,” as Marx maintains, “can obtain a particular embodiment and become individualized only by means of abstraction,” then learning how to abstract is an absolutely indispensable step in learning how to think (1973, 142).

Operating with a philosophy of external relations does not absolve others from the need to abstract. The units in and with which one thinks are still abstractions and products of the process of abstraction as it occurs during socialization, particularly in the acquisition of language. Only, in this case,

one takes boundaries as given in the nature of reality as such, as if they have the same ontological stature as the qualities perceived. The role played by the process of abstraction is neither known nor appreciated. Consequently, there is no awareness that one can, and often should, re-abstract, and the ability and flexibility for doing so is never acquired. Whatever re-abstraction occurs, of necessity, as part of learning new languages or new schools of thought, or as a result of important new experiences, takes place in the dark, usually unconsciously, certainly unsystematically, with little understanding of either assumptions or implications. Marx, on the other hand, is fully aware that he abstracts and of its assumptions and implications both for his own thinking and that of others—hence the frequent equation of ideology in those he criticizes with their inadequate abstractions.²

Three Modes of Abstraction: Extension

Once we recognize the crucial role abstraction plays in Marx's method, how different his own abstractions are, and how often and easily he re-abstracts, it becomes clear that Marx constructs his subject matter as much as he finds it. This is not to belittle the influence of natural and social conditions on Marx's thinking, but rather to stress how, given this influence, the results of Marx's investigations are prescribed to a large degree by the preliminary organization of his subject matter. Nothing is made up of whole cloth, but at the same time Marx only finds what his abstractions have placed in his way. These abstractions do not substitute for the facts, but give them a form, an order, and a relative value; just as frequently changing his abstractions does not take the place of empirical research, but does determine, albeit in a weak sense, what he will look for, even see, and of course emphasize. What counts

2. In order to forestall possible misunderstandings, it may be useful to assert that the philosophy of internal relations is not an attempt to reify "what lies between." It is simply that the particular ways in which things cohere become essential attributes of what they are. The philosophy of internal relations also does not mean, as some of its critics have charged, that investigating any problem can go on forever (to say that boundaries are artificial is not to deny them an existence, and, practically speaking, it is simply not necessary to understand everything in order to understand anything); or that the boundaries which are established are arbitrary (what actually influences the character of Marx's or anyone else's abstractions is another question); or that we cannot mark or work with some of the important objective distinctions found in reality (on the contrary such distinctions are a major influence on the abstractions we do make); or finally, that the vocabulary associated with the philosophy of internal relations—particularly "totality," "relation," and "identity"—cannot also be used in subsidiary senses to refer to the world that comes into being after the process of abstraction has done its work. For a more detailed discussion of the philosophy of internal relations, see Ollman (1976, 12-40, 256-96).

as an explanation is likewise determined by the framework of possible relationships imposed by Marx's initial abstractions.

So far we have been discussing the process of abstraction in general, our main aim being to distinguish it from other mental activities. Marx's own abstractions were said to stand out insofar as they invariably included elements of change and interaction, while his practice of abstracting was found to include more or less of each as suited his immediate purpose. Taking note of the importance Marx gave to abstractions in his critique of ideology, we proceeded to its underpinnings in the philosophy of internal relations, emphasizing that it is not a matter of this philosophy's making such moves possible—since everybody abstracts—but of making them easier and enabling Marx to acquire greater control over the process. What remains is to analyze in greater detail what actually occurs when Marx abstracts and to trace its results and implications for some of his major theories.

The process of abstraction, which we have been treating as an undifferentiated mental act, has three main aspects or modes, which are also its functions vis-à-vis the part abstracted on one hand, and the system to which the part belongs and which it in turn helps to shape on the other. That is, the boundary setting and bringing into focus that lie at the core of this process occur simultaneously in three different, though closely related, senses. These senses have to do with extension, level of generality, and vantage point. First, each abstraction can be said to achieve a certain extension in the part abstracted, and this applies both spatially and temporally. In abstracting boundaries in space, limits are set in the mutual interaction that occurs at a given point of time. While in abstracting boundaries in time, limits are set in the distinctive history and potential development of any part, in what it once was and is yet to become. Most of our examples of abstractions so far have been drawn from what we shall now call "abstraction of extension."

Second, at the same time that every abstraction establishes an extension, it also sets a boundary around and brings into focus a particular level of generality for treating not only the part but the whole system to which it belongs. Operating rather like a microscope that can be set at different degrees of magnification, this mode of abstraction enables us to see the unique qualities of any part or the qualities associated with its function in capitalism or the qualities that belong to it as part of the human condition (to give only the most important of these levels of generality). In abstracting capital, for example, Marx gives it an extension in both space and time, as well as a level of generality such that only those qualities associated with its appearance and functioning as a phenomenon of capitalism are highlighted (i.e., its

production of value, its ownership by capitalists, its exploitation of workers, etc.). The qualities a given capital may also possess as a Ford Motor Company assembly line for making cars or as a tool in general, that is, qualities that it has as a unique object or as an instance of something human beings have always used, are not brought into the picture. They are abstracted out. This aspect of the process of abstraction has received the least attention, not only in our own discussion but in other accounts of dialectics. In what follows, we shall refer to it as “abstraction of level of generality.”

Third, at the same time that abstraction establishes an extension and a level of generality, it also sets up a vantage point or place within the relationship from which to view, think about, and piece together the other components in the relationship; meanwhile, the sum of their ties (as determined by the abstraction of extension) also becomes a vantage point for comprehending the larger system of which it is part, providing both a beginning for research and analysis and a perspective in which to carry it out. With each new perspective, there are differences in what can be perceived, a different ordering of the parts, and a different sense of what is important and how much. Thus, in abstracting capital, Marx not only gives it an extension and a level of generality (that of capitalism); he also views the interrelated elements that compose it from the side of the material means of production and simultaneously transforms this configuration itself into a vantage point for viewing the larger system in which it is an internally related part, providing himself with a perspective in which all other parts will appear (one that gives to capital the central role). We shall refer to this aspect of abstraction as “abstraction of vantage point.” By manipulating extension, level of generality, and vantage point, Marx puts things into and out of focus, into better focus, and into different kinds of focus, enabling himself to see more clearly, investigate more accurately, and understand more fully and more dynamically his chosen subject.

As regards the abstraction of extension, Marx’s general stand in favor of large units is evident from such statements as, “In each historical epoch, property has developed differently and under a set of entirely different social relations. Thus, to define bourgeois property is nothing else than to give an exposition of all these social relations of bourgeois productions... To try to give a definition of property an independent relation, a category apart, an abstraction and eternal idea, can be nothing but an illusion of metaphysics and jurisprudence” (n.d., 154). Obviously, large abstractions are needed to think adequately about a complex, internally related world.

The specifics of Marx’s position emerge from his frequent criticisms of the political economists for offering too narrow abstractions (narrow in the

double sense of including too few connections and too short a time period) of one or another economic form. Ricardo, for example, is reproached for abstracting too short a period in his notions of money and rent, and for omitting social relations in his abstraction of value (1968, 125; 1971, 131). One of the most serious distortions is said to arise from the tendency among political economists to abstract processes solely in terms of their end results. Commodity exchange, for example, gets substituted for the whole of the process by which a product becomes a commodity and eventually available for exchange (1973, 198). As Amiri Baraka so colorfully points out: "Hunting is not those heads on the wall" (1966, 173). By thinking otherwise for the range of problems with which they are concerned, the political economists avoid seeing the contradictions in the specific capitalist processes that give rise to these results.

The same narrowing of abstractions obtains a similar ideological result in thinking about human beings. In order to maximize individual freedom, Max Stirner sought to abstract an "I" without any messy presuppositions. Marx's response is that by excluding all that brought it into existence and the full context in which it acts, this "I" is not a particularly helpful abstraction for understanding anything about the individual, least of all his or her freedom (Marx and Engels 1964, 477-82). Yet, something like Stirner's "I," in the person of the isolated individual, has become the standard way of thinking about human nature in capitalist society. It is the preferred abstraction of extension in which bourgeois ideology treats human beings.

Granted the unusually large extensions Marx gives to his abstractions, we now want to examine the effects and implications of this practice for his work. What do such abstractions make possible, perhaps even necessary, and what do they make impossible? Consider all that a wide-angle photograph does in giving value to what is included, to what crowds the edges as well as to what appears at the center. Notice the relations it establishes as important, or at least relevant, and even the explanations that are implicit in what is included and what is left out. Something very similar occurs through the extension given to units of thinking in the process of abstraction. It is by placing so much in his abstractions, and by altering them as often as he does, that Marx greatly facilitates his analysis of what we have called the double motion of the capitalist mode of production. In particular, Marx's practice in abstracting extension serves as the basis for his theory of identity; it underlies his criticism of existing systems of classification and their replacement by the various classificatory schemes that distinguish his theories, for example, the class division of society, forces/relations of production, appearance/essence,

and so on; and it enables him to capture in thinking the real movements going on in both nature and society.

As regards identity, Marx claims,

It is characteristic of the entire crudeness of “common sense,” which takes its rise from the “full life” and does not cripple its natural features by philosophy or other studies, that where it succeeds in seeing a distinction it fails to see a unity, and where it sees a unity it fails to see a distinction. If “common sense” establishes distinction determinations, they immediately petrify surreptitiously and it is considered the most reprehensible sophistry to rub together these conceptual blocks in such a way that they catch fire (Marx and Engels 1961, 339).

According to the common-sense approach, things are either the same (the sense in which Marx uses “unity” here) or different. A frequent criticism that Marx makes of the political economists is that they see only identity or difference in the relations they examine (1971, 168, 497, and 527). Marx has it both ways—he is forever rubbing these blocks together to make fire. Most striking are his numerous references to what most people take to be different subjects as identical. Such is his claim that “the social reality of nature and human natural science, or natural science about man are identical terms” (1959a, 111). Demand and supply (and in a “wider sense” production and consumption) are also said to be identical (1968, 505). The list of such claims, both with and without the term “identity,” is very long. An example of the latter is his reference to “bourgeoisie, i.e. capital” (Marx and Engels 1945, 21).

In one place, Marx says that by “identity” he means a “different expression of the same fact” (1968, 410). This appears straightforward enough, but in Marx’s case this “fact” is relational, composed of a system of mutually dependent parts. Viewing this mutual dependence within each of the interacting parts, viewing the parts as necessary aspects of each other, they become identical in expressing the same extended whole. Consequently, Marx can claim that labor and capital are “expressions of the same relation, only seen from opposite poles” (1971, 491). Underlying all such claims are abstractions of extension that are large enough to contain whatever is held to be identical.

If Marx often expands the size of an abstraction to bring out identity, he is equally capable of reducing it, generally by omitting qualities that emphasize its interdependence, in order to mark some difference. The complex relations of identity and difference that Marx attributes to production, distribution, exchange, and consumption in his Introduction to the *Critique*

of *Political Economy* is based on just such manipulation of these abstractions (1904, 274-92).

Besides its effect on the relation of identity, Marx's practice in abstracting extension also has major implications, as I have indicated, for the various classificatory schemes that frame his theories. Every school of thought stands out in large measure by the distinctions it makes and does not make, and by those it singles out as being in some respect the most important. Marxism is no exception. Among the better known classifications found in Marx's work are the juxtapositions of forces and relations of production, base and superstructure, materialism and idealism, nature and society, objective and subjective conditions, essence and appearance, the periodization of history based on different modes of production, and the class division of society (particularly the split between workers and capitalists).

Most accounts of Marxism try very hard to establish where one element in each of these classifications ends and the next one begins, to define neatly and permanently the boundaries that subdivide the structures into which Marx organizes human existence. However, given Marx's practice of abstracting extension based on his philosophy of internal relations, it should be clear that this is a fruitless exercise. It is only because they assume that Marx is operating with a philosophy of external relations in which the boundaries between things are taken to be of the same order as their other sense-perceptible qualities (hence determined and discoverable once and for all) that these critics can so consistently dismiss the overwhelming evidence of Marx's practice. Not only does Marx often redraw the boundaries of each of these units, but with every classification there are instances where his abstractions of individual units are large enough to contain most or even all of the qualities that seemed to fall into other contrasting units.

Marx's materialist conception of history, for example, is characterized by a set of overlapping contrasts between mode of production and "social, political and intellectual life processes," base and superstructure, forces and relations of production, economic structures (or foundations) and the rest of society, and material and social existence (1904, 11-12). Since Marx did not take much care to distinguish these different formulations, there is a great deal of dispute over which one to stress in giving an account of his views. But on two points there is widespread agreement: (1) that the first term in each pairing is in some sense determinant of the latter; and (2) that the boundaries between the terms in each case are more or less set and relatively easy to establish. But how clear-cut can such boundaries be if Marx can refer to "religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc." as "particular modes of production," community and the "revolutionary class" as forces of

production (which also has “the qualities of individuals” as its subjective side), theory “insofar as it gets ahold of people” as a “material force,” and can treat laws regarding private property (which would seem to be part of the superstructure) as part of the base and class struggle (which would seem to be part of political life) as part of the economic structure (1959, 103; 1973, 495; n.d., 196; 1970, 137; Acton 1962, 164)? It is worth noting, too, that Engels could even refer to race as an economic factor (Marx and Engels 1951, 517).

To be sure, these are not the main uses to which Marx put these categories, but they do indicate something of their elasticity, something about how encompassing he could make his abstractions if he wanted to do so. And it does show how futile it is to try to interpret the sense in which one part is said to determine the other before coming to grips with the practice that rearranges the boundaries between them.

Perhaps the classification that has suffered the greatest misunderstanding as a result of readers’ efforts to arrive at permanent boundaries is Marx’s class division of society. Marx’s abstraction of extension for class brings together many people but not everything about them. Its main focus is on whatever it is that both enables and requires them to perform a particular function in the prevailing mode of production. As a complex relation, class contains other aspects such as distinguishing social and economic conditions (ones that generally accompany their position in the mode of production), a group’s opposition to other similarly constituted groups, its cultural level, its state of mind (encompassing both ideology and degree of consciousness of themselves as a class), and forms of intra-class communication and of inter-class political struggle. But how many of these aspects Marx actually includes in abstracting the extension of class or of any one of the classes into which he divides society varies with his problem and purpose at the time. Likewise, since all of these aspects in their peculiar configuration have evolved over time, there is also a decision to make regarding temporal extension, over how much of this evolution to include in the abstraction. How widely Marx’s decisions on these matters may differ can be seen from such apparently contradictory claims as “all history is the history of class struggle” (where class contains a bare minimum of its aspects) and “class is the product of the bourgeoisie” (where class is abstracted as a sum of all these aspects) (Marx and Engels 1945, 11; Marx and Engels 1964, 93).

What class any person belongs to and even the number of classes in society are also affected by where exactly Marx draws his boundaries. Thus, “working class,” for example, can refer to everyone who is employed by capitalists or to all the people who work for capitalists but also produce value (a smaller group) or to all the people who not only work for capitalists and

produce value but are also organized politically as a class (a smaller group still). As regards temporal extension, Marx can also abstract a particular group to include where they seem to be heading, together with the new set of relations that await them but which they have not yet fully acquired. In the case of peasants who are rapidly losing their land and of small businessmen who are being driven into bankruptcy, this translates into becoming wage laborers (Marx and Engels 1945, 16). Hence, the class of workers is sometimes abstracted broadly enough to include them as well, that is, people in the process of becoming workers along with those who function as workers at this moment. Marx's well-known reference to capitalism as a two-class society is based on his abstracting all groups into either workers or capitalists depending on where they seem to be heading, the landlords being the major group that is moving toward becoming capitalists. Abstracting such large spatial and temporal extensions for class is considered helpful for analyzing a society that is rapidly developing toward a situation where everyone either buys labor-power or sells it.

At the same time, Marx could abstract much more restricted extensions, which allowed him to refer to a variety of classes (and fragments of classes) based on as many social and economic differences between these groups. In this way, bankers, who are usually treated as a fragment of the capitalist class, are sometimes abstracted as a separate monied or financial class (1968, 123). This helps explain why Marx occasionally speaks of "ruling classes" (plural), a designation that also usually includes landlords, narrowly abstracted (Marx and Engels 1964, 39).

Obviously for Marx, arriving at a clear-cut, once-and-for-all classification of capitalist society into classes is not the aim, which is not to deny that one such classification (that of capitalists/landlords/workers) enjoys a larger role in his work, or that one criterion for determining class (a group's relationship to the prevailing mode of production) is more important. Much to the annoyance of his critics, Marx never defines "class" or provides a full account of the classes in capitalist society. *Capital* (vol. 3) contains a few pages where Marx appears to have begun such an account, but it was never completed (1959b, 862-63). In my view, had he finished these pages most of the problems raised by his theory of class would remain, for the evidence of his many shifting abstractions of class is clear and unambiguous. Thus, rather than looking for which class a person or group belongs to or how many classes Marx sees in capitalist society—the obsession of most critics and of not a few of his followers—the relevant question is, do we know on any given occasion when Marx uses "class," or the label associated with any particular class, to whom he is referring and why he refers to them

as a class? Only then can the discussion of class advance our understanding, not of anything or of everything, but of what it is Marx is trying to explain. It cannot be repeated too often that Marx is chiefly concerned with the double movement of the capitalist mode of production, and arranging people into classes based on different though interrelated criteria is a major means for uncovering this movement. Rather than simply a way of registering social stratification as part of a flat description or as a prelude to rendering a moral judgment, which would require a stable unit, class helps Marx to analyze a changing situation of which it is an integral and changing part (Ollman 1978, chap. 2).

Besides making possible his theory of identity and the various classifications that mark his theories, Marx's practice of abstracting broad extensions for his units also enables him to capture in thought the various real movements he sets out to investigate in reality. In order to grasp things "as they really are and happen," Marx's stated aim, in order to trace their happening accurately and to give it the right weight in the interactive system to which it belongs, Marx extends his abstractions to include how things happen as part of what they are (Marx and Engels 1964, 35). Until now, change has been considered in a very general way. What I have labeled the double movement (organic and historical) of the capitalist mode of production, however, can only be fully understood by breaking it down into a number of submovements, the most important of which are quantity/quality, metamorphosis, and contradiction.³ These are some of the main ways in which things move or happen; they are forms of change. Organizing becoming and time itself into sequences, they are the main pathways that bring order to the flow of events. As such, they help structure all of Marx's theories, and are indispensable to his account of how capitalism works, how it developed, and where it is tending.

Quantity/quality change is a historical movement containing moments of before and after, encompassing both build-up (or build-down) and what it leads to. Initially, the movement is one of quantitative change: one or more of the aspects that constitute any process-cum-relation gets larger (or smaller), or increases (or decreases) in number. Then, at a certain point with the attainment of a critical mass—which is different for each entity studied—a qualitative transformation occurs, understood as a change in appearance

3. Other important dialectical movements are mediation, interpenetration of polar opposites, negation of the negation, precondition and result, and unity and separation. These are all treated in the longer work of which this essay is a part, and the role that abstraction plays in constructing and helping to make visible the movements of quantity/quality, metamorphosis, and contradiction applies equally to them.

and/or function, while the entity overall remains essentially the same. In this way, Marx notes, money becomes capital, that is, acquires the ability to buy labor-power and produce value only when it reaches a certain amount (1958, 307-8). In order for such change to appear as an instance of the transformation of quantity into quality, Marx's abstractions have to contain the main aspects whose quantitative change is destined to trigger the coming qualitative change, as well as the new appearances and/or functions embodied in the latter, and all this for the time it takes for this to occur. Abstracting anything less runs the risk of first dismissing and then missing the coming qualitative change and/or misconstruing it when it happens, three frequent errors associated with bourgeois ideology.

Metamorphosis is an organic movement of interaction within a system in which qualities (occasionally appearances but usually conditions or functions) of one part get transferred to other parts so that the latter can be referred to as forms of the former. What is essential is that this process of metamorphosis be large enough to include both what is changing and what it is changing into, so that the transformation becomes an internal movement. Thus when, through exchange, value metamorphoses into commodity or money, for example, and the latter assumes some of the alienated relationships embodied in value as its own, this is seen as a later stage in the development of value itself. Otherwise, operating with smaller abstractions, commodity or money could never actually become value, and speaking of them as "forms" of value could only be understood metaphorically.

The essentially synchronic character of metamorphosis, no matter the number of steps involved, is also dependent on the size of the abstraction used. To some it may appear that the various phases in the metamorphosis of value occur one after another, serially, but this is to assume a brief duration for each phase. When, however, all the phases of this metamorphosis are abstracted as ongoing, as Marx does in the case of value—usually as aspects of production abstracted as reproduction—then all phases of the cycle are seen as occurring simultaneously (1971, 279-80). Whereas stopping too soon, which means abstracting too short a period for each phase, leaves one with an incompleting piece of the interaction and inclines one to mistake what is an organic connection for a causal one.

Contradiction, perhaps the most important of the submovements treated by Marx, has its core in a union of two or more internally related processes that are simultaneously supporting and undermining one another—internally related, because, as Marx asserts, where there is "no inner connection," there can be no "hostile connection," no "contradiction" (1971, 503). In the contradiction between capital and labor, for example, capital, as the means of

production used to produce value, helps bring into existence labor of a very special kind, that is, alienated labor, labor that will best serve its needs as capital, while labor, as the production of goods intended for the market, helps fashion capital in a form that enables it to continue its exploitation of labor. However, capital and labor also possess qualities that exert pressure in the opposite direction. With its unquenchable thirst for surplus-value, capital would drive labor to exhaustion, while labor, with its inherent tendencies toward working less hours, in better conditions, and so on, would render capital unprofitable. To avoid the temptation of misrepresenting contradiction as a simple opposition, tension, or dysfunction (common ideological misrepresentations of the origins, ramifications, and potential in any conflict), it is essential that the chief movements which reproduce the existing equilibrium as well as those which tend to undermine it be brought into the same overarching abstraction.

What determines the resolution of a contradiction, of course, is not its dialectical form, the fact that differences get abstracted as a contradiction, but its real content. However, such content is unlikely to reveal its secret to anyone who cannot read it as a contradiction. By including the undermining interaction of mutually supporting processes in the same unit, by expanding this unit to take in how these crisscrossing effects have developed and where they are tending, it is Marx's broad abstractions of extension that make it possible to grasp such varied movements as internal and necessary elements of real contradictions.

Level of Generality

The second main aspect of Marx's process of abstraction, or mode in which it occurs, is the abstraction of level of generality. In his unfinished Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy*, Marx's only systematic attempt to present this method, great care is taken to distinguish "production" from "production in general" (1904, 268-74). The former takes place in a particular society, capitalism, and includes all the relations of this society that enable it to appear and function as it does. "Production in general," on the other hand, refers to whatever it is that work in all societies have in common—chiefly the purposive activity of human beings in transforming nature to satisfy human needs—leaving out everything that distinguishes different social forms of production from one another.

Marx makes a further distinction within capitalist production between "production as a whole," what applies to all kinds of production within capitalism, and "production as a specific branch of industry," what applies only to

production in that industry (1904, 270). It is clear that more than a change in extension is involved in making these distinctions, especially the first one. The relations of productive activity with those who engage in it as well as with its product are *internal* relations in both cases, but production in capitalism is united with producers and its products in their distinctive capitalist forms, while production in general is united with them in forms that share its own quality as a lowest common denominator.

The abstraction that Marx makes in moving from capitalist production to production in general, then, is not one of extension but one of level of generality. It is a move from a more specific understanding of production, which brings into focus the whole network of equally specific qualities in which it functions (and with it the period of capitalism in which all this takes place), to a more general understanding of production, which brings into focus the equally general state of those conditions in which it occurs (along with the whole of human history as the period in which these qualities are found).

Something very similar is involved in the distinction that Marx makes between “production as a whole” and “production in a particular branch of industry,” though the movement here is away from what is more general in the direction of what is more specific. How a particular branch of industry—car manufacturing, for example—appears and functions involves a set of conditions that fall substantially short of applying to the entire capitalist epoch. What appears superficially like a whole/part distinction is, like the earlier distinction between “capitalist production” and “production in general,” one of levels of generality. Both capitalist production (or production as a whole) and production in a particular industry are internally related to the rest of society, but each brings into focus a different period of history, the capitalist epoch in one case and what might be called “modern capitalism,” or that period in which this branch of production has functioned in just this way, in the other.

In this Introduction, Marx comes out in favor of concentrating on production in its current historical forms, that is, on capitalist and modern capitalist production, and criticizes the political economists for contenting themselves with production in general when trying to analyze what is happening here and now. Then, falling for the all-too-common error of mistaking what is more general for what is more profound, the political economists treat the generalizations they have derived from examining various specific forms of production as the most important truths about each historical society in turn, and even as the cause of phenomena that are peculiar to each one. In this way, for example, the general truth that

production in any society makes use of material nature, the most general form of property, is offered as an explanation and even a justification for how wealth gets distributed in capitalist society, where people who own property claim a right to part of what gets produced with its help (1904, 271-72).

While Marx's discussion of the political economists in this Introduction oscillates between modern capitalism, capitalism as such, and the human condition, much of what he says elsewhere shows that he can operate on still other levels of generality, and therefore that a more complex breakdown of what are in fact degrees of generality is required. Before offering such a breakdown, I would like to stress that the boundary lines which follow are all suggested by Marx's own practice in abstracting, a practice that is largely determined by his aim of capturing the double movement of the capitalist mode of production together with the special role he gives to production. In other words, there is nothing absolute about the particular divisions I have chosen. Other ways of distinguishing between levels of generality are possible, and for other kinds of problems may be very useful.

Keeping this in mind, there are seven major levels of generality into which Marx subdivides the world, seven planes of comprehension on which he places all the problems he investigates, seven different foci for organizing everything that is. Starting from the most specific, there is the level made up of whatever is unique about a person and situation. It is all that makes J. Smith different from everyone else, and so too all his/her activities and products. It is what gets summed up in a proper name and an actual address. With this level—call it level one—the here and now, or however long what is unique lasts, is brought into focus.

Level two distinguishes what is general to people, their activities and products, because they exist and function within modern capitalism, understood as the last twenty to fifty years. Here the unique qualities that justify using proper names, like J. Smith, are abstracted out of focus (we no longer see them), and the qualities that make us speak of an individual as an engineer or in terms of some other occupation that has emerged in modern capitalism are abstracted into focus. Bringing these slightly more general qualities into sight, we also end up considering more people, everyone to whom such qualities apply, and a longer period, the entire time during which these qualities have existed. We also bring into focus a larger area, usually one or a few countries, with whatever else has occurred there that has affected or been affected by the qualities in question during this period. Marx's abstraction of a "particular branch of production" belongs to this level.

Capitalism as such constitutes level three. Here, everything that is peculiar to people, their activity, and products due to their appearance and functioning in capitalist society is brought into focus. We encountered this level earlier in our discussion of “production as a whole.” The qualities that J. Smith possesses which mark him/her as J. Smith (level one) and as an engineer (level two) are equally irrelevant. Front and center now are all that makes that person a typical worker in capitalism, including his/her relations to a boss, product, and so on. Productive activity is reduced to the denominator indicated by calling it “wage labor,” and the product to the denominator indicated by calling it “commodity” and “value.” Just as level two widens the area and lengthens the time span brought into focus as compared to level one, so too level three widens the focus so that it now includes everyone who partakes of capitalist relations anywhere that these relations obtain, and the entire five hundred or so years of the capitalist era.

After capitalism, still moving from the specific to the general, there is the level of class society, level four. This is the period of human history during which societies have been divided up into classes based on the division of labor. Brought into focus are the qualities which people, their activities, and products have in common across the five to ten thousand years of class history, or whatever capitalism, feudalism, and slavery share as versions of class society, and wherever these qualities have existed. Next, level five, is human society. It brings into focus—as we saw in the case of the political economists above—qualities which people, their activities, and products have in common as part of the human condition. Here, one is considering all human beings and the entire history of the species.

To make this scheme complete, two more levels will be added, but they are not nearly as important as the first five in Marx’s writings. Level six is the level of generality of the animal world, for just as we possess qualities that set us apart as human beings (level five), we have qualities (including various life functions, instincts, and energies) that are shared with other animals. Finally, there is level seven, the most general level of all, which brings into focus our qualities as a material part of nature, including weight, extension, movement, and so on.

In acquiring an extension, all Marx’s units of thought acquire in the same act of abstraction a level of generality. Thus, all the relations that are constituted as such by Marx’s abstractions of extension, including the various classifications and movements they make possible, are located on one or another of these levels of generality. And though each of these levels brings into focus a different time period, they are not to be thought of as “slices of time,” since the whole of history is implicated in each level, including the

most specific. Rather, they are ways of organizing time, placing the period relevant to the qualities brought into focus in the front and treating everything that comes before as what led up to it, as origins.

It is important, too, to underline that all the human and other qualities discussed above are present simultaneously and are equally real, but that they can only be perceived and therefore studied when the level of generality on which they fall has been brought into focus. This is similar to what occurs in the natural sciences, where phenomena are abstracted on the basis of their biological or chemical or atomic properties. All such properties exist together, but one cannot see or study them at the same time. The significance of this observation is evident when we consider that all the problems from which we suffer, and everything that goes into solving them or keeping them from being solved, is made up of qualities that can only be brought into focus on one or another of these different levels of generality. Unfolding as they do over time, these qualities can also be viewed as movements and pressures of one sort or another—whether organized into tendencies, metamorphoses, contradictions, and so on—that, taken together, pretty well determine our existence. Consequently, it is essential, in order to understand any particular problem, to abstract a level of generality that brings the characteristics chiefly responsible for this problem into focus. We have already seen Marx declare that because the classical political economists abstract production at the level of generality of the human condition (level five) they cannot grasp the character of distribution in capitalist society (level three).

Given Marx's special interest in uncovering the double movement of the capitalist mode of production, most of what he writes on human beings and society falls on level three. Abstractions such as "capital," "value," "commodity," "labor," and "working class," whatever their extensions, bring out the qualities that these people, activities, and products possess as part of capitalism. Precapitalist and postcapitalist developments come into the analysis done on this level as the origins and likely futures of these capitalist qualities. What Marx refers to in the *Grundrisse* as "precapitalist economic formations" (the apt title of an English translation of some historical material taken from this longer work) are just that (1973, 471-513). The social formations that preceded capitalism are mainly viewed and studied here as early moments of capitalism abstracted as a process, as its origins extending back before enough of its distinctive structures had emerged to justify the use of the label "capitalism."

Marx also abstracts his subject matter on levels two (modern capitalism) and four (class society), though this is much less frequent. Where Marx operates on the level of generality of class society, capitalism, feudalism, and

slave society are examined with a view to what they have in common. Studies of feudalism on this level of generality emphasize the division of labor and the struggle between the classes to which it gives rise, as compared to the breakdown of the conditions underlying feudal production which gets most of the attention when examining feudalism as part of the origins of capitalism, that is, on level three (1958, part 8).

An example of Marx operating on level two, modern capitalism, can be found in his discussion of economic crisis. After examining the various ways that the capitalist system, given what it is and how it works, could break down, that is, after analyzing it on the level of capitalism as such (level three), he then shows how these possibilities had been actualized in the immediate past, in what was for him modern or developed capitalism (1968; 492-535). To explain why the last few crises occurred in just the ways they did, he has to bring into focus the qualities that apply to this particular time period and these particular places, that is, recent economic, social, and political history in specific countries. This is also an example of how Marx's analysis can play off two or more different levels of generalization, treating what he finds on the more specific level as the actualization of one among several possibilities present on the more general level(s).

It is instructive to compare Marx's studies of human beings and society conducted on levels two, three, and four (chiefly three, capitalism) with studies in the social sciences and also with common-sense thinking about these subjects, which typically operate on levels one (the unique) and five (the human condition). Where Marx usually abstracts human beings, for example, as classes (as *a* class on level four, as one of the main classes that emerge from capitalist relations of production—workers, capitalists, and sometimes landowners—on level three, and as one of the many classes and fragments of classes that exist in a particular country in the most recent period on level two), most non-Marxists abstract people as unique individuals, where everyone has a proper name (level one) or as a member of the human species (level five). In proceeding in their thinking directly from level one to level five, they may never even perceive, and hence have no difficulty in denying, the very existence of classes. But the question is not which of these different abstractions is true. They all are insofar as people possess qualities that fall on each of these levels of generality. The relevant question is, which is the appropriate abstraction for dealing with a particular set of problems? More specifically, if social and economic inequality, exploitation, unemployment, social alienation, and imperialist wars are due in large part to conditions associated with capitalist society, then they can only be understood and dealt with through the use of abstractions that bring out their capitalist qualities.

And that involves, among other things, abstracting people as capitalists and workers. Not to do so, to insist on sticking to levels one and five, leaves one blaming particular individuals (a bad boss, an evil president) or human nature as such for these problems.

To complete the picture, it must be admitted that Marx occasionally abstracts phenomena, including people, on levels one and five. There are discussions of specific individuals, such as Napoleon III and Palmerston, where he focuses on the qualities that make these people different, and some attention is given, especially in his earliest writings, to qualities that all human beings have in common, to human nature in general. But not only are such digressions an exception, but, more important for our purposes, Marx seldom allows the qualities that come from these two levels to enter into his explanation of social phenomena. Thus, when G. D. H. Cole (1966, 11) faults Marx for making classes more real than individuals, or Carol Gould (1980, 33) says individuals enjoy an ontological priority in Marxism, or, conversely, Althusser (1965, 225-58) denies the individual any theoretical space in Marxism whatsoever, they are all misconstruing the nature of a system that has places, levels of generality, for individuals, classes, and the human species. The very idea of attributing an ontological priority to either individuals, class, or the species assumes an absolute separation between them that is belied by Marx's conception of human beings in terms of social relations with qualities that fall on different levels of generality. None of these ways of thinking about human beings is more real or more fundamental than the others. If, despite this, class remains Marx's preferred abstraction for treating human beings, it is only because of its necessary ties to the kind, range, and, above all, level of generality of the phenomena he seeks to explain.

If all Marx's abstractions involve, as I have argued, a level of generality as well as an extension, if each level of generality organizes and even prescribes to some degree the analyses made with its help, that is, in its terms, if Marx abstracts this many levels of generality in order to get at different, though related problems (even though his abstraction of capitalism as such, level three, is the decisive one), then the conclusions of his studies, the theories of Marxism, are all located on one or another of these levels and must be viewed accordingly if they are to be correctly understood, evaluated, and where necessary revised.

Marx's labor theory of value, for example, is chiefly an attempt to explain why all the products of human productive activity in capitalist society have a price, not why a particular product costs such and such but why it costs anything at all. That everything humans produce has a price is an extraordinary

phenomenon peculiar to the capitalist era, whose social implications are even more profound because most people view it ahistorically, simply taking it for granted. Marx's entire account of this phenomena, which includes the history of how a society in which all products have a price has evolved, takes place on the level of generality of capitalism as such, which means that he only deals with the qualities of people, their activities, and products in the forms they assume in capitalism overall. The frequent criticism one hears of this theory, that it does not take account of competition in real market places and therefore cannot explain actual prices, is simply off the point, that is, the more general point that Marx is trying to make.

Marx's remarks on history are particularly vulnerable to being misunderstood unless they are placed on one or another of these levels of generality. The role Marx attributes to production and economics generally, for example, differs somewhat depending on whether the focus is on capitalism (including its origins), modern capitalism, class societies, or human societies. Starting with human societies, the special importance Marx accords to production is based on the fact that one has to do what is necessary in order to survive before attempting anything else, that production limits the range of material choices available just as, over time, it helps to transform them, and that production is the major activity which gives expression to and helps to develop our peculiarly human powers and needs (1958, 183-84; Marx and Engels 1964, 117; Ollman 1976, 98-101). In class society, production plays its decisive role primarily through the division of labor that comes into being in this period and the class divisions and antagonisms that it sets up (1959b, 772; Marx and Engels 1951, 9-10). In capitalism, the special role of production is shared by everything that goes into the process of capital accumulation (1958, part 8). In modern capitalism, it is usually what has happened in a particular phase or sector of capitalist production in a given country in the most recent period (like the development of railroads in India during Marx's time) that is treated as decisive (Marx and Engels n.d., 79).

Each of these interpretations of the predominant role of production applies only to the level of generality that it brings into focus. No single interpretation comes close to accounting for all that Marx believes needs to be explained, which is probably why, on one occasion, Marx denies that he has any theory of history whatsoever (Marx and Engels 1952, 278). It might be more accurate, however, to say that he has four complementary theories of history, one each for history as abstracted on these four different levels of generality. The effort by most of Marx's followers and virtually all of his critics to encapsulate the materialist conception of history into a single

generalization regarding the role of production (or economics) has never succeeded, therefore, because it could not succeed.

Finally, the various movements that Marx investigates, some of which were discussed under abstraction of extension, are also located on particular levels of generality. That is, like everything else, the movements of quantity/quality, metamorphosis, and contradiction are composed of qualities that are unique or special to modern capitalism, or to capitalism, and so on, so that they only take shape as movements when the relevant level of generality is brought into focus. Until then, whatever force they exercise must remain mysterious and our ability to use or influence them virtually nil.

Two major questions relating to this mode of abstraction remain to be treated. One is, how do the qualities located on each level of generality affect those on the others? And second, what is the influence of the decision made regarding abstraction of extension on the level of generality that is abstracted, and vice versa? The effect of qualities from each level on those from others, moving from the most general (level seven) to the most specific (level one), is that of a context on the possibilities it contains. That is, each level, beginning with seven, establishes a range of possibilities for what can occur on the more specific levels that follow. The actualization of some of these possibilities on each level limits in turn what can come about on the levels next in line, all the way up to level one, that of the unique.

Each more general level, in virtue of what it is and contains, also makes one or a few of the many (though not infinite) alternative developments that it makes possible on less general levels more likely to be actualized. Capitalism, in other words, was not only a possible development out of class society, but made likely by the character of the latter, by the very dynamics inherent in the division of labor once it began. The same might be said of the relation between capitalism as such and the “modern” English capitalism in which Marx lived, and the relation between the latter and the unique events that Marx experienced.

It is within this framework, too, that the relation that Marx saw between freedom and determinism can best be understood. Whatever the level of abstraction—whether we are talking about a unique individual, a group in modern capitalism, workers throughout the capitalist era, any class, or human beings as such—there is always a choice to be made and some ability to make it. Hence, there is always some kind and some degree of freedom. On each level of generality, however, the alternatives among which people must choose are severely limited by the very nature of the overlapping contexts, which also make one or one set of alternatives more feasible and/or attractive, just as they condition the very personal, class, and human qualities

brought into play in making any choice. Hence, there is also a considerable degree of determinism. It is this relationship between freedom and determinism that Marx wishes to bring out when he says that it is people who make history but not in conditions of their own choosing (Marx and Engels 1951, 225). What seems like a relatively straightforward claim is complicated by the fact that both the people and the conditions referred to exist on various levels of generality, and depending on the level that is brought into focus, the sense of this claim—though true in each instance—will vary.

The view of determinism offered here is different from, but not in contradiction with, the view presented in our discussion of the philosophy of internal relations, where determinism was equated first with the reciprocal effect found in any organic system and then with the greater or special influence of any one process on the others. To this we can now add a third, complementary sense of determinism that comes from the limiting and prescribing effects of overlapping contexts on all the phenomena that fall within them. Marx's success in displaying how the latter two kinds of determinism operate in the capitalist mode of production accounts for most of the explanatory power that one finds (and feels) in his writings.

Affects of events on their larger contexts, that is, of qualities found on more particular levels on those that fall on more general ones, can also be discerned. Whenever Marx speaks of people reproducing the conditions of their existence, the reference is to how activities whose main qualities fall on one level of generality help to construct the various contexts, including those on other levels of generality, that make the continuation of these same activities both possible and highly likely. Such effects, however, can also be detrimental. In our time, for example, the unregulated growth of harmful features associated with modern capitalist production (level two) have begun to threaten the ecological balance necessary not only for the continuation of capitalism (level three), but also for the life of our species (level five).

As for the relation between the choice of extension and that of level of generality, there would seem to be a rough correspondence between narrow abstractions of extension and abstracting very low and very high levels of generality. Once the complex social relations in which a particular phenomenon is situated are put aside through an overly narrow abstraction of extension, there is little reason to bring these relations into better focus by abstracting the relevant level of generality. Thus, abstracting an extension that sets individuals apart from their social conditions is usually accompanied by an abstraction of level of generality that focuses on what is altogether different and unique about people (level one). With the social qualities that were abstracted from individuals in extension now attached to the groups to

which they belong (viewed as externally related to their members), efforts at generalizing tend to bypass the levels on which these social qualities would be brought into focus (modern capitalism, capitalism, and class society) and move directly to the level of the human condition (level five). For bourgeois ideology people are either all different (level one) or all the same (level five), while for Marx, whose abstractions of extension usually include a significant number of social relations, privileging the levels of generality of capitalism, modern capitalism, and class society was both easy and obvious—just as giving special attention to these levels led to abstractions of extension that enabled him to take in at one sweep most of the connections that these levels bring into focus.

Vantage Point

The third mode in which Marx's abstractions occur is that of vantage point. Capitalists, as we saw, are referred to as "embodiments of capital"; but capital is also said to function as it does because it is in the hands of people who use it to make profit (1959b, 857-58, 794; 1959a, 79). The state is said to be an instrument of the ruling economic class; but Marx also treats it as a set of objective structures that respond to the requirements of the economy, as an aspect of the mode of production itself (Marx and Engels 1945, 15; Marx 1959a, 103). There are many similar, apparently contradictory positions taken in Marx's writings. They are the result of different abstractions, but not of extension or level of generality. They are due to different abstractions of vantage point. The same relation is being viewed from different sides, or the same process from different moments.

In the same mental act that Marx's units of thought obtain an extension and a level of generality, they acquire a vantage point or place from which to view the elements of any particular relation and, given its extension, from which to reconstruct the larger system to which this relation belongs. A vantage point sets up a perspective that colors everything which falls into it, establishing order, hierarchy, and priorities, distributing values, meanings, and degrees of relevance, and asserting a distinctive coherence between the parts. Within a given perspective, some processes and connections will appear large, some obvious, some important; others will appear small, insignificant and irrelevant; and some will even be invisible.

In discussing Marx's conception of relation, we saw that it was more than a simple connection. It was always a connection contained in its parts *as seen* from one or another side. So capital and labor, for example, were quoted as being "expressions of the same relation, only seen from the opposite pole"

(1971, 491). Or again, Marx says, capital has one “organizational differentiation or composition” (that of fixed and circulating capital) from the point of view of circulation, and another (that of constant and variable capital) from the point of view of production (1968, 579). Both circulation and production are part of the extended capital relation. A criticism of the political economists is that they try to understand capital only from the point of view of circulation, but to grasp the nature of wealth in capitalism, Marx believed, the decisive vantage point is that of production (1968, 578). Prioritizing one vantage point in this way does not mean that Marx cannot use others, and in his study of capital—as of labor, value, class, the state, and so on—Marx makes use of various vantage points.

It is clear that the decisions Marx makes regarding extension and levels of generality greatly affect the kind of vantage points which he abstracts, and vice versa. The amount of mutual dependence and process that is included in an abstraction of extension largely determines what can be seen and studied from this same abstraction taken as a vantage point. Giving production the extension of reproduction or capital the extension of capital accumulation, for example, enables Marx to bring into view and organize the system of which they are part in ways that would not be possible with narrower (or shorter) abstractions. Likewise, in abstracting a level of generality, Marx brings into focus an entire range of qualities that can now serve individually or collectively (depending on the abstraction of extension) as vantage points, just as other possible vantage points, organized around qualities from other levels of generality, are excluded. Conversely, any commitment as to vantage point predisposes Marx to abstract the extension and level of generality that correspond to it and enables him to make the most of it as a vantage point. In practice, these three decisions (really, three aspects of the same decision) as to extension, level of generality, and vantage point are usually made together and their effects are immediate, though on any given occasion one or another of them may appear to dominate.

In the social sciences, the notion of vantage point is most closely associated with the work of Karl Mannheim (1936, part 5). But for Mannheim a point of view is something that belongs to people, particularly as organized into classes. The conditions in which each class lives and works supplies its members with both a distinctive range of experiences and a distinctive point of view. Because of their different points of view, even the few experiences that are shared by people of opposing classes are not only understood but actually perceived in quite different ways. As far as it goes, this view—which Mannheim takes over from Marx—is correct. Marx’s conception of point of view goes farther, however, by grounding each class’s perceptions in the

nature of its habitual abstractions, in order to show how starting out to make sense of society from just these mental units, within the perspectives that they establish, leads to different perceptual outcomes. In uncovering the cognitive link between class conditions and class perceptions, Marx helps us understand not only *why* Mannheim is right but *how* what he describes actually works. As part of this, point of view becomes an attribute of the abstraction as such (Marx speaks of the point of view or vantage point of accumulation, relations of production, money, etc.), and only secondarily of the person or class that adopts it (1963, 303; 1971, 156; 1973, 201).

We can now explain why Marx believed that workers have a far better chance to understand the workings of capitalism than do capitalists. Their advantage does not come from the quality of their lives and only in small part from their class interests (since the capitalists have an interest in misleading even themselves about how their system works). More importantly, given what constitutes the lives of workers, the abstractions with which they start out to make sense of their society are likely to include “labor,” “factory,” and “machine,” and especially “labor,” which puts the activity that is chiefly responsible for social change at the forefront of their thinking. Within the perspective set up by this abstraction, most of what occurs in capitalism is arranged as part of the necessary conditions and results of this activity. There is no more enlightening vantage point for making sense of what is, both as the outcome of what was and as the origins of what is coming into being. This is not to say, of course, that all workers will make these connections (there are plenty of reasons rooted in their alienated lives that militate against it), but the predisposition to do so coming from the initial abstraction of vantage point is there.

For capitalists, just the opposite is the case. Their lives and work incline them to start making sense of their situation with the aid of “price,” “competition,” “profit,” and other abstractions drawn from the market place. Trying to put together how capitalism functions within perspectives that place labor near the end of the line rather than at the start simply turns capitalist dynamics around. According to Marx, in competition, “everything always appears in inverted form, always standing on its head” (1968, 217). What are predominantly the effects of productive activity appear here as its cause. It is demands coming from the market, itself the product of alienated labor, for example, that seem to determine what gets produced.

As with thinking in terms of processes and relations, common sense is not wholly devoid of perspectival thinking. People occasionally use expressions like “point of view,” “vantage point,” and “perspective” to refer to some part of what we have been discussing, but they are generally unaware of how

much their points of view affect everything they see and know, and of the role played by abstractions in arriving at this result. As with their abstractions of extension and levels of generality, most people simply accept as given the abstractions of vantage point that are handed down to them by their culture and particularly by their class. They examine their world again and again from the same one or few angles, while their ability to abstract new vantage points becomes atrophied. The one-sided views that result are treated as not only correct, but as natural, indeed as the only possible view.

Earlier we saw that one major variety of bourgeois ideology arises from using too narrow abstractions of extension (dismissing parts of both processes and relationships that are essential for accurately comprehending even what is included), and that a second comes from abstracting an inappropriate level of generality (inappropriate in that it leaves out of focus the main qualities in which the problem of concern is rooted). There is a third major form of bourgeois ideology that is associated with the abstraction of vantage point. Here, ideology results from abstracting a vantage point that either hides or seriously distorts the relations and movements that one has to perceive in order to comprehend adequately a particular phenomenon. Not everything we need or want to know emerges with equal clarity, or even emerges at all, from every possible vantage point.

A related form of ideology may also result from examining a phenomenon from only one perspective, no matter how crucial, when multiple perspectives are needed—all the while being unaware of the limits on what can be learned from this single perspective—and mistaking such a partial, lopsided view for a full understanding. This is what Hegel had in mind when he said, to think abstractly (in the ideological sense of the term) is “to cling to one predicate” (1966, 118). Murderers, servants, and soldiers, who serve as Hegel’s examples, are all much more than what is conveyed by viewing them from the single vantage point associated with the label that we have given them. Marx is even more explicit when, for example, he berates the economist Ramsay, for bringing out all the factors but “one-sidedly” and “therefore incorrectly,” or equates “wrong” with “one-sided” in a criticism of Ricardo (1971, 351; 1968, 470).

What needs to be stressed is that Marx never criticizes ideology as a simple lie or claims that what it asserts is completely false. Instead, ideology is generally described as overly narrow, partial, misfocused and/or one-sided, all of which are attributable to limitations in the abstractions of extension, level of generality, and vantage point that are used, where neither these abstractions nor their implications are grasped for what they are. While correctly pointing to the material roots of ideology in capitalist conditions

and in the conscious manipulations of capitalists, and bringing out how it functions to serve capitalist interests, most discussions of ideology have completely ignored the misapplication of the process of abstraction that is responsible for its very forms.

Among the major vantage points associated with bourgeois ideology, where the error is not simply one of restricting analysis to a single perspective but where the one or few that are chosen either hide or distort the essential features of capitalism, are the following: the vantage point of the isolated individual, the subjective side of any situation (what is believed, wanted, intended, etc.), the results of almost any process, anything connected with the market, and all of what falls on level five of generality, particularly human nature. Marx, who on occasion made use of all these vantage points, favored vantage points connected with production, the objective side of any situation, historical processes generally, and social class, particularly at the level of generality of capitalist society. The reason that Marx privileges such vantage points varies, as does the extension he gives them, with the level of generality on which he is operating. But in almost every case, his choice of vantage point is determined by what is necessary to uncover some part of the organic or historical movement of the capitalist mode of production.

The easy facility that Marx shows in moving from one to the other is equally characteristic of his practice in abstracting vantage points. Aware of the limitations inherent in any single vantage point, even that of production, Marx frequently alters the angle from which he examines his chosen subject matter. While whole works and sections of works can be distinguished on the basis of the vantage point that predominates, changes of vantage point can also be found on virtually every page of Marx's writings. Within the same sentence, Marx can move from viewing wages from the vantage point of the worker to viewing them from the vantage point of society as a whole (1963, 108). Marx's analysis of the complex relations among production, distribution, exchange, and consumption, which has already come into this work on several occasions, also provides what is perhaps the best example of how often he changes his abstractions of both extension and vantage point, and how crucial this practice and his facility in it was for obtaining his results (1904, 274-92).

As with his abstractions of extension and level of generality, Marx's abstractions of vantage point play a decisive role in the development of all his theories. It is Marx's abstractions of vantage point that enable him to find identity in difference (and vice versa), to actually catch sight of the organic and historical movements made possible by his abstractions of extension, and

to classify and reclassify the world of his perceptions into the explanatory structures bound up in the theories of Marxism.

Earlier, in discussing Marx's theory of identity, we saw that abstracting an extension that is large enough to contain both identical and different qualities of two or more phenomena is what makes the coexistence of identity and difference possible, but one's ability to actually see and therefore to examine either set of qualities depends on the vantage point adopted for viewing them. Sticking with only one vantage point will restrict understanding any relation to its identical or different aspects when, in fact, it contains both. Marx, on the other hand, can approach the relation of profit, rent, and interest from the vantage point of surplus value, or what they have in common as the portion of value that is not returned to the workers who produced it, their identity, as well as from any of the vantage points located in differences arising from who holds these forms of surplus value and how each functions in the economic system.

Abstracting vantage points that bring out the differences between two or more aspects of an interactive system also highlights the asymmetry in their reciprocal effect. Granted such reciprocal effect, production was said to play the dominant role on all five levels of generality on which Marx operates. But it is only by abstracting production as a vantage point that its special influence on other economic processes and on society as a whole on each level can be seen for what it is. As Marx says, with the level of class societies in mind, the existence of the ruling class and their functions "can only be understood *from* the specific historical structure of their production relations" (1963, 285, emphasis added).

Along with his abstractions of extension, Marx's abstractions of vantage point play an equally important role in establishing the flexible boundaries that characterize all his theories. In Marx's division of reality into objective and subjective conditions, it is by abstracting a vantage point first in one, then in the other, that he uncovers the more objective aspects of what is ordinarily taken to be subjective (extending the territory of the objective accordingly), and vice versa. Together with the aforementioned theory of identity, it is the abstraction of the vantage point that enables Marx actually to see objective and subjective conditions as "two distinct forms of the same conditions" (1973, 832). Likewise, it is by abstracting a particular vantage point that Marx can see aspects of nature in society, or the forces of production in the relations of production, or economic in noneconomic structures, or the base in the superstructure, and vice versa, adjusting the abstraction of extension for each pairing accordingly. By looking at the relations of production from the vantage point of the forces of production, for example, even the

cooperative power of workers can appear as a productive force (Marx and Engels 1964, 46).

Marx's various class divisions of society, based as we saw on different abstractions of extension for class, are also only discernible from the vantage point of the qualities (functions, opposition to other classes, consciousness, etc.) that serve as the criteria for constructing a given classification. That is, if class is a complex relation made up of a number of different aspects, and if the composition of any particular class depends on which ones Marx includes in his abstraction of extension and brings into focus through his abstraction of level of generality, then his ability to actually distinguish people as members of this class depends on his having abstracted just these aspects as his vantage points for viewing them. It also follows that as Marx's vantage point changes so does his operative division of society into classes. In this way, too, the same people, viewed from the vantage points of qualities associated with different classes, may actually fall in different classes. The landowner, for example, is said to be a capitalist insofar as s/he confronts labor as the owner of commodities, that is, functions as a capitalist vis-à-vis labor (rather than as a landowner vis-à-vis capitalists), and is viewed from this vantage point (1963, 51).

Viewed from the vantage point of any one of his/her qualities, the characterization of the individual is limited to what can be seen from this angle. The qualities that emerge from the use of other vantage points are ignored because, for all practical purposes, at *this* moment in the analysis, and for treating *this* particular problem, they simply do not exist. Hence, people abstracted as workers, that is, viewed from one or more of the qualities associated with membership in this class, where the object of study is capitalist political economy, are presented as not having any gender, nation, or race. People, of course, possess all these characteristics and more, and Marx, when dealing with other problems, can abstract vantage points (usually as part of noncapitalist levels of generality) that bring out these other identities.

Given Marx's flexibility in abstracting extension, he can also consider people from vantage points that play down their human qualities altogether in order to highlight some special relation. Such is the case when Marx refers to the buyer as a "representative of money confronting commodities," that is, views him/her from the vantage point of money inside an abstraction of extension that includes money, commodities, and people (1963, 404). The outstanding example of this practice is Marx's frequent reference to capitalists as "embodiments" or "personifications" of capital, where living human beings are considered from the vantage point of their economic function

(1958, 10, 85, and 592). The school of structuralist Marxism has performed an important service in recovering such claims from the memory hole in which an older, more class struggle-oriented Marxism had placed them. However useful decentering human nature in this manner is for grasping some of the role-determined behavior that Marx uncovered, there is as much that is volunteerist in his theories that requires the adoption of distinctively human vantage points, and only a dialectical Marxism that possesses sufficient flexibility in changing abstractions—of vantage point as of extension and level of generality—can make all the necessary adjustments.

If Marx's abstractions of extension are large enough to encompass how things happen as part of what they are, if such abstractions of extension also allow him to grasp the various organic and historical movements uncovered by his research as essential movements, then it is his abstractions of vantage point that make what is there—what his abstractions of extension have "placed" there—visible. The movement of the transformation of quantity into quality, for example, is made possible as an essential movement by an abstraction of extension that includes both quantitative changes and the qualitative change that eventually occurs. But this transformative process is not equally clear or even visible from each of its moments. In this case, the preferred vantage point is one that bridges the end of quantitative changes and the start of the qualitative change. Viewing the cooperation among workers, for example, from the vantage point of where its transformation into a qualitatively new productive power begins provides the clearest indication of whence this change comes as well as where the process that brought it about was heading.

The movement of metamorphosis, we will recall, is an organic movement in which qualities associated with one part of a system get transferred to its other parts. In the case of the metamorphosis of value, the main instance of this movement in Marx's writings, some of the central relationships that constitute value are taken up by commodity, capital, wage labor, and so on. Only an abstraction of extension large enough to include its different phases as internally related aspects of a single system allows us to conceive of metamorphosis as an internal movement and of its subsequent stages as forms of what it starts out as. But to observe this metamorphosis and, therefore, to study it in any detail, we must accompany this abstraction of extension with an abstraction of vantage point in the part whose qualities are being transferred. Thus, the metamorphosis of value into and through its various forms can only be observed as a metamorphosis from the vantage point of value.

As regards contradiction, Marx says, “in capitalism everything seems and in fact is contradictory” (1963, 218). It *is* so—in reality, and with the help of Marx’s broad abstractions of extension which organize the parts as mutually dependent processes. But it *seems* so only from certain vantage points. From others, the incompatible development of the parts would be missed, misconstrued, or, at a minimum, seriously underestimated. The vantage point from which Marx observes contradictions is the intersection between the two or more processes said to be in contradiction. It is a composite vantage point made up of elements of all these processes. If one has not abstracted differences as processes and such processes as mutually dependent, there is no point of intersection on which to focus. People who operate with external relations and static units do not see contradictions because they cannot. They lack both the abstractions of extension and vantage point that are needed to do so.

What we have called the double movement of the capitalist mode of production can be approached, that is, viewed and studied, from any of the major contradictions that compose it, and in each case, given internal relations, the elements that are not directly involved enter into the contradiction as part of its extended conditions and results. In this way, the vantage point that is adopted organizes not only the immediate contradiction, but establishes a perspective in which other parts of the system acquire their order and importance. In the contradiction between exchange- and use-value, for example, the relations between capitalists and workers are part of the necessary conditions for this contradiction to take its present form and develop as it does, just as one result of this contradiction is the reproduction of the ties between capitalists and workers. Given the internal relations that Marx posits between all elements in the system, this makes capitalists and workers subordinate aspects of the contradiction between exchange- and use-value. The whole process can be turned around: adopting the vantage point of the contradiction between capitalists and workers transforms the relations between exchange- and use-value into its subordinate aspects. The actual links in each case, of course, need to be carefully worked out. Hence contradictions can be said to overlap; they cover much the same ground, but this ground is broken up in various ways, along a variety of axes, based on as many different foci.

Marx’s laws offer still another illustration of the crucial role played by the abstraction of vantage point. All of Marx’s laws are tendencies, arising from the very nature of whatever it is that is said to have them. In every case, it is Marx’s abstraction of extension that brings the various organic and historical movements together under the same rubric, making the way that things happen a part of what they are, but it is his abstraction of vantage point

that enables him (and us) to actually view them as a single movement, as a tendency.

The law of the falling rate of profit, for example, is a tendency inherent in the relation of profit to the organic composition of capital, which is the ratio of constant to variable capital, or the amount of surplus labor that can be realized with a given amount of capital (1959b, part 3). Like all tendencies in Marx's work, it is subject to countertendencies (state subsidies, inflation, devaluation of existing capital, etc.), which are often strong enough to keep the falling rate of profit from finding expression in the balance sheet of businesspersons at the end of the year. To observe this tendency, therefore, and to be in a position to study the constant pressure which it exerts on the concentration of capital (another law) and through it on the entire capitalist system, one must follow Marx in abstracting an extension for profit that includes its relation over time to the organic composition of capital, and view this relation from the vantage point of this composition. Without such abstractions of extension *and* vantage point, one simply cannot see, let alone grasp, what Marx is saying. With them, one can see the law despite all the evidence presented in countertendencies. Hence, the irrelevance of various attempts by Marx's critics and followers alike to evaluate the law of the falling rate of profit based on analyses made from the vantage point of one of its possible results (the actual profits of real businesspersons), from capitalist competition or some other vantage point located in the market place. All the laws in Marxism can only be described, studied, and evaluated within the perspectives associated with the particular vantage points from which Marx both discovered and constructed them as laws.

The Role of Abstractions in the Debates over Marxism

It will have become evident by now that it is largely differences of vantage point that lay behind many of the great debates in the history of Marxist scholarship. In the *New Left Review* debate between Ralph Miliband and Nicos Poulantzas on the character of the capitalist state, for example, Miliband (1970) viewed the state chiefly from the vantage point of the ruling economic class, while Poulantzas (1969) viewed what are essentially the same set of relations from the vantage point of the socioeconomic structures that establish both the limits and the requirements for a community's political

functions.⁴ As a result, Miliband is better able to account for the traditional role of the state in serving ruling-class interests, while Poulantzas has an easier time explaining the relative autonomy of the state and why the capitalist state continues to serve the ruling class when the latter is not directly in control of state institutions.

The debate over whether capitalist economic crisis is caused by the tendency of the rate of profit to fall or by difficulties in the realization of value, where one side views the capitalist economy from the vantage point of the accumulation process and the other from the vantage point of market contradictions, is of the same sort (Mattick 1969; Baran and Sweezy 1966).⁵ A somewhat related dispute over the centrality of the capitalist mode of production as compared to the international division of labor (the position of “world systems theory”) for charting the history and future of capitalism is likewise rooted in a difference of preferred vantage points (Brenner 1977; Wallerstein 1974). So, too, is the debate over whether bourgeois ideology is mainly a reflection of alienated life and reified structures or the product of the capitalist consciousness industry, where one side views the construction of ideology from the vantage point of the material and social conditions out of which it arises, and the other from that of the role played by the capitalist class in promoting it (Mephram 1979; Marcuse 1965).

Earlier, in what is perhaps the most divisive dispute of all, we saw that those who argue for a strict determinism emanating from one or another version of the economic factor (whether simple or structured) and those who emphasize the role of human agency (whether individual or class) can also be distinguished on the basis of the vantage points which they have chosen for investigating the necessary interaction between the two (Althusser 1965; Sartre 1963). To be sure, each of these positions, here as in the other debates, is also marked by somewhat different abstractions of extension for shared phenomena based in part on what is known and considered worth knowing, but even these distinguishing features come into being mainly as a result of the vantage point that is treated as privileged.

The different levels of generality on which Marx operates are also responsible for their share of debates among interpreters of his ideas, the

4. Both thinkers seriously modified the views expressed in these articles in later works (Miliband 1977; Poulantzas 1978), and these revisions, too, can be explained in large part through changes in their abstractions of vantage point.

5. There are still other Marxist interpretations of capitalist crises (as, indeed, of the state) that are also largely dependent on the vantage point adopted. Here, as in the other debates mentioned, it was enough to refer to a single major cleavage to illustrate the general point regarding abstractions.

main one being over the subject of the materialist conception of history: is it all history or all of class history or the period of capitalism (in which earlier times are conceived as precapitalist) (Kautsky 1988; Korsch 1970)? Depending on the answer, the sense in which production is held to be primary will vary as will the abstractions of extension and vantage point used to bring this out.

Finally, the various abstractions of extension of such central notions as mode of production, class, state, and so on, have also led to serious disagreements among Marx's followers and critics alike, with most schools seeking to treat the boundaries they consider decisive as permanent. However, as evidenced by the quotations upon which practically every side in these disputes can draw, Marx is capable of pursuing his analysis not only on all social levels of generality and from various vantage points, but with units of differing extension, only giving greater weight to those which are most useful in revealing the particular dynamic he was investigating. The many apparently contradictory claims that emerge from his study are in fact complementary, and all are required to "reflect" the complex double movement (historical—including probable future—and organic) of the capitalist mode of production. Without an adequate grasp of the role of abstraction in dialectical method, and without sufficient skill and flexibility in making the needed abstractions of extension, level of generality, and vantage point, most interpreters of Marx have simply constructed versions of his theories that suffer in their very form from the same rigidity, inappropriate focus, and one-sidedness that Marx saw in bourgeois ideology.

In an often-quoted though little-analyzed remark in the Introduction to *Capital*, Marx says that value, as compared to larger, more complex notions, has proven so difficult to grasp because "the body, as an organic whole, is more easy to study than are the cells of that body." To make such a study, he adds, one must use the "force of abstraction" (1958, 8). Using the force of abstraction, as I have tried to show, is Marx's way of putting dialectics to work. It is the living dialectic, its process of becoming, the engine that sets other parts of his method into motion. In relation to this emphasis on abstraction, every other approach to studying dialectics stands on the outside looking in, treating the change and interaction that abstractions help to shape in one or another already completed form. The relations of contradiction, identity, law, and so on, which they study have all been constructed, ordered, brought into focus, and made visible through prior abstractions. Consequently, while other approaches may help us to understand what dialectics is and to recognize it, only an approach that puts the process of abstraction at the center enables us to think adequately about change and

interaction, that is, to think dialectically, and to do research and engage in political struggle in a dialectical manner.

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