

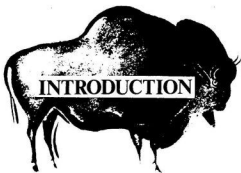
HISTORY and REVOLUTION

a revolutionary critique of
historical materialism

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the motive force and pattern of historical development: the development of technology, the growth of the productive forces, and the interactions between the economic structure and social relations of society, and its ideas and institutions.

Talking of 'dangerous friends', Engels* wrote: 'the materialist conception of history has a lot of them nowadays, to whom it serves as an excuse for not studying history'. To dissociate himself from such friends 'Marx used to say about the French "marxists" of the late seventies: "all I know is that I am not a marxist"'. Rather than argue, therefore, with marxists (whom other marxists will almost certainly consider 'dangerous friends') Cardan takes up the argument with the 'founders of scientific socialism' themselves, seeking to show how their conceptual categories were themselves products of historical development. They were, therefore, almost by definition, socio-centric and ethnocentric ... and hence inadequate. Cardan's critique aims neither to detract from the greatness of Marx and Engels, nor to belittle the importance of the mode of production in society. But it stresses that their analysis of history was itself a historical product: the product of a particular epoch and of a particular society. Moreover Cardan's critique emphasizes - contrary to Marx and Engels - that the mode of production itself is not a force weaving the pattern of history from the outside, but that both the role and the dynamics of the mode of production are themselves variables, and part of the overall pattern and structure of any given society, at any given time.

Our text is a little longer than the original French text. In response to queries raised during a collective discussion of the translation the author wrote a number of explanatory footnotes developing his ideas further. These have been incorporated. The translation is an exact one, but the title on the cover, the chapter headings and the illustrations and quotes (the source of which will be found on p. 35) are entirely our own. We found it necessary to add these quotes for the benefit of all those marxists who are unaware of what their mentors really wrote.

'Solidarity' (London), August 1971.

* Letter to Schmidt, August 5, 1890.

Between April 1961 and June 1965, the French journal 'Socialisme ou Barbarie' published (in its issues 36-40) a long article by Paul Cardan entitled 'Marxisme et theorie revolutionaire'. We have decided to translate and publish it, because we consider it a most original and penetrating exploration of this theme.

The article discussed six main areas :

- a) the historical fate of marxism and the notion of orthodoxy;
- b) the marxist theory of history;
- c) the marxist philosophy of history;
- d) the two elements in marxism and what historically became of them;
- e) the balance sheet;
- f) the nature of revolutionary theory.

In August 1966 we published (in 'Solidarity' vol. IV, No. 3) the first section of Cardan's text. We called it 'The fate of marxism'. This was subsequently produced as a pamphlet (by the Clydeside Solidarity group) and has given rise to great controversy - being praised or denounced as 'the best' and 'worst' thing Solidarity has ever published - a sure indication that it was challenging revolutionary orthodoxy. We are now pleased to bring to our readers the second section of the text, which deals with what has become known as the 'materialist conception of history'.

Although it may come as a surprise to many marxists, Marx himself never used the words 'historical materialism' (although Engels did, repeatedly). But we are not dealing here with a question of words. Cardan's argument deals with what both Marx and Engels undoubtedly considered

1. MARX AND THE ECONOMY

I hope even British respectability will not be overshadowed if I use the term 'historical materialism' to designate that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historical events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange...



(I)

We should start by examining what has happened to the most concrete part of marxist theory, namely to its economic analysis of capitalism. Far from being a contingent, accidental or empirical application of marxist theory to a particular historical phenomenon, this economic analysis is the place where the whole substance of the theory is concentrated. It is the area where the theory should show at last that it is capable of producing not merely a few general ideas, but that it can make its own dialectic coincide with the dialectic of historical reality and finally that it is capable of extracting

from this very movement of reality both the foundations and the orientation of revolutionary action. It is not for nothing that Marx devoted most of his life to this analysis (or that the marxist movement subsequently allocated a pre-eminent position to it) and those sophisticated 'marxists' of today who would only talk of Marx's early manuscripts show not only superficiality but also exorbitant arrogance, for their attitude implies that Marx was no longer aware of what he was doing after he had reached the age of 30. (1)

We know that for Marx capitalist economy was subject to insoluble contradictions which manifested themselves both in periodic crises of over-production and in long term tendencies whose unfolding would increasingly shake the system to its very foundations. Among such tendencies were the increase in the rate of exploitation (implying increased misery, absolute or relative, of the proletariat), the rise in the organic composition of capital (implying an increase of the industrial reserve army i.e. permanent unemployment) and the fall in the rate of profit (implying the slowing down of accumulation and of the expansion of production). What is expressed in these 'tendencies' is, in the last analysis, the fundamental contradiction of capitalism as Marx saw it: namely the incompatibility between, on the one hand, the development of the productive forces and, on the other, the capitalist 'relations of production' or 'forms of property'. (2)

The experience of the last twenty years, however, suggests that periodic crises of over-production are not inevitable under modern capitalism (except in the form of minor and temporary 'recessions'). And the experience of the last hundred years in any developed capitalist country shows neither pauperization (absolute or relative) of the proletariat, nor any long-term and permanent increase in unemployment, nor any fall in the rate of profit. Still less does it show any slowing down in the development of the productive forces, the growth of which has, on the contrary, accelerated to previously unimaginable proportions.

In itself, of course, all this proves nothing. It forces us, however to reconsider Marx's economic theory in order to see if the contradiction between the theory and the facts is merely apparent and temporary. Perhaps appropriate modifications of the theory would allow us to give an account of the facts without destroying the essence of the theory. Or is it, everything considered, the very substance of the theory which is in question?

If one reconsiders Marx's economic theory, one is led to the conclusion that neither its premises, nor its method, nor its structure are tenable any longer. (3) Amazing as it may seem to most 'marxists' the theory as such 'neglects' the actions of social classes. It 'neglects' the effect of the workers' struggles on the distribution of the social product and thus, necessarily, on all aspects of the functioning of the economy. It 'neglects' in particular the effect of this struggle on the constant expansion of the market for consumer goods. It

'neglects' the effect of the gradual self-organisation of the capitalist class, precisely with the aim of dominating the 'spontaneous' tendencies of the economy. These shortcomings stem from the theory's fundamental premise, namely that in a capitalist economy, men (proletarians or capitalists) are actually and completely transformed into things (i.e. 'reified') and that they are submitted to the action of economic laws that in no way differ from natural laws, except insofar as they use the 'conscious' actions of men as the unconscious instruments of their own realisation.

In fact, this premise is an abstraction. It relates, so to speak, to only one half of reality. And as such it is false. Reification, although a fundamental tendency of capitalism, can never completely fulfil itself. If it were ever to do so, if capitalism were ever successful in transforming people into things driven only by economic forces, the system would collapse. And it wouldn't be 'in the long run', but instantly. The struggle of people against reification is, just as much as the tendency to reification, an essential condition for the functioning of capitalism. A factory in which the workers would really and totally be mere cogs of the machines, blindly carrying out managerial instructions, would stop in next to no time. Capitalism can only function by constantly using the genuinely human activity of its subjects, which activity capitalism at the same time seeks constantly to limit and to de-humanize as much as possible. The system can only function if its fundamental tendency, which is indeed the tendency to reification, is not achieved. It can only function if its norms are constantly challenged in their application. The fundamental contradiction of capitalism lies here (4) and not in the quasi mechanical incompatibilities that the economic gravitation of human molecules in the system is claimed to give rise to. These incompatibilities, insofar as they go beyond particular and local phenomena, are in the last analysis, irraginary.

From this reconsideration stem a whole series of conclusions. We shall only deal with the most important ones.

Firstly one can no longer maintain the central importance given by Marx (and the whole marxist movement) to the economy as such. The word 'economy' is here used in the relatively precise sense given to it by the very contents of 'Capital', i.e. the whole system of abstract and quantifiable relations, which starting from a given type of appropriation of productive resources (whether

this be legally guaranteed as property, or derives simply from a 'de facto' power of disposal) determines the creation, the exchange and the distribution of values. These economic relations cannot be constructed into an autonomous system, whose functioning would be governed by its own laws, independently of other social relations. Such a construction is impossible in the case of capitalism, and since it is precisely under capitalism that the economy tends to acquire the greatest 'autonomy' as a sphere of social activity, one suspects that it would be even less possible to do so for previous societies. Even under capitalism the economy remains fundamentally an abstraction: society is never transformed into a series of economic relations to the point where all other social relations could be considered as secondary.

Secondly, if reification as a category needs to be re-examined the whole philosophy of history which underlies the analysis of 'Capital' must also be reconsidered. This question will be dealt with further on.

Finally it becomes clear that the very conceptions that Marx had elaborated concerning social and historical dynamics (in their most general form) have to be questioned on the very ground where they were most concretely elaborated. If 'Capital' is so important in Marx's works and in the ideology of marxists, it is because this work set out to demonstrate scientifically, and in the instance which is precisely relevant (that of capitalist society) the theoretical and practical truth of a general conception of the dynamic of history, namely that 'at a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production, or what is but a legal expression for the same thing - with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto.' (5)

'Capital', imbued from beginning to end with the intuition that nothing can now stop the development of technology (or the concomitant increase in the productivity of labour) seeks to show that capitalist relations of production, which were at the onset the most adequate and efficient instrument for the development of the productive forces, become 'at a certain stage' a brake on this development and must for this very reason burst asunder.

Both the hymns of praise addressed to the bourgeoisie in its progressive period (glorifying it for having been the historical instrument of the development of the productive forces) and the condemnation of the bourgeoisie by both Marx and later marxists stem from the idea that the development of the productive forces is henceforth impeded



by the capitalist mode of production. 'The great forces of production - that shock factor in historical development - were choked in those obsolete institutions of the superstructure (private property and the national State) in which they found themselves locked by all preceding development. Engendered by capitalism the forces of production were knocking at all the walls of the bourgeois national State, demanding their emancipation by means of the socialist organisation of economic life on a world scale' wrote Trotsky in 1920. (6) In 1936 he based his Transitional Programme on the observation that 'the productive forces of humanity had ceased to develop' because in the meantime capitalist relations had become converted from relative to absolute brakes to their development.

We know today that all this is not so. In the last 25 years the productive forces have undergone a development far in excess of anything previously imaginable. Certainly, this development has been the result of modifications in the organisation of capitalism, and has itself brought about further changes, but it has not altered or challenged the capitalist nature of the relations of production. What seemed to Marx and the marxists to be a contradiction which would lead to the explosion of the system has been 'solved' from within the system itself.

This shows that, in fact, there never was a contradiction. To speak of a 'contradiction' between the forces of production and the relations of production is worse than an abuse of language. It is to resort to a phraseology which gives a dialectical appearance to something which is but a model of mechanistic thinking. When gas is heated in a closed vessel, and exerts a growing pressure on the wall of the vessel (a pressure which may eventually make the vessel burst) it is meaningless to say that there is a 'contradiction' between the pressure of the gas and the rigidity of the vessel wall. Similarly there is no 'contradiction' between two forces applied to the same point and acting in opposite directions. In the case of society, one could at most only speak of a tension, of an opposition or of a conflict between the productive forces (the actual production of society or its productive capacity) - the development of which requires at each stage a given type of organisation of social relations - and those types of organisation which 'lag' behind the productive forces and cease to be appropriate to them. When the tension becomes too high, or the conflict too sharp, a revolution sweeps away the old pattern of social organisation and opens the way to a new stage in the development of the productive forces.

But even at the simplest empirical level this mechanistic model is not tenable. It represents an impermissible extrapolation applied to the whole of history of a process which only existed

during a single period of history: the period of the bourgeois revolution. It more or less accurately describes what happened during the transition from feudal to capitalist society. Or, more accurately, it describes what happened to the hybrid societies of Western Europe, between 1650 and 1850, when an already well developed and economically dominant bourgeoisie clashed with absolute monarchy and with feudal remnants in land ownership and in the juridical and political structures. But this 'model' can be applied neither to the collapse of ancient society and to the subsequent appearance of the feudal world, nor to the birth of the bourgeoisie, which emerges precisely outside of the feudal relations of production and apart from them. Neither can the 'interpretation' account for the constitution of the bureaucracy as a dominant social stratum in those backward countries now being industrialised. Nor, finally, can it account for the historical evolution of non-European societies. In none of these cases can the growth of the productive forces be identified with the development of a social class within the existing social structure, a development which 'at a given stage' would have become incompatible with the existence of the system and thus lead to a revolution giving power to the 'rising' class.

Here again, we must look beyond the 'confirmation' or the 'refutation' of the theory brought about by real facts. We must centre our thoughts on the meaning of the theory, on its deepest content, on its categories and on the type of relationship it seeks to achieve with reality.



In broad outlines, Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic evolution of society.

(III)

2. ON THE EVOLUTION OF TECHNOLOGY



(IV)

It is one thing to recognise the fundamental importance of Marx's insights on the connections that exist between production and other aspects of the life of a society. Since Marx, nobody can think history and 'forget' that every society has to ensure the production of the material necessities for its existence, or that every aspect of social life is deeply linked with work, with the way production is organised and with the social divisions that flow from this organisation.

But it is another thing to reduce production, work, and human activities mediated by instruments

and objects to the level of 'productive forces' i.e. in the end to the level of technology. (7) And it would be just as wrong to grant to technology an evolution which 'in the last analysis' would be autonomous. One cannot evolve a system of social mechanics based on an eternal, and eternally constant opposition between a technology (or productive forces) endowed with an autonomous evolution and the remaining mass of social relations and human life (the 'superstructure') to which would just as arbitrarily be attributed both passivity and an in-built inertia.

In fact there is neither autonomy of technology nor any ingrained tendency of technology in the direction of such an autonomous development. During 99.5% of its development (that is to say during the whole of its evolution except for the last 500 years) known or presumed history was based on what appears to us now to have been technological stagnation. Those thousands of years were lived and perceived by contemporary mankind as embodying a self-evident technological stability. During several millennia, civilisations and empires were founded and collapsed on similar technological 'infrastructures'. (8)

During Greek antiquity the techniques applied to production lagged behind the possibilities already offered by the development of knowledge. But this fact cannot be separated from social and cultural conditions of the Greek world or from the attitude of the Greeks towards nature, work and knowledge. Similarly one cannot divorce the enormous technological development of modern times from radical changes in these attitudes, however gradually these may have appeared. For instance, the notion that nature is only there to be exploited by man would be anything but self-evident from the point of view of previous generations of mankind - and would even today be questioned in many non-industrial societies. To convert scientific knowledge primarily into a means of technological development and to vest it with predominantly instrumental characteristics also corresponds to a new attitude. The appearance of these attitudes is inseparable from the birth of the bourgeoisie which takes place, to begin with, on the basis of the old techniques. It is only with the flowering of bourgeois society that one begins to witness what appears to be a sort of autonomous evolution of technology. But this is only appearance. This technological evolution is a product of the philosophic and scientific development launched or accelerated by the Renaissance (whose deep links with the whole of bourgeois culture and society are undeniable). It is also deeply influenced more and more by the development of the proletariat and by the class struggle waged in the womb of capitalism, a development which leads to a selection of techniques applied to production from among a whole spectrum of possible techniques. (9) Finally in the present stage of capitalism, technological research is planned, directed and explicitly orientated towards the objectives of the dominant strata in society. Does it really make sense to speak of an 'autonomous' evolution of technology when the U. S. Government decides to spend a thousand million dollars on rocket fuel research - and only one million dollars on research into the causes of cancer?

During past periods of history, when men so to speak accidentally came across some new method or invention, and when the basis of production (as well as of war and of other social activities) was characterised by technological scarcity, the idea of a relative autonomy of technique might have appeared to have some meaning - although even then it would have been false to claim that this technique was a 'determinant', in any exclusive sense, of the structure and evolution of society. This is proved by the immense variety of cultures, both archaic and historical (Asiatic, for instance) built on the same technological bases. Even for these periods the problem of relations between the type of technique and the type of society and culture remains unsolved. In contemporary societies, on the other hand, the continual expansion of the range of what is technologically possible, and the permanent influence and action of society in relation to its methods of work, of communication, of war, etc., definitively refutes any idea of the 'autonomy' of the technical factor. Modern society makes the reciprocal relationship absolutely explicit. There is an uninterrupted circular feed-back between methods of production, social organisation and the total content of culture.

Assume particular stages of development in production, commerce and consumption and you will have a corresponding social constitution, a corresponding organization of the family, of orders or of classes, in a word a corresponding civil society.

Assume a particular civil society and you will get particular political conditions which are only the official expression of civil society.



3. 'INFRASTRUCTURE' AND 'SUPERSTRUCTURE'

What we have just said shows that there isn't nor can there ever have been any inherent inertia in the rest of social life. 'Superstructures' have never enjoyed the privilege of being passive. These superstructures are only a web of social relations. They are neither more nor less 'real', neither more nor less 'inert' than other relationships. They are as conditioned by the infrastructures as the infrastructures are conditioned by them (if the term 'to condition' can be used to describe the mode of coexistence of various diverse aspects of social activity),

The famous phrase about 'consciousness lagging behind reality' is no more than a phrase. It represents an empirical assertion, valid so to speak for the right half of any phenomenon and false for the left half. In the speech of the marxists, and in their subconscious it has become a theological phrase and as such quite meaningless. There is neither life nor social reality without consciousness and to say that consciousness is lagging behind reality is tantamount to saying that the head of a walking man is always to the rear of the man himself. Even were we to take 'consciousness' in the narrow sense (of explicit consciousness, of a theoretical elaboration of given data) the formula would still as often be false as true. There can be a 'lagging' of consciousness behind reality and a 'lagging' of reality behind consciousness. In other words there is as much correlation as distance between what people do (or how they live) and what they think. What they think is not only a painfully achieved insight and elaboration of what is already there, a sort of breathless march along the footsteps of reality. It is also the relativisation of what is given, taking one's distances, projection. History is as much conscious creation as unconscious repetition. What Marx called the superstructure has no more been a passive and delayed reflection of an otherwise undefinable social 'materiality' than human perception and knowledge have been hazy and imprecise 'reflections' of an external world 'in itself' perfectly formed, coloured and endowed with odour.

To be sure, human consciousness - considered as a transforming and creative factor in history - is essentially a practical consciousness. It is an operative and active reason, rather than a theoretical reflection to which praxis could be appended like the corollary to the theorem, merely materialising the consequences of the reflection. But human praxis is not just a modification of the material world. It is as much, and even more, a modification of the behaviour of men and of their relations. The 'Sermon on the Mount' and the 'Communist Manifesto' belong just as much to historical practice as any technological invention. And their real effects on history have been infinitely weightier.

Such is the present ideological confusion, and so forgotten are certain elementary truths, that what we have just said will appear as 'idealism' to many marxists. But could there be cruder or more naive idealism than the attempt to reduce the whole of historical reality to the effects of a single determinant? What is more idealist than isolating a single abstract factor (the evolution of technology) - which is moreover of the order of an idea - and building a whole theoretical edifice on this basis?

In every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up - and from which alone can be explained - the political and intellectual history of that epoch... this proposition in my opinion is destined to do for history what Darwin's theory has done for biology...



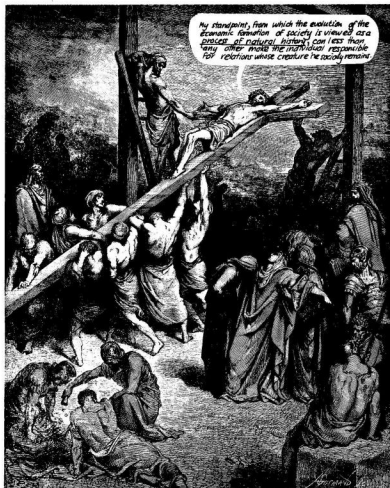
(VI)

In what is known as 'historical materialism' history is indeed propelled by ideas. But instead of being religious, philosophical or political ideas, the ideas are technological. It is true that to become operative these ideas must be 'embodied' in instruments and methods of work. But the ideas themselves determine this incarnation. A new instrument is new in so far as it is the materialisation of a new concept concerning relations between productive activity and its means and ends. Technological ideas remain then a kind of prime mover. One of two alternatives then has to be chosen. We either remain just there - and the whole allegedly 'scientific' edifice of historical materialism is seen to base all history on a mystery; the mystery of the autonomous and inexplicable evolution of a particular category of ideas (technological

ideas). Or we replunge technology into the bath of total social reality. But if we do so technology can no longer claim a privileged position as a determinant, either 'a priori' or 'a posteriori'. Engels' attempt to escape this dilemma by explaining (10) that although superstructures may act on infra-structures, the latter remain determinant 'in the last analysis' hardly makes sense. In a causal explanation there is no 'in the last analysis', each link being inevitably related to others. Either Engels was making a purely verbal concession in which case we are left with a factor (technological ideas) which determines history without being determined by it. Or Engels is making a genuine concession and the pretension of having discovered the ultimate explanation of historical phenomena (in a specific factor) lies shattered.



(VII)



My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains.

(VIII)

The really idealistic character of the 'materialist conception of history' appears at an even more fundamental level when one considers another aspect of the categories 'infrastructure' and 'superstructure' as used by Marx. In Marx's vision not only has the infrastructure a determining weight but it alone has weight, for it alone is at the origin of the movement of history. Unlike everything else, the infrastructure embodies truth. Consciousness can be 'false consciousness' and most of the time it is. It is mystified, its content is 'ideological'. 'Superstructures' are always ambiguous: they both express and hide the 'real situation'. Their function is essentially a dual one. For example, the Constitution of any bourgeois Republic - or Civil Law - have an

explicit or apparent meaning (provided by reading the text itself) and a latent or real meaning, revealed by marxist analysis. The text talks of the equality of citizens and of the sovereignty of the people. The reality is the division of society into classes and the 'de facto' power of the bourgeoisie. Sticking to explicit, manifest meanings is sheer juridical fetishism. Law, politics and religion can only be fully understood in the context of the rest of the social phenomena of a given period, etc., etc.

But for marxists this ambiguity, this deformed relationship to historical reality would apparently cease to exist when we start dealing with the infra-

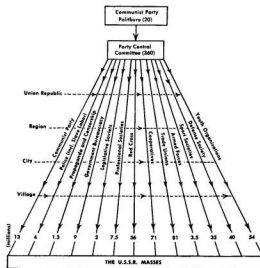


structure. Here things can be understood in themselves. A technical fact has an immediate and full significance. There is no ambiguity about it. It is what it 'says' and it says what it is. It even spells out a lot more. The water wheel spells feudal society, the steam mill: capitalism. There are therefore things that in themselves embody meanings and which are at the same time fully and immediately (11) understandable by us. Technical facts are not only the embodiment of previous ideas (i.e. incarnated meanings). They are also ideas 'to the fore': they actively signify everything that will 'result' from them, they give a determined meaning to everything around them.

There is not the shadow of a doubt that history is the area where meanings become 'embodied' and where things become meaningful. But, in themselves, none of these meanings are ever something finished or closed. They always throw one forward to something else. Nothing - and certainly no historical fact - bears inscribed on it a meaning we can just accept at face value. No technical fact has an assignable meaning if isolated from the society in which it occurs. And no technical fact imposes a univocal and ineluctable direction on the human activities - even the closest ones - that it may give rise to. In the same jungle, two primitive tribes may be living only a few miles apart. They use the same weapons and instruments. Yet they may have developed cultures and social structures as different as possible. Must we resort to God or to the particular 'soul' of each tribe for explanations? Surely not. A study of the total history of each tribe, of its relations with others, etc, would allow us to understand how and why different evolutions took place (although it would not allow us to 'understand everything', and still less to isolate a 'cause' of this evolution).

The British motor car industry operates on the same 'technological' basis as the French motor industry. It uses machines of the same type and employs the same methods to produce the same objects. The 'relations of production' are identical in both countries. Capitalist firms, producing for the market, hire workers. But the situation in the factories is quite different. In Britain: frequent unofficial strikes, a permanent guerilla of the workers against management, and bodies like shop stewards which are probably as democratic, efficient and combative as is possible under capitalism. In France: apathy and the integral transformation of workers' 'delegates' into buffers between management and men. The real 'relations of production', that is the extent to which the management's purchase of labour power assures it some real control over it, are significantly different. Even a partial understanding of how these different situations arose would require an analysis of the whole of each of these societies their past histories, etc.

"The general result at which I arrived and which, once won, served as a guiding thread for my studies can be briefly formulated as follows: in the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will... The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure... The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general..." (X)



4. ON THE HISTORICAL NATURE OF HISTORICAL CATEGORIES

So far we have dealt by and large with the content of the materialist conception of history. We have sought to see to what extent its actual formulations could be held to be true or even made sense. Our conclusion is clearly that this content is untenable, and the marxist conception of history does not offer the explanation of history that it claims to provide.

But the problem is not exhausted by these considerations. If the marxist conception fails to provide the explanation of history we are looking for, might there not be another conception that would provide it? And would it not then be an urgent task to work at the elaboration of a 'better' theory?

This second question is far more important than the first. After all it is one of the very laws of the progress of knowledge that scientific theories should, at a given stage, be seen to be insufficient or erroneous. The real condition for progress, however, is to understand why a theory reveals itself as false or inadequate.

Marx has proved that the whole of previous history is a history of class struggles, that in all the manifold and complicated political struggles the only thing at issue has been the social and political rule of social classes...



From what has already been said it will be seen that what is at stake in the failure of the materialist conception of history is something much more fundamental than the relevance or accuracy of a particular idea relating to the theory. It is the aim of the theory, and the very type of theory we are dealing with, that should be incriminated. Behind the attempt at erecting the productive forces into an autonomous factor determining historical evolution, there lurks the notion of condensing into some simple model the 'forces' which have dominated this evolution. And the simplicity of the model flows from the belief that the same forces, acting on the same objects, must produce the same chain of effects.

In what measure can history be made to conform to these categories? To what extent does historical material lend itself to this kind of treatment?

The idea, for instance that in all societies the development of the productive forces has 'determined' the relations of production and thereby all legal, political and other relations presupposes that in every society there has existed the same type of articulation between various types of human activity. It presupposes that economy, law, politics, religion etc, have always been, and have always necessarily been, both separate and separable. (If they are not, the opening statement is meaningless). But this is an unwarranted extrapolation. The articulations and structurations which characterise our society are not necessarily meaningful outside of our society. In fact these particular articulations and structurations are precisely products of historical development. Marx has already pointed out that 'the individual was a social product'. By this he didn't mean that the existence of the individual presupposed the existence of society or that society determined what the individual would be. He meant that the category 'the individual' (as a person freely detachable from his family, tribe or city) was not a 'natural' category and that it only appeared at a given stage of history. Similarly Marx repeatedly stressed that the different aspects or sectors of social activity only tend to become 'autonomous' in a given type of society and at a certain stage in historical development. But if this is true it becomes impossible to provide, once and for all, a model of relations or 'determinations' valid for any society. The points of support of these relations are not fixed. The movement of history constantly reconstitutes or redeploys the social structures, in an ever-changing manner. This does not necessarily take

place in the direction of an ever increasing differentiation. Aspects of social life for instance which were separate in the Greco-Roman world were reunited under feudalism (12) which in this sense represents an involution or recon-densation. We can sum it all up by saying that no more than in nature or in life are there in history any separate and fixed sub-stances acting from the outside on one another. One cannot make any generalisations about 'economy determining ideology' or about 'ideology determining economy' (or even about 'economy and ideology mutually determining one another') for the very good reason that both economy and ideology (con-sidered as separate areas that might or might not act on one another) are themselves products of a given phase (and a fairly recent one at that) of historical development. (13)

The marxist theory of history - and any general and simple theory of the same type - is necessarily led to postulate that the fundamental motivations of men are, and have always been, the same in every society. Historical 'forces' (productive or otherwise) can only become effective through the actions of men. To say therefore that the same forces play everywhere the same determining role means that these forces must somehow correspond to eternal and ubiquitously constant human motivations. Making of the 'development of the productive forces' the motive force of history implicitly presupposed a constant pattern of fundamental human motivations: roughly speaking the economic motivation. It implies that throughout history, human societies have always aimed first and foremost to increase production and consumption (and it does not matter here whether this aim was conscious or unconscious).

But this idea is not only materially wrong. It forgets that the pattern of motivations (and the corresponding values that orient men's lives) are social creations, that each culture determines its own values and rears individuals in accordance with its own norms. This moulding is virtually 'all powerful' (14) for the very good reason that there is no such thing as a 'human nature' that could resist the moulding process. Man does not at birth bear within himself the finished meaning of his life. The maximisation of consumption, or of power or of sanctity, are not tendencies inherent in the newborn child. It is the prevailing culture in which he will be brought up which will teach him that he 'needs' these things.

It is inadmissible to mix biological 'needs', or the 'instinct' of self-preservation with the analysis of history. (15) Biological 'needs' or the 'instinct' of self-preservation are the universal and self-evident bases of any human society, or for that matter of any living species. They can tell us nothing about any





It was precisely Marx who had first discovered the Great Law of Motion of history, the law according to which all historical struggles, whether they proceed in the political, religious, philosophical or some other ideological domain, are in fact only more or less clear expression of struggles of "social classes". The existence and thereby the collisions too, between these classes, are in turn conditioned by the degree of development of their economic position, by the mode of production and of exchange determined by it. This law has the same significance for history as the law of transformation of energy has for natural science.

(XII)

particular society. To base history (by definition always different) on the permanence of an 'instinct' of self-preservation (by definition always identical) is as absurd as trying to attribute to the constancy of the libido the infinite variety of neuroses, of sexual perversions existing in human societies, or of familial organisational structures.

When therefore a theory postulates that the development of the productive forces has everywhere been the determining factor, it does not just imply that men have always needed food (in that case, they might have remained apes). It implies something more. It implies that men always went further than biological needs, that they created for themselves 'needs' of another kind, and in this respect historical materialism is indeed a theory of the history of men. But historical materialism implies at the same time that these 'other needs' have always, in all places and at all times, been predominantly economic needs. And in so doing the marxist theory of history is not speaking about history in general but only about the history of capitalism. In fact to say that men have always sought the greatest possible development of the productive forces and the only obstacle encountered in this endeavour was the state of technology - or to claim that societies have always 'objectively' been dominated by this tendency and shaped according to it - are impermissible extrapolations. To proclaim these beliefs is tantamount to applying to the whole of history the motivations, values, movement and structuration of present society, or precisely of its capitalist (or state capitalist) half.



The notion that the meaning of life lies in the accumulation and preservation of wealth would appear sheer lunacy to the Kwakiutl Indians, who gather riches in order to destroy them. The idea of anyone deliberately seeking power or authority would seem just as absurd to the Zuni Indians, who if they want a chief for their tribe have to beat up some 'candidate' into acceptance. (15) Myopic marxists may smirk at examples of this kind which they may consider mere ethnological curiosities. But the real ethnological curiosities are those 'revolutionaries' who equate capitalist mentality with the ubiquitously identical and eternal content of human nature. What is this curious species which while endlessly prattling about the colonial problem or about the 'Third World' forget, in their acceptance of historical materialism, to take account of two thirds of mankind?

One of the major obstacles which the penetration of capital met, and still meets, in the 'backward' countries is precisely the lack of any capitalist type of economic motivation and mentality. A typical case (still often seen) is represented by those Africans who work for a time, stop as soon as they have gathered a certain small sum, return to their village and resume what for them was the only normal life. When capitalism succeeded in creating among these people a class of wage earners, it had not only (as Marx clearly showed) to reduce them to misery by systematically destroying the material basis of their independent existence. It had simultaneously, ruthlessly to destroy the values and meanings of their culture and life. It had to convert them into that combination of muscular brawn and empty stomach, ready to accept meaningless work, which is the capitalist image of man. (17)

It is wrong to claim that technico-economic categories have always been the determinant ones, for during long periods of history they neither existed as materialised categories of social life nor as poles or values. It is also false to pretend that in fact these categories were always there, albeit buried beneath layers of mystification (such as religion, politics, etc.) and to say that capitalism by demystifying and disenchanting the world, has allowed us at last to discover the real meaning of men's actions, a meaning which eluded the men themselves. In a sense, of course, technique and economy 'have always been there', since every society has to produce in order to survive and has to evolve a social organisation of this production. But the addition of these words 'in a sense' makes all the difference. Can one pretend that the way economic factors integrate with other social relations (for example with authority relations or with the relations of allegiance within feudal society) have no influence either on the nature of the economic relations of society in question or on the way these relations act upon one another?



'The economic structure of society always furnishes the real basis, starting from which we can alone work out the ultimate explanation of the whole superstructure of judicial and political institutions.' (XII)



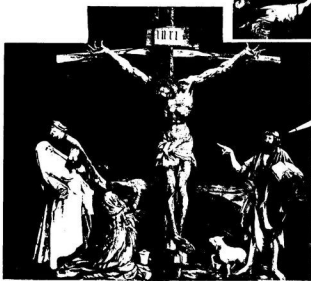
For example there is no doubt that once capitalism is constituted the distribution of productive resources between the different social strata and among the capitalists themselves is essentially the outcome of the free play of the economy. Such an affirmation would be meaningless however in the case of a feudal (or an 'asiatic') economy. At another level we might accept the idea that under 'laissez-faire' capitalism the State apparatus (and political relations) can be envisaged as a 'super-structure' depending on the economy but having no influence over it. But what becomes of this idea when the State owns or has the effective control of the means of production or when the State apparatus is peopled by a hierarchy of bureaucrats whose relation to production and to exploitation are necessarily mediated through and subordinated to their relations to the State? This was the case during several thousand years for such ethnologic curiosities as the Asiatic monarchies and is the case today for such sociological curiosities as the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, the People's Republic of China and sundry other 'socialist' countries. Does it really make sense to say that today the 'real' bureaucracy of the USSR only comprises the managers of the factories and that the bureaucracy in the Party, or Army, or State are merely secondary bureaucracies?

How can one claim that the way people experience these relations, which is so different between one society and another, is not important? Can one pretend that the meanings, motivations and values created by each culture have no function or effect other than that of camouflaging an economic psychology, which somehow always existed? This not only leads one to the paradoxical postulation of an unalterable human nature. It also leads to the no less paradoxical attempt to reduce the life of men as they themselves genuinely lived it (whether consciously or unconsciously) to a mere illusion - an illusion in relation to the 'real' (economic) forces which determined it. All this is equivalent to the invention of another subconscious beneath the subconscious, which unlike the first subconscious would be both 'objective' (since totally independent of the past history of the individual and of his actions) and 'rational' (since constantly geared towards definable and even quantifiable objectives - namely economic objectives.) But unless we believe in magic, the consciously or unconsciously motivated action of individuals is the obvious channel through which any play of historical 'forces' or 'laws' must exert itself. The elaboration of a whole 'economic psychoanalysis' would be required in order to reveal the 'real' - if hidden - economic meaning of human action. In such a system 'economic surges' would replace the pulses of the libido.

To be sure, hidden economic meanings can often be discovered in actions which on the surface don't appear to have any. But this doesn't imply that these economic meanings are the only ones or even the primary ones. It certainly does not mean that their content is always and everywhere the maximisation of 'economic satisfaction' in the Western capitalist sense. Whether 'economic surges' (one might say the 'pleasure principle' diverted to the ends of consumption and appropriation) take this or that form, whether they choose this or that objective, whether they manifest themselves in this or that pattern of behaviour, will depend on a totality of inter-related factors. It will depend in particular on the relations between the 'economic drive' and the sexual drive (and in particular on the manner in which the latter 'specifies' itself in a given society). It will depend finally on the world of meanings and values created by the culture in which the individual lives. (18) In fact it would be less false to say that homo economicus is a product of capitalist culture than to say that he created that culture. But we must say neither. There is always a deep similarity and correspondence between the personality structure of individuals and the cultural contents of the societies in which men live. It is pointless to seek to pre-determine the one by the other.



(XIV)



*The ideal is nothing but
the material world
reflected by the
human mind*

↑
- (XV) -
↓



The cultivation of maize among certain Mexican tribes, or the cultivation of rice in some Indonesian villages is not only a means of ensuring food. Agricultural labour is also lived as god-worship, as festival and as dance. And when some marxist theoretician comes along and claims that on these occasions everything which is not directly productive labour is but mystification, illusion or 'cunning of reason', it must be forcefully pointed out that he is himself a far more complete personification of capitalism than any mere boss ever could be. For not only does he remain pitifully entrapped in the specific categories of capitalism but he would like to enforce them upon the rest of human history.

What he is saying, in the end, is that everything that men have done or sought to do in history was only crude prefiguration of the factory system. Nothing justifies our pretence that the framework of gestures that make up productive work in the narrow sense is any more 'true' or 'real' than the web of meanings into which these gestures have been woven by those who engaged in them. Nothing except the postulate that the real nature of man is to be a productive-economic animal. This is a totally arbitrary postulate, and if it were true it would mean that socialism would for ever be impossible.





If in order to retain a theory we have to expunge from history almost everything that really happened there (except what occurred in the course of a few centuries in a narrow belt bordering the North Atlantic) the price is really too high. We had better keep the history and reject the theory. But there is no such dilemma. As revolutionaries we have no need to reduce history to simple diagrams. We need first of all to understand and to interpret our own society. And we can only do this by relativising it, by showing that none of the present forms of social alienation are inevitable and that they have not always existed. There is no need whatsoever to transform our society into an absolute, or unconsciously to retroject onto the past the models and categories which express the most fundamental aspects of that very capitalist reality against which we are struggling.

5. ECONOMIC DETERMINISM AND CLASS STRUGGLE

Another aspect of Marxism, the one that proclaims that 'the history of humanity is the history of the class struggle' seems to be opposed to economic determinism. But only seems. If one accepts the main propositions of the materialist conception of history, the class struggle is not an independent factor. It is but one link in the chain of causal relations unambiguously determined at any given moment by the state of the technico-economic infrastructure. What the social classes do, what they have to do, is each time plotted out for them by their situation in the relations of production. Since these relations of production have a causal and logical primacy classes can exert no influence over them. In fact, classes are only seen as the mediums, in which the action of the productive forces seeks incarnation. If classes act on the stage of history we have to understand the words 'to act' much as they are used in the classical theatre: actors recite a text published in advance. They carry out predetermined gestures and, be their acting good or bad, they cannot prevent the tragedy from moving on to its inexorable conclusion. A class is needed to keep a given socio-economic system working according to its own laws. And another class is needed to destroy that system when it becomes 'incompatible with the development of the productive forces'. The class which destroyed the previous system will then inevitably be led by its own interests to institute a new system, whose functioning it will have to ensure. According to the classical schema classes are agents of the historical process, but unconscious agents



(the term recurs repeatedly in both Marx and Engels). In the words of Lukacs 'they don't so much act as they are acted upon'. They act according to their class consciousness. But we are told that 'it is not men's consciousness that determines their being, but their social being which determines their consciousness'. Therefore not only must the class in power be conservative and the rising class revolutionary, but this conservatism and this revolutionary spirit are predetermined in their content and in all their important details (19) by the situation of each class in the productive process.



(XVIII)

It is no accident that for a marxist the idea of capitalism resorting to more or less intelligent policies is a stupidity hiding a mystification. To even speak of an intelligent policy pre-supposes that one accepts that the application or non-application of such a policy can make the real evolution different. But for the marxist that is impossible since this evolution is determined by 'objective' conditions. It isn't even argued that the policy didn't fall from Heaven, that it can only act in a given situation, that it cannot transcend the limits determined by the historical context, that it can only evoke an echo if other conditions are present - all this is brushed aside. No marxist will speak as if this intelligence could change anything (except perhaps the style of the speeches). At most he will seek to show how the 'genius' of Napoleon or the 'stupidity' of Kerensky were 'needed' and engendered by the historical situation.

It is no accident either that marxists will violently resist the idea that modern capitalism has attempted to adapt itself to historical evolution and to the social struggle and that it has modified itself in consequence. This would be tantamount to admitting that the history of the last century has not been exclusively determined by the remorseless functioning of predetermined economic laws but that the actions of social groups and classes have been able to modify the laws themselves by changing the conditions under which they operate.



(XVIII)



The development of modern industry therefore cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave diggers. Its fall, and the victory of the proletariat, are equally inevitable.

(XIX)

This last example clearly shows that economic determinism and class struggle propose two mutually incompatible explanations. In marxism there is not really a 'synthesis' but a triumph of determinism over class struggle. What, in historical materialism, is essential for the evolution of capitalism? Is it the development of technology and the effects of economic laws that govern the system? Or is it the struggle of groups and social classes? As far as 'Capital' is concerned the first answer is the correct one. Once the initial sociological conditions are established, capitalism evolves as the result of its own 'laws' which Marx outlined. These may be called 'the axioms of the system'. They are embedded in a given historical reality (a given level and a given type of technical development, the existence of adequate accumulated capital, the development of a sufficient proletariat, etc.). The system is continuously propelled as the result of the autonomous progression of technology. The class struggle here has no independent role to play. (20)

More sophisticated marxists, referring if necessary to other texts of Marx, will refuse this unilateral view and will assert that the class struggle plays an important role in the history of the system, that it can modify the functioning of the economy, and that one should not forget that this struggle can only take place within a given framework which determines its limits and gives it its direction.

But these concessions are useless. One cannot conciliate lion and lamb. The economic laws formulated by Marx are simply meaningless outside of the class struggle. For example the 'law of value' means nothing when applied to the fundamental commodity: labour power. It is then an empty formula whose real content can only be provided by the constant struggle between workers and employers, a struggle which is the main determinant both of the absolute level of wages and of the drift of wages over a whole period of time - And since all the other 'laws' presuppose a given distribution of the social product, the whole system hangs in mid-air, completely undetermined. (21) This is not just a theoretical lacuna - it is a hole so gaping that the whole theory is ruined. It also leads to different worlds in practice. Between the capitalism of 'Capital' (where economic laws' lead to a stagnation of wages, to increasing unemployment, to more and more violent crises and finally to a virtual impossibility of the system to function) and real modern capitalism (where wages increase in the long run in parallel with production and where the expansion of the system continues without encountering any economically insoluble problem) there is not only the difference between the real and the imaginary. There are in fact two different universes, each embodying a different fate, a different philosophy, a different policy, and demanding a different conception of revolution.

The idea that the autonomous action of the masses constitutes the central element of the socialist revolution - whether admitted or not - will always remain a secondary matter for a consequential marxist. The idea would be devoid of any real interest and wouldn't even have a proper theoretical or philosophical status. The marxist knows where history must go. If the autonomous action of the masses happens to go in that particular direction it teaches him nothing. And if it goes in another direction it is a bad autonomy, or more correctly it is no autonomy at all, since if the masses aren't moving towards correct targets it is because they are not autonomous and still under the influence of capitalism. When one holds truth, all else is error. But error means nothing in a determinist universe: error is only the product of enemy class action and of the whole system of exploitation.

The action of one particular class (the proletariat), its accession to a consciousness of its interests and situation has a special status in marxism. But only in a limited and special sense. This special status doesn't grant the proletariat much autonomy. The proletariat has to undertake a specific task, (22): the socialist revolution. And in the classic perspective the task of this revolution is, roughly speaking, to develop the productive forces to a level of such plenty that communist society and a free humanity become possible. The only real autonomy granted to the working class in all this is the autonomy to make the revolution or to refrain from doing so. Side by side with the idea that socialism was inevitable, Marx and the great marxists (Lenin and Trotsky for example) envisaged the possibility of an incapacity of society to transcend its crisis. This possibility of a 'mutual destruction of the two classes in struggle' left open an historical alternative: socialism or barbarism. But this idea is the limit of the system, and in a sense, the limit of any coherent thought. It was not completely excluded that history might 'fail', thus revealing itself to be absurd. But it would then not only be this theory but any theory that would collapse. The question of whether the proletariat will or won't carry out the revolution, even if the answer is uncertain, therefore conditions everything and no discussion is possible without the hypothesis that it will. This hypothesis granted, the direction in which the proletariat will carry out its task is predetermined. The autonomy thus allocated to the proletariat is seen to be no different from the freedom to be mad that each of us can grant to himself. It is a freedom which only exists - which only has any validity - as long as we don't seek to implement it. Using it would abolish it, as well as any coherence to the world. (23)

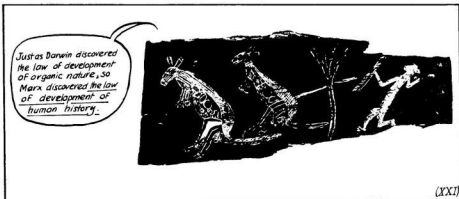
No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed.



(XX)

We must reject the idea that classes and their actions are mere relays and admit that the development of consciousness and the activity of classes and social groups (or individuals) may bring about new elements, which are neither predetermined nor predeterminable. (This does not mean of course, that either the achievement of consciousness or the activity of classes occur independently of the situation in which they take place.) But to do so we have to abandon the classic marxist model and look at history with new eyes.

The important conclusion from all this is not that the content of the materialist conception of history is 'wrong'. It is that the type of theory aimed at by this conception is meaningless. Such a theory is impossible to establish and is moreover unnecessary. To pretend that at last we have unravelled the secret of past and present history (and to a certain extent, the secret of the future) is no less absurd than to pretend that we have discovered the secret of nature. It is in fact more absurd and for those very reasons that make of history a history and of historical knowledge historical knowledge.



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6. SUBJECT AND OBJECT OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

When we speak of history, who is speaking? Obviously, a person of a given epoch, society and class - in short someone who is himself an historical being. But the very situation that creates the possibility of historical knowledge (namely the fact that only a historical being can have an experience of history and speak about it) also makes it impossible for this cognition ever to achieve the status of finished knowledge. Historical knowledge is itself, in essence a historical phenomenon, needing to be understood and interpreted as such.

These ideas should not be confused with the affirmation of a naive scepticism or relativism. We are not saying that what anyone says is but one opinion and that when we speak we only betray ourselves and don't convey anything real. There is something more than mere opinion (otherwise neither speech, nor action nor society would ever be possible). Prejudices, preferences, hatreds can be controlled or eliminated, and the rules of 'scientific objectivity' can be applied. All opinions don't have the same value. Marx for example is a great economist (even when he is wrong) whereas F. ancois Perroux is but a windbag (even when he is not wrong). But even after all the sifting has been carried out, all the rules observed, all the facts duly respected, the person who speaks is not a 'transcendental consciousness'. He is an historical being. And this is not an unfortunate accident but a logical condition (one might even say a 'transcendental condition') of historical knowledge. Just as only natural beings can ask themselves questions about a science of nature (for only a being of flesh and blood can have an experience of nature) (24) only historical beings can take up the problem of the knowledge of history. They alone can have experienced history. And just as experiencing nature does not consist in going out of the Universe and contemplating it from the outside, having an experience of history is not observing it from the outside as a finished product, laid out in front of one. Such a history has never existed and shall never offer itself to anybody as a field of study.

To have an experience of history as a historical being is to be in and part of history, as well as in and part of society. It necessarily means thinking history in terms of the categories of one's own epoch and one's own society (these categories being themselves the product of historical evolution) (25). It also means thinking history in relation to some objective or purpose, which purpose is itself a part of history.

Not only was Marx aware of all this but he was the first clearly to say it. When he mocked those who believed themselves able to 'step out of their epoch' he was denouncing the idea that there could ever be a theoretically pure subject, producing pure insights into history. He was attacking the idea that one could ever deduce 'a priori' the categories relevant to historical data (except as empty abstraction) (26). He denounced the bourgeois thinkers of his time who both naively applied to previous historical periods categories which were only meaningful in relation to capitalism and who refused to relativise these categories historically. ('For them there has been some history, but there is no more' Marx wrote in a sentence one might believe coined as an anticipatory description of later marxists). When Marx affirmed that his own theory reflected a class viewpoint (that of the revolutionary proletariat) he was not only exposing the bourgeois thinkers of his time. He was raising (and for the first time even attempting to answer) a problem which we now call socio-centrism: the fact that every society sees itself as the centre of the world and considers all others from its own viewpoint.

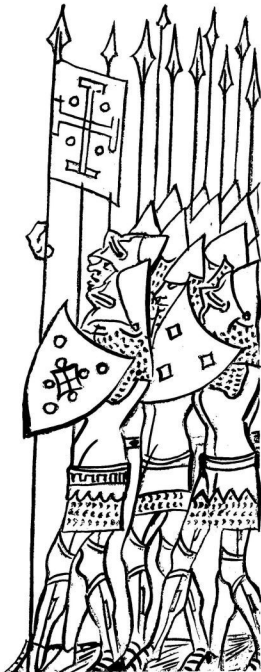
We have tried to show that Marx did not overcome this socio-centrism. His works embody a paradox. Marx was fully conscious of the historical relativity of capitalist categories, yet at the same time he was projecting (or retrojecting) them onto the whole of humanity. To say this is no criticism of Marx. It is a critique of historical knowledge in general. The paradox in question is part and parcel of any attempt seriously to think about history. From our vantage point of living a century later we not only can, we must relativise certain of Marx's categories, clearly isolating those elements of a great theory which deeply rooted it into its particular epoch. It is precisely because it is deeply rooted in its epoch that a great theory is great. To become aware of the problem of socio-centrism and to seek to eliminate all elements of it that can be identified is the first step towards any serious revolutionary re-thinking.

To believe that being deeply rooted has only negative characteristics (and that we could or should get rid of them by means of an infinite purification of reason) is the illusion of a naive rationalism. It is not only that this rooting is the condition of our knowledge and that it is only as historical beings, part of a moving society, that we can experience social structuration and struggle. Being deeply

rooted in our epoch is a positive condition of our knowledge. It is our very particularity that opens to us the doors of the universal. It is because we are linked to a certain viewpoint, to a structure of categories, to a given project, that we can meaningfully speak about the past. It is only when the present is intensely lived, experienced and understood as the present that we begin to see more - and other things - in the past than did the past itself. In a sense it is because Marx projects something onto the past that he discovers something about it.

It is one thing to criticize Marx's projections, as we have done, when they are presented as integral, exhaustive, and systematic. It is another thing to forget that, however 'arbitrary' Marx's attempts were to size up preceding societies, using capitalist categories, they proved tremendously fruitful - even if these attempts did, in the process, rape the 'truth proper' belonging to each of these societies. For, in fact, there is not such 'truth proper': neither the one 'revealed' by historical materialism nor the one which would be revealed by a quite utopian (and in the end quite socio-centrist) attempt 'to think each society for itself and from its own point of view'. What can be called the truth of any society is its truth for itself and for all other societies too. (28). It is one of the paradoxes of history that each civilisation or epoch, from the very fact that it is particular and dominated by its own obsessions, is led to suggest or to uncover new meanings in the societies which preceded it or surround it. These meanings can never exhaust or fix their object, not the least reason for which is that they themselves sooner or later become objects of interpretation. (People are today trying to understand why and how the Renaissance or the 17th or 18th centuries interpreted classical Antiquity in such different ways) These meanings moreover can never be reduced to the obsessions of the epoch which brought them to light, otherwise history would only be a juxtaposition of deliria and we would never be able to read a book about the past.

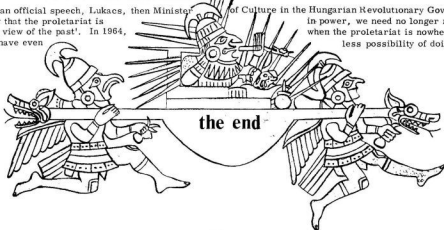
As we know, marxism attempted to transcend this paradox, integral to any historical thinking. This transcendence was seen as the result of a double movement. On the one hand there was the dialectic of history, which meant that the successive viewpoints of different epochs, classes, societies, had a definite relation (albeit a very complex one) with one another. These successive points of view conformed, however, to a certain order. Together they formed a system which unfolded throughout time, in such a way that what followed transcended (i.e. suppressed while maintaining) what went before. The present was seen as encompassing the past (as a 'surmounted' moment) and from this fact the present could



understand the past better than this past could understand itself. This dialectic is essentially the Hegelian dialectic. That what was for Hegel the movement of logos (reason) becomes in Marx the development of the productive forces (and the succession of social classes which marks the stages of this development) is, in this respect, of little importance. For both Marx and Hegel, Kant transcended Plato, and bourgeois society is 'superior' to the Ancient world. (29) This gives importance to the second term of the movement. Precisely because this dialectic is the dialectic of the successive appearance of the various classes in history, it is not infinite. (30) Historical analysis, according to marxism, showed that the succession could and would end with the appearance of the 'last class': the proletariat. And the proletariat was the last class - not simply the latest to appear on the scene (for we would then remain bound, within the terms of the historical dialectic, to a particular viewpoint which would later have to be relativised) - but the last ever. It would achieve the abolition of all classes and the passage to the 'true history of humanity'. The proletariat was a universal class, and it was because it had no particular interests to defend that it could both achieve the classless society and have a 'true' insight into past history. (31)

We cannot today maintain this point of view for a number of reasons. We cannot give ourselves in advance a finished dialectic of history or a dialectic on the verge of completion, even if we call it a dialectic of 'pre-history'. We cannot grant ourselves the solution in advance of the problem. We cannot give ourselves as a starting point a dialectic of any kind, for a dialectic postulates the rationality of the world and of history, whereas this rationality is a problem, both practical and theoretical. We cannot think of history as a unity, blinding ourselves to the enormous problems that this formulation gives rise to, as soon as more than mere lip service is paid to it. Nor can we think of history as a progressive dialectical unification. Plato is not absorbed in Kant, nor the Gothic in the Rococco. And the statement that the superiority of Spanish over Aztec culture was proven by the extermination of the latter satisfies neither the surviving Aztecs nor ourselves, who fail to understand how or why pre-Columbian America was silently preparing its dialectical negation in its meeting-to-come with the Spanish musket-carrying cavalry. We cannot base a final answer to the ultimate problems of thought and action upon the fact that Marx thought he had an exact understanding of the dynamic of capitalism. We now know that his understanding was partly illusion. But neither could we have done so if we still thought his insights 'true'. We cannot present a theory, even our own, as if it represents 'the viewpoint of the proletariat', for as the history of the last century has shown, this viewpoint far from offering the solution to every problem is itself a problem whose solution may or may not be found by working humanity. In any case we cannot accept the idea that marxism represents this viewpoint, for it contains capitalist elements deeply ingrained in its very substance and, not unrelated to this fact, it is currently everywhere an ideology defending the acts of the bureaucracy and nowhere a system of ideas embraced by the proletariat. We cannot accept, even if the proletariat were the last class, and marxism its authentic mouthpiece, that this vision of history would be the vision of history which would finally close all discussion on the matter. The relative nature of historical knowledge is not only function of its production by a class - it is also a function of its production within a given culture and in a given epoch, and the latter statement can in no way be offset by the former. The disappearance of classes in a future society will not automatically eliminate all differences concerning views of the past which might exist within it. Nor will it give to these views an immediate coincidence with their object. It will not protect such views from historical evolution.

In 1919, in an official speech, Lukacs, then Minister of Culture in the Hungarian Revolutionary Government, said: 'Now that the proletariat is in power, we need no longer maintain a unilateral view of the past'. In 1964, when the proletariat is nowhere in power, we have even less possibility of doing so.





(XXII)

FOOTNOTES

1. In the (as yet) untranslated portion of this text i.e. in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* No. 37 (pp 28-53) No. 38 (pp 44 to 86) No. 39 (pp 16 to 66) and No. 40 (pp 37 to 71) Cardan goes on to discuss, amongst other things, the two elements in Marx and how historical development led to the virtual disappearance of the one and to the monstrous hypertrophy of the other. He shows how Marx cannot be either identified with - or disconnected from - the movement he created, and stresses that there are many 'contradictions' in the writings of Marx, as indeed there are in those of any great thinker. (Eds. *Solidarity*)
2. A quote among dozens: 'The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production, which has sprung up and flourished along with, and under it. Centralisation of the means of production and socialisation of labour at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder...' Karl Marx, *Capital* (Allen and Unwin, 1938) p. 789.
3. For a detailed critique of Marx's economic theory see *Modern Capitalism and Revolution* by Paul Cardan (*Solidarity*, 1965) pp 19-33.
4. See *Modern Capitalism and Revolution*, pp 36 to 46.
5. Karl Marx. Preface to 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', *Selected Works*, vol I, pg 363 Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow 1958.
6. Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism* (Ann Arbor Paperback, 1961, p.17). Need we recall that until very recently (and even today) stalinists, trotskyists and the purists of 'ultra lefts' were virtually of one mind in denying, camouflaging or minimising under every possible pretext the continuing development of production since 1945. Even today the reflex-response of a marxist is 'Ah, but it's all due to the production of armaments'.
7. 'A distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic - in short ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out'. K. Marx, Preface to 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy' p. 363 (our emphasis).

In discussing technological stagnation (whether under 'feudalism' or more generally) two points should be highlighted:

Firstly there is the specific problem of what happened in Western Europe in the realm of technology between the fall of the Roman Empire (or even before, i.e. from the 4th century on) and the 11th or 12th centuries. These 600 or 700 years of human existence are part of the tremendously important, paradigmatic, hegelo-marxist segment of history known as 'western history' (or, to continental philosophers, as 'greco-occidental' history). I call this particular phase of history 'paradigmatic' and 'hegelo-marxist' because it is in fact the only instance in history where a quasi-'dialectical' development (in the socio-economic sense as well as, for Hegel, in the philosophical-'spiritual' sphere) can be construed (at the cost of repeated rapes of the facts, but this is another matter). But even this construction can only be elaborated by obliterating 6 or 7 centuries which were, whether compared to the greco-roman world or whether judged globally, a period of tremendous regression. Marxists never speak about these lost centuries. When they refer to 'technological progress during the Middle Ages' they mean by 'Middle Ages' the 12th, 13th or 14 centuries. I don't care about terminological quibbles, except that terminological sloppiness or tricks often serve to hide muddled thinking or sophistry. I am asserting that what we have here is not an 'accident' or a 'seasonal variation' but a tremendously long historical period during which, even if on specific points (say, the replacement of the light roman scratch plough by the heavy plough) a progressive change took place, the social fabric as a whole lost most of the achievements of the previous period. This is important, for it shows that technology is not bound to progress continually and that it is not 'autonomous' in any meaningful sense of the word.

Secondly, there is the more general problem of the change (and rate of change) of techniques during human history. It would be absurd to claim that there was absolute and wholesale technological stagnation until the 15th century. What I am saying is that most societies have lived most of their history on the basis of relatively stable technological conditions. So stable were in fact these conditions that, to Western eyes in the last few centuries, they would appear indeed as sheer technological stagnation within the societies and during the periods considered. This would apply, roughly speaking, to long periods of Chinese history, to Indian history from the 5th or 4th century B.C., until the Moslem invasions - and then again until the British conquest - not to mention the histories of all and sundry 'primitive' societies. It makes

all the difference in the world whether one lives in a society where an important new invention takes place every day, or every year, or every ten years (as has been the case in the West over the last 3 centuries) or whether one lives in a society where such events only occur every 300 years. Human history has taken place over - overwhelmingly under the latter, not the former conditions.

9. This problem will be discussed more fully in a forthcoming pamphlet dealing with the economic foundations of a self-managed society.
10. Letter to Joseph Bloch of September 21, 1890.
11. We don't mean 'immediately' in the chronological sense, but in the logical sense of 'without mediation' without the need of passing through another meaning.
12. For instance in the 'classic' period of feudalism the feudal lord was simultaneously the military leader, the administrator, the judge as well as the exploiter.
13. This was clearly perceived by Lukacs in his famous article on the 'Changing Function of Historical Materialism'. See Histoire et Conscience de Classe, (Paris, 1960, Editions de Minuit) pp 266 et seq.
14. No culture can of course condition people to walk on their heads or to fast eternally. But within these limits, one encounters in history almost every conceivable type of conditioning.
15. As Sartre does for instance in his Critique de la Raison Dialectique p. 166 et seq.
16. See Ruth Benedict Patterns of Culture.
17. See Margaret Mead et al. Cultural Patterns and Technical Change, a UNESCO publication (1953)
18. See Margaret Mead's Male and Female and Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies.
19. Strictly speaking one should say 'in all their details', full stop. Determinism only has meaning as a total determinism: even the resonance of the voice of a fascist demagogue or of a people's tribune should flow from the laws of the system. To the extent that this is impossible, determinism takes refuge behind distinctions between what is 'important' and what is 'secondary'. We are told that Clemenceau may have added a certain personal style to the policies of French Imperialism, but that style or no style these policies would in any case have been 'the same' in their important aspects, in their essence. Reality is thus divided into a principal layer, where 'essential'

things happen (and where causal connections can and must be established around the event considered) and a secondary layer (where such connections either don't exist or matter little). Determinism can thus only fulfill itself by again dividing the world. It is only at the level of ideas that it aims at 'one world' - in practice it is compelled to postulate a 'non-determined' segment of reality.

20. It only intervenes, in this vision, at the historical and logical limits of the system. Capitalism is not organically born out of the mere functioning of the economic laws of simple mercantile production. Primitive accumulation is necessary, which constitutes a violent break with the old social order. Moreover, capitalism won't cede its place to socialism without the proletarian revolution. But this doesn't alter what we are saying. It is still necessary that these active interventions of classes in history be predetermined. They introduce nothing that, in its own right, could be unforeseen.

21. See Modern Capitalism and Revolution, pp. 19-33)

22. 'The question is not what this or that proletarian, or even the whole of the proletariat at any moment considers as its aim. The question is what the proletariat is and what, consequently on that being, it will be compelled to do.' K. Marx and F. Engels The Holy Family (Moscow 1956, Foreign Languages Publishing House), p. 53.

23. Despite appearances this is also true for Lukacs. When he writes that 'for the proletariat... liberation can only come about through its own action' and that 'objective economic evolution... can only place in the hands of the proletariat the possibility and the need to transform society. But this transformation can only be the free action of the proletariat itself.' (Histoire et Conscience de Classe, p. 256. It is clear that the whole dialectic of history he is describing is only valid on condition that the proletariat accomplishes the 'free' action allocated to it.

24. In terms of Kantian philosophy: the corporality of the subject is a transcendental condition of the possibility of a science of nature, and thereby of everything that such corporality implies.

25. See the Fate of Marxism p. 4.

26. See for instance Marx's critique of the abstractions of the bourgeois economists in his Preface to his Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.

27. To think seriously and in depth. For the naive or the superficial there is no paradox but only the simple platitudes of non-critical projections or of an equally non-critical relativism.

28. It will be claimed that this formulation is tantamount to denying history any 'unity' or 'development' and that such an attitude can only lead to relativism, scepticism or eclecticism in the field of revolutionary practice.

But what is the 'unity' of history other than the sum total of the acts of speaking bipeds, which is a purely descriptive definition? I have sought to show that the 'dialectical unity' of history is a myth. The only 'clear' unity one can see is the one I have tried to describe when saying that each and every society necessarily had a 'view of itself' which was at the same time a 'view of the world' (including a view of other societies it may have been aware of) and that this view was part of 'its truth' (or, to use Hegelian jargon, of its 'reflected reality') but did not exhaust it.

We know almost nothing of Greece, for instance, if we do not know what the Greeks knew, thought or felt about themselves. There are obviously equally important things about Greece which the Greeks did not, and could not have known. We see them but we see them from where we are, and also by virtue of where we are. This is what seeing is all about. One never sees an thing from all possible places at once. One always sees from a definite viewing point and one then always sees an 'aspect'. I see because I am myself. I see not only with my eyes: when I see something, my whole life is there, embodied in this vision, in this act of seeing. Those who believe that a total history of humanity, almost free from socio-centrism, will be achieved under socialism are utterly wrong. This is equivalent to saying that socialist society will be capable of seeing everything (including, strictly speaking, the future, otherwise what is total history?). How can you 'fix' the meaning of the past if you do not know what comes afterwards? Was the 'meaning' of the Russian Revolution the same in 1917, in 1925, in 1936, and today? Or is there, somewhere in the sky, some Marx Yavesh seeing everything and from nowhere, everything, including a 'meaning in itself' of the Russian Revolution which would include, of necessity, the meaning of all its possible consequences and repercussions until Doomsday?

We always see from somewhere, from a certain perspective. This is not a 'defect' of our vision: it is seeing, it is vision. The rest is the perennial phantasm of theology and philosophy alike. And what we say about seeing also applies to thinking.

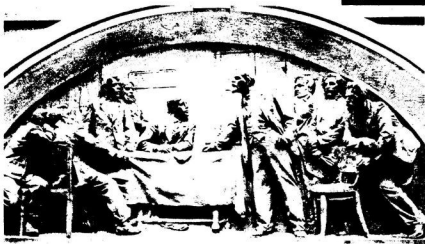
Does the fact that I can only explore successive 'aspects' of an object, that I can never be everywhere at once (for instance both inside and outside the object simultaneously) abolish the distinction between a blind man and one capable of sight? Does it



Below : 1925: Lenin in 1917.



«Was the 'meaning' of the Russian Revolution
the same in 1917, in 1925, in 1936 and today?»



1970: Lenin in 1917.

abolish the distinction between the colour blind and the normal? Or the difference between somebody who has hallucinations or sees what he wishes to see (like the hungry Charlie Chaplin in The Gold Rush seeing his companion take the form of a chicken) and somebody else? Does it abolish the difference between somebody who does not know that the stick bent in the water is an optical illusion and somebody who does? Don't we see the stick unbent when we know? And so on and so forth. If truth is anything at all in history or anywhere else - it is this continuous project of bringing to light other aspects of the object, and of ourselves, of locating the illusions and the reasons they exist, of trying to relate all this in what we call - mysterious words - a consistent way. This is of course an infinite project. But, contrary to what Marxists and sometimes Marx himself thought, all this is not, and never was, the prerequisite of revolution and of a radical reconstruction of society. To possess 'absolute truth' in this sense (i.e. the fulfillment of this infinite project) is rather the very opposite. The belief that an absolute truth exists (and therefore can be in the possession of an individual or a group of individuals) is a profoundly reactionary belief and one of the common intellectual foundations of Fascism and Stalinism alike.

29. Marx never specifically asserted the 'superiority' of bourgeois society (and culture) over that of the Greeks but this is the inevitable logical implication of 'dialectics' applied to history, where the so-called 'superstructure' is made dependent on the so-called 'infrastructure'. It is precisely because Marx was not a phillistine, and not the 'Absolute Spirit made Man' that he 'contradicted' himself on this very point. In a sense, this is all to his credit.

On March 7, 14 and 21, 1903, Karl Kautsky published in Neue Zeit an article which Marx had left unfinished in his life time. In it Marx starts asking such questions as 'Is the view of nature and of social relations which shaped Greek imagination and Greek art possible in the age of automatic machinery, and railways, and locomotives and electric telegraphs? Where does Vulcan come in as against Roberts and Co., Jupiter as against the lightning rod, and Hermes as against the Credit Mobilier ... What becomes of the Goddess Fame side by side with Printing House Square ... Is Achilles possible side by side with powder and lead? Or is the Iliad at all compatible with the printing press and steam press?'

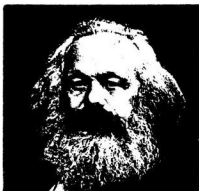
Marx then wonders why, despite the links between Greek art and the specific forms of social development to which it corresponded, we could 'still enjoy them and consider them, in

certain respects, as norms and unattainable models'. The 'explanation' he offers - that the Greeks were 'normal children' and therefore that they convey to us the 'eternal charm' of the child's 'naivety' and 'sincerity' - is, to put it mildly, childish. One can only laugh at the idea that Oedipus Rex is 'naive and sincere'. And what about philosophy, are we still reading Plato and Aristotle - and heaping interpretation upon interpretation - because we are under the charm of their infantile normalcy? Marx's manuscript ends abruptly at this point - as does the chapter on Social Classes in Das Kapital - and we are left with the problem in its entirety: how is it that 25 centuries later one finds more food for thought in a few sentences of these authors than in 99% of the millions of volumes now printed, year in, year out? And if Plato belongs to a happy 'childhood of humanity' Kant, although perhaps less 'graceful', should certainly be more intelligent than Plato, But he is not. If humanity passes through 'childhood' and subsequent 'adulthood' (granting fully that metaphors are metaphors) then Spinoza is of necessity more 'mature' than Aristotle. But he is not. These statements are meaningless, Kant and Spinoza are not 'superior' to Plato or Aristotle neither are they 'inferior' (though one might recall that a non 'literary' scientific philosopher, such as A. N. Whitehead once wrote that 'the whole of western philosophy is best understood as a series of marginal annotations to Plato's text'.) But contemporary technology, qua technology, is infinitely 'superior' to Greek technology. Now what has Marx (and the marxists, vulgar or not) to say about this divorce? Nothing. They may point out that according to Marx bourgeois society was more progressive than ancient, but hardly superior... But this single little sentence totally and irreversibly ruins the whole of the marxist conception of history. If 'progressivity' and 'inferiority' can go together, or conversely, if a society can be 'materially' more 'backward' and culturally 'superior' (or 'not inferior') what is left of the 'materialist conception of history'? What is left of the 'dialectical development of history', etc...?

30. The need for such an 'infinity' and for its opposite is one of the impossibilities of Hegelianism and of any system of dialectics. We will return to this point later.
31. Lukacs, in his History and Class Consciousness developed this point in a most thorough and rigorous manner.



- I. Special introduction to the English (1892) edition of 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific'.
 - * Aubrey Beardsley. Salome: the Dancer's Reward. (1894)
- II. 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific' (1877).
 - * Gustave Doré. The Vision of Death (1865).
- IV. Preface to the 1888 English edition of the Communist Manifesto.
 - * Gustave Doré. The Last Supper (1865).
- VI. Preface to the 1888 English edition of the Communist Manifesto.
- VII. Letter to Bloch (1890).
 - * G. Doré. Don Quixote and Sancho setting out (1863)
- IX. Letter to Mehring (1893).
- XI. 'Karl Marx'. Brunswick Volkskalender, 1878.
- XII. Introduction to 3rd German (1885) edition of Marx's 'Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte'.
 - * Greek vase: Hercules feasting among the gods on Olympus. About 510 B.C.
- XIII. 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific' (1877).
 - * Frans Masereel. Skyscrapers (1926).
- XIV. 'Feuerbach and the end of classical German philosophy' (1886)
 - * Jacques Louis David. The Death of Marat (1793).
- XVI. 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific' (1877).
 - * J.V. Stalin addressing the Congress (Jan, 1924).
- XVIII. Letter to Starkenburg (1894).
 - * David's 'Napoleon crossing the Alps' and Meissonnier's '1814'
- XXI. Speech at the graveside of Karl Marx (1883).
 - * Australian aboriginal painting on tree bark.



- III. Preface to 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy'. (1859)
 - * The storming of the Winter Palace.
- V. Letter to Annenkov. (1846)
 - * Joseph Stalin and German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop shake hands after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. (August 24, 1939)
- VIII. Preface to the first German (1867) edition of 'Capital'.
 - * Gustave Doré. The erection of the Cross (1865)
- X. Preface to 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy'. (1859)
- XV. Appendix to second German edition of 'Capital' (1873).
 - * Matthias Grünewald. The Crucifixion. (1509-11), Musée Unterlinden, Colmar.
 - * Eugene Delacroix. 'Liberty guiding the People. July 28, 1830.' (1830). Louvre Museum, Paris.
 - * The October Days of 1917. Painting by M. Sokolov. (Lenin in Smolny)
- XVII. 'Capital', (1867)
 - * Hungary, 1956. The people pull down Stalin's statue.
- XIX. 'Capital', (1867)
 - * Frans Masereel. Fumees. (1920)
- XX. Preface to 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy'.
- XXII. Letter to Annenkov. (1846)
 - * Hanging of rebels during Thirty Years War. (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.) Early 17th Century.

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