

Louis Althusser and Historical Materialism

by Neil Eriksen

If I were asked for a brief summary of the essential *thesis* I have been trying to defend in my philosophical essays, I should say: Marx founded a new science: the science of History. I should add: *this scientific discovery is a theoretical and political event without precedent in human history.*¹

We have previously claimed that some of Louis Althusser's most profound contributions to revolutionary marxism can be found in the area of historical materialism.² Foremost in this area is his rigorous defense of the scientificity of marxism—the scientific character of Marx's theories for the study of social formations in history. But what does it mean to say that marxism is a science? On what basis is this claim for scientificity made? And what does this really mean for revolutionary politics? To answer these questions we must first discuss what we mean by science. To this end we will begin with some rigorous definitions. And while the question of what constitutes a science is a difficult one, it is necessary to begin here to lay the basis for understanding our subsequent discussions of the science and politics of marxism.

To anticipate some of our arguments, the issue of the relationship between science and ideology is one of specific scientific concepts and their interrelationship for us, and is not a question of 'true' or 'false' ideas. They are different social practices: science produces knowledge; ideology produces specifically oriented sets of values and interpretations of the world that permit people to live their daily lives. There are few ideologies in the modern world that do not contain some elements of scientific knowledge. Just as no science exists in a pure state, free of ideological elements.

Once we have outlined what science is and its relationship to ideology, we will proceed to discuss specific concepts that Althusser used to advance the science of historical materialism. This discussion will include such concepts as problematic, symptomatic reading and the epistemological break. We will also discuss how the marxist science is different from other, experimental sciences such as chemistry and physics. Then we will discuss concepts specific to Marx's theories of history that Althusser deepened and elaborated, including mode of production and social formation. Then, in our discussion of relative autonomy and overdetermination,

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we will relate these concepts to Althusser's overall system and to the work of Marx and Lenin. This will be followed by an extended critique of the economist deviation and an analysis of Lenin's contributions to this critique with the conception of the conjunctural analysis. Finally, we will conclude with an outline of the marxist conceptions of ideology and the state. But before any of these specific scientific conceptions can be thoroughly addressed, we must tackle the subject of science itself: what it is, and what it does.

The Production of Knowledge

Scientific practice produces knowledge of the world in which we live. In this respect, science is fundamentally different from ideology, or ideological practice. Science produces knowledge; that is to say, an approximation or relative truth concerning its object, whether it be an atom, a chemical reaction or a given social formation. Scientific practice is the organization and production of this knowledge through the acting of a definite theoretical system upon determinate raw data and ideas. Ideology, on the other hand, provides human individuals with perceptions and an outlook on their relations to the world and their place within it with a particular slant or coloration, as with nationalism or populism, thereby constituting them within that world, qualified to perform a role within it and subject to its hierarchies of domination. Ideology is the product, or the effect of the social practices of a society, functioning as a necessary element in that society's reproduction. Human interaction is based on ideology; communication cannot take place without language, or without ideology—a shared system of reference points.

But by its very nature ideology, as a product of a particular society, tends to conceal certain fundamental aspects of given relations in the interest of the reproduction of that society. Any understanding of the scientificity of marxism is predicated on the distinction between science and ideology, because science, by definition, must work to reveal what is concealed in physical and social relationships.

While there are a multiplicity of sciences, each defined by its own field (living organisms for biology, chemical reactions for chemistry, etc.) and by the employment of specific mechanisms to provide knowledge of that particular field or focus of work; there are certain general assumptions about the world which are shared by all science. First among these generalities is the materialist assumption that there is a concrete material world existing independently of the human

mind which can be appropriated and understood by the rational thought processes of that mind. This mental appropriation is scientific knowledge.³

Knowledge is a process of reasoning which takes place in the distinct realm of thought—the mechanisms of the human mind. The process of the production of knowledge, however, has a definite effect on objects outside the human mind, those existing in the distinct realm of the real world. The effect of knowledge is to 'assimilate' these latter objects within the realm of thought by reproducing them as concrete 'mental categories'. The correspondence between knowledge and the real object is the correspondence of the products of two distinct processes which produce their results in different ways: on the one hand, the evolution of concepts, through reasoning; on the other, the evolution of real objects through a multiplicity of historical causal factors. It is the products of these two processes which correspond, and not the processes themselves. Reasoning follows its own laws and methods; it does not simply mirror the actual historical development of the objects to which it corresponds. The correspondence between the results of these two processes—knowledge and the concrete—is possible, despite their different natures and modes of formation, because both share the common property of being synthetic. In *Capital Marx* defined the processes of political economy as a synthesis of many determinations. In an earlier text he conceived of knowledge, too, as a synthetic process:

The concrete concept is concrete because it is a synthesis of many definitions, thus representing the unity of diverse aspects.⁴

In this manner knowledge assimilates the concrete: one synthetic combination of elements corresponds to and represents another. This is the marxist theory of epistemology; epistemology being the study of the relationship between the process of the production of knowledge and the objects external to it existing in the real world.

Science is not simply the mysterious product of the minds of a handful of 'brilliant' and 'gifted' individual scientists. Scientific knowledge is the complex product of particular material social practices which discover and explain distinct phenomena which account for what is observed in the real world, and with which empirical data becomes conceivable and explicable⁵ To further understand what we mean when we say that science is a *practice* that produces knowledge, we refer to Althusser's description of practice in general:

By *practice* in general I shall mean any process of transformation of a determinate given raw material into a determinate *product*, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means (of 'production'). In any practice thus conceived, the determinant moment (or element) is neither the raw material nor the product, but the practice in the narrow sense: the moment of the *labour* of transformation itself, which sets to work, in a specific structure, men, means and a technical method of utilizing the means.⁶

In the realm of theory, Althusser calls these three elements of theoretical production Generalities I (raw materials), Generalities II (means of production) and Generalities III (final product). Generalities I—the raw materials that the marxist science transforms—are existing concepts and empirical data which have been previously observed, gathered and generalized by a human observer, operating within a particular frame of reference. Generalities II, the means of production, are the theoretical concepts and methodology existing at the time that the practice is undertaken. This

includes the state of the marxist science, as well as the influence upon it of marxist philosophy. Generalities III are the finished product; the actual knowledge produced is the result of the transformation of the raw materials through the application of the means of production to them. The word *transformation* is the key here; for, it is the *process* of transformation which is decisive for the production of knowledge. If the first level—raw materials—is dominant, the result is empiricism. If the third level is dominant—the final product—the result is speculative reasoning.

This leads us to the recognition that, while science can provide knowledge of the concrete, that *scientific* knowledge is not necessarily the same as everyday perceptions (ideology). To primitive human beings it appeared that the sun *rose* in the East and *set* in the West; that the earth was the center of the universe around which everything else revolved. It took science—the Copernican revolution—to demonstrate otherwise. This demonstration, or if you will, the constitution of a new science, is always like this: based on a fundamental break (discontinuity) with the 'common sense' of immediate sensual perception or of previous ideological systems.

This process of constituting a science is not an instant, or automatic one; it must be constantly fought for and defended against the holdovers (vestiges) of previous perceptions and ideologies. It is a process which never ends; witness the debates over the theory of evolution today, decades after it was generally accepted into the general assumptions of the sciences and even every day life. There is no science for which this constant struggle is more necessary than marxism, which has found arrayed in active opposition to it a host of theoretical ideologies and pseudo-scientific disciplines.

But it is necessary to do more than simply defend and fight for science. Each science itself must constantly develop and change, in order to effectively function within a rapidly changing world. Althusser has been acutely conscious of the fact that it is in the very process of posing problems that science opens itself up to be able to produce true knowledge of a situation, or on the other hand, precludes any but the predetermined answers with which one expected, or hoped to conclude.

It is on this basis that we must raise the issue of the continual process of the transformation of a scientific system. A true science is engaged in a constant reworking of its concepts and theories, constantly questioning and probing basic assumptions, and challenging any 'easy' answers.

To be convinced of this we need only note that a science only progresses, i.e., *lives*, by the extreme attention it pays to the points where it is theoretically fragile. By these standards, it depends less for its life on what it knows than on what it *does not* know: its absolute precondition is to focus on this unknown, and to pose it in the rigour of a problem.⁷

In this process of posing problems, there are times when science itself goes through major upheavals because the existing theories are inadequate for addressing a changing world. Einstein's theories transformed the realm of physics as established by Copernicus and Newton. In turn, aspects of Einstein's theory of relativity are being challenged today because of new observations and postulations.

In the course of the evolution of a science, the process of the transformation of concepts and theories, the development of new elements and the discarding of old ones, as well as the deepening and modifying of elements to be retained, reaches a point of fundamental transformation or recasting. The transformation of physics initiated by Einstein was such a recasting. Similarly, Lenin and Althusser contributed to such recastings within the marxist science.

The Concept of the Problematic

All knowledge is by definition, inseparable from the *productive system . . . of which it is a product.*⁸

The constitution of a science is a fundamental revolution in the way in which a phenomenon is perceived. Put another way, it represents a replacement of one theoretical framework by another. Therefore, in order to understand the constitution of a science, we must understand theoretical frameworks in general. Althusser enables us to do so with his conception of the *problematic*. In the conception of knowledge that we describe here, words, concepts and methods cannot be considered in isolation; they only exist in the (theoretical) framework in which they are used. This framework is a *problematic*.

All theoretical work, whether the practitioner is conscious of it or not, is based on some type of problematic, however rudimentary; that is, a unity of concepts and methods which ask questions, have expectations and provide conclusions. Any problematic is like a 'field of vision': the concepts and methods allow the practitioner to see and handle certain problems within the field, while the presence of those concepts and methods, as well as *the absence of others*, prevents him or her from seeing and handling others, outside, as well as, within the 'field of vision'.

All problematics are not the same, however; nor do all problematics function the same within theory. Ideological problematics are fundamentally closed in nature, defending and reproducing themselves; subject, however, to changes as a result of economic and political crises and their interaction with other ideologies as well as with science. Scientific problematics, if they are to be truly scientific, must by nature be open, constantly challenging their own concepts and methodology, and previous assumptions and conclusions, constantly working to expand their field of vision and to produce new knowledge.

Ideological and scientific problematics also function differently within their processes of production. The mode of production of ideology starts with a "given" produced outside itself, and then seeks to construct around it a legitimating theoretical system. The mode of production of science is one in which previously tested and proven concepts and methods are applied to new phenomena in order to produce knowledge of them. This distinction is clearly seen in the theory of evolution and creationism. Creationism starts with a conclusion produced outside of science, in theology—accepts it unquestioningly, and seeks to construct around it a legitimating, pseudo-scientific rationale. The theory of evolution, on the other hand, is the product of a long period of critical study and investigation of the actual material phenomena in the world, which has been constantly and critically tested, and its theories rectified in light of new discoveries.

Because a problematic is centered as much on the absence of problems and concepts within it, as on their presence, "it can therefore only be reached by a *symptomatic reading* on the model of the Freudian analyst's reading of his patients' utterances."⁹ Grasping the concept of *symptomatic reading* is essential to understanding the concept of problematic. This new concept was developed as a sharp demarcation with a type of 'reading' most often associated with empiricism, which generally asserts that the meaning of any discourse or written text is immediately accessible for all to see—a text needs simply to be read to be fully understood. Not so says Althusser. For him each text or discourse is structured much the same as the human unconscious, where the errors, omissions and absurdities of the discourse of dreams and everyday life conceal the symptoms of a complex and hidden structure.¹⁰

For Althusser there are two possible ways to read any text. The first is a 'simple' ('innocent') reading. Such a reading works to understand what is said, as well as to pinpoint the gaps or weaknesses of the text. A 'symptomatic reading' goes beyond the 'simple reading' of what is present and what is absent, to delve into the underlying content hidden in what is omitted. A simple reading can record discoveries of a particular text—that is, what is seen (sighted) and explicitly explained, at the same time that the omissions and oversights of the text can be noted. More than simply 'reading between the lines', symptomatic reading, on the other hand, examines the mechanisms which actually *produce* the 'sightings' and 'oversights', rather than merely recording them. In the absences or omissions of a text (the invisible), we can find revelations of prejudices, and even understandings that the author did not know were there. Marx read the classical political economists in this way, discovering the concept of surplus value buried in a gaping hole in their discourse. Althusser read Marx's *Capital* similarly, with an epistemological eye, that is, with an eye to exercising vigilance in the conceptual and methodological operations of the scientific practice of marxism.¹¹

The understanding of 'symptomatic reading' is central to Althusser's work; that which is excluded from a discourse must be addressed as a problem to be solved. In his texts on method, he is more concerned with the process—with the 'problems posed' (or not posed), than with the answers that are generated by any one group or individual. The 'field of visibility' often holds to conclusions which are reached long before the problems are posed in any ideological discourse; and such conclusions shape the way a question is formulated in the first place. As Engels wrote concerning Marx's relation to the classical political economists: "What they considered a solution he considered a problem."¹² In fact, because a given problematic functions to deny a given set of problems, or to define them as outside the acceptable limits of its discourse, it generally cannot even see the limits it sets. A scientific problematic ceases to function as such if it sets limits beyond which it will not probe and question.

It was to decipher the difference between Marx's scientific work and the pre-scientific work of his predecessors, that Althusser embarked on the journey recorded in *Reading Capital*. And if this text is not completely satisfactory, it does clearly distinguish the specific character of the object of Marx's study, which he had gleaned from the omissions of Adam Smith and David Ricardo. In this context, the symptomatic reading is the basis for establishing the presence of an *epistemological break* that initiated the scientific problematic of historical materialism.

The Epistemological Break

The concept of the 'epistemological break', is one that Althusser utilized from the work of Gaston Bachelard, the renowned French historian of the sciences under whom Althusser studied,¹³ although he revised it in conjunction with dialectical materialism to ensure its usefulness for marxist science. The 'epistemological break' refers to the process by which a science is born and constructs itself out of a pre-existing ideological field. Or as Althusser put it, the 'epistemological break' designates the "mutation in the theoretical problematic contemporary with the foundation of a scientific discipline."¹⁴

In order for a science to produce knowledge of its object it must produce the concepts necessary to think that object. Such concepts must be the product of scientific practice, they do not exist spontaneously in the given ideological field. Thus, the birth of any science requires a revolution in

terminology, a new language, and thus a new epistemology. Hence the concept of the 'epistemological break'.

The 'epistemological break' must be distinguished from other kinds of changes in problematics: first of all from mere "intra-ideological" ruptures, or revampings, on the one hand, and from "intra-scientific" recastings on the other.¹⁵ What we are saying here is that not every new development in ideology is an 'epistemological break', and that every new development in a science is a part of the continuation of the 'epistemological break' which founded it, and not a new 'epistemological break' of its own. In other words, Einstein's theories do not call into question the scientificity of the mechanics of physics, but are a further development *within* that general science.

The 'epistemological break' signifies a fundamental critique of what went before, a "point of no return" after which the science which is born must constantly deepen its critique of the ideological problematic from which it emerged. The effects produced by the 'epistemological break' must be specified. First, as we have just discussed, the break renders impossible within it certain ideological discourses with which the existence of the new science has ruptured. Secondly, the break, in creating the new science gives it a relative autonomy. After the break the new science depends on its own continuation and the necessity of developing concepts and methods appropriate to it. Third, the birth of any science necessarily produces determinant effects in the field of philosophy, indicating new lines of demarcation in conflicts on the philosophical terrain.¹⁶ The birth of the marxist science is illustrative of these propositions.¹⁷

The issues surrounding the foundation of historical materialism center on two interrelated questions: does an 'epistemological break' exist in Marx's work; and if it does, where is it located? What is at issue here is the distinction between Marx's early work, essentially ideological in character, and Marx's mature and scientific work. In other words, recognition of an 'epistemological break' signifies a "recognition of the specificity of scientific knowledge."¹⁸ Depending on whether or not one recognizes the radical line of demarcation that separates the young Marx from the mature Marx, one conceives of marxism as either a new philosophy—a new morality; or as a scientific practice—a dialectical practice directed toward the *concrete world* and *action* through the process of the production of scientific knowledge.¹⁹

Althusser sums up his position on the nature of the development of Marx's thought in three basic theses:

(1) There is a fundamental 'epistemological break' in Marx's work that is located by Marx himself in the *Theses on Feuerbach*—marking the earliest bounds of the break in the Spring of 1845, and developed more substantially, if not conclusively, in *The German Ideology*—Marx and Engels' critique of their "erstwhile philosophical [ideological] consciousness."

(2) This 'epistemological break' simultaneously concerns two distinct theoretical disciplines: scientific practice and philosophical practice. With his break with his ideological 'philosophies of history', Marx founded the *science* of history—historical materialism, and established a new philosophy—dialectical materialism.

(3) The 'epistemological break' divides Marx's thought into two long periods: "the 'ideological' period before, and the scientific period after the break in 1845."²⁰

But it must be emphasized that the break is not a simple thesis relating to texts on either side of a clearly drawn line. Rather, the significance of the break concerns "what the texts indicate."²¹ With a 'symptomatic reading' we can go beyond a comparison of what is included in a particular text to "construct the 'problematic' of the text: its underlying conceptual framework, the 'space' in which its positions—and

its silences—function significantly."²² Therefore, we see that the claim of an 'epistemological break' is one concerning the transformation of Marx's ideological problematic into a scientific problematic. The similarities in terminology in the texts before and after the break do not negate the significance of the change in the problematic because the terms begin to take on different meanings and usages, as well as a different hierarchy and predominance.

Thus, when we consider the two main periods and the texts that fall within their limits, we must consider them as a process, a transition from ideological notions to mature, but by no means 'pure', scientific conceptions. The changes that occurred to bring Marx from radical-liberal political positions in the early 1840s when he edited the *Rheinische Zeitung*, onto the terrain of a new scientific problematic, took place on three major levels: theoretical, political and philosophical. All three combined in a complex interaction, overdetermined in the last instance by their structural unity. Althusser has described this process as a move from Marx's earlier radical-liberal political and philosophical positions, through a stage of radical-humanist positions—exemplified in the *1844 Manuscripts*, culminating in the process of developing (working class) communist-materialist positions. Therefore, says Althusser, when we consider a text of the middle stage such as the *1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, the central text for all attempts to construct a "marxist humanism," we can recognize the tension of a work that poses questions for which its problematic cannot provide answers. As Emile Bottigelli put it in his introduction to the French edition of the text:

In 1844, Marx's thought was still a long way from having reached its definitive form. The *Manuscripts* are evidence of the clarification-process of thinking that, on many points, is still seeking its way, rather than the expression of finished thought."²³

But as we mentioned above, the initial break with Marx's early works did not constitute a total break, once and for all. Althusser claims that the period from 1845 to 1857 should be seen as a transition period itself, with its mature work emerging from 1857-83. And so, if the break with Marx's prescientific problematic was not as abrupt as Althusser first postulated it, a fundamental rupture can be said to exist in its initial stages in Marx's mature work.

The fundamental discontinuity in Marx's thought represented by the break, marked a twofold break with his past: both a theoretical event and a political event. Before Marx "settled account" with his pre-scientific conceptions, the "continent of history" was dominated by various "philosophies of history"—'theoretical ideologies' inspired by religious, moral or political preconceptions that blocked the scientific recognition of the nature of class societies, that is the particular character of the struggles among social classes. Marx's scientific discovery marked the beginning of a political class struggle in theory which accompanies the struggle of classes in society as a whole.

By demonstrating that human history is the history of class societies, and . . . ultimately of class struggle, by demonstrating the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation and capitalist rule, Marx directly countered the interests of the ruling classes.²⁴

And not only did Marx expose the various manifestations of the class struggle, but he also worked to change them. As we mentioned above, the initiation of the science of historical materialism permitted the *fusion* of the workers' movement with scientific theory such that scientific political practice became possible. We will return to this essential element of revolutionary marxism shortly.

In Marx's case, the fundamental critique of what preceded him was of previous theories which helped the ruling classes retain power in the face of increased resistance by the working classes to the exploitation under which they suffered. The irreplaceable difference between Marx's developed theories and the notions of previous theoretical disciplines—the 'philosophies of history'—centered around the fact that Marx replaced the old notions with fundamentally new and unprecedented concepts. He structured his theories around the concepts of mode of production, productive forces, relations of production, social formation, ideology and class struggle; where those who preceded him had relied on abstract notions of 'society', 'man', alienation, injustice and 'freedom' as the center of their theories. The change in concepts signalled a discontinuity (rupture) that represented a totally new approach to the study of social history. Where the prescientific ideas claimed to provide true representations of historical processes, they in fact generally closed off avenues of investigation, masking the mechanisms that governed those processes. This process essentially reproduces the existing relations of exploitation. In contrast the marxist science was "destined endlessly to pose and confront problems so as to produce new knowledges."²⁵

The rupture was essential to counter the claims that the findings presented utilizing the old conceptions were the 'truth of history'—the exhaustive, definitive and absolute knowledge of history. Where science provides an open and dynamic process of investigation, constantly questioning previous assumptions; theoretical ideologies based on 'absolute truth' provide a closed system that reflects the prejudices and preconceptions brought to it, as with a mirror.

We should clarify here that theoretical ideologies can contain scientific elements. But since these elements are contained *within* an ideological structure, "they can provide only partial knowledge which is distorted or limited by its location within this structure."²⁶ As we have seen, a good example of the difference between scientific and ideological structures is the stark contrast between evolutionary theory and 'creationism', which attempts to close off discussion and debate, and emphasizes easy explanations for complex problems, drawn from one highly unreliable source of 'knowledge'. Not all cases of theoretical ideologies are so clear cut, as we shall see.

Two Areas for Caution

There are two areas that should be dealt with cautiously *within* Althusserian marxism concerning historical materialism as a science. We hope to address certain philosophical questions at a later time. Andrew Levine, one of the very few Americans to seriously address Althusser's work, has criticized Althusser for claiming that Marx's 'epistemological break' of 1845 led to the practice of historical materialism as an established science. For Levine a fundamental discontinuity *did* occur, but it cannot be described as anything more than an initial event permitting a 'programmatic' account of the new science, or as Anne Bailey and Josep Llobera have described it, as "a science in formation."²⁷ We tend to agree with this assessment. The method and theory of historical materialism have been tentatively outlined, but the full elaboration of this science continues to await a concerted effort—rigorous labor on the part of revolutionary marxists, to make the claim for an 'epistemological break' an unquestionable reality. This distinction is important because it addresses head on the fact that, while there is a recognizable transformation of the written texts of Marx after the 'break', vestiges of previous

theoretical ideologies are carried into his advanced scientific works such as *Capital*. Even in Marx's mature works there are pre-scientific notions situated next to scientific concepts. In other words, the scientific problematic was initially outlined, but not fully developed. Althusser himself has had to admit that within his framework the only 'purely' scientific works by Marx were *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* and his "Marginal Notes on Adolph Wagner's *Textbook on Political Economy*," a short essay written in 1879-80, shortly before his death.²⁸

Such an admission of the tentativeness of the 'epistemological break' that initiated historical materialism does not necessarily challenge its scientific potential, but rather makes the claim to scientificity contingent on the continual process of the development of the science that we have just discussed.

The second area for caution concerning marxism as a science relates to the difference between marxism and the physical sciences. Historically, marxism has suffered from uncritically accepting the model of the practice of the natural sciences for its own. The result has been the generation within marxism of a "resistant web" of 'epistemological obstacles'. Such an obstacle can be described as any "extra-scientific" element or process which, by its intervention in a scientific practice—that is, by its *function* and its *effects*, slows down, prevents, or perverts the production of knowledge. These 'epistemological obstacles' within marxism, derived from the model of the natural sciences, include vulgar materialism, inductivism and empiricism.

Vulgar materialism, when applied to the study of human societies, suggests that the techno-economic elements of society determine all the other elements; that the latter are mere phenomenal expressions of the former. The result of this view is to suggest that the techno-economic sphere alone is the necessary and sufficient cause for the existence of the other social spheres. As a result the social whole is understood, not as an articulation of different spheres with a complex causality which has to be deciphered, but as a simple totality in which social, political and ideological elements are seen as the mere emanation of the techno-economic structure.

A second obstacle is inductivism which insists that what is scientific can only be deduced from, or proven by reference to 'facts'. This view denies the need for a free conceptual construction in the development of theories, and thereby limits scientific practice to only those investigations which can be immediately verified in fact. The widespread nature of the inductivist approach is expressed in its most naked form in Charles Dickens' 1854 novel *Hard Times*, where an instructor in the school of Thomas Gradgrind, the "eminently practical" merchant and politician from Coketown, explains,

You are not to see anymore what you don't see in fact; you are not to have anymore what you don't have in fact. . . . You are to be in all things regulated and governed by fact.³⁰

Empiricism is another 'epistemological obstacle' which has been particularly prevalent in the English speaking world. Two dimensions of empiricism are particularly relevant here. First, empiricism reduces the method of science to the simple collection of facts. In this sense it is related to inductivism. Secondly, and more importantly, empiricism assumes that knowledge is contained within the 'real' itself. Empiricism fails to distinguish between nature as it is appropriated by the senses, and nature as it is perceived by science.

Marxism is not a science just like all the other sciences. Therefore, its development cannot be uncritically modeled on the natural sciences. Breaking with this model, and the 'epistemological obstacles' which have resulted from it, is an

important challenge for the future development of scientific socialism.³¹

Each scientific discipline has its own specific mechanisms for transforming raw materials into knowledge. The major distinction between historical materialism and such physical sciences as chemistry and physics is that the latter are *experimental* sciences, while the marxist science could more correctly be defined as an *observational* science, more similar to astronomy or meteorology. Therefore, unlike chemistry where one has the ability to isolate individual elements for experiment, and to control the many variables; with historical materialism the proof of various theories can only come with the observation of historical realities as they unfold in the development of concrete social formations. As with astronomy, marxist science monitors events as they take place, and as the tools for observation become available.

This is not to say that concrete actions cannot be based on the scientific knowledge produced by the marxist science. Indeed, this is its *raison d'être*. But it is to point to the reality that it is not scientific practice that will change social relations, but rather, concrete political practice based on the conclusions and knowledge that the sciences produce.

With the above concerns in mind, and with the recognition that marxist scientific practice is distinct from other practices of economics, politics and ideology, we can proceed to consider certain concepts that Marx produced through the prism of Althusser's work.

Mode of Production and Social Formation

We have said that historical materialism is the science of history. Within marxist theory the concept of 'mode of production' is fundamental to the scientific analysis of history and the development of capitalism. However, Marx and Engels never rigorously defined this concept; and most marxists utilize it without recognizing that Marx most often used 'mode of production' in his mature works to designate much more than simply the economy.³² More correctly, 'mode of production' should be seen as a concept which permits us to theoretically discuss a particular complex social whole.

There are two similar but distinct definitions of 'mode of production' put forward by theoreticians operating within the Althusserian problematic. The first, or 'narrow' definition is set forward by Paul Hirst and Barry Hindess in their *Pre-capitalist Modes of Production*:

A mode of production is an articulated combination of relations and forces of production structured by the dominance of the relations of production. The relations of production define a specific mode of appropriation of surplus-labour and the specific form of social distribution of the means of production corresponding to that mode of appropriation of surplus labour

'Forces of production' refers to the mode of appropriation of nature, that is, to the labour process in which a determinate raw material is transformed into a determinant product.³³

Proponents of the narrow view qualify it by insisting that a mode of production can *only* exist in the context of its relations to political and ideological instances which act to reproduce it.

The broad definition of 'mode of production' seeks to define this concept by including within it these other, non-economic instances. As Nicos Poulantzas explains, in this approach 'mode of production' designates, not just the

economy, but a specific combination of various structures and practices which can be described as levels or 'instances': economics, politics and ideology. A mode of production is a *global structure* made up of regional structures; and each structure should be conceived as a process, and not a rigid mechanism. Each of the three levels of social structures/processes are constituted as practices *and* an ensemble of institutions and concrete mechanisms; and each has its own mode of expression and its own specific effects.

Economic practice is the transformation of elements in the natural environment by human labor into social products, including the social relations that govern such transformation in the realm of the factory, field, office or home. Political practice is the transformation of social relations in the realm of the judicial and State apparatuses, including parliamentary activity, mass mobilizations and revolution. Ideological practice is the transformation of one set of relations to, or perceptions of the lived world, into new relations through the distinct processes of ideological struggle. Althusser outlined the existence of a fourth fundamental social practice, theoretical practice, working with distinctions laid out by Lenin in his political essays, as we mentioned previously. The interrelationship of the various levels or practices of a mode of production can be described as a 'structure in dominance'. This means that the social structure resulting from the articulation of the different levels is governed by a specific hierarchy. One level is always dominant in the social process of history. "At the level of the mode of production, we consider that regional structure dominant which plays the fundamental role in the reproduction of a given mode of production."³⁴ But that dominant level is not always the same one. Materialist theory holds that the economic level determines the specific level that *is* dominant at any given time. The bottom line here is the fact that human beings must produce their means of subsistence in order to survive. If social relations do not permit the production and reproduction of human life, the species is doomed to extinction. Marx was very clear on the existence of a determining element:

There is in every social formation a particular branch of production which determines the position and importance of all the others, and the relations obtaining in this branch accordingly determine the relations of all the other branches as well. It is as though light of a particular hue were cast upon everything, tingeing all other colours and modifying their specific features; as if a special ether determined the specific gravity of everything found in it.³⁵

And in *Capital* Marx specifically cited the determining role of the economy in designating the dominant level of any particular mode of production. He explained that in capitalism the dominant and determining roles *both* fall to the economy,

but not for the middle ages, in which Catholicism, nor for Athens and Rome, where politics, reigned supreme. . . . This much, however, is clear, that the middle ages could not live on Catholicism, nor the ancient world on politics. On the contrary, it is the economic conditions of the time that explain why here politics and there Catholicism played the chief part.³⁶

Therefore, we can say that what distinguishes one mode of production from another is the specific articulation of the various levels hierarchically ordered and dominated by one or another level. And in all cases, the economic base 'determines' which element is to be dominant.

But here we must emphasize that this conception has nothing in common with reductionism or 'economic determinism'. Though there is a special determining place for the economy, or material production, it is affected and shaped by the other levels in determinant ways. Engels, in a letter to J. Bloch took strong exception to the mechanical materialist conception of 'economic determinism'.

According to the materialist conception of history the determining element [moment] in history is *ultimately* the production and reproduction in real life If therefore somebody twists this into the statement that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms it into a meaningless, abstract and absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure—political forms of the class struggle and its consequences. . . —forms of law . . . philosophical theories, religious ideas and their further development into systems of dogmas—also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*.³⁷

This conception of the determination of the dominant element, designated here by Engels with the term '*ultimately*', and at other times by the 'last analysis', is conceptualized by Althusser as 'determination in the last instance'. As we have explained, this determination is traced to the basis of human existence. But, again, it must be demarcated from 'economic determinism' and Althusser does this by exclaiming that "the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes."³⁸

What does this mean concretely? It is nothing more than the realization that we cannot trace each and every social phenomenon back to the economy. While we recognize the underlying basis for human existence as production and reproduction, the connection of non-economic phenomena to this basis is so extremely mediated—the connection is so tenuous and distant—that at any given moment they ultimately cannot be traced back to the economy. As Engels said, the link is so 'remote' that it is "impossible to prove."

A good example of the inability to trace all social phenomena back to the economy is the special oppression faced by lesbians and gay men. While we can certainly cite economic *aspects* and *consequences* of this oppression, there is no way to explain that particular condition as an *effect* of the economy. There simply is no economic reason for capitalist social relations to fail to embrace homosexuals as agents of production and exploitation, as the thriving gay community in San Francisco attests. To understand this contradiction we must look to the historical development of other social processes, but of course never in isolation from the limits set by the economy.

Another example, that the 'last instance' never comes, is the question of the alarming incidence of rape and violence against women. While we can connect the objectification and degradation of women in a mediated way to patriarchal ideology, and thereby to patriarchal relations of production and the sexual division of labor; there is no way that we can explain *why* or *how* rape and all other aspects of the special oppression of women are connected to specific economic relations and arise in social formations based on an ideology of democracy and equality.

Just as important to remember is the fact that there are no situations where the economy is totally isolated from the other levels. There can be no simple expression of a 'pure' contradiction between labor and capital. As Althusser explained, the capital-labor contradiction is never simple, but always specified by the historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised. This provides an accounting for back and forth interaction. None of the

practices and levels can exist in isolation from the others. They are all intimately related, affecting and affected by all the others.

Before we proceed to discuss this complex interrelationship we must briefly situate the mode of production in the process of history. While mode of production is a theoretical concept useful for discussing an *abstract* social whole, the actual analysis of historical situations requires a concept relating to a *concrete* historically determined society. This is the concept *social formation*.

The concept of '*social formation*' was developed with the recognition that in the historical development of social relations there has never existed a 'pure' mode of production. Modes of production are always and everywhere articulated in combination with other modes—either actively coexisting or existing as historical vestiges or precursors of other specific relations. "The social formation itself constitutes a complex unity in which a certain mode of production dominates the others which compose it."³⁹

The Articulation of Modes of Production

The hierarchy of any process of domination and subordination can be described with the concept 'articulation'. We have already used this concept in describing the relationship between the various levels of a mode of production. This concept is here applied to describe the specific linkage between modes of production, enabling us to understand the uneven development of various contradictions within the dynamics of the historical process. The articulation of modes of production is not a static condition where they are simply maintained in a given combination, but is imbued with the constant motion of changing relations and conditions. Thus, in contemporary societies where the capitalist mode exists in articulation with other non-capitalist modes, a condition prevalent in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, but also in southern Europe, the former mode *alters* every other mode of production, but does not necessarily *destroy* them. The non-capitalist modes, in turn, have measurable effects on the dominant capitalist mode.

Charles Bettelheim has demonstrated the usefulness of this concept in analyzing the relationship between the advanced capitalist nations and the countries of the 'third world' in his critical assessment of Arghiri Emmanuel's *Unequal Exchange*.⁴⁰ Bettelheim describes how the "major effect of capitalist domination is the 'blocking' of the forces of production in the dominated areas," as well as various unequal national and international relations that are produced.⁴¹

With this foundation we can proceed to deepen our knowledge of modes of production and social formations by exploring the complex interrelationship between their different levels.

Relative Autonomy and Overdetermination

In every social formation and mode of production the articulation of the various levels or practices is a complex and changing process. As we have said, the multiplicity of contradictions that exist at all the different levels of the social whole constitute an ordered hierarchy. From Mao we remember that social contradictions are never static, there is a constant shifting of determination and emphasis. And as we discussed above, in any given situation the primary aspect can exist on any one of the levels, with the economic level

being determinant only in the 'last instance'. Further, not only does the economy determine the other levels, it is also determined by them. Finally, "while economics plays the determinant role in the last instance (the fundamental contradiction), it is the *class struggle* . . . which has *primacy* in the historical process."⁴²

Each social level is *relatively autonomous* from the economy, as well as from the other levels. That is, the various levels are not simply reflections of the economy. They have their own specific content and their own laws of operation and rhythms of development—their own structure and historical time. The concept of '*differential historical time*' is utilized to conceptualize the fact that each social level has its own rhythm of development.

This means simply that a different pace is set in the development of contradictions on the separate levels—'uneven development'—such that measuring that development requires different categories than linear days, months and years.⁴³ Upheavals on one level need not necessarily find immediate expression in all the other levels. There is no single continuous-reference time continuum common to all the histories of all the levels at once.

For example, the unfolding of contradictions at the political level is not automatically or mechanically paralleled by the unfolding of contradictions at the other levels according to an identical tempo. Thus, Watergate represented the unfolding of a type of US political contradiction at a relatively rapid tempo, which was not equalled by a similar tempo at the ideological or economic levels. But to say that the tempo of each instance is relatively autonomous, is not to say that they are entirely independent. As Althusser explains:

The fact that each of these times and each of these histories is *relatively autonomous* does not make them so many domains which are independent of the whole: the specificity of each of those times and each of those histories—in other words, their relative autonomy and independence—is based on a certain type of *dependence* with respect to the whole.⁴⁴

In addition to these aspects of temporality, every level or practice contributes its distinct characteristics and history—determining the overall configuration of the complex whole of which it is a part; at the same time that it is determined in concrete ways by the whole and the other constituent parts. The multiplicity of contradictions and this complex interaction is described by Althusser with the concept of '*overdetermination*'.

Freud used the term overdetermination in his practice of psycho-analysis to designate the condensation of a number of thoughts and representations into one symbolic dream image, as well as the use of apparently trivial images to represent particularly potent thoughts. "Althusser uses the same term to describe the effects of the contradictions in each practice constituting the social formation on the social formation as a whole, and hence back on each practice and each contradiction, defining the pattern of dominance and subordination . . . at any given moment."⁴⁵

It is in this sense that Althusser declared that the contradiction between labor and capital could never be conceived as a 'pure' or simple contradiction. At any given moment in a social formation, all the various political and ideological determinations, from the contradictions within the working class centered on racism and sexism, to the questions of nuclear destruction and environmental contamination, fundamentally affect the questions of the labor process, unemployment, wage scales and job safety. Such determinations may not always be easily linked to any immediate struggle, but overall, they must be taken into

account. This realization is crucial if we are to be able to actually help facilitate the radicalization of those who are oppressed and exploited. For example,

In Russia in 1917 the contradiction between wage labor and capital was overdetermined by the contradictions between the peasantry and the feudal ruling classes, between capitalism and feudalism, and between the imperialist states, which produced a revolutionary situation (revolutionary conjuncture).⁴⁶

An example of overdetermination closer to home than the previous one can be seen in the experience and struggles of Black working women. The conditions of their lives are a product of the articulation of the capital/labor, male/female and Black/white contradictions.

Althusser explained that "an '*overdetermined contradiction*' may either be *overdetermined* in the direction of an *historical inhibition*, a real 'block' for the contradiction . . . or in the direction of *revolutionary rupture* . . . but in neither condition is it ever found in the 'pure' state."⁴⁷

In other words, the unfolding of contradictions at different levels can either neutralize or cancel each other out—holding back social development; at other times they reinforce or intensify each other, forcing history forward in a quantitative manner or a qualitative leap. Every contradiction is apprehended by marxist experiences and practice as an *overdetermined contradiction*.

This understanding, as well as the rest of the conceptions delineated in this section lays the basis for us to seal the fate of all attempts to conceive of marxism as a reductionist theory where all social contradictions are reduced to the economy. Only the most rigid mechanical materialists will find solace in such attempts; and while there is certainly room for disagreement within the ranks of those who unite against reductionism concerning the validity of specific conceptions, there should be little controversy over the general project and its importance for the effective study of history.

Struggle Against Deviations in Marxism

One of Althusser's constant concerns has been to distinguish the differences between the various social practices: theoretical practice from political practice, economic practice from ideological practice, technical practice from scientific practice. This concern was repeatedly expressed by Engels, Lenin and Mao. Unfortunately, the importance of this effort to distinguish practices is continually lost on the vast majority of revolutionaries. Yet, in the balance the process of delineating the limits and concrete forms of interrelation of the distinct practices is of crucial significance. Various political deviations, and numerous tragedies can be cited where the character and results of one practice have been confused with another.

Repeated examples of this problem can be found in the workers movement where attempts are made to produce political effects by engaging in economic practice alone. The anarcho-syndicalist notion that a general strike can bring the seizure of state power is the ultimate expression of this error. But there are many other similar errors: voluntarism attributes to political practice specific effects that can only be conducted through economic practice. Spontanaist errors attribute effects which can only be produced by theoretical or ideological practices to political or economic practice. In each case the failure to recognize the specific character and effects of particular practices can lead to disastrous results.

Therefore, when we consider our own practice we must take extreme care to understand what the appropriate practice is to achieve the desired effects in conjunction with the other practices. It is with this in mind that we can go on to discuss Althusser's specific contributions to the struggle against the economist conception of marxism which attribute political effects to economic and technical practices.

Critique of Economism

Building on the indispensable work of Lenin, Althusser brought the critique of economism, or economist marxism, into the forefront of contemporary theoretical struggles in the 1960s and '70s. The economist deviation is the specific political result of vulgar materialist and techno-economist theoretical orientations in the realm of scientific practice cited above. This political deviation has been addressed quite often in the pages of this journal in the past. In *Theoretical Review* No. 15 the following definition was provided as a summary of what is involved:

Economism reduces the other levels of the social formation to a mere expression of the economy, and social contradictions at all levels to an expression of the contradictions between forces and relations of production. In the end, class struggle, too, becomes either a secondary characteristic and/or itself an expression of economic forces.⁴⁸

It is important to acknowledge Althusser's reliance on Lenin's formulations because of the remarkable similarities between the marxism of the 2nd International before World War I and the marxism that came to dominate the world communist movement under the influence of Stalin and the 3rd International.

Unfortunately, what started as a fundamental break with economist notions under the leadership of Lenin, degenerated into even more crude and vulgar expressions of economic determinism under the (mis)leadership of Stalin and his cohorts. And, in spite of all the work produced by Lenin, Althusser, Bettelheim, and a host of others, a mechanical economist conception continues to be "the main theoretical obstacle confronting Marxism in the effort to surpass the present crisis."⁴⁹ According to such an economist conception, political struggle is not seen as constitutive or central to the social order, but as merely a "superstructure of an inexorable economic process," the maturation of the productive forces.

As Charles Bettelheim has explained, economism need not completely deny the role of class struggle to effectively liquidate its place as the motor force of history. By relegating class struggle (politics) to a secondary level in the analysis of the social whole, economism can still pay lip-service to political struggle, at the same time that it relegates it to a relatively unimportant role in the course of history. As Bettelheim put it, for economism

the class struggle intervenes essentially in order to smash production relations that hinder the development of the productive forces, thus engendering new production relations which conform to the needs of the development of the productive forces.⁵⁰

Because of its perspective on social development, which sees the existing objective conditions for revolution blocked only by the relations of production holding back the forces of production, economism is most often accompanied by voluntarism. In this context voluntarism compliments economism by taking as a given favorable objective conditions (for revolution), and by thinking that only the

revolutionary "will" of the workers—class consciousness—is required to make revolution a reality. Or else, that revolutionary "will" is enough, regardless of the objective conditions. The political results of economism can range from a parliamentary or reformist approach, to ultra-leftism and anarchistic vanguard actions.

For this reason it is important to recapitulate the general approach of economist marxists before we move on to the Leninist critique of that approach. The characteristic tenets of the economist problematic as summarized in the previously cited article were:

- (a) insistence that the development of productive forces is the decisive factor in social development (theory of productive forces);
- (b) reduction of the class contradiction to an expression of the contradiction between forces and relations of production;
- (c) insistence that under advanced capitalism production relations are an absolute block on the development of production forces leading to stagnation, decay, crisis and inevitable capitalist collapse (economist catastrophism);
- (d) this situation leading to permanently favorable objective conditions for proletarian revolution.⁵¹

A further corollary to the four tenets outlined here, is class reductionism, the notion that with the progressive development of the productive forces comes the inevitable 'proletarianization' of the middle classes (including the peasantry). This idea leads to a type of 'workerism' and isolation, or 'working class sectarianism': since the middle classes are condemned to disappear, it would be 'extremely dangerous' to constitute a politically complex movement, articulating a multiplicity of class and social antagonisms to the established order. There is no need to articulate the interests of other social sectors to those of the workers. Rather, since the working class is the only "truly revolutionary" force:

by relying on itself and defending its own specific interests, it would end up by representing the whole of the exploited masses. Political and ideological struggles were thus reduced to subordinate moments through which was verified a necessary process, transcending them.⁵²

But while the left manifestation of this sectarianism reached its ultimate tragic implications in the 'third period' Comintern line of 'social fascism'; equally devastating for the working class was the rightist manifestation in Social Democratic theory in the same period. Both the Communist Party and the Social Democrats failed to provide leadership to the sections of the middle classes who were being radicalized by the Depression, and who, in the end, were swept up into the Nazi movement. Thus, to argue over whether historically the "main danger" was a left or right deviation almost becomes irrelevant. The struggle must be to overcome the theoretical/political basis which is concretely manifested in left and right errors. For, until the underlying problematic is decisively abandoned (and it is never a finished process, but a constant struggle in class societies), both left and right errors will continue to reappear.

A Revolutionary Situation

The basis of a strategic approach to revolutionary activity is to be found in the marxist view of a revolutionary situation. Though the two main antagonists in contemporary class society are the capitalist class and the working class; as we have discussed above, there is no simple contradiction between labor and capital. A revolutionary situation does not exist simply in

the opposition of the working class to capital. A revolutionary situation is rather a complex accumulation of a wide range of social contradictions acting simultaneously with the fundamental class contradiction.

Althusser understands marxist revolutionary strategy to be based on the need to determine the concrete possibilities for social change represented at any given time, to be able to mobilize the strongest and broadest array of forces to achieve a new balance of political forces more favorable to the working classes and their allies in the struggle ahead. In the formation of alliances building toward radical social transformation, the strategic and tactical independence of the working class must be maintained, but this should never be conceived as a narrowing of the over-all struggle. 'Workerism' can be avoided by distinguishing and articulating the diverse struggles against the existing social order in a flexible strategy, while at the same time constantly advancing a coherent and consistent working class position. In this way the accumulated contradictions between capital and 'the people' can be exploited to the fullest, potentially producing conditions favorable to socialist revolution. Althusser summed up this conception of revolution, drawing out the full implications of Lenin's work:

If this [class] contradiction is to become 'active' in the strongest sense, to become a ruptural principle, there must be an accumulation of 'circumstances' and 'currents' so that whatever their origin and sense (and many of them will necessarily be paradoxically foreign to the revolution in origin and sense, or even its direct opponents), they 'fuse' into a *ruptural unity*: when they produce the result of the immense majority of the popular masses *grouped* in an assault on a regime which its ruling classes are *unable to defend*.⁵³

Such a conception of revolution is totally alien to economist marxists, for in Lenin and Althusser the development of the productive forces are not only dominated by relations of production, they are *overdetermined* by a broad accumulation of social contradictions—revolutionary in their unity and nothing outside of that unity. The contradiction between labor and capital is overdetermined in that it is

inseparable from its formal *conditions* of existence, and even from the instances it governs; it is radically *affected by them*, determining, but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the various *levels* and *instances* of the social formation it animates...⁵⁴

Ideology and the State

The term 'ideology' is used to mean many things. It is a prime example of the need to carefully define terms and concepts if they are to be useful in scientific analysis. And while Althusser began to work in the direction of precise formulations of ideology, often enough in his work, his usage is ambiguous and somewhat misleading.

Further, in counterposing ideology to science, and defending the fundamental difference between the two, Althusser was really only carrying through conceptions forcefully argued by Marx, Engels and Lenin, though they had been essentially lost in the intervening years except in the work of Mao and Gramsci. But with his text "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation)" Althusser opened new ground in the conceptual field of analyzing the ideological instance of social formations. In fact, it is this work of Althusser which has transformed the way in which all succeeding authors have approached the subject. Whether for or against, Althusser's work can hardly be ignored.

Althusser begins his investigation of ideology with a discussion of the economy, laying the basis for understanding the processes that make production possible. Citing Marx in his 1868 letter to Kugelmann, Althusser states that the "ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production."⁵⁵ As far as Althusser is concerned, the "obviousness" of this statement has led to a situation where the elements involved in this reproduction have been "uniquely ignored." (Remember that a science must probe and question any and all easy or 'obvious' answers.) And this has meant that the reproduction of labor power has been ignored. Althusser indicates that because this reproduction takes place outside the capitalist enterprise or firm—outside the economy, as such—economist marxists have tended to ignore the spheres where this reproduction primarily takes place—the family and the schools, among others. But for Althusser this ignorance has meant a failure to grasp the full importance of ideological practice, since

the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e., a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression...⁵⁶

Though this may sound the same as the typical marxist notion of 'ideology as false consciousness' to some readers, Althusser utilizes this recognition to elaborate a fundamentally new *theoretical* understanding of ideology and the State. We emphasize *theoretical* understanding because Althusser indicates that his conceptions are drawn from the political practice of Marx and Lenin, but not theorized by them.

The *State* cannot be conceived simply as a repressive apparatus, and *state power* is not a tangible object like a building simply to be seized. The complex reality of the capitalist state is, for Althusser, better understood as a process which includes both repressive apparatuses (Army, Police, Courts, Prisons, etc.) and *ideological* apparatuses, including such institutions as schools, political parties, the legal system, cultural and sports projects, churches and the family. But citing these institutions as *state* apparatuses does not mean that they do not have other functions, nor that they are mechanically controlled by the state. Rather, each has particular connections to the State which give them 'legitimacy' (marriage license, public schools) or set specific limits (separation of church and state). What Althusser is most concerned with is not the term 'ideological State apparatuses' (he has since acknowledged the confusion generated by the use of 'State' in the designation, which has been dropped by such recent theorists as Goran Therborn⁵⁷), but the mechanisms of control and reproduction involved—that is, how the apparatuses *function*. Drawing on Gramsci's conception of 'civil society', Althusser points out that

The distinction between the public and the private is the distinction internal to bourgeois law, and valid in the (subordinate) domains in which bourgeois law exercises its 'authority'.⁵⁸

For Althusser, a more useful distinction than public and private in analyzing social formations is made in the basic difference between the Repressive State Apparatuses, which function primarily 'by violence', and the Ideological State Apparatuses which function primarily 'by ideology'. But no apparatus maintains an exclusive hold on either repression or ideology. And there is no such thing as a purely repressive apparatus. "For example, the Army and the Police also function by ideology both to ensure their own cohesion and reproduction, and in the 'values' they propound externally."⁵⁹

Similarly, ideological apparatuses such as churches and schools function secondarily by repression through particular methods of punishment, expulsion and censorship. etc. Further, the relative autonomy of the ideological apparatuses provide a field for the expression of various contradictions, either limited or extreme, particularly in the clash between capitalist and workers' class struggle.

It is the complex combination of repression and ideology found in the legal, political and ideological apparatuses that ensures the reproduction of capitalist *relations of production*. This reproduction is secured first by the exercise of State Power with the support of the various other apparatuses. But this may be more correctly conceived by noting that the ideological apparatuses largely secure the reproduction of the relations of production, with the repressive apparatuses determinant 'in the last instance'.

The role of the repressive State apparatus, in so far as it is a repressive apparatus, consists essentially in securing by force (physical or otherwise) the political conditions of the reproduction of relations of production which are in the last resort *relations of exploitation*. Not only does the State apparatus contribute generously to its own reproduction (the capitalist State contains political dynasties, military dynasties, etc.) but also and above all, the State apparatus secures by repression (from the most brutal physical force, via mere administrative commands and interdictions, to open and tacit censorship) the *political conditions for the action* of the Ideological State Apparatuses.⁶⁰

Here we should note that in pre-capitalist social formations the Church was the dominant ideological apparatus in close conjunction with the family, which was itself the dominant apparatus in earlier patriarchal formations. With capitalism the place of the dominant ideological apparatus shifted to the school (but not without violent political and ideological class struggles), with the family still playing a significant role. Now the role of television seemingly threatens to usurp them both.

With these general conceptions of the relationship of ideology to the economy and the State, we can proceed to discuss the social role of ideology concerning individuals or 'subjects'.

The Nature of Ideology

While we previously emphasized ideology as theoretical systems in distinction from science, and while many marxists view ideology as false consciousness, Althusser has produced a conception of ideology that goes beyond such general or one-sided ideas. As a 'practical' social practice, ideology for Althusser is a distinct instance of every social formation. And as Marx said, ideology is both illusion and allusion—it contains both false perceptions *and* allusions to real relations. Althusser has gone so far as to state that "there is no practice except by and in ideology."⁶¹

There are three general aspects of ideology to be addressed. First, ideology is a representation of the *perceived* relationship of individuals to their conditions of existence in the real world. Ideology is a specific practice which articulates fixed relations of representation to a specific orientation to reality. These relations establish positions which individuals inhabit within the social whole. In this the individual's 'image' (perception) of real social relations is represented in ideology as a mediated relation. This means that "it is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that 'men' 'represent to themselves' in ideology, but above all it is their *relation* to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there."⁶²

Second, ideology has a material existence, it is not simply ideas in people's heads.

Ideology is thus a material practice in both senses of the term: first because it is produced and reproduced in concrete institutions; second, because it produces fixed relations and positions in which the individual represents him/herself, relations and positions which are a material force in the process of the social formation.⁶³

This recognition of the 'materiality' of ideology is important because it goes to the heart of the reproduction of ideology. Ideology cannot be transformed independently of the transformation of the concrete practices, institutions and rituals that secure its reproduction.

Finally, the third general characteristic of ideological practice is its function to constitute individuals as subjects—that is, to produce 'agents' who consciously recognize and carry out their given role in the concrete structures of the world. This means that ideology produces the subject in a relation to "representation within the social process in which he or she is situated, as an identity (a point of self-reference) rather than a process. . . . In bourgeois ideology, a subject can represent itself as free, homogeneous and responsible for its actions..."⁶⁴

For Althusser there is no ideology outside of its relation to subjects. At the same time that ideology constitutes (interpellates) subjects, it is constituted itself as a category and practice.

I say: the category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology, but at the same time and immediately I add that *the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects.*⁶⁵ (Emphasis in original.)

Ideology is nothing other than the concrete processes of human social interactions functioning in their material forms of existence.

From the moment of birth, a child is engaged in the rituals of ideological recognition. The specific familial ideology begins to generate expectations and positions for the child from the moment it is conceived. (This is certainly the allusion to reality that the mystical illusions of the 'right to lifers' have obscured with their claims that a human being exists at conception. Thereafter, all of the social practices of society, to the extent that the individual participates in them, function to constitute his or her subjectivity. Since this multitude of social practices is by no means a harmonious and unified system, the subjectivity thereby constituted is complex, contradictory and subject to constant change and transformation in the course of daily life.

In addition to being constituted as subjects, able to act and interact in the world, each individual is subjected to the authority of a dominant element of the ideology in question. The ultimate authority, or Subject (with a capital 'S') for Christianity and Judaism is God, while the Subject in a Stalinian perspective is the monolithic, all-knowing Party (with a capital 'P', which rhymes with 'T', and that stands for Trouble). In most ideologies the Subject (final authority) absolutely guarantees that "everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right..." and they will be rewarded in an afterlife, or will see the inevitable collapse of capitalism and the inevitable coming of socialism.⁶⁶ The relationship between the constitution of individual subjects by ideology as "bearers" of social relations and the ability of those subjects to act within and transform those relations, needs to be clarified.

For Paul Hirst and Barry Hindess, and their associates Antony Cutler and Athar Hussain, social structures *create the*

space in which agents maneuver, while the agents themselves make decisions as to the action, if any, that will be taken.

Agents differ from other objects which enter into social relations not only in the sense that they may effect movement and changes, but also in the sense that their actions are dependent on decisions.⁶⁷

A bicycle pedal may *act* on the chain which turns the wheel to facilitate travel, but this action takes place because of a 'definite mechanical connection' between them. Only the rider can *decide* whether or not to pedal, coast or brake. Similarly for all social structures; human subjects act within the limits of those structures—a bicyclist cannot pedal 200 miles an hour nor stop on a dime, and we can only do what we are physically capable of undertaking. The same is true of social responsibilities as well. But the decisions a subject makes have a definite effect on the process of history and on the structures of social relations themselves, either to reinforce and perpetuate them, or to break down and change them, for the better or the worse.

These distinctions between socially created spaces and the actions of subjects within them are crucial in addressing those criticisms often leveled at marxists that our theories are nothing more than economic determinism (or in the case of Althusser, 'structural' determinism)—a particular secular form of Calvin's notions of 'predestination'. Certain limits *are* set within which we must act, but those limits are shot through with contradictions and gaps that permit the infiltration of alternatives and choices between one or the other given elements which will either reproduce or challenge existing social relations.

Geran Therborn, while retaining the concepts of constitution (interpellation) and recognition, has seen a need to complement Althusser's conceptions of subjection and guarantees with the *subjection-qualification* couplet. In this usage, human beings are subjected to a given *order* that rewards certain thoughts and actions, while sanctioning and prohibiting others. Within this subjection, individuals become qualified for the given roles they are assigned by the ideology, and can carry them out. But by becoming qualified in a role, the subject can, in turn qualify that role itself—that is, specify *and modify* it. This is particularly the case when contradictions develop between the subjecting authority and the qualifications one possesses—when "new kinds of qualifications may be required and provided, new skills that clash with the traditional forms of subjection. Or, conversely, new forms of subjection may develop that clash with the provision of still needed qualification."⁶⁸ In such cases, clearly including the current state of affairs in the US with such high unemployment and the rush into high-technology operations, individuals can respond to the conflicts between subjection and qualification with opposition and rebellion, or with passivity, withdrawal and underperformance. Neither response is inevitable, yet the power of the ideological authority generally tends to reproduce itself, and the dominant response in non-revolutionary conjunctures is often resignation, except where the contradictory subjectivity of the individual has been constituted to include elements of rebellion.

A Concluding Example

It is important to recognize that every individual is constituted within many different subjugating and qualifying systems. Each individual 'human being' (subject) is constituted with many different, and at times conflicting subjectivities. Let us take, for example, the situation of a married woman with two children, Anna, who works in a small electronics manufacturing plant in the Southwest. Anna is a Chicana, and a devout Catholic. This is certainly not an unlikely situation.

Anna is constituted as an economic subject in two ways, first in her relations at work, where she must produce computer circuits for her boss, and second in her relations in the home where she must undertake the consumption of various commodities to produce meals and the like for the sustenance of her family. The contradictions here are quite apparent. The 'double shift' places heavy burdens on women who have very little, if any, time to themselves. In school Anna was taught to be a cook and housewife, among other things; on the job she is constituted as one cog in the production machine. In church Anna is constituted as a religious subject, and as a 'loving and devoted mother' and a 'subordinate wife'. Neither school nor church prepared her for the particular rigors of factory life, and in fact, the emphasis in these institutions is certainly for women to be subservient and depend on men (so she was at least taught to work hard and *obey* her boss!). The contradictory constitution of Anna as an economic subject constantly pushes and pulls her in different directions. Further, if a labor union begins an organizing drive at her factory, there will be even deeper conflicts between Anna's different subjectivities.

Anna is also constituted as a Mexican-American subject, in relation to her Mexican *and* American heritage, and as a mother in relation to her son who is a Marine. She is fearful that he could die in a conflict in Central America, and while the Catholic church calls on her to be critical of the military junta in El Salvador, it at the same time admonishes her to unquestioningly obey the authority of God and the Pope.

Still further, if the plant where Anna works is dumping hazardous chemicals into the ground water supply of her community, the contradictions for her as a worker who could lose her job if the plant is shut down, as a mother whose children are being contaminated by the pollutants in the environment, and as an individual whose own health is in danger, also pull in many different directions.

Thus we can see that the constitution of Anna as an individual bearer of social relations, a many faceted subject, is *overdetermined*. As we have seen, this overdetermination can be such as to generate a passive response, either resignation or a cynical capitulation to authority and exploitation. Or in certain circumstances, this complex combination of contradictions can stimulate active resistance, calling up reserves of energy to demand better working and living conditions. The movies *Salt of the Earth*, *Norma Rae* and *Man of Iron* depict some of the aspects of such resistance. And it is the overdetermination of contradictions which points to the fallacy of attempting to narrow the focus of revolutionary activity to the economic instance, or to limit the struggle to only one patronizingly 'simple' problem. Truly it can be said that Althusser's contributions to historical materialism, correctly understood and practiced, will render obsolete this narrow economist perspective. The necessary revolutionary strategy for the future, the constitution of new political subjects and a popular-democratic bloc against capital, can and will be built. In this task Louis Althusser and his followers have much to teach us.

We all still have a lot to learn, and the science of marxism itself is still in its infancy.

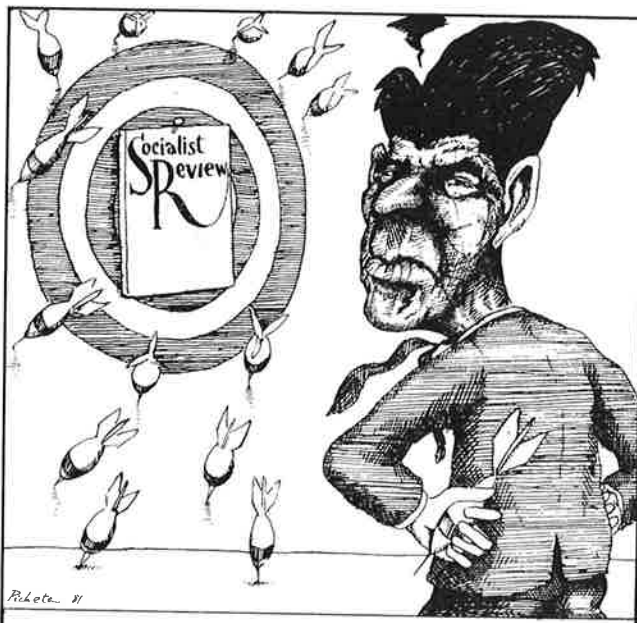
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repressive tendencies of the regime. On the other hand, if done successfully, this could prevent the regime from becoming more repressive and could promote a further democratization of Mexican society.

The next few years will probably see an increasing loss of popular support for the regime. There will be rising popular demands for social equality and democracy. Moreover, there will probably be increasing demands for greater state control over the country's resources and productive process, and for the protection of Mexico's national sovereignty in the face of its increasing financial dependence on international capital and the United States. Unless these demands are translated into an effective mass movement capable of imposing major changes on the system, they will not be realized. The unity and commitment of the progressive forces in the country will be a decisive factor in determining whether this happens or not.