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History as Creation

Cornelius Castoriadis

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1961–64

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form of politics which is other than, and more than, politics again remains to be seen. If there can be a union of reflection and action, and whether this reflection and this action, instead of separating those who practice them from the others, can carry them both together towards a new society, this union still has to be achieved. The intention of such a unification was there when Marxism was born. It has remained mere intention — but a century later, and in a new context, it continues to define our task.

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for whom, strange as it may seem, the whole of subsequent history can be understood by studying the early works of Marx — and not those texts interpreted in the light of subsequent history. They seek thereby to maintain the claim that Marxism has ‘overtaken’ philosophy by fusing it both to a concrete (economic) analysis of society and to a practice and that thereby it is no longer, and indeed never could be, either conjecture or theoretical system. These claims (which are based on a certain way of reading certain pages of Marx, and on amnesia concerning certain other passages infinitely more numerous) are not ‘false.’ There are indeed, as we have said earlier, essential seeds in these ideas. But what must be recognised is not only that these seeds have been buried by the ice of a hundred years. It is that as soon as one tries to go beyond the stage of inspirations, intuitions or programmatic intentions — as soon as these ideas have to be given flesh and blood, to become the substance of thoughts which try to encompass the real world and give rise to acts, the fine new unity dissolves. It dissolves because what sought to be a philosophical description of the reality of capitalism, the integration of philosophy and economics, falls apart in two stages: a resorption of philosophy by an economics that is just economics, and then an unjustified reappearance of philosophy tagged on at the end of the economic analysis. It breaks up because what should be the union of theory and practice becomes dissociated in real history into a doctrine fossilised in the state in which it was left at the death of its founder, and a practice for which this doctrine serves, at best, as an ideological cover. It breaks up, for apart from certain rare moments (such as 1917) the interpretation of which moreover remains to be carried out and is in no way simple, *praxis* has remained a mere word. The problem of how to relate an activity which is intended to be conscious to actual history and the problem of the relationship between revolutionaries and masses both remain total.

Whether there can be a philosophy which is other than, and more than, philosophy remains to be shown. Whether there is a

of Marxism as a theory took place in the intellectual and philosophical climate of the second half of the 19th century. This period was dominated, as no other period of history, by scientism and positivism triumphantly carried forward by the accumulation of scientific discoveries, their experimental verification, and especially, for the first time on this scale, by ‘the reasoned application of science to industry.’ Apparent technological omnipotence was ‘demonstrated’ daily. Whole countries were having their faces rapidly changed through the spread of the industrial revolution. Aspects of technical progress, which appear to us today not only ambivalent but even indeterminate as to their social signification, had not yet emerged. The economy posited itself as the essence of all social relationships, and the economic problem as *the* central problem of society. This setting provided both the bricks and the design for a ‘scientific’ theory of society and of history. It even demanded it, largely predetermining what were to be its dominant categories. But the reader who has understood what we were getting at in the preceding pages will also appreciate that we cannot think of these factors as providing ‘the explanation’ of the fate of Marxism. The fate of the revolutionary element in Marxism expresses, at the level of ideologies, the fate of the revolutionary movement in capitalist society up till now. When we say that Marxism, over a period of a century, has gradually been transformed into an ideology which belongs in existing society, we are only saying that capitalism has been able to maintain and even to strengthen itself as a social system. One cannot conceive of a society where the powers of the ruling class continuously assert themselves and where, simultaneously, a revolutionary theory is alive and develops. The fate of Marxism is inseparable from what happens to the society in which it exists.

This fate cannot be reversed. There can be no ‘restoration’ of Marxism to its original purity, no return to its ‘better half.’ One still sometimes meets subtle and tender ‘Marxists’ (who as a rule have never engaged in politics either at close hand or from afar)

A Note from *Solidarity*

We are pleased to bring our readers a further instalment, in English, of *Marxisme et Théorie Révolutionnaire* by Cornelius Castoriadis (Paul Cardan). The original French text appeared (between 1961 and 1964) in issues 36–40 of the now defunct journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. The first chapter of *Marxisme et Théorie Révolutionnaire* (‘La situation historique du marxisme et la question d’orthodoxie’) was first published in English by Solidarity (London) in 1966 (vol. IV, no. 3) under the title *The Fate of Marxism*. It was later reprinted as a pamphlet. We published the second chapter (‘La théorie Marxiste de l’histoire’) in 1971, calling it ‘History and Revolution.’ The pamphlet in your hands consists of chapters 3 and 4 (entitled respectively ‘La philosophie Marxiste de l’histoire’ and ‘Les deux éléments du Marxisme et leur destin historique’).

Further sections of this article are currently being translated. The present text can easily be read on its own. The overall argument (the critique of Marxist theory — and of the very concept of a theory of this kind — and the positing of the elements of an alternative way of looking at things) can best be grasped, however, by reference to *L’Institution Imaginaire de la Société* (Editions du Seuil, Paris 1975). *Marxisme et Théorie Révolutionnaire* constitutes the opening chapters of this book. The title (and several of the sub-headings) of this pamphlet are, we must stress, entirely our own.

Introduction

‘All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, and all that is holy is profaned...’

K. Marx and F. Engels, '**Manifesto of the Communist Party**,' 1848.

These words are even truer today than when written, 130 years ago. In the 19th century the idea of progress was self-evident: the body of scientific knowledge grew and grew and rapidly became incorporated into the fabric of expanding capitalism. In the 1890's some physicists even predicted that all there was to know about the universe would soon be within their grasp. The figure of 20 years was bandied about. Great 'unifying' theories were being thrown up: Clerk-Maxwell's electromagnetic theory, the Universal Theory of Gravitation, Mendeleyev's Periodic Table of the Elements, Darwin's theory of the Origin of Species through Natural Selection. The great intellectual edifice of 19th century science was an imposing counterpoint to the remorseless surge of the industrial revolution, which during this period was changing the face of Western Europe. Technology seemed omnipotent. The bourgeoisie had dethroned God and instituted the realm of Reason. It believed that everything was inherently rational, determinable, quantifiable (it had to be, in order to be bought and sold).

This was the science that the founders of 'scientific socialism' had sucked into their bones: the science of elegant universalism, of cosmological laws to which there were no exceptions, of systems that would encompass the whole of reality in their net. The very structure of this kind of thinking reflected the confident ambitions of capitalism in full development. In the air was the promise that life itself would soon be amenable to the same mathematical manipulations that had successfully predicted the motions of the stars, the combination of atoms and the propagation of light.

It is scarcely surprising that, as an offshoot or extension of bourgeois objectivist rationalism, a grand theory of history and social change (namely Marxism) was also to emerge, based on the methodological premises and impregnated with the scientific euphoria of the 19th century. This particular setting 'provided both

and judged by it.²⁶ But then there is no historical privilege, no 'historical birthright' for the organisation based on the theory.

This enhanced status of the Party, an inescapable consequence of the classical conception, finds its counterpart in what is, despite appearances, the devalued status of the working class. If the latter has a privileged historical role it is because, as an exploited class, it can only, in the end, struggle against capitalism in a direction predetermined by the theory. It is also because, placed as it is at the heart of capitalist production, the working class forms the largest force in society. 'Trained, taught and disciplined' by this production, it is the vehicle par excellence of this rational discipline. The working class assumes importance not so much as creator of new historical forms, but as the human materialisation of the positive side of capitalism shorn of its negative aspects: it is 'productive force' par excellence, and moreover contains nothing within it which could hamper the development of the productive forces.

History is thus found yet again to have given birth to something other than that which it seemed to be concocting. Under cover of a revolutionary theory an ideology had taken shape and developed the ideology of a social formation as yet unborn: the ideology of the bureaucracy.

It isn't possible here to attempt an explanation of the birth and triumph of this second element in Marxism. It would require going over the history of the labour movement and of capitalist society during the last hundred years. We can just summarise briefly what seems to us to have been the key factors. The development

²⁶ Just how alien this concept is to Marxists is shown by the fact that, for the 'purest' among them, real history is seen implicitly as if it had 'taken the wrong turning' since 1939, or even since 1923, since it has not run along the track decided by theory. That the theory might just as well have gone astray much earlier never crosses their mind.

Finally, if there is a true theory of history, a rationality at work in things, it is clear that guiding its development should be entrusted to specialists of this theory, to the technicians of this rationality. The absolute power of the Party – and, within the Party, of the ‘chorus leaders of Marxist-Leninist science,’ according to the admirable expression coined by Stalin for his own use – has a legitimate philosophical basis. Its rational foundations lie more genuinely in the ‘materialist conception of history’ than in Kautsky’s ideas (reiterated by Lenin) about ‘the introduction of socialist consciousness into the working class by petty-bourgeois intellectuals.’ If the materialist conception of history is true, the Party’s power must be absolute, all democracy being mere concession to the human fallibility of the rulers, or a teaching procedure they alone can dispense in the correct doses. The alternatives are clear-cut. Either the materialist conception of history is true, therefore defining what is to be done, and what the workers do is of value only inasmuch as they conform to what the theory says they ought to do; it isn’t the theory which would be validated or invalidated by what they actually do, for the criteria of its correctness are contained in it: it is the workers who show whether or not they have risen to a ‘consciousness of their historical interests’ by acting in conformity with the slogans which concretise the theory in any given circumstances.²⁵ Or the activity of the masses is an autonomous and creative historical factor, in which case any theoretical conception can only be one link in the long process of realisation of the revolutionary project (which can, indeed should, be overtaken). The theory then no longer posits itself as the key to history, as the yardstick of reality. It accepts the need genuinely to enter history and to be jostled

²⁵ Sure, the slogans may be wrong, the leaders having been mistaken in their appreciation of a situation, and notably in their appreciation of the degree of consciousness and of militancy of the workers. But this doesn’t change the logic of the problem. In the equation which the rulers have to solve, the workers still appear as an uncertain variable.

the bricks and mortar for such a theory ... largely pre-determining even what were to be its dominant categories.’ The economy seemed the obvious basis of all social relations, and was solemnly theorised as such. The techniques of capitalist production were consecrated as scientifically inevitable although criticism was levied at how the product was distributed. Capitalist models of organisation and efficiency were imported into the radical movement. Under the guise of revolutionary theory, an ideology was born and was to develop, the ideology of a bureaucracy whose ascendancy was still in the future.

Bourgeois historians were by no means immune from this movement. They started asserting that their subject was ‘a science, no less and no more’ and as such they were necessarily obliged to meet the ‘scientific demand for completeness and certainty’¹ As E. P. Cheyney succinctly put it: ‘History, the great course of human affairs, has been the result not of voluntary action on the part of individuals or groups of individuals, much less of chance, but has been subject to law.’² The task of the historian was no longer even to attempt to discover ‘what actually happened’ but rather to discover those laws.

Science, however, did not stop in the 19th century. Since the turn of the century it has undergone a series of major revolutions. Its texture and content are radically different today from what they were a few decades ago. The uncertainty principle seems here to stay. The effects of the observer on the ‘thing’ observed are noted in field after field. The inter-reactions of systems are now a topic for study, rather than predictions concerning the position or behaviour of their individual components. The non-hierarchical units of ecological systems are more relevant to us today than studies of linear progressions leading from simple to more complex unicellu-

¹ Lord Acton (1834–1902) in Letter to the Contributors to the Cambridge Modern History. Loc. cit. p. 247

² American Historical Review, 1924.

lar organisms, from these to multi-cellular forms of life and from the latter right 'up' to the summits of biological evolution inhabited by human kind.

Scientific insights today both reflect deep changes in prevailing philosophy and help further to deepen them. A part, it would appear, from revolutionary theory, everything today is up for re-examination. Additional knowledge is no longer automatically equated with progress.³ Scientists are increasingly questioning the methods and structure of science, its rigid separation of the subjective from the objective, its equating of technology with advance (not to mention the ways it misuses knowledge). But the advocates of 'scientific' socialism spare themselves these doubts. They ignore this process of self-questioning. The 'science' of their 'scientific socialism' seems immune from the crisis of science as a whole. Many such people start striving to change the course of history only after becoming convinced that the direction of history is independent of their will! They see history as a train running along a track, an analogy drawn — oh, so tellingly and revealingly — from the industrial revolution. Some would prefer a 'freer' metaphor, perhaps that of a torrent (at times in flood, at times a trickle), earthbound certainly by the laws of gravity, but within those limits able to circumvent or remove obstacles, and certainly capable, when necessary, of shaping its own bed and even of changing it. But this metaphor too, basing itself as it does on the phenomena of natural science, bears the imprint — and has all the limitations — of a period.

³ The debate about genetic engineering is a case in point. Some scientists talk of voluntary self-censorship by the scientific community. A Nobel Prize winner can now write: 'I fear for the future of science as we have known it, for human kind, for life on Earth. The new technology excites me ... yet the price is high, perhaps too high.' (George Wald, *The Sciences*, N.Y. Academy of Sciences, Sept/Oct. 1976.)

meaning only] and univocally determined by the state of technology. There is only one nexus of techniques at any given stage of history, and there is therefore only one rational set of methods of production. There is no question, there is no sense in trying to develop a society by means other than 'industrialisation' — a term apparently neutral but which will finally produce its wholly capitalist litter. The rationalisation of production is the rationalisation already created by capitalism. It is the primacy of the 'economic' in all senses of the word. It is quantification. It is the plan which treats men and their activities as measurable variables. Reactionary under capitalism from the moment the latter ceases developing the productive forces and only uses these techniques for an increasingly parasitic type of exploitation, all this becomes progressive under the 'dictatorship of the proletariat.' The 'dialectical transformation of the meaning of Taylorism, for instance, will be made quite explicit by Trotsky as early as 1919.²⁴ It matters little that this situation leaves some philosophical problems unsolved (how, in these conditions, can identical infrastructures support opposite social constructions?) or that it also leaves certain real problems unsolved (insofar as immature workers fail to understand the difference between the Taylorism of the bosses and that of the Socialist State). The first will be leapt over with the help of 'dialectics,' the second silenced with gunshots. Universal history isn't the place for subtlety, either.

cannot, as Marxism does, just make the 'progressiveness' of a regime correspond to its capacity to develop the productive forces.

²⁴ *Terrorism and Communism*, Ann Arbor Paperbacks (1961), p. 149. ('Under capitalism, the system of piece-work and of grading, the application of the Taylor system, etc. have as their object to increase the exploitation of the workers by squeezing out of surplus value. Under Socialist production, piece-work, bonuses, etc. have as their problem to increase the volume of social product and consequently to raise the general well-being. Those workers who do more for the general interest than others receive the right to a greater quantity of the social product than the lazy, the careless, and disorganizers.')

sure, the vulgar ideology of progress is denounced and derided. It is shown that capitalist progress is based upon the poverty of the masses. But this poverty itself is seen as part of a forward moving process. The exploitation of the working class is justified ‘historically,’ as long as the bourgeoisie uses the fruits of this exploitation for purposes of accumulation, thereby continuing its economic expansion. The capitalist class, an exploiting class from the outset, is said to be a progressive class as long as it keeps developing the productive forces.²² In the great Hegelian realist tradition, not only this exploitation but all the crimes of the capitalist class, recorded and denounced at one level, are recuperated at another by the rationality of history and finally, as there is no other criterion, justified. ‘Universal history is not the place for happiness,’ as Hegel said.

Marxism and the bureaucracy

People have often asked themselves how Marxists could have been Stalinists. But if the bosses are progressive provided they go on building factories, surely the same should apply to the commissars, who build just as many or even more.²³ And as for this development of productive forces, it is seen as univocal [having one

²² Correlatively, it only ceases to be a progressive class when it puts a brake on their development. This idea comes up again and again in the writings of the great classical Marxists (beginning with Marx himself), to say nothing of their epigones. What becomes of this idea today, when it can be shown that, during the last 25 years, capitalism has been developing the productive forces more than forty previous centuries had done? How can a Marxist speak today of a revolutionary perspective and remain a Marxist, i.e. affirm in the same breath that ‘no social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed’ (Marx, preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Selected Works, vol. I, p. 363; FLPH, Moscow 1958). Neither Nikita Khrushchev, nor any ‘leftist’ of any kind, has ever taken the trouble to explain this.

²³ Obviously, we don’t mean that the bourgeoisie was not ‘progressive,’ nor that the development of the productive forces is reactionary, or of no interest. We say that there is no simple connection between these two things and that one

Objections to Marxism, at a coherently argued level, usually come from two main sources: from downright reactionaries defending the existing social order or from the methodological nit-pickers of the academic establishment, more concerned with point-scoring (or with the public display of their erudition) than with a genuine understanding of the world around them. It is rare today to find a philosophical critique of Marx coming from those who, like him, seek radically to transform society. A thought out critique that is both libertarian and revolutionary, and that moreover identifies Marxism as a useful philosophy for the bureaucracy, is rarer still. The need for such an approach is now obvious.

Revolutionaries must challenge the dominant ideology, in whatever guise it may present itself. If Marxism now provides the philosophical cornerstone of new hierarchical and exploitative regimes, it is a relevant target for us. Philosophical ideas and assumptions are as much part of what holds these new societies together as are institutional violence, policemen and — ultimately — the armed forces of the state. A challenge of this kind is a legitimate endeavour. The seeds of new social orders always sprout, as philosophical assumptions, long before the revolution. (The revolutionary bureaucrat, incidentally, also appears before the revolution) Philosophical ideas contribute to the intellectual climate which helps shape societies. The Enlightenment preceded the French Revolution: the bourgeoisie won its philosophical battles against the aristocracy and the clergy long before it secured its own political ascendancy. Bourgeois society is today in crisis. In the wings are the Marxists: the ideologues of the bureaucracy.

Marxist assumptions today permeate the thinking of those who see themselves as the midwives of new societies. There are plenty of examples of what these assumptions are tending to produce, and have in fact already produced. We refuse to believe that these creations are all ‘historical accidents’ (no society can be that accident-prone). Our century is littered with ‘revolutions’

which gave birth to authoritarian and repressive regimes, officially upholding Marx's ideas, even teaching them in schools and universities. These regimes are obsessed with such notions as 'scientific socialism' and 'the unfettered development of the productive forces.' Many have by and large achieved such demands of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) as 'the centralisation of credit' or 'the means of communication and transport in the hands of the state.' 'The extension of factories and instruments of production,' owned by the same state, is nowadays taken for granted by all 'progressive' regimes.

But the future is not settled. The libertarian revolution is not a utopian project. In this perspective the unseating of authority, especially of so-called 'revolutionary' authority, is an act of liberation. For objectivist rationalism applied to history is tantamount to purging history of all that is creative and alive (and therefore unpredictable) within it. Genuine creation is the act of producing that which is *not* totally implicit in the previous state of affairs. Such creation plays a major role in history. By its very nature it defies the dictates of pre-determination. For those who see history as the unfurling of a dialectical process which leads inevitably 'forward' towards a particular brand of 'socialism' (or which grants history — as sole alternative — the right to stagnate in capitalist barbarism) there is no *real* history. There are just mechanisms. There is no more history in such an outlook than there is in a chemical reaction (however explosive) produced by mixing ingredients of known composition, with known properties, in the appropriate proportions, and in the right sequence.

What areas of choice does history offer us? If there are none, are we merely acting out a drama scripted by Him, Her, It or They? Whether the agency be the bearded God of the Christians, the imageless God of the Judeo-Muslims, the Mother-Goddess of early

this is verification and refinement of a solid core of acquired truths: the 'laws of the dialectic.' As a corollary, theory retains its eminent place, its primacy — however much one may invoke 'the golden tree of life' or however much one may refer to praxis as the ultimate verification.²¹

Everything holds together in this conception: the analysis of capitalism, general philosophy, the theory of history, the condition of the working class, the political programme. And the most far-reaching consequences flow from it — both in sound logic and in real history as has been shown by the experience of half a century. The development of the productive forces rules the rest of social life. Therefore, even if this development is not in itself the ultimate end, it is in practice the ultimate end since the rest is determined by and 'moreover' flows from it, since 'the true realm of freedom ... can only blossom forth with this realm of necessity as its basis' this pre-supposing abundance and the reduction of the working day which, in turn, pre-suppose a given degree of development of the productive forces. This development is called progress. To be

²¹ Lukacs shows quite rightly that practice, as understood by Engels, that is 'the attitude proper to industry and to experiment' is 'the most properly contemplative of behaviours' (*History and Class Consciousness*). But he too throws the veil of Noah's son over his father's nakedness, by giving us implicitly to understand that we are faced here with a personal error by Engels, who on this point would have been unfaithful to the true spirit of Marx. But what Marx thought even in his youth, was in no way different: 'The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but a practical question. In practice man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.' (*Second Thesis on Feuerbach*). In this text, it is obviously not a question exclusively, or even mainly of historical praxis, in the sense Lukacs meant it, but of 'practice' in general, including experiment and industry. This is shown, moreover, by other passages in the early works. Now, not only does this practice remain, as Lukacs reminds us within the category of contemplation; it can never be a verification of thought in general, a 'demonstration of the reality of thought.' We never encounter anything else in it except another phenomenon. There is no question of it allowing us to surpass Kantian problems.

In Marxism these insights were to remain insights, they were never really developed.¹⁷ The promise of a new world was quickly stifled by the prolific growth of a second element which will develop into a system, which will rapidly become predominant and will relegate the first into oblivion or will only use it — and that rarely — as an ideological and philosophical alibi. This second element reasserts and extends the deepest tendencies of capitalist culture and of capitalist society, even if it does so through the negation of several apparently (and really) important aspects of capitalism. It knits together the social logic of capitalism and the scientific positivism of the 19th century. It drives Marx to compare social evolution to a natural process¹⁸, stresses economic determinism and greets in Darwin's theory a discovery parallel to that of Marx.¹⁹ As always this scientific positivism overturns immediately into rationalism and idealism as soon as it raises fundamental questions and attempts to answer them. History (it says) is a rational system subject to given laws, the main ones of which we can define as from now. Knowledge forms a system whose principles are already understood. There is certainly an 'asymptotic' progress²⁰ but

¹⁷ Except, up to a point, by Lukacs (in *History and Class Consciousness*). It is moreover striking that Lukacs, when he wrote the essays contained in this book, was not aware of some of the most important early manuscripts of Marx (notably that of 1844 entitled *Political Economy and Philosophy and the German Ideology*) which were not published until 1925 and 1931.

¹⁸ In his postface to the second edition of *Capital*, Marx quotes (describing it as 'generous,' the account of his 'method' outlined in the *European Courier* of St Petersburg. This affirmed notably that 'Marx considered social evolution as a natural process, governed by laws which do not depend on the will, consciousness or intention of men, but on the contrary determine these'). (*Selected Works*, vol. I, p. 454)

¹⁹ A comparison made on several occasions by Engels. That does not mean, obviously, that one should underestimate the importance of Darwin in the history of science or even in that of ideas in general.

²⁰ Engels voices this idea on several occasions, notably in *Anti-Dühring*. The idea masks a bizarre and shameful crypto-Kantism, and is in open contradiction with all 'dialectic.'

civilisations⁴, Hegel's Logos, or the Unfurling of the Materialist Dialectic (leading to the inevitable emergence of communist humanity) matters little in this respect. Can rationalism ('the ratio of all we have already known,' as Blake once put it) fully forecast the creations we have yet to make? If it can, there is nothing original in anything we do. If it cannot, then the power of rationalism has certain inherent limitations. If a 'scientific' theory of history can predict history, there is no such thing as genuine choice. If it cannot, then 'scientific' interpretations of the past are subject to the same limitations as similar predictions of the future.

Castoriadis' critique of 'rationalism' does not throw reason out of the window. It merely challenges its omnipotence and seeks to define its limits. Nor does his critique of objectivism deny that phenomena exist independently of the human mind. It merely stresses that the human mind moulds what it perceives, endowing it with signification. At the level of natural phenomena, new interpretations lead to new exploration. At the level of social phenomena, the human mind shapes new attitudes, new roles and eventually new institutions. The critique of what Marx himself (in *The German Ideology*) was to call 'the tyranny of concepts' is deeply subversive. The struggle against 'all that is' now forces revolutionaries to rethink issues long considered 'settled,' rescuing in the process the term 'praxis' (creative and self-transforming activity) from its widespread confusion with 'practice' (the application of rationality to concrete tasks). Against this background it is not really surprising that the philosophical ideas of Karl Marx should be deemed ripe for re-examination. This critique of 'all fixed, fast-frozen relations' is, after all, only an aspect of the intellectual climate of our time.

Solidarity (London), July 1978.

⁴ Isis in Egypt, Danu in India, Ishtar in Babylon, Nana in Sumer, Ashtoreth in the 'Bible Lands.'

The Marxist Philosophy of History

The Marxist theory of history claims in the first place to be scientific, i.e., to be a generalisation susceptible to validation or challenge at the level of empirical research. As a scientific theory, which it undoubtedly is, it was inevitable that it should share the fate of every important such theory. Having produced an enormous and irreversible upheaval in our way of looking at the historical world, it is itself overtaken by the research it has unleashed and must find its place in the history of theories. This does not minimise what it bequeaths. One can say then, like Che Guevara, that it is no more necessary today to proclaim that one is a Marxist than it is necessary to assert that one is a Pasteurian or a Newtonian — provided we know exactly what we mean thereby. Everyone is a Newtonian, in the sense that nobody would return to the way of posing problems, or to the categories people used before Newton. But at the same time, no one is really a Newtonian, for no one can just go on defending a theory that is purely and simply *false*.⁵

But at the roots of the Marxist theory of history there is a philosophy of history profoundly and contradictorily woven into it, and itself full of contradictions as we shall see. This philosophy is neither ornament nor complement: it is the very foundation of the theory. It is just as much the basis of how Marxism looks at past history as of its current political conceptions and of its perspectives and programme for revolution. The essential thing is that it is a rationalist philosophy. And, like all rationalist philosophies, the Marxist philosophy of history provides itself, in advance, with the answers to all the problems it raises.

⁵ Well and truly false, and not 'an approximation improved by subsequent theories.' The idea of 'successive approximations,' of an additive accumulation of scientific truths, is meaningless 19th century Progressivism which still largely dominates the thinking of scientists.

proclaiming that it is no longer a question of interpreting the world but of changing it, and that we must go beyond philosophy as one realises philosophy. This element refuses to provide itself, in advance, with the solution to the problem of history or with a completed dialectic. It asserts that communism is not an ideal state towards which society is advancing, but the real movement which puts an end to the existing state of affairs. It stresses the fact that men make their own history, in given conditions each time, and will declare that the emancipation of the workers will be brought about by the workers themselves. It is this element which will be capable of recognising in the Paris Commune or in the Russian Soviets not only the insurrectionary events but the creation by the masses in action of new forms of social life. For the time being it matters little that this recognition has remained partial and theoretical, or that the ideas mentioned above are no more than points of departure, raising new problems or side-stepping others. There is here, and one would have to be blind not to see it, the promise of a new world, a project radically to transform society, a quest for the conditions of this transformation in actual history and for its meaning in the situation and activity of people seeking to achieve it. We are not in the world just to look at it, or to suffer it; our destiny isn't slavery. An action is possible, which finds support in that which is, in order to bring about that which we want to be. To understand that we are sorcerers' apprentices is already one step out of the condition of sorcerer's apprentice. And to understand *why* we are such is yet another step. Beyond an activity unaware of its true ends and of its real effects, beyond a technique which according to exact calculations modifies an object without anything new resulting therefrom, there can and must be an historical praxis which transforms the world while transforming itself, which allows itself to learn through educating others, which prepares what is new while refusing to predetermine it because it knows that people make their own history.

a non-determined and non-rational residue, that the residue is just as essential as what has been analysed, that necessity and contingency continually interpenetrate, that 'nature,' both outside and within us, is always something other and something more than what our consciousness makes of it — and that all this is not only valid for the 'object,' but also for the subject, and not just for the 'empirical' subject but also for the 'transcendental' subject, since all transcendental law-making by consciousness presupposes the raw fact that a consciousness exists in a world (order and disorder, seizable and inexhaustible), a fact that consciousness cannot itself produce, either really or symbolically. It is only on this condition that a dialectic can really envisage living history, which a rationalist dialectic is obliged to kill before it can lay it out on the benches of its laboratories.

But such a transformation of the dialectic is only possible in its turn, if one goes beyond the traditional and age-old idea of theory as both closed system and contemplation. That was, in fact, one of the key insights of the young Marx.

The Two Elements of Marxism and Their Historic Fate

There are in Marxism two elements whose meaning and historical fate have been radically opposed to one another.

The revolutionary element bursts forth in the youthful works of Marx, still appears from time to time in his mature works, occasionally reappears in the writings of the greatest Marxists — Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky — re-emerging for the last time in Lukacs. Its appearance represents an essential twist in the history of humanity. This element seeks to dethrone speculative philosophy by

Objectivist rationalism

The Marxist philosophy of history is first and foremost an example of objectivist rationalism. We see it already when Marxism seeks to tackle the past. The object studied is seen as a natural object: the model applied to it is analogous to models drawn from the natural sciences. Forces, acting at defined points, produce predetermined results according to a great schema of causality which has to explain the statics of history as well as its dynamics, the structure and the functioning of each society as well as the instability and upheavals that will lead history to produce new forms. Past history is thus rational, in the sense that everything that happened in it happened in accordance with perfectly adequate causes, penetrable by our reason, as it stood in 1859. According to this theory, the real is perfectly explicable. In principle, it is already explained. (One can write monographs on the economic causes of the birth of Islam in the 7th century: these will 'verify' the materialist conception of history but will teach us nothing about it.) Humanity's past conforms to reason. Everything in it has a definite reason, and together these reasons constitute a coherent and exhaustive system.

But future history is just as rational. It will carry reason into effect, and this time in a second sense: in the sense not only of the fact itself but of the value attached to it. Future history will be what it ought to be. It will witness the birth of a rational society which will embody the aspirations of humanity, where mankind will finally be human — that is its existence will coincide with its essence and its effective will realise its concept.

Finally, history is rational in a third sense: that of the link between the past and the future, of facts which will necessarily become values, of this set of blind quasi-natural laws which blindly generate the least blind situation of all: that of liberated humanity. The reason immanent in all things will produce a society miraculously in keeping with our own reason.

We can see, in all this, that Hegelianism is not really transcended. All that is real, and all that will be real, is and will be rational. That Hegel stops this reality and this rationality at the point in time when his own philosophy appears on the scene, while Marx prolongs them indefinitely up to and into communist humanity, does not invalidate what we say. It reinforces it. The empire of reason which, in Hegel's case, embraced (by a necessary speculative postulate) all that is already given, now extends to encompass all that can ever be given in history. The fact that what can be *said* now concerning the future becomes increasingly vague the further one moves from the present is due to contingent limitations to our knowledge — and even more to the fact that today's tasks are on today's agenda and that they do not include 'providing recipes for the socialist cookshops of the future.' But this future is already fixed in its principles: it will be liberty, just as the present is — and the past was — necessity.

There is therefore a 'Cunning of Reason,' as old Hegel used to say. There is a Reason at work in history which ensures that past history is comprehensible, that future history is desirable, and that the apparently blind necessity of facts is secretly arranged in such a way as to give birth to what is good.

Just stating this idea is enough to shed light on the extraordinary number of problems which it masks. We can only deal with some of them, and that briefly.

Determinism

To claim that past history is comprehensible, as does the Marxist conception of history, is to say that there exists in history a causal determinism without 'important' exceptions.⁶ It is also to

⁶ Determinism only has meaning as total determinism: even the tone of the voice of a fascist demagogue or of a working class orator 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

to the touch. It is quite irrelevant in this respect to say that nature is one moment of the logos, or that the logos arises at a given stage in the evolution of matter, since in both cases the two entities are posited from the onset as being of the same essence, to wit, of rational essence. Besides, neither of these assertions had any meaning since no one can state what spirit is, or what matter is, except through definitions that are essentially empty because essentially nominal: matter (or spirit) is all that which is, etc. Matter and spirit, in these philosophies, are nothing ultimately but pure Being, that is to say as Hegel correctly put it, pure Nothingness. To call oneself a 'materialist' is in no way different from calling oneself an 'idealist' if, by matter, one understands an otherwise indefinable entity, exhaustively submitted to laws co-substantial and coextensive with our reason, and thus from this very moment *de jure* penetrable by us (and even *de facto*, since the 'laws of these laws,' the 'supreme principles of nature and knowledge' are already known here and now: they are the 'principles' or 'laws of dialectics' discovered 150 years ago (and now even numbered, thanks to the efforts of Comrade Mao Tse-Tung). When an 'idealist' astronomer like Sir James Jeans claims that God is a mathematician, and when dialectical materialists fiercely assert that matter, life and history are wholly subordinate to a determinism of which we shall one day discover the mathematical expression, it is sad to think that under certain historical circumstances the supporters of each of these schools could (and in fact did) have the others shot. It is sad because they all say exactly the same thing, simply giving it a different name.

A 'non-idealist' dialectic must also be a 'non-materialist' dialectic, in the sense that it refuses to posit an absolute Being, whether as idea, as matter, or as the *de jure* already given totality of all the possible determinations. Such a dialectic must eliminate notions such as closure and completion, and reject all finite world systems. It should set aside the rationalist illusion, seriously accept the idea that there is infinite and indefinite, admit — without thereby forsaking work on the matter — that all rational determination leaves

the (truly incomprehensible) fact that our knowledge reflects reality. In the 'subjectivist' form the world in question (in fact the universe of discourse) is the product of the activity of the subject, which thereby guarantees its rationality.¹⁶

Conversely, any rationalist dialectic is necessarily a closed dialectic. Without this closure the whole system remains suspended in mid air. The 'truth' of each determination is nothing more than the return to the totality of determinations, without which return each moment of the system remains both arbitrary and indefinite. One must therefore posit the totality, without residue. Nothing must remain outside it, otherwise the system is not incomplete it is nothing at all. Any systematic dialectic must lead to an 'end of history,' be it in the form of Hegel's absolute knowledge or of Marx's 'complete man.'

The essence of the Hegelian dialectic is not to be found in the assertion that the 'logos' (the organisation of intelligible appearances) 'precedes' nature, still less in the vocabulary which forms its 'theological vestment.' It lies in the method itself, in the fundamental postulate according to which 'all that is real is rational,' in the inevitable claim that it can produce all the possible determinations of its object. This essence cannot be destroyed by putting the dialectic 'back on its feet' since it will always remain visibly the same animal. A revolutionary transcendence of Hegelian dialectics demands not that it be put back on its feet, but that, as a first step, its head be chopped off.

The nature and meaning of Hegel's dialectic cannot therefore change because one starts calling 'matter' what was previously called 'logos' or 'spirit' — provided that by 'spirit' one doesn't mean a white bearded gentleman dwelling in heaven, and provided one knows that 'material nature' is not a mass of coloured objects, solid

¹⁶ Elements of 'subjectivist' dialectic of this type may be found in the early works of Marx, and they form the substance of Lukacs' thought. We shall return to this later.

claim that this determinism carries — at one remove, so to speak — meanings linked together in totalities which are themselves bearers of meaning. Neither of these ideas can be accepted without further discussion.

We certainly cannot think of history without reference to the category of causality. Contrary to what the idealist philosophers said, history *is* the area par excellence where causality makes sense to us: for it assumes there, at the very outset, the form of motivation. We can therefore understand the 'causal' concatenation in it, something we can never do in the case of natural phenomena. An electric current makes the bulb glow. The law of gravity causes the moon to be in such and such a place in the sky at such and such a time. These are, and for us will always remain, external connexions: necessary, predictable, but incomprehensible. But if A treads on B's toes, B swears at him, and A responds with blows, we understand the necessity of the links even if we consider them contingent. (We can reproach the participants for having let themselves be carried away when they should have controlled themselves — while we know all the time, from our own experience, that at certain moments one cannot stop oneself from being carried away.) More generally, we constantly think and act out our lives (and envisage that of others) in terms of causality — whether it be in terms of motivation or of the choice of the indispensable technical means; whether it be that a result is achieved because one has deliberately created the conditions of its achievement or whether it be that there are inevitable, even if unwanted, effects from one's actions.

told that Clemenceau 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 don't matter). Determinism can thus only fulfil itself by again dividing the world. It is only at the level of ideas that it aims at 'one world' — when applied, it is compelled to postulate a 'non-determined' part of reality.

The causal exists in social and historical life because there is ‘a subjective rationality’: the deployment of Carthaginian troops at Cannes (and their victory) flows from a rational plan devised by Hannibal. The causal also exists because there is an ‘objective rationality,’ because natural causal relations and purely logical necessities are constantly present in historical relations: under certain technical and economic conditions, steel production and coal extraction stand in a constant and quantifiable relationship to one another (more generally, in a functional relationship). And there is also a ‘raw causality’ which we can perceive without being able to reduce it to subjective or objective rational relationships. There are established correlations of which we do not know the foundations, regularities of behaviour, individual or social, which remain just facts.

The existence of these causal relations of various kinds allows us — beyond a simple understanding of the behaviour of individuals and of its regularity — to gather these behaviour patterns together into ‘laws’ and to give to these laws an abstract expression, from which the ‘real’ content of the behaviour of living individuals has been eliminated. These laws can then provide a basis for satisfactory predictions (verifiable to a given degree of probability). For example, there is in the economic functioning of capitalism an extraordinary number of observable and measurable regularities. As a first approximation we may call them ‘laws.’ They ensure that in many of its aspects this functioning seems both explainable and comprehensible and that it is, up to a point, predictable. Even beyond the economy, there are a number of partial ‘objective dynamics.’ We find it impossible, however, to integrate these into a total determinism of the system, and that for reasons quite different from those that express the crisis of determinism in modern physics. It is not that determinism collapses or becomes problematic at the *limits* of the system, or that cracks develop in the latter. The opposite is rather the case: it is as if some aspects, some areas

Generations of Marxists have thus mechanically parroted Marx’s phrase: ‘with Hegel, the dialectic was standing on its head; I replaced it on its feet,’ without asking themselves whether such an operation was actually feasible, and especially whether it would be able to transform the nature of its object. Is it enough to turn a thing upside down to change its substance? Was the ‘content’ of Hegelianism so loosely linked to its dialectical ‘method’ that one could substitute another content radically opposed to it? And could one do this to a philosophy which proclaimed that its content was ‘produced’ by its method, or rather that method and content were but two moments in the production of the system?

It is obviously impossible. If Marx retained the Hegelian dialectic he also retained its real philosophical content, which was rationalism. He only modified the garment which, ‘idealist’ in Hegel becomes ‘materialist’ in Marx. Using the words in this way, we are only playing with them.

A closed dialectic such as that of Hegel is of necessity rationalist. It simultaneously presupposes and ‘proves’ that all experience is exhaustively reducible to rational determinations. (That moreover these determinations are found each time miraculously to coincide with the ‘reason’ of such and such a thinker or society, that there is consequently at the core of all rationalism an anthropocentrism or socio-centrism, that in other words all rationalism erects as Reason a particular reason, is plainly evident and would already be enough to put an end to the discussion.) A closed dialectic is the necessary end of all speculative and systematic philosophy which seeks to answer the question: ‘how can we have true knowledge?’ And which conceives of truth as a complete system of relations without ambiguity or residue. It matters little in this respect if its rationalism takes on an ‘objectivist’ form (as with Marx and Engels) or a ‘subjectivist’ form (as with the German idealist philosophers, including ultimately even Hegel). In the ‘objectivist’ form, where the world is rational in itself, a system of laws governs without limit an absolutely neutral substratum and our grasp of these laws flows from

component poles of the riddle to the point of making it impossible to think of it rationally.

Marxism does not therefore transcend the philosophy of history. It is merely another philosophy of history. The rationality it seems to extract from the facts is a rationality which it actually imposes upon them. The 'historical necessity' of which it speaks (in the usual sense of this expression, namely that of a concatenation of facts leading history towards progress) in no way differs, philosophically speaking, from Hegelian Reason. In both cases one is dealing with a truly theological type of human alienation. A communist Providence, which would so have pre-ordained history as to produce our freedom, is nevertheless a Providence. In both cases one eliminates the central concern of any reflexion: the rationality of the (natural or historical) world, by providing oneself in advance with a rationally constructed world. Clearly, nothing can be resolved in this way: a totally rational world would, by virtue of this very fact, be infinitely more mysterious than the world in which we struggle. A history that would be rational from beginning to end — and through and through — would be more massively incomprehensible than the history we know. Its whole rationality would be founded on a total irrationality, for it would be in the nature of pure fact, and of fact so brutal, solid and all-embracing that we should suffocate under it. Finally, under these conditions, the main problem of praxis would disappear, namely that people have to give to their individual and collective lives a signification which is not pre-assigned, and that they have to do so while at grips with real conditions which neither exclude nor guarantee the fulfilment of their project.

Dialectic and 'materialism'

When Marx's rationalism takes on an explicit philosophical expression, it is presented as a dialectic. Not as a dialectic in general but as Hegelian dialectic, shorn of its 'mystified idealist form.'

only of society were governed by determinism, while themselves bathed in a mass of non-determinist relations.

It is important to understand what this impossibility is due to. The partial dynamics which we establish are of course incomplete. They constantly refer to each other. Any modification of one modifies all the others. But if this gives rise to immense problems in practice it creates no difficulties of principle. In the physical world too relations are only valid 'all other things being equal.'

The impossibility we are discussing does not stem from the complexity of the social material, it arises from its very nature. It stems from the fact that the social (or the historical) contain the non-causal as an essential ingredient.

This non-causal appears at two levels. The first, which is the least important to us here, is that of deviations between the real behaviour of individuals and their 'typical' behaviour. This introduces an unpredictable element. But it would not, as such, prevent the problems from being tackled in a determinist way, at least at an aggregate level. If these deviations are systematic they can themselves be subjected to causal investigation. If they are random, they can be treated statistically. The unpredictability of the movement of individual molecules has not prevented the kinetic theory of gases from being one of the most rigorous branches of physics. It is in fact this very individual unpredictability which generates the extraordinary power of the theory.

But the non-causal also appears at another level, and it is this one which is important. It appears not simply as unpredictable behaviour but as *creative* behaviour, the creative behaviour of individuals, groups, classes, whole societies. It asserts itself not as a simple deviation from the prevailing type but as the *positing* of new behaviour patterns, as the *institution* of new social rules, as the *invention* of a new object or form — in short, as an emergence or creation which cannot be deduced from what was there before, as a conclusion which exceeds the premises or as a positing of new premises. It has already been noted that living beings go beyond

the realm of simple mechanism because they are capable of giving new answers in new situations. But the historical being exceeds the merely biological (or living) being because he can give new responses to the *same* situations, or create new situations.

History cannot be thought of according to the determinist schema (or, indeed, according to any simple 'dialectical' schema) because it is the realm of *creation*. We shall take up this point again later.

The chain of meanings and the 'cunning of reason'

Beyond the problem of determinism in history lies the problem of 'historical' significations. In the first instance history appears as the scene of the conscious actions of conscious beings. But this obviousness collapses as soon as we examine it more closely. We then find, with Engels, that 'history is the realm of conscious intentions and unwanted ends.' The *real* results of historical action are practically never those which their performers had intended. That isn't, perhaps, so hard to understand. What creates a central problem is that these results, which no one had wanted as such, present themselves as 'coherent' in a certain way. They possess a 'signification' and seem to obey a logic which is neither a 'subjective' logic (carried by a consciousness, or posited by someone), nor an 'objective' logic, like the one we believe we detect in nature. We shall call it an historical logic.

Hundreds of bourgeois, visited or not by the spirit of Calvin, or struck by notions of this-worldly asceticism, begin to accumulate. Thousands of ruined craftsmen and starving peasants find themselves available to enter the factories. Someone invents a steam engine, someone else a new weaving loom. Philosophers and physicists seek to conceptualise the universe as a gigantic machine and to discover its laws. Kings continue to impose their authority on — and simultaneously to emasculate — the nobility. They create na-

level? It is already to do first violence to the facts to transform technico-economic evolution into a 'dialectic of the productive forces.' It is to do violence to them again to superimpose on this dialectic another, which produces freedom out of necessity. The third violence is to claim that the former can be totally reduced to the latter. Even if communism could simply be reduced to the question of the adequate development of productive forces, and even if this development flowed inexorably from the functioning of objective laws established in all certainty, the mystery would remain total. For how could the functioning of blind laws produce a result which, for humanity, has both a signification and a positive value?

Even more precisely and strikingly, this mystery is again encountered in the Marxist idea of an objective dynamic of the contradictions of capitalism. More precisely, because the idea is buttressed by a specific analysis of capitalist economics. More strikingly, because here are added a series of negative significations. On the surface the mystery seems to be resolved: one shows, in the functioning of the economic system, the concatenations of causes and effects which lead the system to its crisis, and prepare the crossing to a new social order. In reality the mystery remains complete. In accepting the Marxist analysis of the capitalist economy we would find ourselves confronted with a unique, coherent and oriented dynamic of contradictions, with the chimera represented by a beautiful rationality of the irrational, with the philosophical riddle of a world of non-meaning which would produce meanings at all levels and would finally fulfil our desires. In fact the analysis is false and the projection implicit in its conclusions is obvious. But never mind. The riddle exists in actual fact, and Marxism does not solve it, far from it. By asserting that everything should be grasped in terms of causation, and that at the same time everything should be envisaged in terms of signification, by claiming that there is a single and immense causal chain, which is at the same time a single and immense concatenation of meanings, Marxism exacerbates the two

lived in reality, and they are conveyed by causal mechanisms which, in themselves, have no signification — or not *that* particular signification. Sensed by humanity from time immemorial, explicitly although metaphorically posited in both myth and tragedy (in which necessity takes the form of accident), the problem was clearly envisaged by Hegel. But Hegel's answer, namely the 'cunning of Reason,' which so arranges things as to rope into its own historical fulfilment events which appear to have no signification, is evidently only a phrase. It resolves nothing. And it is ultimately part of the old mumbo-jumbo about the ways of Providence.

With Marxism, the problem becomes even more acute. For Marxism simultaneously maintains the notion of significations assignable to events and to whole slices of history, asserts more than any other conception the power of the internal logic of historical processes, adds up these significations into a single, already given, signification for history as a whole (namely the creation of communism) — and claims it can totally reduce the level of significations to the level of causations. The two poles of the contradiction are thus pushed to the limit of their depth, but their synthesis remains purely verbal. When Lukacs says (seeking to show that Marx had, in this respect too, solved the problem which Hegel could only pose) that 'the "cunning of reason" can only be something more than mythology if real reason is discovered and shown in a really concrete way. It is then a genial explanation for as yet non-conscious phases of history,' he (Lukacs) isn't really saying anything. It is not only that this 'real reason shown in a really concrete way' boils down for Marx to technico-economic factors and that the latter are insufficient, at the level of causality itself integrally to 'explain' how the results arose. The question is how can technico-economic factors have a rationality which vastly exceeds them? How can their operation throughout the whole of history embody a unity of signification which is itself the bearer of another unity of signification, expressed at another

tional institutions. Each of the individuals and groups in question pursues his own ends. No one aims at the social totality as such.

The result however is of a quite different order: it is capitalism. It is quite immaterial, in this context, that the result might have been totally determined by the causes and conditions, taken as a whole. Let us admit, for the sake of argument, that one can show for each of these facts (up to and including the colour of Colbert's breeches) all the multi-dimensional causal connexions linking them to one another, and linking all of them to the 'initial conditions of the system.' What is important here is that their outcome has a coherence which no person or thing wanted or could guarantee to start with — or subsequently. The result has a signification (or rather appears to embody a virtually inexhaustible system of significations), so that there is well and truly a sort of historical entity that is the capitalist system.

This signification appears in many ways. Through all the causal connexions and beyond them it confers a sort of unity upon the features of capitalist society and enables us to recognise immediately, in a particular phenomenon, a phenomenon of *this* culture. It allows us immediately to classify as belonging to this period objects, books, instruments, phrases of which we might know nothing else, and to exclude from this culture, just as immediately, a host of other objects. It appears as the simultaneous existence of an infinite set of possibilities, and of an infinite set of impossibilities given, so to speak, from the outset. It appears moreover in the fact that all which happens within the system is not only produced according to something we might call the 'spirit of the system,' but contributes to reinforce it (even when it opposes the system and seeks — at the limit — to overthrow it as a real order).

Everything happens as if this overall signification of the system was given, in some way, in advance, as if it 'predetermined' and over-determined the causal sequences and links, subjecting them to itself, compelling them to produce results compatible with an 'intention' which, of course, is no more than a metaphorical ex-

pression, given that it is no one's intention. Marx says somewhere that 'if there was no element of chance, history would be magic' — a profoundly true phrase. But the astonishing thing is that chance itself, in history, takes on most of the time the form of meaningful chance, of 'objective' chance. The 'by chance, no doubt' of popular irony captures it very well. What is it that gives to the innumerable gestures, actions, thoughts, individual and collective behaviour patterns which make up a society this overall unity of a particular world, where a certain order (an order of meaning, not necessarily an order of causes and effects) can always be found woven into the texture of chaos? What gives great historical events that appearance, which is more than appearance, of an admirably thought out and directed tragedy. At times it seems as if the obvious errors of the actors could not in any way stop the result being achieved; as if the 'internal logic' of the process was capable of inventing and producing, at the desired moment, the 'stops' and the 'go's,' all the corrections and all the 'special effects' necessary for the process to proceed to its conclusion. And at other times the actor, till now infallible, makes the one and only mistake in his life, in its turn indispensable to produce the 'aimed at' result.

This signification, already other than that actually lived through the particular acts of given individuals, poses, as such, an altogether inexhaustible problem. For the significant cannot be reduced to the causal. The significant builds up an order of concatenations which are separate from and yet inextricably woven into the concatenations of causality.

Coherence in society

Let us consider for example the question of the *coherence* of a given society — be it a primitive society or a capitalist one. What is it that ensures that this society 'holds together'? What is it that ensures that the rules (legal or moral) which regulate the behaviour of its adults are in keeping with their motivations, and that they

dividuals) seems truly pre-constituted in the material which history offers us. To keep to the aforementioned example, the myth of Achilles who also died young (and of numerous other heroes who shared the same fate) was not forged on the basis of the example of Alexander (it was rather the other way round).¹⁴ The meaning expressed by the phrase: 'The hero dies young' seems from way back to have fascinated humanity in spite of — or because of — the absurdity it denotes. Reality seems to have provided enough support for it to become 'obvious.' In the same way the myth of the birth of a hero¹⁵ presents — throughout very different epochs and in very different cultural environments — similar features (features which simultaneously deform and reproduce real facts). Ultimately, all myths bear witness to how facts and significations are mingled in historical reality long before the rationalising consciousness of the historian or of the philosopher appears on the scene. *Thirdly*, because history seems constantly dominated by *tendencies*, because one encounters in it a sort of 'internal logic' of its processes which confers a central place to a signification or complex of significations (we referred earlier to the birth and development of the bourgeoisie and of the bureaucracy), links with one another causal sequences which have no internal connexion, and provides itself with all the necessary 'accidental' conditions. The first surprise one experiences on looking at history is to note that in truth, had Cleopatra's nose been shorter, the face of the world would have been changed. The second, even greater surprise is to note that these noses did have, most of the time, the required dimensions.

The impossible synthesis

There is therefore a central problem: there are significations which go beyond the immediate significations experienced and

¹⁴ We know that Alexander 'took Achilles as a model.'

¹⁵ See *The Myth of the Hero's Birth* by O. Rank, and Freud's *Moses*.

On retrospective rationalisation

As with the problem of the coherence of a society, there is here again a causal reduction which one can and should operate – and this is precisely what an exact and reasoned study of history consists of. But this causal reduction, as we have just seen, does not abolish the problem. An illusion must then be eliminated: the illusion of retrospective rationalisation. The historical material, in which we cannot help seeing links between meanings, well defined entities, one might even say a personal aspect – the Peloponnesian War, the Spartacus revolt, the Reformation, the French Revolution – has itself cast our idea of what historical meaning – or a historical figure – is. These particular events have taught us what an event is, and the rationality we later detect in them only surprises us because we have forgotten that we had ourselves first extracted it from them. When Hegel more or less asserts that Alexander had of necessity to die at the age of thirty three, because it was of the essence of a hero to die young and that one could not imagine an old Alexander, and when he thus builds up an accidental fever into the manifestation of Reason hidden in history, we note that our image of what a hero is was precisely forged out of the real case of Alexander and other similar ones, and that there is therefore nothing surprising if one discovers in the event a form which constituted itself for us through the event.

Similar demystifications are needed in many cases. But even this won't exhaust the problem. *Firstly*, because here too we meet something similar to what happens in our knowledge of nature¹³: when one has reduced all that appears rational in the physical world to the rationalising activity of the cognisant subject, there still remains the fact that this a-rational world should be such that this activity can impinge upon it, which excludes its being chaotic. *Secondly*, because the historical meaning (that is to say, a meaning which surpasses the meaning effectively lived and carried by in-

¹³ What Kant was already referring to as 'a happy accident'

are not only compatible but deeply and mysteriously related to the society's method of work and production? How is it that all this, in turn, corresponds to the structure of the family, to how mothers breastfeed their infants, to weaning, to the bringing up of children? How is it that there is a definite structure of the human personality in that particular culture, including its particular neuroses (and no others) – and that all this coordinates itself with one worldview, one religion, such and such a manner of eating or of dancing? When studying a primitive society⁷ one sometimes has the giddy impression that a team of psychoanalysts, economists, sociologists, etc., of superhuman capacity and knowledge, has worked in advance on the problem of its coherence, has made laws setting out the rules that would ensure it. Even if our ethnologists, while analysing the functions of such a society and revealing it to us, introduce more coherence than there actually is, this impression is not, and cannot be, totally illusory. After all, these societies function. They are stable. They are even self-stabilising and capable of absorbing important shocks (except, obviously, that of contact with 'civilisation').

To be sure, the mystery of this coherence can be vastly reduced through causal considerations. This is what is involved in the 'exact' study of a society. If adults behave in a certain fashion, it is because they were brought up in a certain way; if the religion of a people contains such and such an element, it is because it corresponds to the 'basic personality' of the culture in question; if the authority relations are organised in a particular way, this is due to these particular economic factors, or vice versa, etc. But this causal reduction does not exhaust the problem, it only gradually strips it to the bone. The links which it detects, for instance, are those between individual acts situated in a predefined framework. The framework is both that of a social life already coherent at any

⁷ See, for example, the studies of Margaret Mead in *Male and Female*, or in *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*.

moment as a concrete totality⁸ (for without such a coherence there would be no individual acts), and of a collection of rules both explicit and implicit, of an organisation, of a structure which is at one and the same time both an aspect of this totality and something different from it. The rules are themselves the product, in some respects, of that social life. In a number of instances (hardly ever in primitive societies, more often in the case of historical societies) we can insert their emergence into a pattern of social causation (for example free competition and the abolition of serfdom, introduced by the bourgeoisie, serve the ends of the bourgeoisie and are explicitly desired for this reason). But even when one succeeds in ‘producing’ the rules in such a manner, the fact remains that their authors were not, and could not have been, conscious of the totality of their results and of their implications — and yet these results and implications were inexplicably ‘harmonised’ with what already existed or with what others were producing, at the same time, in other areas of the social scene.⁹ In most instances, conscious ‘authors’ quite simply did not exist. The evolution of forms of family life, fundamental to the understanding of all cultures, did not depend on explicit legislative acts. Still less did such acts stem from an awareness of obscure psychoanalytical mechanisms at work in the family. There also remains the fact that these rules are given at the point of departure of each society¹⁰ and that they are coherent with each other, whatever the distance between the areas they cover.

⁸ Thus merely to refer to an ‘infinite series of causations’ doesn’t solve the problem.

⁹ Of course, that is not an absolute truth. There are also bad laws which are incoherent, or which themselves destroy the ends they seek to serve. This phenomenon seems, moreover, curiously restricted to modern societies. But this doesn’t alter the essence of what we are saying: it remains an extreme variant of the production of coherent social rules.

¹⁰ We do not say ‘of society in general.’ We are not discussing the metaphysical problem of the origins.

affirms and completes itself through chains of causes bearing no relationship to it, but nonetheless inexplicably bound up with it.

The emergence of the bureaucracy in Russia after the revolution enables us to envisage the problem at yet another level. In this case too, analysis lets us see deep and understandable factors at work, upon which we can’t dwell again here.¹² The birth of the bureaucracy in Russia was certainly not a chance occurrence. The proof is that bureaucratisation has since then increasingly appeared as the dominant trend of the modern world. But to understand the bureaucratisation of capitalist countries we call upon the tendencies immanent in the organisation of production, of the economy and of the state under capitalism. To understand the origins of the bureaucracy in Russia, we refer to totally different processes, such as the relationship between the revolutionary class and ‘its’ party, the ‘maturity’ of the former and the ideology of the latter. Now, from the sociological point of view, there is no doubt that the canonical form of the bureaucracy is that which emerges at an advanced stage in the development of capitalism. Yet the bureaucracy which first appeared historically was that which arose in Russia, on the very morrow of the revolution, on the social and material ruins of capitalism; it is even this bureaucracy which, through a thousand direct and indirect influences, has strongly induced and accelerated the movement towards bureaucratisation within capitalism. Everything happened as though the modern world was pregnant with bureaucracy — and that to produce it it was ready to bring all grist to its mill, including some which seemed least appropriate such as Marxism, the workers’ movement and the proletarian revolution.

¹² See, for example, in No. 36 of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, The Workers’ Opposition by Alexandra Kollontai. Also the introduction and notes accompanying this text.

tions which either 'demand' or 'forbid.' Besides, the situation which ought to forbid sometimes doesn't. For half a century now the ruling classes have been able to provide themselves with leaders who, whatever their historical role was, have been neither Prince Lvov nor Kerensky's. But the explanation doesn't say enough either, for it cannot explain why chance is excluded from the business in the very place where it appears to be at work in the most blinding fashion, why chance always operates 'in the right direction,' and why the infinite number of possible events which would operate in other directions never materialise. For the revolution to come about we need the weakness, flabbiness and inertia of the Tsar. We need the character of the Tsarina. We need Rasputin and the absurdities of the Court. We need Kerensky and Kornilov. Lenin and Trotsky must return to Petrograd, and for this we need a mistaken reasoning on the part of the German General Staff and another by the British government, not to mention all the pneumococcal and diphtheria bacilli which conscientiously avoided these two persons ever since their birth. Trotsky puts the question squarely: without Lenin, would the revolution have been completed? After discussing the matter, he tends to answer 'no.' We are inclined to think that he is right, and moreover that one could say just as much about Trotsky himself.¹¹ But in what sense can we say that the internal necessities of the revolution guaranteed the appearance of individuals like Lenin and Trotsky, their survival until 1917, and their more than improbable presence in Petrograd at the right moment? We are compelled to note that the signification of the revolution

¹¹ One could obviously go on discussing this forever. One can almost certainly say that the revolution would not have taken the form of a seizure of power by the Bolshevik Party. Perhaps it might have consisted of a re-enactment of the Commune. The content of such considerations may seem pointless. The fact that they are unavoidable shows that history cannot be thought of, even retrospectively, outside of the categories of the possible, or of the accident which is more than an accident.

(When we talk of coherence in this context, we take the word in its widest possible sense: for a given society even crisis and being torn apart can, in a certain way, be manifestations of coherence, for they are inserted in *its* functioning. They are never followed by a total collapse, by a pure and simple atomisation. They are *its* crises and *its* incoherence. The great depression of 1929, like the two world wars, is entirely 'coherent' manifestations of capitalism. It is not simply that they are integrated into its concatenations of causality, but also that they promote the functioning, *qua* functioning, of the system. In their very meaninglessness we can still see in many ways the meaning of capitalism.)

There is a second reduction we can apply. There is no reason to be surprised if all current and past societies are coherent. By definition, only coherent societies are observable. Non-coherent societies would have collapsed immediately and we wouldn't be able to talk about them. This idea, important as it is, does not put an end to the discussion either. It would only enable us to 'understand' the coherence of the societies we are looking at by reference to a process of 'trial and error,' whereby only viable societies would have survived by some sort of natural selection. But already in biology, where evolution has many millions of years at its disposal and where there is an infinitely rich process of contingent variations, natural selection through trial and error does not seem a sufficient answer to the problem of the origin of species. 'Viable' forms seem to be produced far more often than the statistical probability of their appearance would predict. In history, this reference to random variations and to a process of selection seems gratuitous. Besides, the problem is posed at a previous level (in biology, too): the disappearance of peoples and nations described by Herodotus may well have been the outcome of their encounter with other peoples who crushed or absorbed them; nevertheless the former already had an organised and coherent way of life, which would have continued had not the encounter occurred. Anyway, we have seen with our own eyes, literally or metaphorically, the birth of new societies and

we know things don't happen like this. Between the 13th and the 19th century, we don't see an enormous number of different types of society appearing in Europe, all of which but one disappear because incapable of surviving. We see a different phenomenon: the birth (accidental, in relation to the system preceding it) of the bourgeoisie, which through thousands of contradictory ramifications and manifestations, from the Lombard bankers to Calvin, and from Giordano Bruno to the use of the compass, causes the appearance from the outset of a coherent meaning which will go on developing and strengthening itself.

On the Russian Revolution

These considerations allow one to grasp a second aspect of the problem. It isn't only in the structure of a society that we see how a system of significations imposes itself upon a network of causes. We see it also in the *succession* of historical societies or, more simply, in each historical process. Let us look, for instance, at the process, already touched upon, whereby the bourgeoisie emerged. Or better still, let us look at one we think we know so well, which led first to the Russian Revolution of 1917, and subsequently to the power of the bureaucracy.

It isn't possible here, and it is hardly necessary, to recall the causes deep at work in Russian society which were leading it towards a second violent social crisis after that of 1905, and which were allocating roles to the main actors of the drama in the person of the basic classes of society. It doesn't seem difficult for us to understand that Russian society was pregnant with revolution, or that in this revolution the working class was going to play a decisive role. We won't dwell on it. But this comprehensible necessity remains 'sociological' and abstract. It has to be manifested through definite processes. It must embody itself in acts (or omissions) dated and signed by particular individuals and groups, ending up with the appropriate result. Necessity has also to find com-

bined, at the outset, a mass of conditions whose presence wasn't always guaranteed by the very factors which generated the 'general necessity' of revolution. One aspect of the question, a minor one if you like but which allows one to see easily and clearly what we are driving at, is that of the role of individuals. Trotsky, in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, certainly doesn't neglect it. He is himself sometimes seized with an astonishment, which he conveys to his readers, when confronted with the perfect adequacy of the character of people for the 'historic roles' they will be called upon to play. He is also struck by the fact that when the situation 'demands' a person of a given type, this person somehow emerges (one recalls the parallels he draws between Nicholas II and Louis XVI, between the Tsarina and Marie Antoinette).

What then is the key to this mystery? Trotsky's answer still seems sociological: everything in the life and historical existence of a decadent privileged class leads it to produce individuals without ideas and without character. If a different type of individual were exceptionally to appear, he could do nothing with this particular social fabric, and he could do nothing against 'historical necessity.' On the other hand, everything in the life and existence of a revolutionary class tends to produce individuals of hardened temperament, with strongly-held opinions. This answer contains without doubt a large part of truth. Yet it is not sufficient. Or rather it says both too much and not enough. It says too much because it ought to be valid in all cases, whereas it is only valid where the revolution has been victorious. Why did the Hungarian proletariat only produce as 'hardened' leader a Bela Kun — for whom Trotsky never has enough scornful irony? Why could not the German working class recognise — and eventually replace — Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht? Where was the French Lenin in 1936?

To say that in these cases the situation was not ripe for the appropriate leaders to appear is precisely to abandon the sociological interpretation, which can legitimately lay claim to a certain comprehensibility, and to return to the mystery of particular situa-