

Base, superstructure, and dialectical totality

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In recent years it became something of a custom to begin any contemporary discussion of historical materialism with a nod to the briefly dominant axiom that humanity had reached its veritable terminus. Capitalism had triumphed over socialism, Francis Fukuyama insisted, and the ‘end of history’ was upon us. Fukuyama’s bold declaration of historical finality could be read in hindsight as little more than neoliberal triumphalism, proffered in 1989 as philosophical sustenance to a U.S. elite then looking forward to carving out a ‘new American century’ in the years ahead. The political trajectory of the author of *The End of History and the Last Man* would arguably confirm that appraisal, with Fukuyama collaborating for much of the 1990s with an assortment of neo-cons who rose to prominence around the presidency of George W. Bush before their fall from grace in the catastrophic unravelling of the ‘war on terror’.

But it was also unquestionably true that the ‘end of history’ captured something of a more general mood in post-Cold War politics, including amongst sections of a disoriented left, for whom history had indeed come to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The talented essayist Perry Anderson, for example, detected an ‘inverted Marxism’ within Fukuyama’s neo-Hegelian framework: if Marx could turn Hegel on his head, then the left could do the same with Fukuyama.¹ This was always a highly questionable proposition, with *The End of History* owing more to the work of Russian-born French philosopher Alexandre Kojève than to the dialectics of Hegel,² for whom world history would only ‘be completed at the moment when the synthesis of the Master and the Slave is realised’.³ More significant, perhaps, was the manner in which Fukuyama’s desolate perspective spoke to the pessimism of sections of the left who had tied their hopes for socialism to the sinking ship of Stalinism, and who were therefore vulnerable to

a prognosis that capitalism no longer faced a viable systemic alternative.

Much of this pessimism was in fact shared by Fukuyama himself, who was ambivalent if not altogether gloomy about the new world order he heralded, warning that ‘the end of history will be a very sad time’ when ‘worldwide ideological struggle...will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands.’⁴ Few on the left were moved by this morose vision of the future, but too many adopted a kind of *inverted pessimism* from Fukuyama: if the ‘history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle’, and the working class had been definitively defeated in that epic battle, then perhaps humanity was staging its final act after all.

The cultural turn

It was not only the misidentification of socialism with Stalinism that precipitated a pessimistic flight from a Marxist theory of history. This was, in many forms, well underway before the USSR’s collapse, with the ‘cultural turn’ from class and materialism gathering pace in the academy from at least the late 1970s, first under the guise of a post-structuralist break with Marxism (most notably in the work of Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault), and into the next decade with the rise of postmodernism, which rejected any kind of ‘grand narrative’ of history and, in some guises, the very notion of historical truth itself. Not everyone, it should be said, was swept into this retreat. But this context did create a general atmosphere wherein even many of those seeking to work within a Marxist framework—particularly in the academy—felt driven to concede that there was something deficient in Marx’s conception of history, or compelled to adapt lest they be charged with economic reductionism.

So strong was the reaction against materialism that

by 1990 Barbara Fields was complaining of a historiography of slavery that presumed its ‘chief business [was] the production of white supremacy rather than the production of cotton, sugar, rice and tobacco.’⁵ Ironically, under the cover of rejecting ‘economic reductionism’, the predominant movement in the academy was towards a new reductionist paradigm centred around cultural discourse, wherein the ‘basic Marxist proposition that in any society ideas are a reflection of material conditions [was] considered terribly quaint’:⁶ in this environment, rejection of any kind of class-centred relativity became almost a rite of passage for theorists aspiring to be welcomed into a self-replicating academic elite.

In explaining this cultural turn, Marxists have generally offered a subjective rationale: the pessimism taking hold among a layer of academics who felt powerless to halt the ebb tide of post-1968 radicalism, and amongst a further layer who had presumed the Soviet Union represented ‘actually existing socialism’; the weakening of the labour movement through a succession of serious defeats leading to a downplaying of class; the detachment of intellectuals from any kind of political practice through the decline of mass communist parties. To be sure, all of these explanations have validity to them. But isn’t it also the case that there is, in fact, a *material basis* to this flight from materialism: that in denying the link between material foundations and ideas, these intellectuals were paradoxically reflecting aspects of the material base of late capitalism themselves?

A viable Marxist explanation, of course, would have to rest on an acknowledgement that both the subjective and the objective have been at play. Frederic Jameson was no doubt correct to write of modern capitalism that the ‘very sphere of culture itself has expanded, becoming coterminous with market society in such a way that the cultural is no longer limited to its earlier, traditional or experimental forms, but is consumed throughout daily life itself.’⁷ But this outcome was accounted for in the original historical materialist thesis: the more expansive and complex the division of labour is at the base, the more varied the cultural and political forms that arise from it, and the greater the appearance of ‘detachment’ between the two becomes. It was this very perception of detachment that inspired Marx to look for the ‘hidden’ source of ideas in material life in the first place. That this separation appears vastly more

substantial in an age of capitalist senescence would not have come as a great surprise to Marx; nor does it negate his claim that this alienation can only be overcome in practice—most importantly through struggle and revolutionary upheaval—where the contradiction between the base and its superstructure is most clearly revealed.

Surveying the panorama of uncertainty and political volatility spreading across the world today, and the diverse forms of resistance that have emerged as a result—best exemplified, perhaps, by a resurgent women’s movement and the power of Black Lives Matter (BLM)—it should be apparent just how far-reaching the transformation of politics has been since Fukuyama called time on history, with U.S. hegemony teetering in the face of Chinese expansion, the intensification of climate change forcing a discussion about systemic alternatives to capitalism, and a deep ideological rift sharpening between those who want to smash oppression and those who seek to maintain it. Not only is history not finished, history itself has become a remarkably contested terrain, as disputes about the past move beyond the classroom and the sanitised historical perspectives of the market-driven tourism sector to become live features of political and ideological struggle, most notably in the manner in which BLM protestors have sought to literally dump the edifices of colonialism and slavery into the river.

In a fashion that only Marxists can comprehend, however, ideas lag behind this process. The profoundly emancipatory potential of these movements has not always been matched by the level of discourse, which invariably reduces endemic and systemic oppression to a less tangible by-product of privilege—limiting itself to the illumination of important intersections of shameful and deeply problematic practices reinforcing aspects of oppression, while too often sidestepping the centrifugal force of class underpinning both economic inequality and oppressive relations. This results in a situation where millionaires and billion-dollar corporations offer up their services in the fight against ‘privilege’ without any apparent contradiction. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s conceptualisation of ‘intersectionality’—whereby roads at an intersection are analogous to multiple oppressions—powerfully spoke to the experience of millions of people, but it’s unlikely she foresaw the ease with which ‘intersectionalists’ like Hillary Clinton would navigate the

crossroads in their proverbial sports cars.

Marxists and the left more generally have much to learn from these struggles and from the generation of activists driving them, many of whom are engaging with socialist ideas in one form or another for the first time. But we also have something to offer in return. Early in his revolutionary career, Marx identified the distinction between ‘political emancipation’ and ‘human emancipation’, between the formal freedoms afforded to individuals by the state and the material constraints on the realisation of that freedom in practice.⁸ This contradiction prominently lies at the heart of many of the struggles and protests today. Despite decades of formal equality—for black people, for women, for other oppressed groups—deep and systemic inequality persists; indeed they are *resurgent*. How to go beyond this contradiction, to truly enter the ‘realm of freedom’ as Marx would have it, is at the very core of the historical materialist thesis.

Base, superstructure, and marxism

Realising this potential, and the promise of a renewal of historical materialism along with it, demands a reckoning with a beleaguered Marxism bearing the scars of decades of defensive posturing. Fukuyama may well be in the rear-view mirror, but the assumptions that prepared the ground for him and began to take firm hold in the ‘80s—not least that Marxism was an archaic theory with little explanatory power in the world we inhabit today—are still very much front and centre. Chief amongst these is the charge that Marxism is a reductionist theory, frequently written off as being teleological, technologically or economically deterministic, and as having no capacity for informing complex debates around race, sex, or gender. The critical distinction made by Marx between base and superstructure—between the material basis of society, in other words, and the political and legal superstructure that arises from it—is a common starting point for such dismissals. So relentless have these attacks been over recent decades that a number of Marxist intellectuals have felt compelled to abandon the base/superstructure distinction themselves. I will argue that this has been both an unnecessary and a regressive miscalculation—one that has charted a trajectory away from the fundamental tenets of historical materialism.

Much of the negativity surrounding base/super-

structure has its origins in Stalinist distortion. In his *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, Stalin outlined a theory of history that equated the development of the productive forces with progress itself, eliminating any role for human agency and thought, and reducing the Marxist method to the kind of vulgar materialism that Marx had so sharply polemicized against.⁹ Stalin’s account of history was of course self-serving: it reflected the interests of the Soviet nomenklatura, which had a stake in developing an account of history that drew equivalence between industrialisation and human progress as they sought to coerce the working class to industrialise at breakneck speed. This was a theory of history that, in common with the early (non-Marxist) materialists, expunged any notion of human agency, viewing humanity as the mere plaything of larger material forces. Despite its crudity, Stalin’s distortion of historical materialism would become seriously influential—both in the sense that it informed a generation of historians working within the orbit of communist parties, but also in its impact in repelling many more away from the Marxist method.

Matters were not helped by the fact that some of those who sought to break from this methodology did so from within a broadly Stalinist framework. Mao’s infamous inversion of base/superstructure—in which ‘political and cultural reforms become the principal and decisive factors’—was as self-serving as Stalin’s. This amounted to a distortion of the Marxist method to suit the conditions of peasant war, by effectively eliminating any notion of material constraint on the communist project.¹⁰ As a method for statecraft—most notably in the *Great Leap Forward*—and as a political strategy for Maoists around the world, Mao’s insistence that history could be leapt over by the sheer force of will was an unmitigated disaster, with a heavy human toll. But its intellectual legacy outlived Maoism’s catastrophic real-world impact.

Maoism was an important reference point for Althusser’s structuralist theory—ascendant in academic circles during the 1970s—which sought to integrate it with his own reworking of base/superstructure, in which the material base was determinant only in ‘the last instance’, later qualified to insist that the ‘hour of the “last instance” never comes.’¹¹ Althusser’s structuralism, affording relative autonomy to the fields of cul-

ture and politics, would inform developments in work within the 'ideological field', as he termed it. Some of the attempts to creatively engage with base/superstructure from within this category were useful, if flawed, corrections to Stalinist reductionism; most notably in the work of Stuart Hall and his collaborator Raymond Williams.¹² However, the increasing detachment of the ideological field from its material anchor opened the door to the post-structuralism and postmodernism that now pervades the academy.

It was against this backdrop that some Marxists, seeking a path away from a static model of historical materialism, came to abandon the idea of base and superstructure entirely. Reacting against the crude materialism of the Stalinist model and the rigid structuralism of Althusser, E. P. Thompson declared the schema 'radically defective'. 'It cannot be repaired,' he wrote, citing 'an in-built tendency...towards reductionism'.¹³ In its place, Thompson gravitated toward 'the poetry of voluntarism'—a common point of attraction for those who wished to discard any kind of material determination, but one that tends to err in the opposite direction.¹⁴ In her own robust attack on Althusser, Ellen Meiksins Wood was drawn to concur with Thompson on the utility of base/superstructure, writing that the 'metaphor has always been more trouble than it's worth' and had been afforded a 'theoretical weight far beyond its limited capacities'.¹⁵ David Roediger perhaps best embodied the thinking amongst contemporary left-wing academics when he identified base/superstructure as a concept belonging decidedly to the cannon of an 'old left' who '[overemphasise] the point that class and not race is the central consideration in the history of white and black workers'—as against his own emphasis on the centrality of 'whiteness'.¹⁶ Indeed, base/superstructure meets with such ubiquitous disdain within left academia that it seems entirely fitting that its most recent book-length treatment is titled *Biography of a Blunder*.¹⁷

Most of these attacks on base and superstructure have emerged either as reactions against Stalinism or under the influence of the cultural turn in the academy. But it remains the case that this framework was the basis of the classical Marxist tradition, not only of Marx and Engels themselves, but also the best of the Second International, the traditions associated with Lenin and Trotsky, and some of the finest historiography Marxism

has to offer. Importantly, this framework was also central to Gramsci, who did so much to develop the Marxist theory of ideology and the state, and for whom base and superstructure remained a vital 'Archimedean point'.¹⁸ Later writers have made important defences of base and superstructure as well. Franz Jakubowski developed one of the most perceptive studies of the subject in 1936,¹⁹ and his work—which has shaped my own thinking on these questions—marks him out as one of only a handful of contemporary Marxists who have sought to defend historical materialism against the grain of academic trends.²⁰

While taking exception to aspects of this established literature, this essay shares their aim in reasserting the centrality of base and superstructure to classical Marxism, demonstrating that, far from underpinning occasional blunders, the concepts were a critical and recurring feature of Marx's method, which utilised them not as strict, literal categories but as necessary abstractions in the deconstruction of a complex and dialectical totality. Understanding the 'explanatory primacy' of base and superstructure is therefore a vital Archimedean point for the construction of a dynamic and contingent theory of history: one that firmly roots itself in the material world and the social relations that develop from it, but which can account for the role of agency and human thought in the transformation of that world.²¹ As with Lukács and Jakubowski,²² and against Althusser and mechanical materialists (including Cohen),²³ it is necessary to locate historical materialism within an explicitly dialectical framework—identifying the continuities between Hegel and Marx, as well as the breaks, allowing for a more rounded understanding of the ways that Marx deploys the concepts of base and superstructure as antagonistic points within a wider contradictory totality.

Dialectics and materialism

Engels once wrote that there are two modes of thinking—idealist and materialist. He insisted, though not uncritically, that Marxism was decidedly in the materialist camp: ideas could not be detached from the reality from which they sprung, he argued, and human history had to be located in the particularity of its social and environmental context.²⁴ 'The *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life', wrote Engels to Bloch in 1890. 'Other than

this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted.’ However, he added an important note of caution: ‘If somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase.’²⁵ Thus Marxism is materialist, but it is also a *dialectical* materialist method, in that it aims to account for the complex interaction between the material world and the actions of people.

The Marxian ‘problematic’, to use a phrase associated with Althusser, can only be deciphered by its relationship to two of its intellectual antecedents: Hegel and Feuerbach. The debt that Marx and Engels owed to Hegelian dialectics is quite obvious, with Marx declaring in an afterword to *Capital* that he ‘openly avowed’ himself a ‘pupil of that mighty thinker.’²⁶ For Hegel, the world was driven by the dynamic interaction of contradictory tendencies: ‘Contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality,’ he wrote, ‘it is only in so far as something has a contradiction within it that it moves, has an urge and activity.’²⁷ These contradictions were not, Hegel insisted, merely distinct factors to be accounted for in separation. He would stress not only dialectical interaction but also the totality of existence—in which the dialectic of history was conceived of in a circular pattern, where the end would eventually come to justify the beginning—or as Hegel would more succinctly express it, ‘The true is the whole.’²⁸

Engels would explain that he and Marx took from Hegel a dialectical view of the totality not ‘as a complex of ready-made *things*, but as a complex of *processes*’.²⁹ However, they insisted that this dialectical ‘method’ of inquiry had to be separated from Hegel’s idealistic ‘system’—what Marx called the ‘mystifying side of [the] Hegelian dialectic’—wherein the ‘process of thinking’ was transformed ‘into an independent subject’ external to the material world, finding its expression in the Absolute Idea.³⁰ Marx, in contrast, stated that ‘the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.’³¹ By adopting Hegel’s method whilst discarding his idealist system, Marx insisted you could turn the dialectic ‘right side up again’ and ‘discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell’:

In its mystified form, dialectic became the fashion in Germany, because it seemed to transfigure

and to glorify the existing state of things. In its rational form it is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors, because it includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up; because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary.³²

The ingenuity of the Marxist application of the dialectic, therefore, was to make the material world its foundation. ‘The production of the immediate material means of subsistence’ was the starting point of historical materialism, ‘instead of vice versa’.³³ But Marx and Engels would also come to develop a critique of a metaphysical view of history, where the determination of the ideal was replaced with the strict determination of matter—most importantly with the philosophy of Feuerbach. That is not to say that Feuerbach had no positive influence on the pair. His own materialist critique of Hegel’s idealism, in particular his inversion of its Christian theodicy—whereby god is the outworking of humanity, rather than the other way round—had a profound effect on Marx and Engels, with the latter recalling that ‘we were all *Feuerbachians*’ for a period in their youth.³⁴ So influential was Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel, that Marx ‘saved himself the job of arguing his own divergence from Hegelian philosophy in systematic detail.’³⁵ However, ‘with the dialectic as his tool’, Marx would be drawn to dissect Feuerbach’s thesis as well—a moment that augured the development of the historical materialist synthesis.

In his *Theses On Feuerbach*, for example, Marx wrote: ‘The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively.’ Here Marx was highlighting an important symmetry between the weakness of Hegel’s idealism and the weakness of Feuerbach’s materialism: whereas the former afforded an independent existence to the Ideal, the latter considered the force

of matter in an equally ethereal fashion. In highlighting the role of ‘circumstances and upbringing’, Feuerbach had failed to note ‘that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself.’ Following this, Marx insisted that the materialist conception of history must also grasp the role played by human agency within the ‘ensemble of the social relations.’ Not only was such a method necessary to explain the fullness of the interaction between the material world and humanity, but also to grasp how it could be transformed: ‘The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.’³⁶

Marx’s theory of history, as he succinctly put it, was predicated on a ‘materialism which coincides with humanism’.³⁷ It would be too simplistic, however, to simply say that Marxism is materialism *and* dialectics—or mind *and* matter. For one, this kind of dualism is incompatible with dialectics itself: ‘Thinking and being are thus certainly distinct’, as Marx remarked in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, ‘but at the same time they are in unity with each other.’³⁸ Jakubowski makes a convincing case, following this, that Marx’s materialist inversion of Hegel was not an arbitrary appendage to his method ‘but a demand of the dialectic [itself]’. ‘Hegelian philosophy already bears within itself the seed of its own destruction’, he insists. ‘It is negated and maintained [by Marx] at the same time.’³⁹

The 1859 preface

‘If there should ever be time for such a work again’, wrote Marx to Engels in 1858, ‘I should greatly like to make accessible to the ordinary human intelligence, in two or three printer’s sheets, what is rational in the method which Hegel discovered but at the same time enveloped in mysticism.’⁴⁰ Alas, Marx never found the time to explicitly and succinctly outline his dialectical method. That is not to say that discerning this method is an impossible task—the thread can be found running through Marx’s vast body of work, most notably in *Capital*, and in fragmentary allusions to his basic framework elsewhere.

Perhaps the closest he came to an explicit explanation of his method comes in the 1859 *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*—which

explains its centrality to historical materialism—where in a basic outline of the Marxist theory of history can be found. Here, Marx gives a brief biographical sketch of his studies, when as a young Hegelian he first turned his ‘attention to economic questions’, and then to a study of the ‘Hegelian philosophy of law’ in order ‘to dispel the doubts assailing me’, before concluding ‘that neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended...on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but...on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life.’ How to move beyond the manner in which society presents itself, then, to discover the concealed motive forces driving it? Marx explains the ‘guiding principle’ of his studies:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.

The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters.

Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic — in short,

ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production.⁴¹

Here are presented in a clear and concise way the basic propositions of historical materialism. Firstly, society is a complex interaction of integrated forms of organisation which are part of a wider totality, but which are in constant contradiction with one and other. Secondly, the manner in which these contradictions play out is not immediately discernible: 'Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so too must we go beyond the superficial way that societies present themselves, and look instead for the 'contradictions of material life' that make up its 'real foundation'.⁴² Thirdly, though consciousness cannot be 'determined with the precision of natural science'—because of the complex interaction of its 'legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic' components—it is necessary to locate its origins in connection with the inner contradiction of society.

Following this framework, Marx situates history as the development of particular forms of productive interaction with nature (productive forces), which necessarily involve a corresponding form of social organisation (relations of production), together forming the basis of a series of historically identifiable 'modes of production'—a composite totality of the forces and relations of production, such as feudalism, slavery, or capitalism—with their own innate 'laws of motion'. The contradiction between the forces, relations, and production, according to Marx, is the primary motor of history. Out of this tension 'arises' a political, legal, and ideological 'superstructure', in which humanity becomes 'conscious of this conflict and fight[s] it out.'⁴³ At some point in this development, these social relations become 'fetters' on the further development of production, the overcoming of which invariably requires an 'era of social revolution' if humanity is to move from one mode of production to another (as in from feudalism to capitalism, or from capitalism to socialism).

Naturally, the brevity with which Marx races through these concepts has led to a myriad of disputes about their precise meaning. Some elaboration is required, therefore, that locates base and superstructure within Marx's wider oeuvre. By the forces of production, Marx is speaking of the material components of production used to transform nature (tools, machinery, etc.), the level of technological technique in any given society (e.g. has it mastered horticulture, or the domestication of animals, or is it industrialised or largely agrarian?), as well as the power of labour used in that process (slaves, serfs, peasants, workers, etc). The final component is of critical importance. As Molyneux points out, the oft-repeated claim that Marx is only speaking of technological forms makes little sense because 'tools and machinery have first to be produced by human labour and, even then, do not produce anything themselves without further human labour to set them in motion.'⁴⁴

Marx makes this point explicitly himself in *Capital*, where he describes the 'labour-process' as involving three things: '1, the personal activity of man, i.e., work itself; 2, the subject of that work; and 3, its instruments.' Whilst placing the activity of human beings and nature at the centre of this dialectical interaction—including the admission that a person's 'limbs' were their original 'instrument of labour' and 'the earth[their] original tool house'—Marx is crystal clear that the progression of humanity 'requires specially prepared instruments.'. He goes on: 'Instruments of labour not only supply a standard of the degree of development to which human labour has attained, but they are also indicators of the social conditions under which that labour is carried on.' The particular degree to which these instruments have developed and the level of technique employed, by extension, minimises or increases the degree to which a society can adapt 'nature's material' to 'the wants' of humanity.⁴⁵

What of the relations of production? Because the production of subsistence is a thoroughly social endeavour, it necessarily involves particular forms of social interaction in order to carry it out. In class societies—where production is predicated on exploitation—these interactions inevitably involve some form of what Cohen called 'relations of effective power over persons and productive forces'.⁴⁶ That is to say, the basis for productive relations is the means of control over the

forces of production, most crucially of one class over the other: relations between lord and serf, slave owner and slave, bourgeois and proletarian, etc. It is out of this tension that the superstructure arises—both to justify this contradiction and to enforce it. Under feudalism this involved what Brenner dubbed a process of ‘political accumulation’, whereby lords were compelled to accrue greater political and military power in order to overcome both the resistance of peasants and that of rival lords.⁴⁷ Under capitalism, as Gramsci suggests, this superstructure comprises an integral state built on an imbrication of coercion and consent—encompassing aspects of civil society as well as armed bodies such as the police or the military, with one or the other becoming hegemonic depending on the balance of class forces.⁴⁸

Because these social relations are ‘interwoven’ with the forces of production, transformations in the latter can induce a transformation in the former: ‘The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society.’⁴⁹ It is in this sense that the ‘form of [social] intercourse is again determined by production.’⁵⁰ However, this is not a linear process. As Marx highlights in the 1859 *Preface*, ‘at a certain stage of their development’ the relations of production can become ‘fetters’ that impede the further development of production. This can be observed in the way that sections of the old feudal ruling classes resisted the development of capitalism in its fullest form, or the way the bourgeoisie today resist developing the kinds of productive forms necessary to build a democratic and ecologically stable society. Consequently, an ‘an epoch of social revolution’ becomes necessary. It was out of this framework that Marx and Engels declared that the ‘history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.’⁵¹

Productive relations and superstructure

Cohen is correct, therefore, to identify the means of effective control over the forces of production as absolutely central to Marx’s conception of productive relations. However, his intention to narrow the concept exclusively to this relationship is a critical error that fuels the prevailing consensus that historical materialism has nothing to say about social relations more generally. Firstly, this is much too narrow a concept. The par-

ticular form of exploitation by ruler over ruled is indeed central, but this interaction can have an impact on all manner of other relations. Is the workforce exclusively male, for example, or overwhelmingly so? If the answer is affirmative, then naturally this will have an impact on gender relations, the nature of the family, etc.—which in turn will have an impact on wider society. What of the religious or racial composition of the workforce? Are particular oppressed groups part of these relations, excluded from them, or included but in an unequal fashion? Again, such dynamics cannot be excluded from our conception of the relations of production.

Because humanity cannot exist without a form of subsistence—involving a particular form of exploitation in class society—then the material base is always a key determinant in the relations of production, and by extension in society itself. But other relations can arise from this and react ‘upon it as a determining element’ as well. In the third volume of *Capital*, for example, in the process of reaffirming the centrality of class to the material base, Marx adds:

This does not prevent the same economic basis—the same from the standpoint of its main conditions—due to innumerable different *empirical circumstances, natural environment, racial relations, external historical influences*, etc. from showing infinite variations and gradations in appearance, which can be ascertained only by analysis of the empirically given circumstances.⁵²

The above qualification, often omitted in the critical literature, points to a dynamic conceptualisation of base and superstructure—that firmly roots history and politics in the material basis of life—which is capable of accounting for the ‘infinite variations and gradations’ of society that arise out of historical or environmental factors, or indeed because of particular forms of oppression. It is a framework, too, that allows for an understanding of periods where ‘the class struggle between capital and labour is forced into the background’, as Marx put in his afterword to *Capital*.⁵³

This framework suggests as well that Marx considered the superstructure as more than a passive reflection of the base. Harman stresses the conservative nature of superstructure, describing it as ‘concerned with controlling the base, with fixing existing relations of exploitation, and therefore in putting a limit on changes in

the relations of production.’ He cites the example of ancient China, where the ruling class set out to ‘crush any new social force that emerged out of changes in production’ by literally smashing their means of subsistence.⁵⁴ This is a useful corollary as to how the relations of production can become ‘fetters’ on the productive forces, and the way that the institutions of the superstructure—most notably the state—can play a conservative role by seeking to reinforce the class divisions in society. Harman’s treatment has a certain undialectical quality about it, however, that can inadvertently reinforce the mechanical reading of history he sought to overcome.

Marx claims only that the relations of production can become fetters at a ‘certain stage’ in pre-capitalist development—not at every stage—and only when ‘all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production... have matured within the framework of the old society.’⁵⁵ His own writings on the development of capitalism—not least in the way the bourgeois state that arose out of it became ‘the unconscious tool of history’⁵⁶ by greatly expanding the capitalist mode of production across the world—suggests that the superstructure can encourage or discourage the development of the productive relations depending on its stage of development. As Engels writes:

The reaction of the state power upon economic development can take a three-fold form. It can run in the same direction, and then the tempo of development becomes accelerated; it can buck up against that development in which case today in every large nation the state power is sure to go to smash for good; or it can block economic development along some directions and lay down its path along others. This last case is ultimately reducible to one of either of the foregoing two.

It is clear that in the second and third cases the political power can do great damage to the course of economic development and result in a great waste of energy and materials.⁵⁷

Crucial, too, is Marx’s insistence in the *1859 Preface* that the superstructure is where forces ‘become conscious of this conflict and fight it out’. This does not mean, as Hegel would have had it before Marx, that the state is a neutral arena for the settling of scores. Rather, it suggests that the outworking of antagonisms at the

base of society will find their expression in ideological and political discourse, and find resolution only through this struggle. It is for this reason that Marx’s own historical writings, most notably in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, are full of contingencies that emanate from the course of the ebbs and flows of political battle. But it is also why Gramsci was compelled to reemphasise the centrality of hegemony—as against the ‘technological determinism’ of some of his interlocutors who had constructed a quasi-evolutionary conception of social change—when outlining how the working class can win power.

In what Hal Draper described as Marx’s ‘most concentrated statement...of his theory of the state in relation to his theory of social structure and change’,⁵⁸ we find explicit reference to the way that the superstructure ‘grows directly out of production’ and ‘reacts upon it as a determining element’:

The specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of direct producers, determines the relationship of rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself and, in turn, reacts upon it as a determining element. Upon this, however, is founded the entire formation of the economic community which grows up out of the production relations themselves, thereby simultaneously its specific political form. It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers—a relation always naturally corresponding to a definite stage in the development of the methods of labour and thereby its social productivity—which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state.⁵⁹

An off night?

This conception of historical materialism, particularly the base/superstructure distinction, has been repeatedly attacked as a flawed concept, including by some Marxists who argue that base/superstructure was a clumsy analogy used by Marx that he never (or rarely) repeated, and which can thus be discarded. This tendency was reinforced by the theory postulated by Prinz that the *1859 Preface* was flawed because Marx delib-

erately crafted the work in an opaque fashion for fear of falling foul of the Prussian censor.⁶⁰ This may offer an explanation as to why the role of class struggle is not more explicit in the *Preface* as it is in other writings, but it does not follow logically that base/superstructure was merely a ruse employed to avoid the censor. For one, Marx never disavowed the concept. Nor was the 1859 *Preface* the only (or indeed the first) instance of its usage by Marx, as is often claimed. The concept appears at least seven years earlier in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where Marx gives a wonderfully succinct summation:

Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought, and views of life. The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the corresponding social relations. The single individual, who derives them through tradition and upbringing, may imagine that they form the real motives and the starting point of his activity.⁶¹

The passage above is very much in line with the schema outlined in the 1859 *Preface*: the ‘entire superstructure’ arises out of the ‘social conditions of existence’, which comprises its ‘material foundations’ (forces of production) and the ‘corresponding social relations’ (relations of production). It does, however, afford a more explicit role for human agency and the class struggle—in line with his wider work. Marx would return to a defence of base/superstructure in *Capital*, and in the 1873 afterword to the German edition of *Capital*, as did Engels in a number of subsequent letters. In a footnote to *Capital*, for example, Marx is unequivocal in his defence of the framework he had outlined in the 1859 *Preface*:

In the estimation of that paper, my view that each special mode of production and the social relations corresponding to it, in short, that the economic structure of society, is the real basis on which the juridical and political superstructure is raised and to which definite social forms of thought correspond; that the mode of production determines the character of the social, political, and intellectual life generally.⁶²

Importantly, Marx goes on to explain why the base and superstructure relationship does not discount the

key role played by ideas and politics. Using the example of the Middle Ages and that of Athens and Rome—where Catholicism and politics respectively ‘reigned supreme’—Marx explains that even when ideology plays a determinant role, it cannot be completely detached from its material base:

All this is very true for our own times, in which material interests preponderate, but not for the middle ages, in which Catholicism, nor for Athens and Rome, where politics, reigned supreme. In the first place it strikes one as an odd thing for any one to suppose that these well-worn phrases about the middle ages and the ancient world are unknown to anyone else. 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 mode in which they gained a livelihood that explains why here politics, and there Catholicism, played the chief part. For the rest, it requires but a slight acquaintance with the history of the Roman republic, for example, to be aware that its secret history is the history of its landed property.⁶³

Thus, contrary to the defensive jettisoning that some have engaged in, Edara is correct to write that ‘we cannot reject the base and superstructure thesis as having no significant place in Marx, because the idea it encapsulates...occurs quite frequently, with unmistakable significance, in his writings.’⁶⁴

Technological reductionism?

A more prevalent criticism of base and superstructure is that it is technologically deterministic, that it equates the expansion of production with human progress in a neat, almost mathematically determined package. As E. P. Thompson sardonically put it: ‘However many the Emperor slew / The scientific historian / While taking note of contradiction / Affirms that productive forces grew.’⁶⁵ This is a profoundly mistaken proposition.

Marx conceives of technology in a dialectical manner. Human beings create technology, which in turn changes the world around us, and in the process changes the nature of human relationships themselves: ‘Technology discloses man’s mode of dealing with Nature, the process of production by which he sustains his life, and thereby also lays bare the mode of formation of his social relations, and of the mental conceptions that flow

from them.⁶⁶ This transformative process holds great emancipatory potential, but the closing of the gap between potential and realisation is by no means predetermined: whether or not it is overcome depends on human agency.

This is evident in the way that Marx identifies the revolutionary possibilities that emanated from capitalist expansion—which vastly expanded human productive capacity, but did so through a process that came ‘dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with dirt and blood’.⁶⁷ The massive expansion of productive capacity that capitalism brought in its train, therefore, created the conditions from which a more egalitarian society could conceivably arise, but such progress was far from inevitable. Indeed the suggestion that Marx equated technological advancement with progress is contradicted by Marx’s own critique of capitalism, in which he insists that technical changes in production can lead to a general tendency of the rate of profit to fall (because of its effect on the organic composition of capital), thus leading to a crisis in society.⁶⁸ Hence the contingent clause in the *Communist Manifesto*: that class struggle will result ‘either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.’⁶⁹

For Marx, the forces of production do not equal progress, but instead determine the level of *potential progress*: ‘The development of productive forces...is an absolutely necessary practical premise because without it want is merely made general.’⁷⁰ A certain level of development of the productive forces is a *prerequisite*, then, for overcoming necessity—without which humanity cannot ‘pursue politics, science, art’, etc.—but not a guarantee. Marx insists, following this, that certain impediments to human progress—be they in the field of production, medicine, science, etc.—cannot be overcome until the level of productive technique allows for it: ‘Mankind...inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.’⁷¹ Or as Engels put it: ‘Freedom is the appreciation of necessity.’⁷²

In arguing that the level of productive force is a *necessary condition* for progress in society, Marx does not say that is a *sufficient condition*. This is why Marx in-

sists in *The German Ideology* that the ‘writing of history must always set out from these natural bases’ as well as ‘their modification in the course of history through the action of men.’⁷³ The expansion of technology can lead to the discovery of cures for deadly diseases, but also to the development of weapons for human annihilation. Therein lies the rationale for the Marxist insistence on social revolution: workers must seize the means of production in order to acquire the ‘full development of human mastery over the forces of nature’,⁷⁴ and subordinate it to the democratic will of society at large.

A further qualification is required. Though Marx identified the emancipatory potential of the expansion of production under capitalism, he did not mechanically presume that emancipation required all peoples across the diverse societies marking the globe to enter through that productive ‘stage’. In a series of letters on Russia written late in his life, he warned against those who would ‘metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into an historico-philosophic theory of the *marche generale* [general path] imposed by fate upon every people, whatever the historic circumstances in which it finds itself.’⁷⁵ In particular, he refused to support the abolition of the peasant village commune under the logic that this would hasten the development of capitalism. To the contrary, he considered that the collective nature of these communes made them worthy of support—going as far to speculate that ‘the rural commune [may] gradually shake off its primitive characteristics and directly develop as an element of collective production on a national scale.’⁷⁶ This argument—an example of what Trotsky would come to call the ‘privilege of historic backwardness’—demonstrates just how central social relations were to Marx’s conception of political transformation.⁷⁷

Another common refrain is that the base/superstructure distinction invariably involves a reductionist framework that eliminates any role for human agency or consciousness. This often begins with the statement that, for Marx, being determines consciousness. Of course, what Marx more precisely said was that ‘*social being* determines consciousness’;⁷⁸ that is to say, human beings are *social* beings, and therefore the production of ideas is not only an individual endeavour, but one that arises from the social nature of our species. It is for this reason that the ‘production of ideas, of con-

ceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity'.⁷⁹ In order to avoid an idealist conception of history, therefore, one must not 'descend from heaven to earth' but instead 'ascend from earth to heaven.'⁸⁰ Or as Labriola put it, ideas do not fall from the sky.

This process of conditioning does not negate the fact that human beings are 'the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.—real, active [people]'.⁸¹ As Engels wrote elsewhere, 'Everything which sets in motion must pass through their minds.'⁸² One passage often quoted in contradiction to this is the quip from Marx that the 'hand-mill gives you society with a feudal lord; the steam mill society with an industrial capitalist.'⁸³ This passage proves, ostensibly, that Marx presumed that technology determined everything around it. But as already highlighted, this makes little sense, because technology itself is a product of human endeavour. Marx made this point explicitly himself: 'Nature builds no machines, no locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules etc. These are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature.'⁸⁴

Crucially, Marx goes on to say that these technological forms 'are organs of the human brain, created by the human hand; the power of knowledge, objectified.'⁸⁵ Thus, the industrial capitalist was not possible without the steam mill, but the steam mill itself was an example of 'human will over nature' and 'knowledge, objectified.' Indeed, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx obliterates any notion that he does not afford any place to ideas or mental ingenuity in the base/superstructure schema, by highlighting how 'general social knowledge has become a direct force of production' under capitalism.⁸⁶ The material base, therefore, 'conditions *the general process* of social, political, and intellectual life.'⁸⁷ But 'of all the instruments of production the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself.'⁸⁸

The 'red thread' of history

Distancing himself from 'dangerous friend[s]' who were applying Marxism in a mechanical fashion, Engels felt compelled to mount a nuanced defence of historical materialism in a series of important letters written in the twilight of his life. 'The materialist conception of history has a lot of them nowadays', referring to those

dangerous allies, 'to whom it serves as an excuse for not studying history. Just as Marx used to say, commenting on the French "Marxists" of the late [18]70s: "All I know is that I am not a Marxist."⁸⁹

The catalyst for these letters was the distortion of Marxism being perpetrated by those who 'deny all and every retroaction of the political, etc., reflexes of the economic movement upon that movement itself.' Engels was self-critical, admonishing himself and Marx for not 'stress[ing] systematically enough in our writings' this reciprocal movement, giving their opponents a 'welcome occasion for misunderstanding.' Now, as an 'old sinner' guilty of this infraction, he sought to exorcise historical materialism of any vestiges of mechanical interpretation. In a letter to Franz Mehring he wrote:

Because we denied that the different ideological spheres, which play a part in history, have an independent historical development, we were supposed therewith to have denied that they have any historical efficacy. At the basis of this is the ordinary undialectical notion of cause and effect as fixed, mutually opposed, polar relations, and a complete disregard of reciprocity. These gentlemen forget, almost intentionally, that an historical factor, once it has been brought into the world by other—ultimately economic facts—thereupon also reacts upon its surroundings and even affects its own causes.⁹⁰

He expanded on the same point in a letter to J. Bloch: The economic situation is the basis but the various factors of the superstructure—the political forms of the class struggles and its results—constitutions, etc., established by victorious classes after hard-won battles—legal forms, and even the reflexes of all these real struggles in the brain of the participants, political, jural, philosophical theories, religious conceptions and their further development into systematic dogmas—all these exercise an influence upon the course of historical struggles, and in many cases determine for the most part their form. There is a reciprocity between all these factors in which, finally, through the endless array of contingencies (i.e., of things and events whose inner connection with one another is so remote, or so incapable of proof, that we may neglect it, regarding it as nonexistent) the economic movement asserts itself as necessary. Were this not the case, the application

of the history to any given historical period would be easier than the solution of a simple equation of the first degree.⁹¹

Engels is here making clear, in the most explicit terms, that historical materialism rests on a dialectical view of history: the superstructure arises from the base, but it can 'react back' upon it, and the two interact in a reciprocal fashion. He would use a series of examples to illustrate this point. Bourgeois legality, for instance, had its 'foundations' in the 'economic', in the manner that it reflects and protects capitalist property relations, or in the way that schemes of inheritance protect the rich. This underlying class bias 'takes place without the participants becoming conscious of it', with most people conceiving legal relations as being above society. However, once law comes into existence and is codified into fixed rules, it develops an independence that can have 'a reactive influence on the economic basis and within certain limits to modify it.'

Engels would similarly cite the role of scientists, who 'belong again to special spheres in the division of labour' and thus 'imagine that they are working up an independent domain.' Because this division of labour is entwined with the wider ensemble of capitalist relations, scientists 'remain under the dominant influence of economic development.' However, this does not mean that scientists are mere passive reflections of the economic base—they can also exert a counteracting influence on the world as well: 'In so far as they constitute an independent group within the social division of labour, their products, inclusive of their errors, exerts a counter-acting influence upon the entire social development, even upon the economic.'⁹²

Engels was equally explicit about the crucial role played by struggle and consciousness. As he wrote to Bloch: 'We ourselves make our own history, but, first of all, under very definite presuppositions and conditions. Among these are the economic, which are finally decisive. But there are also the political, etc. Yes, even the ghostly traditions, which haunt the minds of men play a role albeit not a decisive one.'⁹³ Contrary to those who would purge Marxism of its essential humanism, Engels places human agency at the centre of history. But he does so in a dialectical fashion, combining will and determination as complimentary elements in a single dialectical totality:

History is so made that the end-result always arises out of the conflict of many individual wills, in which every will is itself the product of a host of special conditions of life. Consequently there exist innumerable intersecting forces, an infinite group of parallelograms of forces which give rise to one resultant product—the historical event. This again may itself be viewed as the product of a force acting as a whole without consciousness or volition. For what every individual wills separately is frustrated by what every one else wills and the general upshot is something which no one willed...every will contributes to the resultant and is in so far included within it.⁹⁴

'Production is in the last instance,' Engels repeated, 'the decisive factor.' But where there is a 'division of labour on a social scale'—which becomes more and more expansive and involves a myriad of social relations—'there will also be found the *growing independence* of workers in relation to each other.'⁹⁵ Thus the 'further removed the field we happen to be investigating is from the economic', the greater the propensity of the superstructure to react back upon the base, and the more expansive the appearance of separation between the two becomes:⁹⁶

Society gives rise to certain public functions which it cannot dispense with. The people who are delegated to perform them constitute a new branch of the division of labour within society. They acquire therewith special interests in opposition even to those who have designated them; make themselves independent of them, and the state is here. And now the same thing takes place as in commodity exchange and later in money exchange: while the new independent power must, on the whole, submit to the movement of production, in turn it also reacts, by virtue of its immanent, i.e., its once transmitted but gradually developed relative independence, upon the conditions and course of production. There is a reciprocity between two unequal forces; on the one side, the economic movement; on the other, the new political power which strives for the greatest possible independence and which having once arisen is endowed with its own movement. The economic movement, upon the whole, asserts itself but it is affected by the reaction of the relatively independent

political movement which it itself had set up. This political movement is on the one hand the state power, on the other, the opposition which comes to life at the same time with it.⁹⁷

The above does not mean the base and the superstructure are ever entirely separate, however. Life begins with a means of subsistence, and production will always determine in the last instance. As the eminent evolutionary biologists Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldredge put it in their ground-breaking study of 'punctuated equilibrium': 'History...moves upward in a spiral of negations.'⁹⁸ Human history, Engels reiterated, can never be separated from the general 'trend of economic development': 'No matter how much [people] are influenced by relations of a political and ideological order', economic relations will always constitute 'a red thread which runs through all the other relations.'⁹⁹ Grasping this 'red thread', it should be apparent, is the very essence of the historical materialist method.

Base, superstructure, and the Marxist method

Having established that Marxism conceives of reality as a dynamic and interacting totality, what cause is there to maintain the reference points of base and superstructure within that methodology? Do these categories not oversimplify this complex interaction, or too easily subsume it into fixed relations? Or, perhaps, does the real problem lie in affording too much weight to this reciprocal interaction? Ought we not endeavour to construct a 'less untidy version' of historical materialism, as Cohen urged, predicated on the strict primacy of productive forces?¹⁰⁰

Engels was clear that those who distorted historical materialism—whether through mechanical economic reductionism or by ignoring the trace of the material 'red thread' of history—were guilty of a similar error: 'What these gentlemen all lack is dialectic. They never see anything but here cause and there effect...Hegel has never existed for them.'¹⁰¹ Answering these questions, therefore, requires a few general comments on the dialectical method.

As the *Grundrisse* insisted, Marxism is predicated on the methodology of 'rising from the abstract to the concrete.'¹⁰² Because reality is so vast and complex, and its 'appearance' does not always correspond directly to its 'essence', it is necessary to identify the essential fea-

tures of society 'through a number of intermediary stages.'¹⁰³ This requires what Marx described as the 'intense application of our power of abstraction.'¹⁰⁴ Marxism, therefore, seeks to reveal the 'rich totality of [the] many determinations and relations' of society, by beginning from abstract concepts that delineate its most fundamental features.¹⁰⁵ Without this process of abstraction, and the intermediary stages it necessitates, one is simply left with a view of history as a 'chaotic conception of a whole'¹⁰⁶ wherein, as Engels put it, 'everything is relative and nothing is absolute'.¹⁰⁷

Base and superstructure are, therefore, necessary abstractions in the deconstruction of reality, not literal categories. They are, as Engels explained, a 'guide to study'—intermediary stages that help to 'appropriate' the 'concrete in the mind', in the words of Marx.¹⁰⁸ Those who criticise base and superstructure for having unnecessarily split our understanding of the complexities of society have themselves failed to grasp the very essence of dialectical method. In his *Philosophical Notebooks*, written during an intense study of the Hegelian method, Lenin underscored this point decisively: 'The splitting of a single whole and the cognition of its contradictory parts is the essence...of dialectics.'¹⁰⁹ Without recourse to this method, according to Engels, historians risk reducing 'the tragic conflict to smaller dimensions.'

By grasping the interrelationship *as well* as the antagonism between base and superstructure, historical materialism is uniquely capable of positing a theory of change through history—situating progress within the material foundation of social interaction with nature and between classes, but understanding that the full realisation of that potential can only be attained by the conscious actions of people themselves. Though dealing specifically with the relationship between consumption and production, the following extract from Marx's *Theories of Surplus Value* provides a useful summary of this underlying method: 'The movement of one process through two opposite phases...can only show itself forcibly, as a destructive process.'¹¹⁰ The relationship between base and superstructure is no different: they are independent and fluid features of the same dialectical totality, whose mutual contradiction will eventually 'show itself forcibly, as a destructive process' of revolutionary change.

Conclusion

Base and superstructure remain a critical Archimedean point in the navigation of the vast oceans of history. But they are not, as Marx warned, a ‘universal passport of a general historico-philosophical theory’¹¹¹ or ‘the master-key’ of history.¹¹² They are necessary abstractions, yes, but must be creatively applied to concrete situations. As Marx wrote in *The German Ideology*:

Viewed apart from real history, these abstractions have in themselves no value whatsoever. They can only serve to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata. But they by no means afford a recipe or schema, as does philosophy, for neatly trimming the epochs of history. On the contrary, our difficulties begin only when we set about the observation and the arrangement—the real depiction—of our historical material, whether of a past epoch or of the present. The removal of these difficulties is governed by premises which it is quite impossible to state here, but which only the study of the actual life-process and the activity of the individuals of each epoch will make evident.¹¹³

Thus, a less untidy version of historical materialism is neither possible nor desirable. As Duncan Hallas perceptively remarked: ‘Contradiction is rooted in the reality and cannot be solved by theoretical refinements, but only by transforming that reality’.¹¹⁴ Production may well determine in the last instance, therefore, but the hour of that denouement will only arrive in history’s most powerful ‘locomotive’: the triumph of revolutionary class struggle.¹¹⁵

Endnotes

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- 3 Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. A. Bloom, trans. J.H. Nichols Jr, 44. Basic Books, 1969.
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- 20 See for example Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, Vol. I: State and Bureaucracy*, Monthly Review Press, 1977, Duncan Hallas, 'Comments on Chris Harman's Base and Superstructure', in *International Socialism* 2:34 (Winter 1987), Chris Harman, 'Base and Superstructure', in *International Socialism* 2:32 (Summer 1986), John Molyneux, 'Is Marxism Deterministic?', in *International Socialism* 2:68 (Autumn 1995).
- 21 Quote from Alex Callinicos, *Making History: Agency, Structure, and Change in Social Theory*, 173. Polity Press, 1989.
- 22 See Jakubowski (1936), Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, Merlin Press, 1975.
- 23 G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, Princeton University Press, 2000, and *History, Labour and Freedom: Themes from Marx*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.
- 24 See for example Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*.
- 25 Friedrich Engels to J. Bloch in Königsberg, 21 September 1890, emphasis in original, accessed at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_09_21.htm
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- 36 All quotes from Karl Marx, *Theses On Feuerbach* (1888), accessed at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>
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- 44 Molyneux (Autumn 1995).
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- 48 See Thomas (2009), 137-141.
- 49 Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848.
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- 52 Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. III*, 1867. Emphasis in original.
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