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On Reproduction

Louis Althusser, trans. G. M. Goshgarian,

Appendix 1

On the Primacy of the Relations of Production over the
Productive Forces

Things must be as clear as possible when it comes to the
absolutely fundamental thesis of the primacy of the relations of
production, which may be the key to one part of the history of the
International Socialist and then the Communist Movement.

Why 'as clear as possible' rather than 'perfectly clear'? Why this
limitation and a reservation of this kind?

1) Because things are not clear and are not easy to clarify, even
in the minds of a number of Marxist and Communist militants, as a
result of the History they have experienced.

2) Because, besides the confusions sown by this history, they
are exposed to the influence of bourgeois ideology, which is basically
'economistic' and constantly insinuates (or imposes) the 'self-evident'
but false idea that everything depends in the last instance on the
Productive Forces and, especially, 'the impetuous development of the
Sciences and Technology' – on the 'prodigious mutation' [sic] that we
are supposedly witnessing.

3) Because there unfortunately exist texts by Marx that are
extremely ambiguous, to say the least – one in particular, the famous
'Preface' to the 1859 Critique; and because this text was both the
Second International's and also Stalin's Bible.

4) Because it is theoretically very hard to formulate the
question in fully elaborated form, and because this will take effort and
time.

That said, here is the Thesis in question, to which I give the
following precise form: 'Within the specific unity of the Productive
Forces and Relations of Production constituting a Mode of

1  TN. Crossed-out: 'qui est la clé' [which is the key].
Production, the Relations of Production play the determining role, on the basis of, and within the objective limits set by, the existing Productive Forces.'

The polemic starts immediately. I shall start it myself.

One will immediately oppose texts of Marx's to this Thesis. To begin with, the well-known lines from *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), in which Marx says: with the water-mill, you have the Feudality; with the steam engine, you have capitalism. The Productive Forces, then, in line with their 'level of development', endow themselves with, as it were, their Relations of Production – that is, with the corresponding Relations of Production, those adequate to these Productive Forces. Every revolution in the Productive Forces, since it leads to non-correspondence with the old Relations of Production, precipitates a revolution in the Relations of Production that puts the new Relations of Production in new (and adequate) correspondence with the new Productive Forces.

This is plainly stated in the famous 'Preface' (published by Marx himself in 1859, who thus vouched for its accuracy) to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Here is the core passage in this preface in my translation, based on the German text in the 1953 Dietz edition (*Zur Kritik*, pp. 13-14):

In the social production of their existence, men enter into relations that are determinate, necessary, and independent of their will: Relations of production, which correspond to a determinate degree of development of their material Productive Forces. The ensemble of these Relations of Production represents the economic structure of society, the real base on which there arises a legal and political su-

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perstructure and to which there correspond determinate forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions, in general, the process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not men's consciousness that determines their being; on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness. The material Productive Forces of society, at a certain degree of their development, enter into contradiction with the existing Relations of Production, or – this is merely a legal term designating them – with the Property Relations within which they had hitherto operated. From forms of development of the Productive Forces, these Relations are transformed into fetters on the Productive Forces. There then begins a period of social revolution. With the changes in the economic base, the whole immense Superstructure is overturned, more or less slowly or rapidly.... A social formation never disappears before all the Productive Forces that it is spacious enough to hold have been developed, and new, superior Relations of Production never take the place of the old ones before their material conditions have matured-blossome at the heart of the old society. That is why humanity only ever sets itself tasks that it can accomplish, for, upon closer examination, one constantly finds that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for accomplishing it are already present or, at least, caught up in the process of becoming. In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern-bourgeois modes of production may be designated as progressive epochs of the economic social formation. Bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but of an antagonism that issues from the social conditions of individuals' lives. However, the Productive Forces that develop in the heart of bourgeois society simultaneously create the material conditions for resolving this antagonism. This social formation therefore closes the prehistory of human society.

A detail: the words in italics in the text were not italicized by Marx, but by me. We shall see why in a moment.

A remark: there can be no question here of putting so short
and, necessarily, sharply condensed text on trial. Be it noted, however, that there is no explicit mention of the state or social classes in this text, nor even any implicit mention of the class struggle, although, as The Manifesto had declared, it plays the role of 'motor' in all of human history and, in particular, 'social revolutions', which are here evoked only in connection with the contradiction between Productive Forces and Relations of Production. This odd silence is perhaps not due solely to the constraints imposed by the brevity of the exposé.

A second remark: this text is practically the only one of Marx's that contains an exposé of the basic principles of Historical Materialism. That is why it has become classic. Stalin reproduced it nearly verbatim in his essay 'Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism'.4 On the other hand, to my (limited) knowledge, Lenin never put it at the centre of his thinking or action; nor did he ever suggest it was the Bible, even the heavily abridged Bible, of historical materialism. He cites only the text's incontestable passages.

One final remark: we know, from Marx's correspondence with Engels, that he happened to have 'reread', admiringly, Hegel's Science of Logic in 1858. The obvious Hegelian influence in Grundrisse, which dates from the 1857-1859 period, seems to me to be conspicuous in this Preface. Let us recall that Capital, which has a very different ring to it, dates from eight years later.

Here is my demonstration:

All the terms that I have italicized belong to Hegelian philosophy, as anyone who has read any Hegel at all (especially The Philosophy of History, above all the Introduction) can confirm and must admit. More precisely, Marx has not just borrowed Hegelian terminology, but has taken up the Hegelian conception itself, with one difference that is important but basically changes nothing. The set of these Hegelian terms forms a system that functions in Marx's text in accordance with the Hegelian conception itself.

This conception is that of alienation, which finds expression in the dialectic of correspondence and non-correspondence (or 'contradiction', 'antagonism') between Form and Content. The

dialectic of non-contradiction (correspondence) and contradiction ('non-correspondence') between Form and content as well as the dialectic of degrees of development of the Productive Forces (in Hegel, the moments of the development of the Idea) are one hundred percent Hegelian.

What belongs to Marx in this text are the concepts of Productive Forces, Relations of Production, base and superstructure, and social formation. These concepts stand in for the following Hegelian notions: content of the moment of the Idea, internalization-objectivation, forms of development of this content, 'peoples'. The new Marxist concepts are simply substituted for the Hegelian notions. The ensemble functions on the Hegelian dialectic of non-contradictory, then contradictory alienation between Content and Form, and thus on the theoretical basis of the Hegelian conception itself.

This Hegelian conception has it that each 'historical people' represents a moment (a degree) of the development of the Idea; that the content of this degree was formed at the heart of the previous developed moment of the previous 'people', like the kernel of an almond; and that, at a given moment, the new content (the almond) enters into contradiction with the previous form (the shell) and bursts it, in order to endow itself with its own forms of development (its new shell).\(^5\) Hegel thinks this process in the form of the content's externalization-alienation in forms specific to it: at the heart of these forms, a new kernel is once again constituted – it is embryonic at first, then becomes more and more substantial: a new almond (a new, 'superior' 'degree' of the 'development' of the Idea). This new kernel will enter into contradiction with the existing Form (shell), and the process continues until the end of History, when the ultimate contradiction is resolved (for Hegel, in the unity of the French Revolution and the German religiosity consecrated by his own philosophy).

Going back to Marx's text, we find, word for word, the same schema there, with the development of the material Productive Forces in progressive, 'superior' degrees standing in for the

\(^5\) The image is Hegel's.
development of 'degrees' or moments of development of the Idea. We also find the thesis that each degree (of development) of the Productive Forces has to develop all its resources in the space that the existing Relations of Production allow it before the intervention of the contradiction that proves fatal for those relations of production, no longer 'spacious enough' to hold the new content as its form, and so on. We also find the finality⁶ by virtue of which the future that will replace the past is developing in a social formation at every moment; this grounds the famous thesis that 'Humanity' (a strange 'Marxist' concept) 'only ever sets itself tasks that it can accomplish', because the means needed to accomplish it [sic] are, every time, already completely ready – providentially, as it were – and to hand. We also find the finality⁶ that was the delight of the Second International's evolutionism (later adopted by Stalin): the regulated, 'progressive' succession of modes of production, tending toward the end of class society. Is it, then, any wonder that there is no mention at all of class struggle, since everything is apparently regulated by the play of the 'correspondence' and subsequent contradiction between content (the Productive Forces) and form (the relations of production)?

To repeat: there can be no question of putting Marx [on trial]⁷ for writing this handful of very equivocal lines, nor even for publishing them (whereas he did not publish other, still more dubious manuscripts, such as the Manuscripts of 1844 or even The German Ideology). For all of Capital protests against this Hegelianism, in its deepest spirit and, barring a few unfortunate but rare formulas, its letter as well. In Capital, indeed, 1) the unity of the Productive Forces and Relations of Production is no longer conceived of at all as the relationship of a Content to its Form; and 2) the accent is put on the Relations of Production, the primacy of which is unquestionably affirmed.

We must, however, take note of a historical fact of crucial importance for the history of the Workers' Movement. Here I consider just one element. It is only a symptom, after all, but I believe it is serious enough to warrant reflection.

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⁶ TN. Crossed out: 'téléologie', replaced with finalité.

⁷ TN. The phrase 'on trial', absent from the manuscript, has been supplied by the editor.
The fact is that, in the history of the Marxist Workers' Movement, this famous, unfortunate 1859 Preface has constituted the Law and the Prophets for some people and been totally neglected by others. One could, in other words, write a History of the Marxist Workers' Movement by considering the answer given to the following question: Within the unity Productive Forces/Relations of Production, to which element should we assign primacy, theoretically and politically?

Some have answered (in their texts and acts): primacy must be assigned to the Productive Forces. Their names are, first, those of most of the Second International's leaders, beginning with Bernstein and Kautsky; and also Stalin.

Others have answered (in their texts and acts): primacy must be assigned to the Relations of Production. Their names are Lenin and Mao. It is no accident that Lenin and Mao led their Communist Parties to the victory of the Revolution.

I simply ask the following question. How, if Lenin and Mao had ever taken the central thesis of the Preface literally – 'A social formation never disappears before all the Productive Forces that it is spacious enough to hold have been developed, and new Relations of Production never take the place of the old ones before their material conditions have matured-blossomed in the old society' – how could Lenin and Mao ever have taken the lead of the Party and Masses and secured the victory of the Socialist Revolution?

This was the very thesis that Kautsky used against Lenin when he accused him of 'making the Revolution too early' in a backward country whose Productive Forces were a thousand miles from being sufficiently developed to 'warrant' receiving (at the hands of the unspeakable voluntarist-putschist named Lenin) Relations of Production that were obviously 'premature'... Kautsky might even have added (and perhaps did: he ought to be read) that capitalist Russia's productive forces, once freed of the burden represented by Nicolas II, were far from having developed all their resources in the new capitalist relations of production that had already undergone considerable development before Czarism fell....

What should we say of China, whose productive forces were
less developed at the time of its 1949 revolution than Russia's in 1917? Had Kautsky been alive, he might well have excoriated Mao's 'volunterism' and 'putschism' still more severely.... But let us here say no more about these questions, which are still burning questions – and not just on account of what we can perceive from afar of what was at issue in China during the Great Leap Forward and, later, Mao's eviction from power and subsequent return to it in the Proletarian Cultural Revolution. It seems to me that, here too, this question of the primacy of the productive forces or Relations of Production must again have played a certain role.

Let us discuss what is closer and more familiar to us: not the 'personality cult', but Stalin's politics as it took shape around 1930 and was pursued with unremitting tenacity thereafter. I do not think it is any accident that Stalin took up the theses of the 1859 Preface word for word in 1938.

Incontestably, we can characterize Stalin's politics (inasmuch as, from the 1930-1932 'turn' onwards, Stalin was, in the last resort, the only one to take political decisions) by saying that it was the consistent politics of the Primacy of the Productive Forces over the relations of production. It would be interesting to examine, in this regard, Stalin's policies [politique] in connection with planning and the peasantry; the role he assigned the Party; and even certain stupefying formulas such as the one which, defining 'man' as 'the most valuable capital', obviously treated man with regard to labour-power alone, in other words, as nothing more nor less than a component of the productive forces (consider the related theme of Stakhonovism).

Of course, one can justify this politics by citing the absolutely urgent necessity of endowing Soviet Russia, threatened by imperialist encirclement and aggression, with Productive Forces and a heavy industry that would enable it to confront the predictable, because virtually inevitable, ordeal of war. Of course, it can also be said that primitive socialist accumulation could only be carried out, in this urgent situation, at the cost of the peasantry, and by virtually 'all available means', and so on. Of course, it can be added that the bulk of the working class, which had made the 1917 Revolution, had been
massacred in the overt civil war and the disguised civil war that reigned for years in the countryside, where untold worker militants were quite simply killed; and that Stalin's Party could no longer be Lenin's Party after these massacres and years of famine. Granted.

Yet I cannot help asking the question that haunts me – for it haunts us all. Might it not be that Stalin fell short of Lenin's politics, as his 1938 text attests, veering toward the tradition of the Second International's politics, the politics of the primacy of the Productive Forces over the Relations of Production? All the objective difficulties notwithstanding, would a different politics not have been possible, possible for a very long time, down to the moment when the logic of the politics that was decided on had gained the upper hand over everything else and precipitated everything we know: the victory over Nazism, but also systematic massacres whose method and magnitude are stupefying – to say nothing else?

Since I am on the subject (I am very well aware of how little I am advancing, in the face of events that still dwarf our understanding of them, and aware as well of the risk I am taking), let me go back to the USSR of the period following the Twentieth Congress and all the thorny problems being debated in connection with the issue of planning, 'liberalization' of the plan, and so on: might it not be that the contemporary USSR, now that an end has been put to the police abuses bound up with Stalin's politics, is pursuing the same politics of the Primacy of the Productive Forces? All the Soviet texts one can read, all the conversations one can have with Soviet citizens, the improbable thesis put forward by Khrushchev (and not repudiated since) to the effect that the USSR has moved beyond the Dictatorship of the Proletariat and is entering the period of the construction of ... communism, as well as the other thesis to the effect that economic competition with the United States will determine the fate of socialism in the rest of the world (the well-known talk of 'Gulash Communism': when 'they' see what we produce, 'they' will be won over to socialism!) – all this is food for thought. We cannot hold back the question on our lips: Where is the Soviet Union going? Does it know?

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8 TN. Crossed out: 'all the conversations I have managed to have with a few Soviet citizens'.
I return to my proposition about the primacy of the Relations of Production over the Productive Forces. We have to perform a gigantic task of theoretical elaboration in order to pronounce on this question: that of knowing what Productive Forces and Relations of Production are, not only for a given mode of production, but for a social formation, in which several modes of production exist under the domination of one of them; that of knowing what becomes of this unity in a capitalist social formation in the imperialist stage, which adds supplementary determinations that are not secondary, but essential to the question of this 'unity'. How is it possible not to see, for instance, that if the 1917 Russian Revolution and the Chinese revolution broke out at the end of world wars, at the 'weakest links', these weakest links were links in a chain known as Imperialism? How is it possible not to see that if these revolutions, which triumphed in technologically backward countries, could and can overcome the backwardness of their Productive Forces in a relatively short span, the reason is the state of the Productive Forces at the international level, especially the very advanced state of technology?

That is why, all things considered, and so as not to give the impression that I am indulging a theoretical penchant for voluntarism and adventurism, I have written, and here repeat, that the Primacy of the Relations of Production over the Productive Forces should not be indiscriminately invoked, but invoked on the basis of, and within the limits set by, the objectively existing Forces of Production, taking into account the fact, the limits of which are also precise – depend, that is, on precise conditions – that the modern Productive Forces, namely, technology at the highest level, are now basically available to every country that, once it has successfully carried out its Revolution, can overcome the backwardness of its Productive Forces in conditions unimaginable in the past. The USSR proved this between 1917 and 1941. China is proving it as well, if only by the sign represented by its atomic bomb.

Many other considerations on the difference between revolutions we know should be discussed at a theoretical level. The French bourgeoisie had developed not just its Productive Forces, but also, to a great extent, its relations of production, before the 1789
Revolution. The Russian capitalist bourgeoisie had done so as well before the February Revolution. The same holds for the Chinese bourgeoisie. In the case of the Russian and Chinese Revolutions, the bourgeois Revolution was made possible only by the participation of huge masses of common people, who promptly moved beyond the bourgeois Revolution to the Proletarian Revolution. That can no longer occur in our country: the bourgeois revolution has already taken place. In the heart of Western capitalist Social Formations, contrary to what happened in the case of feudal social formations, 'at the heart of which' very powerful elements of the relations of production of the capitalist mode of production had indeed 'grown up', elements of the socialist mode of production that can be taken at all seriously do not develop anywhere, and for good reason. They do not exist there any more than they existed in Russia or China. The Revolution will therefore necessarily take a different form in our country, without the least support or consent from the bourgeoisie, but with the support of its victims and its victims alone, grouped around the proletariat.