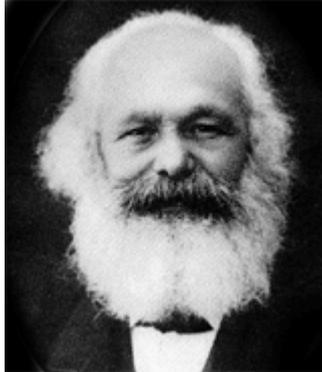


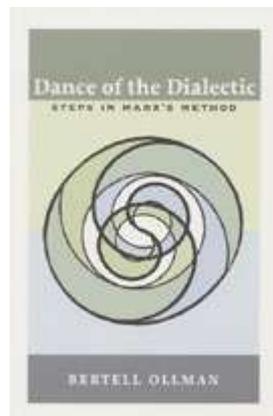
# Dance of the Dialectic



**An investigation into the dialectical method of Karl Marx**

**By Bertell Ollman**

**Being extracts from Chapter 5 of Dance of the Dialectic**



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## **Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method**

### **Chapter 5**

#### **Putting Dialectics to Work: The Process of Abstraction in Marx's Method**

**Parts I-IV | [Part V](#) | [Part VI](#) | [Part VII-VIII](#)**

#### **The Problem: How to Think Adequately about Change and Interaction**

Is there any part of Marxism that has received more abuse than his dialectical method? And I am not just thinking about enemies of Marxism and socialism, but also about scholars who are friendly to both. It is not Karl Popper, but George Sorel in his Marxist incarnation who refers to dialectics as "the art of reconciling opposites through hocus pocus," and the English socialist economist, Joan Robinson, who on reading *Capital* objects to the constant intrusion of "Hegel's nose" between her and Ricardo (Sorel, 1950, 171; Robinson, 1953, 23). But perhaps the classic complaint is fashioned by the American philosopher, William James, who compares reading about dialectics in Hegel—it could just as well have been Marx—to getting sucked into a whirlpool (James, 1978, 174).

Yet other thinkers have considered Marx's dialectical method among his most important contributions to socialist theory, and Lukács goes so far as to claim that orthodox Marxism relies solely upon adherence to his method (Lukács, 1971, 1). Though Lukács may be exaggerating to make his point, it is not—in my view—by very much. The reasons for such widespread disagreement on the meaning and value of dialectics are many, but what stands out is the inadequate attention given to the nature of its subject matter. What, in other words, is dialectics about? What questions does it deal with, and why are they important? Until there is more clarity, if not consensus, on its basic task, treatises on dialectics will only succeed in piling one layer of obscurity upon another. So this is where we must begin.

First and foremost, and stripped of all qualifications added by this or that dialectician, the subject of dialectics is change, all change, and interaction, all kinds and degrees of interaction. This is not to say that dialectical thinkers recognize the existence of change and interaction, while non-dialectical thinkers do not. That would be foolish. Everyone recognizes that everything in the world changes, somehow and to some degree, and that the same holds true for interaction. The problem is how to think adequately about them, how to capture them in thought. How, in other words, can we think about change and interaction so as not to miss or distort the real changes and interactions that we know, in a general way at least, are there (with all the implications this has for how to study them and to communicate what we find to others)? This is the key problem addressed by dialectics, this is what all dialectics is about, and it is in helping to resolve this problem that Marx turns to the process of abstraction.

## **II**

#### **The Solution Lies in the Process of Abstraction**

In his most explicit statement on the subject, Marx claims that his method starts from the "real concrete" (the world as it presents itself to us) and proceeds through "abstraction" (the intellectual activity of breaking this whole down into the mental units with which we think about it) to the "thought concrete" (the reconstituted and now understood whole present in the mind) (Marx, 1904, 293-94). The real concrete is simply the world in which we live, in all its complexity. The thought concrete is Marx's reconstruction of that world in the theories of what has come to be called "Marxism." The royal road to understanding is said to pass from the one to the other through the process of abstraction.

In one sense, the role Marx gives to abstraction is simple recognition of the fact that all thinking

about reality begins by breaking it down into manageable parts. Reality may be in one piece when lived, but to be thought about and communicated it must be parceled out. Our minds can no more swallow the world whole at one sitting than can our stomachs. Everyone then, and not just Marx and Marxists, begins the task of trying to make sense of his or her surroundings by distinguishing certain features and focusing on and organizing them in ways deemed appropriate. "Abstract" comes from the Latin, "*abstrahere*", which means "to pull from." In effect, a piece has been pulled from or taken out of the whole and is temporarily perceived as standing apart.

We "see" only some of what lies in front of us, "hear" only part of the noises in our vicinity, "feel" only a small part of what our body is in contact with, and so on through the rest of our senses. In each case, a focus is established and a kind of boundary set within our perceptions distinguishing what is relevant from what is not. It should be clear that "What did you see?" (What caught your eye?) is a different question from "What did you *actually* see?" (What came into your line of vision?). Likewise, in thinking about any subject, we focus on only some of its qualities and relations. Much that could be included—that may in fact be included in another person's view or thought, and may on another occasion be included in our own—is left out. The mental activity involved in establishing such boundaries, whether conscious or unconscious—though it is usually an amalgam of both—is the process of abstraction.

Responding to a mixture of influences that include the material world and our experiences in it as well as to personal wishes, group interests, and other social constraints, it is the process of abstraction that establishes the specificity of the objects with which we interact. In setting boundaries, in ruling this far and no further, it is what makes something one (or two, or more) of a kind, and lets us know where that kind begins and ends. With this decision as to units, we also become committed to a particular set of relations between them—relations made possible and even necessary by the qualities that we have included in each—a register for classifying them, and a mode for explaining them.

In listening to a concert, for example, we often concentrate on a single instrument or recurring theme and then redirect our attention elsewhere. Each time this occurs, the whole music alters, new patterns emerge, each sound takes on a different value, etc. How we understand the music is largely determined by how we abstract it. The same applies to what we focus on when watching a play, whether on a person, or a combination of persons, or a section of the stage. The meaning of the play and what more is required to explore or test that meaning alters, often dramatically, with each new abstraction. In this way, too, how we abstract literature, where we draw the boundaries, determines what works and what parts of each work will be studied, with what methods, in relation to what other subjects, in what order, and even by whom. Abstracting literature to include its audience, for example, leads to a sociology of literature, while an abstraction of literature that excludes everything but its forms calls forth various structural approaches, and so on.

From what has been said so far, it is clear that "abstraction" is itself an abstraction. I have abstracted it from Marx's dialectical method, which in turn was abstracted from his broad theories, which in turn were abstracted from his life and work. The mental activities that we have collected and brought into focus as "abstraction" are more often associated with the processes of perception, conception, defining, reasoning, and even thinking. It is not surprising, therefore, if the process of abstraction strikes many people as both foreign and familiar at the same time. Each of these more familiar processes operate in part by separating out, focusing, and putting emphasis on only some aspects of that reality with which they come into contact. In "abstraction," we have simply separated out, focused and put emphasis on certain common features of these other processes. Abstracting "abstraction" in this way is neither easy nor obvious, and therefore few people have done it.

Consequently, though everyone abstracts, of necessity, only a few are aware of it as such. This philosophical impoverishment is reinforced by the fact that most people are lazy abstractors, simply and uncritically accepting the mental units with which they think as part of their cultural inheritance.

A further complication in grasping "abstraction" arises from the fact that Marx uses the term in four

different, though closely related, senses. First, and most important, it refers to the mental activity of subdividing the world into the mental constructs with which we think about it, which is the process that we have been describing. Second, it refers to the results of this process, the actual parts into which reality has been apportioned. That is to say, for Marx, as for Hegel before him, "abstraction" functions as a noun as well as a verb, the noun referring to what the verb has brought into being. In these senses, everyone can be said to abstract (verb) and to think with abstractions (noun). But Marx also uses "abstraction" in a third sense, where it refers to a suborder of particularly ill fitting mental constructs. Whether because they are too narrow, take in too little, focus too exclusively on appearances, or are otherwise badly composed, these constructs do not allow an adequate grasp of their subject matter.

Taken in this third sense, abstractions are the basic unit of ideology, the inescapable ideational result of living and working in alienated society. "Freedom," for example, is said to be such an abstraction whenever we remove the real individual from "the conditions of existence within which these individuals enter into contact" (Marx, 1973, 164). Omitting the conditions that make freedom possible (or impossible)—including the real alternatives available, the role of money, the socialization of the person choosing, etc.—from the meaning of "freedom" leaves a notion that can only distort and obfuscate even that part of reality it sets out to convey. A lot of Marx's criticism of ideology makes use of this sense of "abstraction".

Finally, Marx uses the term "abstraction" in a fourth still different sense where it refers to a particular organization of elements in the real world—having to do with the functioning of capitalism—that provides the objective underpinnings for most of the ideological abstractions mentioned above. Abstractions in this fourth sense exist in the world and not, as in the case with the other three, in the mind. In these abstractions, certain spatial and temporal boundaries and connections stand out, just as others are obscure even invisible, making what is in practice inseparable appear separate. It is in this way that commodities, value, money, capital, etc. are likely to be misconstrued from the start. Marx labels these objective results of capitalist functioning "real abstractions", and it is chiefly "real abstractions" that incline the people who have contact with them is referring to when he says that in capitalist society "people are governed by abstractions" (Marx, 1973, 164). Such remarks, however, must not keep us from seeing that Marx also abstracts in the first sense given above and, like everyone else, thinks with abstractions in the second sense, and that the particular way in which he does both goes a long way in accounting for the distinctive character of Marxism.

Despite several explicit remarks on the centrality of abstraction in Marx's work, the process of abstraction has received relatively little attention in the literature on Marxism. Serious work on Marx's dialectical method can usually be distinguished on the basis of which of the categories belonging to the vocabulary of dialectics is treated as pivotal. For Lukács, it was the concept of "totality" that played this role (Lukács, 1971); for Mao, it was "contradiction" (Mao, 1968); for Raya Dunayevskaya, it was the "negation of negation" (Dunayevskaya, 1982); for Scott Meikle, it was "essence" (Meikle, 1985); for the Ollman of *Alienation*, it was "internal relations" (Ollman, 1971), and so on. Even when abstraction is discussed—and no serious work dismisses it altogether—the main emphasis is generally on what it is in the world or in capitalism that is responsible for the particular abstractions made, and not on the process of abstraction as such and on what exactly Marx does and how he does it.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the implications of Marx's abstracting practice for the theories of Marxism remain clouded, and those wishing to develop these theories and where necessary revise them receive little help in their efforts to abstract in the manner of Marx. In what follows, it is just this process of abstraction, how it works and particularly how Marx works it, that serves as the centerpiece for our discussion of dialectics.

### III

#### How Marx's Abstractions Differ

What, then, is distinctive about Marx's abstractions? To begin with, it should be clear that Marx's abstractions do not and cannot diverge completely from the abstractions of other thinkers both then and now. There has to be a lot of overlap. Otherwise, he would have constructed what philosophers call a "private language," and any communication between him and the rest of us would be impossible. How close Marx came to fall into this abyss and what can be done to repair some of the damage already done are questions I hope to deal with in a later work. Second, in depicting Marx's process of abstraction as a predominantly conscious and rational activity, I do not mean to deny the enormous degree to which what results accurately reflects the real world. However, the realist foundations of Marx's thinking are sufficiently (though by no means adequately) understood to be taken for granted here while we concentrate on the process of abstraction as such.<sup>2</sup>

Keeping these two qualifications clearly in mind, we can now say that what is most distinctive about Marx's abstractions, taken as a group, is that they focus on and incorporate both change and interaction (or system) in the particular forms in which these occur in the capitalist era. It is important to underline from the start that Marx's main concern was with capitalism. He sought to discover what it is and how it works, as well as how it emerged and where it is tending. We shall call the organic and historical processes involved here the double movement of the capitalist mode of production. Each movement affects the other, and how one grasps either affects one's understanding of both. But how does one study the history of a system, or the systemic functioning of evolving processes, where the main determinants of change lie within the system itself? For Marx, the first and most important step was to incorporate the general form of what he was looking for, to wit—change and interaction, into all the abstractions he constructed as part of his research. Marx's understanding of capitalism, therefore, is not restricted to the theories of Marxism, which relate the components of the capitalist system, but some large part of it is found within the very abstractions with which these theories have been constructed.

Beginning with historical movement, Marx's preoccupation with change and development is undisputed. What is less known, chiefly because it is less clear, is how he thought about change, how he abstracted it, and how he integrated these abstractions into his study of a changing world. The underlying problem is as old as philosophy itself. The ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, provides us with its classic statement when he asserts that a person cannot step into the same river twice. Enough water has flowed between the two occasions so that the river we step into the second time is not the same river we walked into earlier. Yet our common sense tells us that it is, and our naming practice reflects this view. The river is still called the "Hudson", or the "Rhine" or the "Ganges". Heraclitus, of course, was not interested in rivers, but in change. His point is that change goes on everywhere and all the time, but that our manner of thinking about it is sadly inadequate. The flow, the constant alteration of movement away from something and toward something else, is generally missing. Usually, where change takes place very slowly or in very small increments, its impact can be safely neglected. On the other hand, depending on the context and on our purpose in it, even such change—because it occurs outside our attention—may occasionally startle us and have grave consequences for our lives.

Even today few are able to think about the changes they know to be happening in ways that don't distort—usually by underplaying—what is actually going on. From the titles of so many works in the social sciences it would appear that a good deal of effort is being directed to studying change of one kind or another. But what is actually taken as "change" in most of these works? It is not the continuous evolution and alteration that goes on in their subject matter, the social equivalent of the flowing water in Heraclitus' river. Rather, almost invariably, it is a comparison of two or more differentiated states in the development of the object or condition or group under examination. As the sociologist, James Coleman, who defends this approach, admits, "The concept of change in science is a rather special one, for it does not immediately follow from our sense impressions . . . It is based on a comparison, or difference between two sense impressions, and simultaneously a comparison of the times at which the sense impressions occurred." Why? Because, according to Coleman, "the concept of change must, as any concept, itself reflect a state of an object at a point in

time" (Coleman, 1968, 429). Consequently, a study of the changes in the political thinking of the American electorate, for example, gets translated into an account of how people voted (or responded to opinion polls) in 1956, 1960, 1964, etc., and the differences found in a comparison of these static moments is what is called "change." It is not simply, and legitimately, that the one, the difference between the moments, gets taken as an indication of or evidence for the other, the process; rather, it stands in for the process itself.

In contrast to this approach, Marx set out to abstract things, in his words, "as they really are and happen," making how they happen part of what they are (Marx and Engels, 1964, 57). Hence, capital (or labor, money, etc.) is not only how capital appears and functions, but also how it develops; or rather, how it develops, its real history, is also part of what it is. It is also in this sense that Marx could deny that nature and history "are two separate things" (Marx and Engels, 1964, 57). In the view which currently dominates the social sciences, things exist *and* undergo change. The two are logically distinct. History is something that happens to things; it is not part of their nature. Hence, the difficulty of examining change in subjects from which it has been removed at the start. Whereas Marx, as he tells us, abstracts "every historical social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature *not less* than its momentary existence" (My emphasis) (Marx, 1958, 20).

But history for Marx refers not only to time past but to time future. So that whatever something is becoming—whether we know what that will be or not—is in some important respects part of what it is along with what it once was. For example, capital, for Marx, is not simply the material means of production used to produce wealth, which is how it is abstracted in the work of most economists. Rather, it includes the early stages in the development of these particular means of production, or "primitive accumulation," indeed whatever has made it possible for it to produce the kind of wealth it does in just the way it does (*viz.* permits wealth to take the form of value, something produced not because it is useful but for purposes of exchange). Furthermore, as part of its becoming, capital incorporates the accumulation of capital that is occurring now together with its tendency toward concentration and centralization, and the effect of this tendency on both the development of a world market and an eventual transition to socialism. According to Marx, the tendency to expand surplus-value and with it production, and therefore to create a world market, is "directly given in the concept of capital itself" (Marx, 1973, 408).

That capital contains the seeds of a future socialist society is also apparent in its increasingly socialized character and in the growing separation of the material means of production from the direct control of capitalists, making the latter even more superfluous than they already are. This "history" of capital is part of capital, contained within the abstraction that Marx makes of capital, and part of what he wants to convey with its covering concept. All of Marx's main abstractions—labor, value, commodity, money, etc.—incorporate process, becoming, history in just this way. Our purpose here is not to explain Marx's political economy, but simply to use some of his claims in this area to illustrate how he integrates what most readers would take to be externally related phenomena, in this case its real past and likely future, into his abstraction of its present form.

Marx often uses the qualifying phrase "in itself" to indicate the necessary and internal ties between the future development of anything and how it presents itself at this moment. Money and commodity, for example, are referred to as "in themselves" capital (Marx, 1963, 396). Given the independent forms in which they confront the worker in capitalist society—something separate from him but something he must acquire in order to survive—money and commodity ensure the exchange of labor power and through it their own transformation into means of production used to produce new value. Capital is part of what they are becoming, part of their future, and hence part of them. Just as money and commodity are parts of what capital is, parts of its past, and hence parts of it. Elsewhere, Marx refers to money and commodity as "potential capital," as capital "only in intention, in their essence, in what they were destined to be" (Marx, 1971, 465; Marx, 1963, 399-400). Similarly, all labor is abstracted as wage-labor, and all means of production as capital, because this is the direction in which they are evolving in capitalist society (Marx, 1963, 409-10).

To consider the past and likely future development of anything as integral to what it is, to grasp this whole as a single process, does not keep Marx from abstracting out some part or instant of this process for a particular purpose and from treating it as relatively autonomous. Aware that the units into which he has subdivided reality are the results of his abstractions, Marx is able to re-abstract this reality, restricting the area brought into focus in line with the requirements of his current study. But when he does this, he often underlines its character as a temporally stable part of a larger and ongoing process by referring to it as a "moment." In this way, commodity is spoken of as a "moment in exchange," money (in its aspect as capital) as a "moment" in the process of production, and circulation in general as a "moment in the system of production" (Marx, 1973, 145, 217). Marx's naming practice here reflects the epistemological priority he gives to movement over stability, so that stability—whenever it is found—is viewed as temporary and/or only apparent, or, as he says on one occasion, as a "paralysis" of movement (Marx, 1971, 212). With stability used to qualify change rather than the reverse, Marx—unlike most modern social scientists—did not and could not study why things change (with the implication that change is external to what they are, something that happens to them). Given that change is always a part of what things are, his research problem could only be *how*, *when*, and *into what* they change and why they sometimes appear not to (ideology).

Before concluding our discussion of the place of change in Marx's abstractions, it is worth noting that thinking in terms of processes is not altogether alien to common sense. It occurs in abstractions of actions, such as eating, walking, fighting, etc., indeed whenever the gerund form of the verb is used. Likewise, event words, such as "war" and "strike", indicate that to some degree at least the processes involved have been abstracted as such. On the other hand, it is also possible to think of war and strike as a state or condition, more like a photo than a motion picture, or if the latter, then a single scene that gets shown again and again, which removes or seriously underplays whatever changes are taking place. And unfortunately, the same is true of most action verbs. They become action "things." In such cases, the real processes that go on do not get reflected—certainly not to any adequate degree—in our thinking about them. It is my impression that in the absence of any commitment to bring change itself into focus, in the manner of Marx, this is the more typical outcome.

Earlier we said that what distinguishes Marx's abstractions is that they contain not only change or history but also some portion of the system in which it occurs. Since change in anything only takes place in and through a complex interaction between closely related elements, treating change as intrinsic to what anything is requires that we treat the interaction through which it occurs in the same way. With a static notion of anything it is easy to conceive of it as also discrete, logically independent of and easily separable from its surrounding conditions. They do not enter directly into what it is. While viewing the same thing as a process makes it necessary to extend the boundaries of what it is to include at least some part of the surrounding conditions that enter into this process. In sum, as far as abstractions are concerned, change brings mutual dependence in its wake. Instead of a mere sequence of events isolated from their context, a kind of one-note development, Marx's abstractions become phases of an evolving and interactive system.

Hence, capital, which we examined earlier as a process, is also a complex Relation encompassing the interaction between the material means of production, capitalists, workers, value, commodity, money, and more—and all this over time. Marx says, "the concept of capital contains the capitalist"; he refers to workers as "variable capital" and says capital is "nothing without wage-labor, value, money, price, etc." (Marx, 1973, 512; Marx, 1958, 209; Marx, 1904, 292). Elsewhere, the "processual" character of these aspects of the capital Relation is emphasized in referring to them as "value in process" and "money in process" (Marx, 1971, 137). If capital, like all other important abstractions in Marxism, is both a process and a Relation, viewing it as primarily one or the other could only be a way of emphasizing either its historical or systemic character for a particular purpose.

As in his abstractions of capital as a process, so too in his abstractions of it as a Relation, Marx can focus on but part of what capital contains. While the temporally isolated part of a process is

generally referred to as a "moment", the spatially isolated aspect of a Relation is generally referred to as a "form" or "determination." With "form," Marx usually brings into focus the appearance and/or function of any Relation, that by which we recognize it, and most often it is its form that is responsible for the concept by which we know and communicate it. Hence, value (a Relation) in its exchangeable form is called "money"; while in the form in which it facilitates the production of more value, it is called "capital"; and so on. "Determination," on the other hand, enables Marx to focus on the transformational character of any relational part, on what best brings out its mutual dependence and changeability within the interactive system. Upon analysis, moments, forms, and determinations all turn out to be Relations. So that after referring to the commodity as a moment in wealth, Marx immediately proceeds to pick it apart as a Relation (Marx, 1973, 218). Elsewhere, Marx refers to interest, profit, and rent as forms which through analysis lose their "apparent independence," and are seen to be Relations (Marx, 1971, 429).

Earlier, we saw that some abstractions that contain processes could also be found in what we called common sense. The same is true of abstractions that focus on Relations. Father, which contains the relation between a man and a child, is one. Buyer, which contains the relations between a person and something sold or available for sale, is another. But compared to the number and scope of relations in the world, such relations are few and meager in their import. Within the common sense of our time and place, most social ties are thought about in abstractions that focus on the parts one at a time, separately as well as statically. Marx, however, believes that in order to adequately grasp the systemic connections that constitute such an important part of reality one has to incorporate them—along with the ways in which they change—into the very abstractions in and with which one thinks about them. All else is make-do patchwork, a one-sided, lopsided way of thinking that invites the neglect of essential connections together with the distortion of whatever influence they exert on the overall system.

Where have we arrived? Marx's abstractions are not things but processes. These processes are also, of necessity, systemic Relations in which the main processes with which Marx deals are all implicated. Consequently, each process serves as an aspect, or subordinate part, of other processes, grasped as clusters of relations, just as they do in it. In this way, Marx brings what we have called the double movement of the capitalist mode of production (its history and organic movement) together in the same abstractions, uniting in his thinking what is united in reality. And whenever he needs to focus on but part of this complex, he does so as a moment, a form or a determination.

Marx's abstractions seem to be very different, especially as regards the treatment of change and interaction, from those in which most people think about society. But if Marx's abstractions stand out as much as our evidence suggests they do, it is not enough to display them. We also need to know what gives Marx the philosophical license to abstract as he does. Whence comes his apparent facility in making and changing abstractions? And what is the relation between his abstractions and those of common sense? It is because most readers cannot see how Marx could possibly abstract as he does that they continue to deny—and perhaps not even notice—the widespread evidence of his practice. Therefore, before making a more detailed analysis of Marx's process of abstraction and its place and role in his dialectical method and broader theories, a brief detour through his philosophical presuppositions is in order.

#### IV

### **The Philosophy of Internal Relations**

According to Marx, "The economists do not conceive of capital as a Relation. They cannot do so without at the same time conceiving of it as a historical transitory, i.e., a relative—not an absolute—form of production" (Marx, 1971, 274). This is not a comment about the content of capital, about what it is, *kind* of thing it is—to wit, a Relation. To grasp capital, as Marx does, as a complex Relation which has at its core internal ties between the material means of production and those who own them, those who work on them, their special product, value, and the conditions in which

owning and working go on is to know capital as a historical event, as something that emerged as a result of specific conditions in the lifetime of real people and that will disappear when these conditions do. Viewing such connections as external to what capital is—which, for them, is simply the material means of production or money used to buy such—the economists fall into treating capital as an ahistorical variable. Without saying so explicitly and certainly without ever explicitly defending this position, capital becomes something that has always been and will always be.

The view held by most people, scholars and others, in what we've been calling the common sense view, maintains that there are things and there are relations, and that neither can be subsumed in the other. This position is summed up in Bishop Butler's statement, which G. E. Moore adopts as a motto: "Everything is what it is, and not another thing," taken in conjunction with Hume's claim, "All events seem entirely loose and separate" (Moore, 1903, title page; Hume, 1955, 85). On this view, capital may be found to have relations with labor, value, etc., and it may even be that accounting for such relations plays an important role in explaining what capital is; but capital is one thing, and its relations quite another. Marx, on the other hand, following Hegel's lead in this matter, rejects what is, in essence, a logical dichotomy. For him, as we saw, capital is itself a Relation, in which the ties of the material means of production to labor, value, commodity, etc., are interiorized as parts of what capital is. Marx refers to "things themselves" as "their interconnections" (Marx and Engels, 1950, 488). Moreover, these relations extend backward and forward in time, so that capital's conditions of existence as they have evolved over the years and its potential for future development are also viewed as parts of what it is.

On the common sense view, any element related to capital can change without capital itself changing. Workers, for example, instead of selling their labor-power to capitalists, as occurs in capitalism, could become slaves, or serfs, or owners of their own means of production, and in every case their instruments of work would still be capital. The tie between workers and the means of production here is contingent, a matter of chance, and therefore external to what each really is. In Marx's view, a change of this sort would mean a change in the character of capital itself, in its appearance and/or functioning no matter how far extended. The tie is a necessary and essential one; it is an internal relation. Hence, where its specific relationship to workers has changed, the means of production become something else, and something that is best captured by a concept other than "capital." Every element that comes into Marx's analysis of capitalism is a Relation of this sort. It is this view that underlies and helps explain his practice of abstraction and the particular abstractions that result, along with all the theories raised on them.

It appears that the problem non-Marxists have in understanding Marx is much more profound than is ordinarily thought. It is not simply that they don't grasp what Marx is saying about capital (or labor, or value, or the state, etc.) because his account is unclear or confused, or that the evidence for his claims is weak or undeveloped. Rather, it is that the basic form, the Relation, in which Marx thinks about each of the major elements that come into his analysis is unavailable, and therefore its ideational content is necessarily misrepresented, if only a little (though usually it is much more). As an attempt to reflect the relations in capitalist society by incorporating them into its core abstractions, Marxism suffers the same distorting fate as these relations themselves.

In the history of ideas, the view that we have been developing is known as the philosophy of internal relations. Marx's immediate philosophical influences in this regard were Leibniz, Spinoza, and Hegel, particularly Hegel. What all had in common is the belief that the relations that come together to make up the whole get expressed in what are taken to be its parts. Each part is viewed as incorporating in what it is all its relations with other parts up to and including everything that comes into the whole. To be sure, each of these thinkers had a distinctive view of what the parts are. For Leibniz, it was monads; for Spinoza, modes of nature or God; and for Hegel, ideas. But the logical form in which they construed the relation between parts and the whole was the same.

Some writers on Marx have argued for a restricted form of internal relations that would apply only to society and not to the natural world (Rader, 1979, chapter 2). But reality doesn't allow such

absolute distinctions. People have bodies as well as minds and social roles. Alienation, for example, affects all three, and in their alienated forms each is internally related to the others. Likewise, capital, commodities, money, and the forces of production all have material as well as social aspects. To maintain that the philosophy of internal relations does not respect the usual boundaries between nature and society does not mean that Marx cannot for certain purposes abstract units that fall primarily or even wholly on one or the other side of this divide. Whenever he speaks of "thing" or, as is more frequent, of "social relations," this is what occurs, but in every case what has been momentarily put aside is internally related to what has been brought into focus. Consequently, he is unlikely to minimize or dismiss, as many operating with external relations do, the influences of either natural or social phenomena on the other.

What is the place of such notions as "cause" and "determine" within a philosophy of internal relations? Given the mutual interaction Marx assumes between everything in reality, now and forever, there can be no cause that is logically prior to and independent of that to which it is said to give rise and no determining factor that is itself not affected by that which it is said to determine. In short, the common sense notions of "cause" and "determine" that are founded on such logical independence and absolute priority do not and cannot apply. In their stead we find frequent claims of the following kind: the propensity to exchange is the "cause or reciprocal effect" of the division of labor; and interest and rent "determine" market prices and "are determined" by it (Marx, 1959b, 134; Marx, 1971, 512). In any organic system viewed over time all the processes evolve together. Hence, no process comes first and each one can be said to determine and be determined by the others. However, it is also the case that one process often has a greater affect on others than they do on it; and Marx also uses "cause" and especially "determine" to register this asymmetry. Thus, in the interaction between production, distribution, exchange, and consumption—particularly though not exclusively in capitalism—production is held to be more determining (Marx, 1904, 274ff.). A good deal of Marx's research is devoted to locating and mapping whatever exercises a greater or special impact on other parts of the capitalist system, but, whether made explicit or not, this always takes place on a backdrop of reciprocal effect. (Another complementary sense of "cause" and "determine" will be presented later.)

Returning to the process of abstraction, it is the philosophy of internal relations that gives Marx both license and opportunity to abstract as freely as he does, to decide how far into its internal relations any particular will extend. Making him aware of the need to abstract—since boundaries are never given and when established never absolute—it also allows and even encourages re-abstraction, makes a variety of abstractions possible, and helps to develop his mental skills and flexibility in making abstractions. If "a relation," as Marx maintains, "can obtain a particular embodiment and become individualized only by means of abstraction," then learning how to abstract is the first step in learning how to think (Marx, 1973, 142).

Operating with a philosophy of external relations doesn't absolve others from the need to abstract. The units in and with which one thinks are still abstractions and products of the process of abstraction as it occurs during socialization and, particularly, in the acquisition of language. Only, in this case, one takes boundaries as given in the nature of reality as such, as if they have the same ontological stature as the qualities perceived. The role played by the process of abstraction is neither known nor appreciated. Consequently, there is no awareness that one can—and often should—re-abstract, and the ability and flexibility for doing so is never acquired. Whatever re-abstraction goes on, of necessity, as part of learning new languages or new schools of thought, or as a result of important new experiences, takes place in the dark, usually unconsciously, certainly unsystematically, and with little understanding of either assumptions or implications. Marx, on the other hand, is fully aware that he abstracts and of its assumptions and implications both for his own thinking and that of others—hence the frequent equation of ideology in those he criticizes with their inadequate abstractions.

In order to forestall possible misunderstandings it may be useful to assert that the philosophy of internal relations is not an attempt to reify "what lies between." It is simply that the particular ways

in which things cohere become essential attributes of what they are. The philosophy of internal relations also does not mean—as some of its critics have charged—that investigating any problem can go on forever (to say that boundaries are artificial is not to deny them an existence, and, practically speaking, it is simply not necessary to understand everything in order to understand anything); or that the boundaries which are established are arbitrary (what actually influences the character of Marx's or anyone else's abstractions is another question); or that we cannot mark or work with some of the important objective distinctions found in reality (on the contrary, such distinctions are a major influence on the abstractions we do make); or, finally, that the vocabulary associated with the philosophy of internal relations—particularly "totality," "relation," and "identity"—cannot also be used in subsidiary senses to refer to the world that comes into being after the process of abstraction has done its work.

In the philosophy of internal relations, "totality" is a logical construct that refers to the way the whole is present through internal relations in each of its parts. Totality, in this sense, is always there, and adjectives like "more" and "less" don't apply. But Marx's work also contains constructed or emergent totalities, which are of a historical nature, and great care must be taken not to confuse the two. In the latter case, a totality, or whole, or system is built up gradually as its elements emerge, cohere, and develop over time. "The circumstances under which a relation occurs for the first time," Marx says, "by no means shows us that relation either in its purity or in its totality" (Marx, 1971, 205). Here, too, unlike logical totalities, some systems can be said to be more or less complete than others, or than itself at an earlier stage. There is nothing in the philosophy of internal relations that interferes with the recognition of such totalities. All that is required is that at every stage in its emergence each part be viewable as a relational microcosm of the whole, including its real history and potential for future development.

The advantages of using any relational part as a starting point for reconstructing the interconnections of the whole, of treating it as a logical totality, will increase, of course, as its social role grows and its ties with other parts become more complex, as it becomes in other words more of an emergent totality. One would not expect the commodity, for example, to serve as a particularly useful starting place from which to reconstruct slave society or feudalism, where it exists but only on the fringes (to the extent that there is some wage-labor and/or some trade between different communities), but it offers an ideal starting place from which to reconstruct the capitalist system in which it plays a central role (Marx, 1971, 102-3).

A somewhat similar problem exists with the concept of "relation." Perhaps no word appears more frequently in Marx's writings than "*Verhältnis*" ("relation"). The crucial role played by "*Verhältnis*" in Marx's thinking is somewhat lost to non-German-language readers of his works as a result of translations that often substitute "condition", "system", and "structure" for "relation". "*Verhältnis*" is usually used by Marx in the sense given to it by the philosophy of internal relations, where parts such as capital, labor, etc., are said to be Relations containing within themselves the very interactions to which they belong. But Marx also uses "*Verhältnis*" as a synonym of "*Beziehung*" ("connection"), as a way of referring to ties between parts that are momentarily viewed as separate. Taken in this sense, two parts can be more or less closely related, have different relations at different times, and have their relations distorted or even broken. These are, of course, all important distinctions, and it should be obvious that none of them are foreign to Marx's writings. Yet, if the parts are themselves Relations, in the sense of internal relations, possessing the same logical character no matter what changes they undergo, it would seem that such distinctions could not be made. And, indeed, this belief lays behind a lot of the criticism directed at the philosophy of internal relations.

The two different senses of "relation" found in Marx's writings, however, simply reflect two different orders of relation in his understanding. The first comes out of his philosophy of internal relations and applies to how he views anything. The second is of a practical, empirical sort, and applies to what is actually found between two or more elements (each also Relations in the first sense) that are presently viewed as separate. How Marx separates out parts that are conceived of as

logically internal to one another is, of course, the work of the process of abstraction. Once abstracted, all manner of relations between these parts can be noted and are in fact noted whenever relevant. Refusing to take the boundaries that organize our world as given and natural, the philosophy of internal relations admits a practice of abstraction that allows for an even greater variety of second-order relations than exists on the common sense view.

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1. Possible exceptions to this relative neglect of abstraction in discussions of Marx's method include E. V. Ilyenkov (1982), where the emphasis is on the relation of abstract to concrete in Capital; Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1978), which shows how commodity exchange produces certain ideological abstractions; Derek Sayers (1987), which stresses the role of the process of abstraction in producing ideology; Leszek Nowak (1980), which presents a neo-Weberian reconstruction of some aspects of this process; Roy Bhaskar (1993), which treats most of what occurs in abstraction under conceptualization; and Paul Sweezy (1956) (still the best short introduction to our subject), which stresses the role of abstraction in isolating the essentials of any problem. Insightful, though limited, treatments of abstraction can also be found in articles by Andrew Sayers (1981), John Allen (1983), and Jan Horvath and Kenneth Gibson (1984). An early philosophical account of abstraction, which Marx himself had a chance to read and admire, is found in the work of Joseph Dietzgen (1928). Dietzgen's contribution to our subject is described briefly in chapter 3 above.
  2. The school of Critical Realism, associated with the work of Roy Bhaskar, made just the opposite assumption, particularly in its earliest publications. See, for example, Bhaskar's *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975). In recent works, such as *Dialectic: the Pulse of Freedom* (1993), Bhaskar has given the process of abstraction a much higher profile in his system. For my critical appreciation of this particular version of dialectical thinking, see chapter 10 of this volume.
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Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method  
Chapter 5

Putting Dialectics to Work: The Process of Abstraction in Marx's Method

[Parts I-IV](#) | [Part V](#) | [Part VI](#) | [Part VII-VIII](#)

## VI

### Level of Generality

The second main aspect of Marx's process of abstraction, or mode in which it occurs, is the abstraction of level of generality. In his unfinished Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy*, Marx's only systematic attempt to present his method, great care is taken to distinguish "production" from "production in general" (Marx, 1904, 268-74). The former takes place in a particular society, capitalism, and includes as part of what it is all the relations of this society that enable it to appear and function as it does. "Production in general," on the other hand, refers to whatever it is that work in all societies have in common—chiefly the purposive activity of human beings in transforming nature to satisfy human needs—leaving out everything that distinguishes different social forms of production from one another.

Marx makes a further distinction within capitalist production between "production as a whole," what applies to all kinds of production within capitalism, and "production as a specific branch of industry," or what applies only to production in that industry (Marx, 1904, 270). It is clear that more

than a change in extension is involved in making these distinctions, especially the first one. The relations of productive activity with those who engage in it as well as with its product are *internal* relations in both cases, but production in capitalism is united with the distinctive capitalist forms of producers and their products, while production in general is united with them in forms that share its own quality as a lowest common denominator.

The abstraction Marx makes in moving from capitalist production to production in general then is not one of extension but one of level of generality. It is a move from a more specific understanding of production that brings into focus the whole network of equally specific qualities in which it functions (and with it the period of capitalism in which all this takes place) to a more general understanding of production that brings into focus the equally general state of those conditions in which it occurs (along with the whole of human history as the period in which these qualities are found).

Something very similar is involved in the distinction Marx makes between "production as a whole" and "production in a particular branch of industry," though the movement here is away from what is more general in the direction of what is more specific. How a particular branch of industry—car manufacturing, for example—appears and functions involves a set of conditions that fall substantially short of applying to the entire capitalist epoch. What appears superficially like a whole-part distinction is—like the earlier distinction between "capitalist production" and "production in general"—one of levels of generality. Both capitalist production (or production as a whole) and production in a particular industry are internally related to the rest of society, but each brings into focus a different period of history, the capitalist epoch in one case and what might be called "modern capitalism," or that period in which this branch of production has functioned in just this way, in the other.

In this Introduction, Marx comes out in favor of concentrating on production in its current historical forms, that is, on capitalist and modern capitalist production, and criticizes the political economists for contenting themselves with production in general when trying to analyze what is happening here and now. Then, falling for the all too common error of mistaking what is more general for what is more profound, the political economists treat the generalizations they have derived from examining different social formations as the most important truths about each particular society in turn, and even as the cause of phenomena that are peculiar to each one. In this way, for example, the general truth that production in any society makes use of material nature, the most general form of property, is offered as an explanation and even a justification for how wealth gets distributed in capitalist society, where people who own property claim a right to part of what gets produced with its help (Marx, 1904, 271-72).

While Marx's discussion of the political economists in this Introduction oscillates between modern capitalism, capitalism as such, and the human condition, much of what he says elsewhere shows that he can operate on still other levels of generality, and therefore that a more complex breakdown of what are in fact degrees of generality is required. Before offering such a breakdown, I want to make it clear that the boundary lines that follow are all suggested by Marx's own practice in abstracting, a practice that is largely determined by his aim of capturing the double movement of the capitalist mode of production. In other words, there is nothing absolute about the particular divisions I have settled on. Other maps of levels of generality could be drawn, and for other kinds of problems they could be very useful.

Keeping this in mind, there are seven major levels of generality into which Marx subdivides the world, seven plains of comprehension on which he places all the problems he investigates, seven different foci for organizing everything that is. Starting from the most specific, there is the level made up of whatever is unique about a person and situation. It's all that makes Joe Smith different from everyone else, and so too all his activities and products. It's what gets summed up in a proper name and an actual address. With this level—let's call it level one—the here and now, or however long what is unique lasts, is brought into focus.

Level two distinguishes what is general to people, their activities, and products because they exist and function within modern capitalism, understood as the last twenty to fifty years. Here, the unique qualities that justify using proper names, such as Joe Smith, are abstracted out of focus (we no longer see them), and abstracted into focus are the qualities that make us speak of an individual as an engineer or in terms of some other occupation that has emerged in modern capitalism. Bringing these slightly more general qualities into sight, we also end up considering more people—everyone to whom such qualities apply—and a longer period, the entire time during which these qualities have existed. We also bring into focus a larger area, usually one or a few countries, with whatever else has occurred there that has affected or been affected by the qualities in question during this period. Marx's abstraction of a "particular branch of production" belongs to this level.

Capitalism as such constitutes level three. Here, everything that is peculiar to people, their activity, and products due to their appearance and functioning in capitalist society is brought into focus. We encountered this level earlier in our discussion of "production as a whole." The qualities that Joe Smith possesses that mark him as Joe Smith (level one) and as an engineer (level two) are equally irrelevant. Front and center now are all that makes him a typical worker in capitalism, including his relations to his boss, product, etc. His productive activity is reduced to the denominator indicated by calling it "wage-labor," and his product to the denominator indicated by calling it "commodity" and "value." Just as level two widens the area and lengthens the time span brought into focus as compared to level one, so too level three widens the focus so that it now includes everyone who partakes of capitalist relations anywhere that these relations obtain, and the entire 400 or so years of the capitalist era.

After capitalism, still moving from the specific to the general, there is the level of class society, level four. This is the period of human history during which societies have been divided up into classes based on the division of labor. Brought into focus are the qualities people, their activities, and products have in common across the five to ten thousand years of class history, or whatever capitalism, feudalism, and slavery share as versions of class society, and wherever these qualities have existed. Next—level five—is human society. It brings into focus—as we saw in the case of the political economists above—qualities people, their activities, and products have in common as part of the human condition. Here, one is considering all human beings and the entire history of the species.

To make this scheme complete, two more levels will be added, but they are not nearly as important as the first five in Marx's writings. Level six is the level of generality of the animal world, for just as we possess qualities that set us apart as human beings (level five), we have qualities (including various life functions, instincts, and energies) that are shared with other animals. Finally, there is level seven, the most general level of all, which brings into focus our qualities as a material part of nature, including weight, extension, movement, etc.

In acquiring an extension, all Marx's units of thought acquire in the same act of abstraction a level of generality. Thus, all the Relations that are constituted as such by Marx's abstractions of extension, including the various classifications and movements they make possible, are located on one or another of these levels of generality. And though each of these levels brings into focus a different time period, they are not to be thought of as "slices of time," since the whole of history is implicated in each level, including the most specific. Rather, they are ways of organizing time, placing the period relevant to the qualities brought into focus in the front and treating everything that comes before as what led up to it, as origins.

It is important, too, to underline that all the human and other qualities discussed above are present simultaneously and are equally real, but that they can only be perceived and therefore studied when the level of generality on which they fall has been brought into focus. This is similar to what occurs in the natural sciences, where phenomena are abstracted on the basis of their biological or chemical or atomic properties. All such properties exist together, but one cannot see or study them at the same time. The significance of this observation is evident when we consider that all the problems

from which we suffer and everything that goes into solving them or keeping them from being solved is made up of qualities that can only be brought into focus on one or another of these different levels of generality. Unfolding as they do over time, these qualities can also be viewed as movements and pressures of one sort or another—whether organized into tendencies, metamorphoses, contradictions, etc.—that taken together pretty well determine our existence. Consequently, it is essential, in order to understand any particular problem, to abstract a level of generality that brings the characteristics chiefly responsible for this problem into focus. We have already seen Marx declare that because the classical political economists abstract production at the level of generality of the human condition (level five) they cannot grasp the character of distribution in capitalist society (level three).

A similar situation exists today with the study of power in political science. The dynamics of any power relationship lies in the historically specific conditions in which the people involved live and work. To abstract the bare relation of power from these conditions in order to arrive at conclusions about "power in general" (level five), as many political scientists and an increasing number of social movement theorists have done, ensures that every particular exercise of power will be out of focus and its distinctive features undervalued and/or misunderstood.

Given Marx's special interest in uncovering the double movement of the capitalist mode of production, most of what he writes on man and society falls on level three. Abstractions such as "capital," "value," "commodity," "labor," and "working class," whatever their extensions, bring out the qualities that these people, activities, and products possess as part of capitalism. Pre- and post-capitalist developments come into the analysis done on this level as the origins and likely futures of these capitalist qualities. What Marx refers to in his *Grundrisse* as "pre-capitalist economic formations" (the apt title of an English translation of some historical material taken from this longer work) are just that (Marx, 1973, 471-513). The social formations that preceded capitalism are mainly viewed and studied here as early moments of capitalism abstracted as a process, as its origins extending back before enough of its distinctive structures had emerged to justify the use of the label "capitalism."

Marx also abstracts his subject matter on levels two (modern capitalism) and four (class society), though this is much less frequent. Where Marx operates on the level of generality of class society, capitalism, feudalism, and slave society are examined with a view to what they have in common. Studies in feudalism on this level of generality emphasize the division of labor and the struggle between the classes that it gives rise to, as compared to the breakdown of the conditions underlying feudal production that gets most of the attention when examining feudalism as part of the origins of capitalism, that is on level three (Marx, 1958, Part VIII).

An example of Marx operating on level two, modern capitalism, can be found in his discussion of economic crisis. After examining the various ways that the capitalist system, given what it is and how it works, could break down, that is after analyzing it on the level of capitalism as such (level three), he then shows how these possibilities got actualized in the immediate past, in what was for him modern or developed capitalism (Marx, 1968, 492-535). To explain why the last few crises occurred in just the ways they did, he has to bring into focus the qualities that apply to this particular time period and these particular places, that is recent economic, social, and political history in specific countries. This is also an example of how Marx's analysis can play off two or more different levels of generalization, treating what he finds on the more specific level as the actualization of one among several possibilities present on the more general level(s).

It is instructive to compare Marx's studies of man and society conducted on levels two, three, and four (chiefly three, capitalism) with studies in the social sciences and also with common sense thinking about these subjects, which typically operate on levels one (the unique) and five (the human condition). Where Marx usually abstracts human beings, for example, as classes (as a class on level four, as one of the main classes that emerge from capitalist relations of production—workers, capitalists, and sometimes landowners—on level three, and as one of the many classes and

fragments of classes that exist in a particular country in the most recent period on level two), most non-Marxists abstract people as unique individuals, where everyone has a proper name (level one), or as a member of the human species (level five). In proceeding in their thinking directly from level one to level five, they may never even perceive, and hence have no difficulty in denying, the very existence of classes.

But the question is not which of these different abstractions is true. They all are in so far as people possess qualities that fall on each of these levels of generality. The relevant question is: which is the appropriate abstraction for dealing with a particular set of problems? For example, if social and economic inequality, exploitation, unemployment, social alienation, and imperialist wars are due in large part to conditions associated with capitalist society, then they can only be understood and dealt with through the use of abstractions that bring out their capitalist qualities. And that involves, among other things, abstracting people as capitalists and workers. Not to do so, to insist on sticking to levels one and five, leaves one blaming particular individuals (a bad boss, an evil president) or human nature as such for these problems.

To complete the picture, it must be admitted that Marx occasionally abstracts phenomena, including people, on levels one and five. There are discussions of specific individuals, such as Napoleon III and Palmerston, where he focuses on the qualities that make these people different, and some attention is given, especially in his earliest writings, to qualities that all human beings have in common, to human nature in general. But not only are such digressions an exception, more important for our purposes is that Marx seldom allows the qualities that come from these two levels to enter into his explanation of social phenomena. Thus, when G. D. H. Cole faults Marx for making classes more real than individuals, or Carol Gould says individuals enjoy an ontological priority in Marxism, or, conversely, Althusser denies the individual any theoretical space in Marxism whatsoever, they are all misconstruing the nature of a system that has places—levels of generality—for individuals, classes, and the human species (Cole, 1966, 11; Gould, 1980, 33; Althusser, 1966, 225-58). The very idea of attributing an ontological priority to either individuals, class, or the species assumes an absolute separation between them that is belied by Marx's conception of man as a Relation with qualities that fall on different levels of generality. None of these ways of thinking about human beings is more real or more fundamental than the others. If, despite this, class remains Marx's preferred abstraction for treating human beings, it is only because of its necessary ties to the kind, range, and above all levels of generality of the phenomena he seeks to explain.

It is not only the abstractions in which we think about people but also how we organize our thinking within each of these abstractions that can be set apart on the basis of levels of generality. Beliefs, attitudes, and intentions, for example, are properties of the unique individuals who inhabit level one. Social relations and interests are the main qualities of the classes and fragments of classes who occupy levels two, three, and four. Powers, needs, and behavior belong to human nature as such, while instincts apply to people as part of human nature but also in their identity as animals. Though there is some movement across level boundaries in the use of these concepts—and some concepts, such as "consciousness," that apply in a somewhat different sense on several levels—their use is usually a good indication of the level of generality on which a particular study falls, and hence, too, of the kind of problems that can be addressed. An integrated conception of human nature that makes full use of all these concepts, which is to say that organically connects up the study of people coming from each of these levels of generality, remains to be done.

By focusing on different qualities of people, each level of generality also contains distinctive ways of dividing up humanity, and with that its own kinds of oppression based on these divisions. Exploitation, for example, refers to the extraction of surplus-value from workers by capitalists that is based on a level three division of society into workers and capitalists. Therefore, as a form of oppression, it is specific to capitalism. The human condition, level five, brings out what all people share as members of our species. The only kind of oppression that can exist here comes from outside the species and is directed against everyone. The destruction of the ecological conditions

necessary for human life is an example of an oppression against people that falls on this level of generality. Where certain classes—such as the capitalists through their single-minded pursuit of profit—contribute to this destruction, this only signals that this particular oppression must be studied and fought on two or more levels.

Level four, which is marked by a whole series of distinctions between people that are rooted in the division between mental and manual work, enables us to see the beginning of oppressions based on class, nation, race, religion, and gender. Though racial and gender differences obviously existed before the onset of class society, it is only with the division between those who produce wealth and those who direct its production that these differences become the basis for the distinctive forms of oppression associated with racism and patriarchy. With the appearance of different relationships to the prevailing mode of production and the contradictory interests they generate, with mutual indifference replacing the mutual concern that was characteristic of an earlier time when everything was owned in common, and with the creation of a growing surplus that everyone wishes to possess (because no one has enough), all manner of oppressions based on both the existing and new divisions of society become possible and for the ruling economic class extremely useful. Racism, patriarchy, religion, nationalism, etc. become the most effective ways of rationalizing these oppressive economic practices, whose underlying conditions they help over time to reproduce. Upon frequent repetition, they also sink deep roots into people's minds and emotions and acquire a relative autonomy from the situation in which they originated, which makes it increasingly difficult for those affected to recognize the crucial economic role that these different oppressions continue to play.

To be sure, all the oppressions associated with class society also have their capitalist specific forms and intensities having to do with their place and function in capitalism as a particular form of class society, but the main relations that underlie and give force to these oppressions come from class society as such. Consequently, the abolition of capitalism will not do away with any of these oppressions, only with their capitalist forms. Ending racism, patriarchy, nationalism, etc., in all their forms and completely can only occur when class society itself is abolished, and in particular with the end of the division between mental and manual labor, a world historical change that could only occur, Marx believes, with the arrival of full communism.

If all of Marx's abstractions involve—as I have argued—a level of generality as well as an extension, if each level of generality organizes and even prescribes to some degree the analyses made with its help, that is in its terms, if Marx abstracts this many levels of generality in order to get at different, though related problems (even though his abstraction of capitalism as such, level three, is the decisive one)—*then* the conclusions of his studies, the theories of Marxism, are all located on one or another of these levels and must be viewed accordingly if they are to be correctly understood, evaluated, and, where necessary, revised.

Marx's labor theory of value, for example, is chiefly an attempt to explain why all the products of human productive activity in capitalist society have a price, not why a particular product costs such and such, but why it costs anything at all. That everything humans produce has a price is an extraordinary phenomenon peculiar to the capitalist era, whose social implications are even more profound because most people view it ahistorically, simply taking it for granted. Marx's entire account of this phenomenon, which includes the history of how a society in which all products have a price has evolved, takes place on the level of generality of capitalism as such, which means that he only deals with the qualities of people, their activities, and products in the forms they assume in capitalism overall. The frequent criticism one hears of this theory that it doesn't take account of competition in real marketplaces and, therefore, cannot explain actual prices is simply off the point, that is the more general point that Marx is trying to make.

To account for the fact that a given pair of shoes costs exactly fifty dollars, for example, one has to abstract in qualities of both modern capitalism (level two) and the here and now (level one) in a way that takes us well beyond Marx's initial project. In *Capital*, volume III, Marx makes some effort to

re-abstract the phenomena that enter into his labor theory of value on the level of modern capitalism, and here he does discuss the role of competition among both buyers and sellers in affecting actual prices. Still, the confusion from which innumerable economists have suffered over what has been labeled the "transformation problem" (the transformation of values into prices) disappears once we recognize that it is a matter of relating analyses from two different levels of generality and that Marx gives overriding attention to the first, capitalism, and relatively little attention to the second, which unfortunately is the only level that interests most non-Marxist economists.

The theory of alienation offers another striking example of the need to locate Marx's theories on particular levels of generality if they are not to be distorted. Marx's description of the severed connections between man and his productive activity, products, other people, and the species that lies at the core of this theory falls on two different levels of generality: capitalism (level three) and class society (level four). In his earliest writings, this drama of separation is generally played out in terms of "division of labor" and "private property" (level four). It is clear even from this more general account that alienation reaches its zenith in capitalist society, but the focus is on the class context to which capitalism belongs and not on capitalism as such. Here, capitalism is not so much "it" as the outstanding example of "it." (Incidentally, this conclusion calls for a modification in the subtitle of my earlier work *Alienation*, which has as its subtitle *Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*.)

In later writings, as Marx's concern shifts increasingly to uncovering the double motion of the capitalist mode of production, the theory of alienation gets raised to the level of generality of capitalism (level three). The focus now is on productive activity and its products in their capitalist specific forms, i.e., on labor, commodity, and value; and the mystification that has accompanied private property throughout class history gets upgraded to the fetishism of commodities (and values). The broader theory of alienation remains in force. The context of class society in which capitalism is situated has not changed its spots, but now Marx has developed a version of the theory that can be better integrated into his analysis of capitalist dynamics. With the introduction of this notion of levels of generality, some of the major disputes regarding Marx's theory of alienation—whether it is mainly concerned with class history or with capitalism, and how and to what degree Marx used this theory in his later writings—are easily resolved.

But it is not just Marx's theories that must be placed on particular levels of generality to be correctly understood. The same applies to virtually all of his statements. For example, what is the relation between the claim we have already met in another context that "All history [later qualified to class history] is the history of class struggle" and the claim that "class is the product of the bourgeoisie" (Marx and Engels, 1945, 12; Marx and Engels, 1964, 77)? If "class" in both instances refers to qualities on the same level of generality, then only one of these claims can be true, that is, either class has existed over the past five to ten thousand years of human history or it only came into existence with capitalism, four to five hundred years ago. However, if we understand Marx as focusing on the qualities common to all classes in the last five to ten thousand years (on level four) in the first claim, and on the distinctive qualities classes have acquired in the capitalist epoch (on level three) in the second (that which makes them more fully classes, involving mainly development in organization, communication, alienation and consciousness), then the two claims are compatible. Because so many of Marx's concepts—"class" and "production" being perhaps the outstanding examples—are used to convey abstractions on more than one level of generality, the kind of confusion generated by such apparent contradictions is all too common.

Marx's remarks on history are especially vulnerable to being misunderstood unless they are placed on one or another of these levels of generality. The role Marx attributes to production and economics generally, for example, differs somewhat, depending on whether the focus is on capitalism (including its distinctive origins), modern capitalism (the same), class societies (the same), or human societies (the same). Starting with human societies, the special importance Marx accords to production is based on the fact that one has to do what is necessary in order to survive

before attempting anything else, that production limits the range of material choices available just as, over time, it helps to transform them, and that production is the major activity which gives expression to and helps to develop our peculiarly human powers and needs (Marx, 1958, 183-84; Marx and Engels, 1964, 117; Ollman, 1976, 98-101). In class society, production plays its decisive role primarily through "the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct division of labor that comes into being in this period and producers" (Marx, 1959b, 772). It is also on this level that the interaction between the forces and class based relations of production come into focus. In capitalism, the special role of production is shared by everything that goes into the process of capital accumulation (Marx, 1958, Part VIII). In modern capitalism, it is usually what has happened recently in a particular sector of capitalist production in a given country (like the development of railroads in India during Marx's time) that is treated as decisive (Marx and Engels, n.d., 79).

Each of these interpretations of the predominant role of production applies only to the level of generality that it brings into focus. No single interpretation comes close to accounting for all that Marx believes needs to be explained, which is probably why, on one occasion, Marx denies that he has any theory of history whatsoever (Marx and Engels, 1952, 278). It might be more accurate, however, to say that he has four complementary theories of history, one for history as abstracted on each of these four levels of generality. The effort by most of Marx's followers and virtually all of his critics to encapsulate the materialist conception of history into a single generalization regarding the role of production (or economics) has never succeeded, therefore, because it could not succeed.

Finally, the various movements Marx investigates, some of which were discussed under abstraction of extension, are also located on particular levels of generality. That is, like everything else, these movements are composed of qualities that are unique, or special to modern capitalism, or to capitalism, etc., so that they only take shape as movements when the relevant level of generality is brought into focus. Until then, whatever force they exercise must remain mysterious, and our ability to use or affect them virtually nil. The movement of the metamorphosis of value, for example, dependent as it is on the workings of the capitalist marketplace, operates chiefly on the levels of generality of capitalism (level three) and modern capitalism (level two). Viewing the products of work on the levels of generality of class society (level four) or the human condition (level five), or concentrating on its unique qualities (level one)—the range of most non-Marxist thinking on this subject—does not keep the metamorphosis of value from taking place, just us from perceiving it. Likewise, if, "in capitalism," as Marx says, "everything seems and in fact is contradictory", it is only by abstracting the levels of generality of capitalism and modern capitalism (granted appropriate abstractions of extension) that we can perceive them (Marx, 1963, 218).

What are called the "laws of the dialectic" are those movements that can be found in one or another recognizable form on every level of generality, that is, in the relations between the qualities that fall on each of these levels, including that of inanimate nature. The transformation of quantity to quality and development through contradiction, which were discussed above, are such dialectical laws. Two other dialectical laws that play important roles in Marx's work are the interpenetration of polar opposites (the process by which a radical change in the conditions surrounding two or more elements or in the conditions of the person viewing them produces a striking alteration, even a complete turn about, in their relations), and the negation of the negation (the process by which the most recent phase in a development that has gone through at least three phases will display important similarities with what existed in the phase before last).

Naturally, the particular form taken by a dialectical law will vary somewhat, depending on its subject and on the level of generality on which this subject falls. The mutually supporting and undermining movements that lie at the core of contradiction, for example, appear very different when applied to the forces of inanimate nature than they do when applied to specifically capitalist phenomena. Striking differences such as these have led a growing band of critics and some followers of Marx to restrict the laws of dialectic to social phenomena and to reject as "un-Marxist" what they label "Engels' dialectics of nature." Their error, however, is to confuse a particular

statement of these laws, usually one appropriate to levels of generality where human consciousness is present, for all possible statements. This error is abetted by the widespread practice—one I also have adopted for purposes of simplification and brevity—of allowing the most general statement of these laws to stand in for the others. Quantity/ quality changes, contradictions, etc., that occur among the unique qualities of our existence (level one), or in the qualities we possess as workers and capitalists (levels two and three), or in those we possess as members of a class and human beings (levels four and five), however, are not simply illustrations for and the working out of still more general dialectical laws. To be adequately apprehended, the movements of quantity/quality change, contradiction, etc., on each level of generality must be seen as expressions of laws that are specific to that level as well versions as of more general laws. Most of the work of drafting such multi-level statements of the laws of the dialectic remains to be done.

The importance of the laws of the dialectic for grasping the pressures at work on different levels of generality will also vary. We have just seen Marx claim that capitalism in particular is full of contradictions. Thus, viewing conditions and events in terms of contradictions is far more important for understanding their capitalist character than it is for understanding their qualities as human, or natural, or unique conditions and events. Given Marx's goal to explain the double movement of the capitalist mode of production, no other dialectical law receives the attention given to the law of development through contradiction. Together with the relatively minor role contradiction plays in the changes that occur in nature (level seven), this may also help account for the mistaken belief that dialectical laws are found only in society.

What stands out from the above is that the laws of the dialectic do not in themselves explain, or prove, or predict anything, or cause anything to happen. Rather, they are ways of organizing the most common forms of change and interaction that exist on any level of generality both for purposes of study and intervention into the world of which they are part. With their help, Marx was able to uncover many other tendencies and patterns, also often referred to as laws, that are peculiar to the levels of generality with which he was concerned. Such laws have no more force than what comes out of the processes from which they are derived, balanced by whatever counter-tendencies there are within the system. And like all the other movements Marx investigates, the laws of the dialectic and the level specific laws they help him uncover are provided with extensions that are large enough to encompass the relevant interactions during the entire period of their unfolding.

Two major questions relating to this mode of abstraction remain. One is—how do the qualities located on each level of generality affect those on the others? And second—what is the influence of the decision made regarding abstraction of extension on the level of generality that is abstracted, and vice versa? The affect of qualities from each level on those from others, moving from the most general (level seven) to the most specific (level one), is that of a context on what it contains. That is, each level, beginning with seven, establishes a range of possibilities for what can occur on the more specific levels that follow. The actualization of some of these possibilities on each level limits in turn what can come about on the levels next in line, all the way up to level one, that of the unique.

Each more general level, in virtue of what it is and contains, also makes one or a few of the many (though not infinite) alternative developments that it makes possible on less general levels more likely of actualization. Capitalism, in other words, was not only a possible development out of class society, but made likely by the character of the latter, by the very dynamics inherent in the division of labor once it got under way. The same might be said of the relation between capitalism as such and the "modern" English capitalism in which Marx lived, and the relation between the latter and the unique character of the events Marx experienced.

It is within this framework, too, that the relation Marx sees between freedom and determinism can best be understood. Whatever the level of abstraction—whether we are talking about what is unique to any individual, a group in modern capitalism, workers throughout the capitalist era, any class, or human beings as such—there is always a choice to be made and some ability to make it. Hence,

there is always some kind and some degree of freedom. On each level of generality, however, the alternatives between which people must choose are severely limited by the nature of their overlapping contexts, which also make one or one set of alternatives more feasible and/or attractive, just as these contexts condition the very personal, class, and human qualities brought into play in making any choice. Hence, there is also a considerable degree of determinism. It is this relationship between freedom and determinism that Marx wishes to bring out when he says that it is people who make history but not in conditions of their own choosing (Marx and Engels, 1951a, 225). What seems like a relatively straightforward claim is complicated by the fact that both the people and the conditions referred to exist on various levels of generality, and depending on the level that is brought into focus, the sense of this claim—though true in each instance—will vary.

The view of determinism offered here is different from, but not in contradiction with, the view presented in our discussion of the philosophy of internal relations, where determinism was equated first with the reciprocal effect found in any organic system and then with the greater or special influence of any one process on the others. To this we can now add a third, complementary sense of determinism that comes from the limiting and prescribing affects of overlapping contexts on all the phenomena that fall within them. Marx's success in displaying how the latter two kinds of determinism operate in the capitalist mode of production accounts for most of the explanatory power that one finds (and feels) in his writings.

Affects of events on their larger contexts, that is, of qualities found on more specific levels on those that fall on more general ones, can also be discerned. Whenever Marx speaks of people reproducing the conditions of their existence, the reference is to how activities whose main qualities fall on one level of generality help to construct the various contexts, including those on other levels of generality, that make the continuation of these same activities both possible and highly likely. Such effects, however, can also be detrimental. In our time, for example, the unregulated growth of harmful features associated with modern capitalist production (level two) have begun to threaten the ecological balance necessary not only for the continuation of capitalism (level three) but for the life of our species (level five).

As for the relation between the choice of extension and that of level of generality, there would seem to be a rough correspondence between narrow abstractions of extension and abstracting very low and very high levels of generality. Once the complex social relations in which a particular phenomenon is situated are put aside through a narrow abstraction of extension, there is little reason to bring these relations into better focus by abstracting the level of generality on which they fall. Thus, abstracting an extension that sets individuals apart from their social conditions is usually accompanied by an abstraction of level of generality that focuses on what is unique about each (level one). With the social qualities that were abstracted from individuals in extension now attached to the groups to which they belong (viewed as externally related to their members), efforts at generalizing tend to bypass the levels on which these social qualities would be brought into focus (modern capitalism, capitalism, and class society) and move directly to the level of the human condition (level five). So it is that for bourgeois ideology people are either all different (level one) or all the same (level five). While for Marx, whose abstractions of extension usually include a significant number of social relations, choosing the levels of generality of capitalism, modern capitalism, and class society was both easy and obvious; just as privileging these levels led to abstractions of extension that enabled him to take in at one sweep most of the connections that attention to these attention to levels bring into focus.

ance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method  
Chapter 5

Putting Dialectics to Work: The Process of Abstraction in Marx's Method

[Parts I-IV](#) | [Part V](#) | [Part VI](#) | [Part VII-VIII](#)

## VII

### And Vantage Point

The third mode in which Marx's abstractions occur is that of vantage point. Capitalists, as we saw, are referred to as "embodiments of capital"; but capital is also said to function as it does because it is in the hands of people who use it to make profit (Marx, 1959b, 794, 857-58; Marx, 1959a, 79). The state is said to be an instrument of the ruling economic class; but Marx also treats it as a set of objective structures that respond to the requirements of the economy, as an aspect of the mode of production itself (Marx and Engels, 1945, 15; Marx, 1959a, 103). There are many similar, apparently contradictory positions taken in Marx's writings. They are the result of different abstractions, but not of extension or level of generality. They are due to different abstractions of vantage point. The same relation is being viewed from different sides, or the same process from its different moments.

In the same mental act that Marx's units of thought obtain an extension and a level of generality, they acquire a vantage point or place from which to view the elements of any particular Relation and, given its then extension, from which to reconstruct the larger system to which this Relation belongs. A vantage point sets up a perspective that colors everything which falls into it, establishing order, hierarchy, and priorities, distributing values, meanings, and degrees of relevance, and asserting a distinctive coherence between the parts. Within a given perspective, some processes and connections will appear large, some obvious, some important; others will appear small, insignificant, and irrelevant; and some will even be invisible.

In discussing Marx's conception of Relation, we saw that it was more than a simple connection. It was always a connection contained in its parts *as* seen from one or another side. So capital and labor, for example, were quoted as being "expressions of the same Relation, only seen from the opposite pole" (Marx, 1971, 491). Or again, Marx says, capital has one "organizational differentiation or composition" (that of fixed and circulating capital) from the point of view of circulation, and another (that of constant and variable capital) from the point of view of production (Marx, 1968, 579). Both circulation and production are part of the extended capital Relation. A criticism of the political economists is that they try to understand capital only from the point of view of circulation, but to grasp the nature of wealth in capitalism, Marx believes, the decisive vantage point is that of production (Marx, 1968, 578).

It is clear that the decisions Marx makes regarding extension and levels of generality greatly affect the kind of vantage points he abstracts, and vice versa. The amount of mutual dependence and process that is included in an abstraction of extension largely determines what can be seen and studied from this same abstraction taken as a vantage point. Giving production the extension of reproduction, or capital the extension of capital accumulation, for example, enables Marx to bring into view and organize the system of which they are part in ways that would not be possible with narrower (or shorter) abstractions. Likewise, in abstracting a level of generality, Marx brings into focus an entire range of qualities that can now serve individually or collectively (depending on the abstraction of extension) as vantage points, just as other possible vantage points, organized around qualities from other levels of generality, are excluded. Conversely, any commitment as to a particular vantage point predisposes Marx to abstract the extension and level of generality that correspond to it and enables him to make the most of it as a vantage point. In practice, these three decisions (really, three aspects of the same decision) as to extension, level of generality, and vantage point are usually made together and their effects are immediate, though on any given occasion one or another of them may appear to dominate.

In the social sciences, the notion of vantage point is most closely associated with the work of Karl Mannheim (Mannheim, 1936, Part V). But for Mannheim, a point of view is something that belongs to people, particularly as organized into classes. The conditions in which each class lives and works provides its members with a distinctive range of experiences and a distinctive point of view.

Because of their separate points of view, even the few experiences that are shared by people of opposing classes are not only understood but actually perceived in quite different ways. As far as it goes, this view—which Mannheim takes over from Marx—is correct. Marx's conception of point of view goes further, however, by grounding each class' perceptions in the nature of its habitual abstractions, in order to show how starting out to make sense of society from just these mental units, within the perspectives that they establish, leads to different perceptual outcomes. In uncovering the cognitive link between class conditions and class perceptions, Marx helps us understand not only *why* Mannheim is right but *how* what he describes actually works. As part of this, point of view becomes an attribute of the abstraction as such (Marx speaks of the point of view or vantage point of accumulation, relations of production, money, etc.), and only secondarily of the person or class that adopts it (Marx, 1963, 303; Marx, 1971, 156; Marx, 1973, 201).

We can now explain why Marx believes workers have a far better chance to understand the workings of capitalism than do capitalists. Their advantage does not come from the quality of their lives and only in small part from their class interests (since the capitalists have an interest in misleading even themselves about how their system works). More important, given what constitutes the lives of workers, the abstractions with which they start out to make sense of their society are likely to include "labor," "factory," "machine," especially "labor," which puts the activity that is chiefly responsible for social change at the front and center of their thinking. Within the perspective set up by this abstraction, most of what occurs in capitalism gets arranged as part of the necessary conditions and results of this activity. There is no more enlightening vantage point for making sense of what is, both as the outcome of what was and as the origins of what is coming into being. This is not to say, of course, that all workers will make these connections (there are plenty of reasons coming from their alienated lives and from the ideological barrage directed at them that militate against it), but the predisposition to do so rooted in the initial abstraction of vantage point is there.

For capitalists, just the opposite is the case. Their lives and work incline them to start making sense of their situation with the aid of "price," "competition," "profit," and other abstractions drawn from the marketplace. Trying to put together how capitalism functions within perspectives that place labor near the end of the line rather than at the start simply turns capitalist dynamics around. According to Marx, in competition, "everything always appears in inverted form, always standing on its head" (Marx, 1968, 217). What are predominantly the effects of productive activity appear here as its cause. It is demands coming from the market, itself the product of alienated labor, for example, that seem to determine what gets produced, as in the theory of "consumer sovereignty".

As with thinking in terms of processes and relations, common sense is not wholly devoid of perspectival thinking. People occasionally use expressions such as "point of view," "vantage point," and "perspective" to refer to some part of what we have been discussing, but they are generally unaware of how much their points of view affect everything they see and know and of the role played by abstractions in arriving at this result. As with their abstractions of extension and level of generality, most people simply accept as given the abstractions of vantage point that are handed down to them by their culture and particularly by their class. They examine their world again and again from the same one or few angles, while their ability to abstract new vantage points becomes atrophied. The one-sided views that result are treated as not only correct, but as natural, indeed as the only possible view.

Earlier we saw that one major variety of bourgeois ideology arises from using too narrow abstractions of extension (dismissing parts of both processes and relationships that are essential for accurately comprehending even what is included), and that a second comes from abstracting an inappropriate level of generality (inappropriate in that it leaves out of focus the main level(s) on which the qualities we need to understand are located). There is a third major form of bourgeois ideology that is associated with the abstraction of vantage point. Here, ideology results from abstracting a vantage point that either hides or seriously distorts the relations and movements that pertain to the particular problem that concerns us. Not everything we need or want to know emerges with equal clarity, or even emerges at all, from every possible vantage point.

A related form of ideology results from examining a phenomenon from only one side, no matter how crucial, when several are needed—all the while being unaware of the limits on what can be learned from this side alone. This is what Hegel had in mind when he said, to think abstractly (in the ideological sense of the term) is "to cling to one predicate" (Hegel, 1966, 118). Murderers, servants, and soldiers, who serve as Hegel's examples, are all much more than what is conveyed by viewing them from the single vantage point associated with the labels we have given them. Marx is even more explicit when, for example, he berates the economist, Ramsay, for bringing out all the factors but "one-sidedly" and "therefore incorrectly," or equates "wrong" with "one-sided" in a criticism of Ricardo (Marx, 1971, 351; Marx, 1968, 470).

What needs to be stressed is that Marx never criticizes ideology as a simple lie or claims that what it asserts is completely false. Instead, ideology is generally described as overly narrow, partial, out of focus, and/or one-sided, all of which are attributable to faulty or otherwise inappropriate abstractions of extension, level of generality, and vantage point, where neither these abstractions nor their implications are grasped for what they are. While correctly pointing to the material roots of ideology in capitalist conditions and in the conscious manipulations of capitalists, and bringing out how it functions to serve capitalist interests, most discussions of ideology completely ignore the misapplication of the process of abstraction that is responsible for its distinctive forms.

Among the major vantage points associated with bourgeois ideology, where the error is not simply one of restricting analysis to a single perspective but where the one or few that are chosen either hide or distort the essential features of capitalism, are the following: the vantage point of the isolated individual, the subjective side of any situation (what is believed, wanted, intended, etc.), the results of almost any process, anything connected with the market, and all of what falls on level five of generality, particularly human nature.

The isolated individual, man separated from both natural and social conditions, is not only the preferred abstraction of extension in which bourgeois ideology treats human beings; it also serves as its preferred vantage point for studying society. Society becomes what social relations look like when viewed from this angle. When one adds that within each person it is such subjective qualities as beliefs, wants, intentions etc., that are bourgeois ideology's preferred vantage points for viewing the rest of the person, it should be no surprise that the objective features of any situation of which people are a part are so undervalued. In this perspective, an individual is chiefly what he believes himself to be, and society itself what many individuals operating one at a time in the absence of strong social pressures or significant material restraints have made it.

There is also an obvious link between abstracting human beings narrowly in extension, abstracting this extension on levels one and five of generality, and abstracting this extension on these levels of generality as preferred vantage points. By abstracting the isolated individual in extension, one omits the various social and other connections that would incline one to bring levels two, three, and four of generality into focus in order to learn how these connections have acquired the specific characteristics that make them important. And because the contexts associated with modern capitalism, capitalism, and class society are seldom if ever brought into focus, the qualities that fall on these levels can hardly serve as useful vantage points. To the limited extent that anything from these contexts does get examined from the vantage points associated with bourgeois ideology, the result is usually a hodgepodge of mismatched qualities from different levels of generality, with some more and some less in focus, all loosely held together by the language of external relations. Whatever integration is achieved by such studies only succeeds in breaking up and dissembling the organic unity that exists on each of these levels, making a systematic understanding of any kind that much more difficult.

Other than the isolated individual and his subjective qualities, another family of vantage points that is well represented in bourgeois ideology are the results of various social processes, especially those found in the market. Already narrowly abstracted in extension as finished products, the processes by which these results have emerged are no longer visible. Thus, capital is simply the means of

production; a commodity—any good that is bought and sold; profit—something earned by capitalists; and the market itself—an over-the-counter exchange of goods and services that follows its own extra social laws. When used as vantage points for viewing the capitalist system, these dead building blocks can only construct a dead building, an unchanging system whose emergence at a certain point in history is as much a mystery as its eventual demise. The ultimate distortion occurs in what Marx calls the fetishism of commodities (or capital, or value, or money, etc.), when these results take on a life of their own and are viewed as self-generating. Whenever any static and narrowly conceived set of results are used as a vantage point for examining origins, there is a danger of substituting the end for the beginning in this way.

Still other vantage points put to heavy use in bourgeois ideology are whatever is taken to be part of the human condition, the whole of level five and especially human nature as such, or rather what is taken to be human nature. Starting out from these vantage points, phenomena whose most important qualities fall on levels one to four lose their historical specificity and are made to appear as obvious and inevitable as the flat abstractions that introduce them. In this way, approaching capitalist distribution, as the political economists are accused of doing, from the vantage point of a level five notion of production—that is, production in so far as it partakes of the human condition—makes it appear that the existing capitalist division of wealth is equally part of the human condition.

Marx, who on occasion made use of all these vantage points, favored vantage points connected with production, the objective side of any situation, historical processes generally, and social class, particularly at the level of generality of capitalist society. The reason Marx privileges such vantage points varies, as does the extension he gives them, with the level of generality on which he is operating. Beyond this, Marx's abstraction of vantage point—as indeed of extension and level of generality—can usually be traced to his theories and what they indicate is necessary to uncover some part of the organic or historical movement of the capitalist mode of production. One must be careful, here as elsewhere, not to place within Marx's method many of the judgments and decisions regarding priorities that could only come from the theories he developed with its help.

Equally characteristic of Marx's practice in abstracting vantage points is the easy facility he shows in moving from one to the other. Aware of the limitations inherent in any single vantage point, even that of production, Marx frequently alters the angle from which he examines his chosen subject matter. While whole works and sections of works can be distinguished on the basis of the vantage point that predominates, changes of vantage point can also be found on virtually every page of Marx's writings. Within the same sentence, Marx can move from viewing wages from the vantage point of the worker to viewing it from the vantage point of society as a whole (Marx, 1963, 108). Marx's analysis of the complex relations between production, distribution, exchange, and consumption, which has already come into this work on several occasions, also provides what is perhaps the best example of how often he changes his abstractions of both extension and vantage point, and how important this practice and his facility in it was for obtaining his results (Marx, 1904, 274-92).

As with his abstractions of extension and level of generality, Marx's abstractions of vantage point play a crucial role in the construction of all his theories. It is Marx's abstractions of vantage point that enable him to find identity in difference (and vice versa), to actually catch sight of the organic and historical movements made possible by his abstractions of extension, and to classify and reclassify the world of his perceptions into the explanatory structures bound up in what we call Marxism.

Earlier, in discussing Marx's theory of identity, we saw that abstracting an extension that is large enough to contain both identical and different qualities of two or more phenomena is what makes the coexistence of identity and difference possible, but one's ability to actually see and therefore to examine either set of qualities depends on the vantage point adopted for viewing them. Sticking with one vantage point will restrict understanding any relation to its identical or different aspects when, in fact, it contains both. Marx, on the other hand, can approach the relation of profit, rent, and

interest from the vantage point of surplus-value, of their identity or what they have in common as the portion of value that is not returned to the workers who produced it, as well as from any of the vantage points located in differences arising from who holds these forms of surplus-value and how each functions in the economic system.

Abstracting vantage points that bring out the differences between two or more aspects of an interactive system also highlights the asymmetry in their reciprocal effect. Granted such reciprocal effect, production was said to play the dominant role on all five levels of generality on which Marx operates. But it is only by abstracting production as a vantage point that its special influence on other economic processes and on society as a whole on each level can be seen for what it is. As Marx says, with the level of class societies in mind, the existence of the ruling class and their functions "can only be understood *from* the specific historical structure of their production relations" (My emphasis) (Marx, 1963, 285).

Along with his abstractions of extension, Marx's abstractions of vantage point play an equally important role in establishing the flexible boundaries that characterize all his theories. In Marx's division of reality into objective and subjective conditions, it is by abstracting a vantage point first in one and then in the other that he uncovers the more objective aspects of what is ordinarily taken to be subjective (extending the territory of the objective accordingly), and vice versa. Together with the aforementioned theory of identity, it is changes in the abstraction of vantage point that enables Marx to actually see objective and subjective conditions as "two distinct forms of the same conditions" (Marx, 1973, 832). Likewise, it is by abstracting a particular vantage point that Marx can see aspects of nature in society, or the forces of production in the relations of production, or economic in typically non-economic structures, or the base in the superstructure, and then vice versa, adjusting the abstraction of extension for each pairing accordingly. Looking at the relations of production from the vantage point of the forces of production, for example, even the cooperative power of workers can appear as a productive force (Marx and Engels, 1964, 46).

Marx's various class divisions of society, based as we saw on different abstractions of extension for class, are also discernible only from the vantage point of the qualities (functions, opposition to other classes, consciousness, etc.) that serve as the criteria for constructing a given classification. That is, if class is a complex Relation made up of a number of different aspects, and if the composition of any particular class depends on which ones Marx includes in his abstraction of extension and brings into focus through his abstraction of level of generality, then his ability to actually distinguish people as members of this class depends on which aspect(s) he abstracts as his vantage points for viewing them. It also follows that as Marx's vantage point changes, so does his operative division of society into classes. In this way, too, the same people, viewed from the vantage points of qualities associated with different classes may actually fall into different classes. The landowner, for example, is said to be a capitalist in so far as he confronts labor as the owner of commodities, i.e., functions as a capitalist vis á vis labor (rather than as a landowner vis á vis capitalists), whenever he is viewed from this traditional capitalist vantage point (Marx, 1963, 51).

Viewed from the vantage point of any one of his qualities, the individual's identity is limited to what can be seen from this angle. The qualities that emerge from the use of other vantage points are ignored because for all practical purposes, at *this* moment in the analysis and for treating *this* particular problem, they simply don't exist. Hence, people abstracted as workers, for example—that is, viewed from one or more of the qualities associated with membership in this class—where the object of study is capitalist political economy, are presented as not having any gender or nation or race. People, of course, possess all these characteristics and more, and Marx—when dealing with other problems—can abstract vantage points (usually as part of non-capitalist levels of generality) that bring out these other identities.

Given Marx's flexibility in abstracting extension, he can also consider people from vantage points that play down their human qualities altogether in order to highlight some special relation. Such is the case when Marx refers to the buyer as a "representative of money confronting commodities"—

that is, views him from the vantage point of money inside an abstraction of extension that includes money, commodities, and people (Marx, 1963, 404). The outstanding example of this practice is Marx's frequent reference to capitalists as "embodiments" or "personifications" of capital, where living human beings are considered from the vantage point of their economic function (Marx, 1958, 10, 85, 592). The school of structuralist Marxism has performed an important service in recovering such claims from the memory hole to which an older, more class struggle-oriented Marxism had consigned them. However useful decentering human nature in this manner is for grasping some of the role-determined behavior that Marx wanted to stress, there is much that is volunteerist in his theories that requires the adoption of distinctively human vantage points, and only a dialectical Marxism that possesses sufficient flexibility in changing abstractions—of vantage point as of extension and level of generality—can make the frequent adjustments that are called for.

If Marx's abstractions of extension are large enough to encompass how things happen as part of what they are, if such abstractions of extension also allow him to grasp the various organic and historical movements uncovered by his research as essential movements, then it is his abstractions of vantage point that make what is there—what his abstractions of extension have "placed" there—visible. The movement of the transformation of quantity into quality, for example, is made possible as an essential movement by an abstraction of extension that includes both quantitative changes and the qualitative change that eventually occurs. But this transformative process is not equally clear or even visible from each of its moments. In this case, the preferred vantage point—not the only one possible, but simply the ideal—is one that bridges the end of quantitative changes and the start of the qualitative one. Viewing the cooperation among workers, for example, from the vantage point of where its transformation into a qualitatively new productive power begins provides the clearest indication of where this change has come from as well as where the process that brought it about was heading.

The movement of metamorphosis, we will recall, is an organic movement in which qualities associated with one part of a system get transferred to its other parts. In the case of the metamorphosis of value, the main instance of this movement in Marx's writings, some of the central relationships that constitute value get taken up by commodity, capital, wage-labor, etc. Only an abstraction of extension that is large enough to include its different phases as internally related aspects of a single system allows us to conceive of metamorphosis as an internal movement and of its subsequent stages as forms of what it starts out as. But to observe this metamorphosis and, therefore too, to study it in any detail, we must accompany this abstraction of extension with an abstraction of vantage point in the part whose qualities are being transferred. Thus, the metamorphosis of value into and through its various forms is only observable as a metamorphosis from the vantage point of value.

As regards contradiction, Marx says, as we saw, "in capitalism everything seems and in fact is contradictory" (Marx, 1963, 218). It *is* so—in reality, and with the help of Marx's broad abstractions of extension, which organize the parts as mutually dependent processes. But it *seems* so only from certain vantage points. From others, the incompatible development of the parts would be missed, or misconstrued, or, at a minimum, seriously underestimated. The vantage point from which Marx usually observes contradictions is the intersection between the two or more processes said to be in contradiction. It is a composite vantage point made up of elements from all these processes. Of course, if one has not abstracted differences as processes and such processes as mutually dependent, there is no point of intersection to serve as a vantage point.

What we've called the double movement of the capitalist mode of production can be approached—that is, viewed and studied—from any of the major contradictions that compose it, and in each case—given internal relations—the elements that are not directly involved enter into the contradiction as part of its extended conditions and results. In this way, the vantage point that is adopted organizes not only the immediate contradiction, but establishes a perspective in which other parts of the system acquire their order and importance. In the contradiction between exchange and use-value, for example, the relations between capitalists and workers are part of the necessary conditions for this

contradiction to take its present form and develop as it does, just as one result of this contradiction is the reproduction of the ties between capitalists and workers. Given the internal relations Marx posits between all elements in the system, this makes capitalists and workers subordinate aspects of the contradiction between exchange and use-value. The whole process can be turned around: adopting the vantage point of the contradiction between capitalists and workers transforms the relations between exchange and use-value into its subordinate aspects, again as both necessary preconditions and results. The actual links in each case, of course, need to be carefully worked out. Hence, contradictions can be said to overlap; they cover much the same ground, but this ground is broken up in various ways, along a variety of axes, based on as many different foci.

Even when the shift in vantage points appears to be slight, the difference in the perspective opened up can be considerable. For example, take the contradiction between capital and wage-labor on one hand and that between capitalists and workers on the other. The vantage point for viewing the former is the intersection of two objective functions, while the preferred vantage point for viewing the latter is where the activities and interests of the two classes who perform these functions intersect. Each of these contradictions contains the other as major dependent aspects (neither capital nor capitalists could appear and function as they do without the other, and the same holds for wage-labor and workers). Yet, though both contradictions can be said to cover more or less the same ground, the different perspectives established by these contrasting vantage points allows Marx to distinguish how people create their conditions from how they are created by them, and to trace out the implications of each position without dismissing or undervaluing the other—all the while presenting both contradictions as undergoing similar pressures and in the process of a similar transformation.

Marx's laws offer still another illustration of the crucial role played by the abstraction of vantage point. As was pointed out earlier, all of Marx's laws are tendencies arising from the very nature of whatever it is that is said to have them. In every case, it is Marx's abstraction of extension that brings the various organic and historical movements together under the same rubric, making how things happen a part of what they are, but it is his abstraction of vantage point that enables him (and us) to actually catch sight of them as a single tendency.

The law of the falling rate of profit, for example, is a tendency inherent in the relation of profit to the "organic composition" of capital, which Marx understands as the ratio of constant to variable capital (or the investment put into the material means of production as compared to that put into buying labor power). With the proportion of investment going to constant capital because of technological development always on the rise, less and less of any given investment goes to buy variable capital. But only labor power creates value, and therefore surplus-value. With a constantly decreasing proportion of investment involved in producing surplus-value, therefore, the rate of profit as a percentage of total investment must also go down (Marx, 1959b, Part 3).

Like all tendencies in Marx's work, this one too is subject to counter-tendencies, both on the same and on the other levels of generality (state subsidies, inflation, devaluation of existing capital, etc.), which are often strong enough to keep the tendency for the falling rate of profit from appearing in the balance sheet of businessmen at the end of the year. To observe this tendency, therefore, and be in a position to study the constant pressure it exerts on the concentration of capital (another law) and through it on the entire capitalist system, one must follow Marx in abstracting an extension for profit that includes its relation over time to the organic composition of capital, and view this Relation from the vantage point of this composition (granted, of course, the capitalist level of generality on which both of these are found). Without such abstractions of extension, level of generality and vantage point, one simply cannot see, let alone grasp, what Marx is talking about. With them, one can see the law despite all the sand thrown up by counter-tendencies. Hence, the irrelevance of various attempts by Marx's critics and followers alike to evaluate the law of the falling rate of profit based on analyses made from the vantage point of one of its possible results (the actual profits of real businessmen), or from capitalist competition, or some other vantage point located in the marketplace. All the laws in Marxism can be described, studied, and evaluated only

inside the perspectives associated with the particular vantage points from which Marx both discovered and constructed them.

## VIII

### The Role of Abstractions in the Debates over Marxism

It will have become evident by now that it is largely differences of vantage point that lay behind many of the great debates in the history of Marxist scholarship. In the *New Left Review* debate between Ralph Miliband and Nicos Poulantzas on the character of the capitalist state, for example, the former viewed the state chiefly from the vantage point of the ruling economic class, while the latter viewed what are essentially the same set of relations from the vantage point of the socio-economic structures that establish both the limits and the requirements for a community's political functions (Poulantzas, 1969; Miliband 1970).<sup>4</sup> As a result, Miliband is better able to account for the traditional role of the state in serving ruling class interests, while Poulantzas has an easier time explaining the relative autonomy of the state, and why the capitalist state continues to serve the ruling class when the latter is not directly in control of state institutions.

The debate over whether capitalist economic crisis is caused by the tendency of the rate of profit to fall or arises from difficulties in the realization of value, where one side views the capitalist economy from the vantage point of the accumulation process and the other from the vantage point of market contradictions, is of the same sort (Mattick, 1969; Baran and Sweezy, 1966).<sup>5</sup> A somewhat related dispute over the centrality of the capitalist mode of production as compared to the international division of labor (the position of World System Theory) for charting the history and future of capitalism is likewise rooted in a difference of preferred vantage points (Brenner, 1977; Wallerstein, 1974). So, too, is the debate over whether bourgeois ideology is mainly a reflection of alienated life and reified structures or the product of the capitalist consciousness industry, where one side views the construction of ideology from the vantage point of the material and social conditions out of which it arises and the other from that of the role played by the capitalist class in promoting it (Mepham, 1979; Marcuse, 1965).

Earlier, in what is perhaps the most divisive dispute of all, we saw that those who argue for a strict determinism emanating from one or another version of the economic factor (whether simple or structured) and those who emphasize the role of human agency (whether individual or class) can also be distinguished on the basis of the vantage points they have chosen for investigating the necessary interaction between the two (Althusser, 1965; Sartre, 1963). To be sure, each of these positions, here as in the other debates, is also marked by somewhat different abstractions of extension for shared phenomena based in part on what is known and considered worth knowing, but even these distinguishing features come into prominence mainly as a result of the vantage point that is treated as privileged.

The different levels of generality on which Marx operates is also responsible for its share of debates among interpreters of his ideas, the main one being over the subject of the materialist conception of history: is it all history, or all of class history, or the period of capitalism (in which earlier times are conceived of as pre-capitalist) (Kautsky, 1988; Korsch, 1970)? Depending on the answer, the sense in which production is held to be primary will vary as will the abstractions of extension and vantage point used to bring this out.

Finally, the various abstractions of extension of such central notions as mode or production, class, state, etc., have also led to serious disagreements among Marx's followers and critics alike, with most schools seeking to treat the boundaries they consider decisive as permanent. However, as evidenced by the quotations that practically every side in these disputes can draw upon, Marx is capable of pursuing his analysis not only on all social levels of generality and from various vantage points but with units of differing extension, only giving greater weight to the abstractions that his theories indicate are most useful in revealing the particular dynamic he is investigating. The many apparently contradictory claims that emerge from his study are in fact complementary, and all are required to "reflect" the complex double movement (historical—including probable future—and

organic) of the capitalist mode of production. Without an adequate grasp of the role of abstraction in dialectical method, and without sufficient flexibility in making the needed abstractions of extension, level of generality, and vantage point, most interpreters of Marx (Marxists and non-Marxists alike) have constructed versions of his theories that suffer in their very form from the same rigidity, inappropriate focus, and one-sidedness that Marx saw in bourgeois ideology.

In an often quoted though little analyzed remark in the Introduction to *Capital*, Marx says that value, as compared to larger, more complex notions, has proved so difficult to grasp because "the body, as an organic whole, is more easy to study than are the cells of that body." To make such a study, he adds, one must use the "force of abstraction" (Marx, 1958, 8). Using the force of abstraction, as I have tried to show, is Marx's way of putting dialectics to work. It is the living dialectic, its process of becoming, the engine that sets other parts of his method into motion. In relation to this emphasis on the force of abstraction, every other approach to studying dialectics stands on the outside looking in. The relations of contradiction, identity, law, etc., that they study have all been constructed, made visible, ordered, and brought into focus through prior abstractions. Consequently, while other approaches may help us to understand what dialectics is and to recognize it when we see it, only an account that puts the process of abstraction at the center enables us to think adequately about change and interaction, which is to say—to think dialectically, and to do research and engage in political struggle in a thoroughly dialectical manner.<sup>6</sup>

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4. Both thinkers seriously modified the views expressed in these articles in later works (Miliband, 1977; Poulantzas, 1978), and these revisions too can be explained in large part through changes in their abstractions of vantage point.
  5. There are still other Marxist interpretations of capitalist crises (as, indeed, of the state) that are also largely dependent on the vantage point adopted. Here, as in the other debates mentioned, it was enough to refer to a single major cleavage to illustrate my claim regarding the role of abstractions.
  6. Not all of the important questions associated with dialectics have been dealt with in this essay. Missing or barely touched on are the place and/or role within dialectical method of reflection, perception, emotion, memory, conceptualization (language), appropriation, moral evaluation, verification, wisdom, will and activity, particularly in production. I am painfully aware of their absence, but my purpose here was not to provide a complete overview of dialectics but to make it possible for people to begin to put it to work by deconstructing the much-neglected process of abstraction, which, along with the philosophy of internal relations, I take to be at the core of this method. My next volume on dialectics, which focuses on the process of appropriation as Marx's preferred abstraction for knowing, being, and doing in their interaction with one another, will try to make up for these lapses. It will also contain a more systematic treatment of the moments of inquiry and exposition, as forms of activity under appropriation, as well as a critical survey of some important contributions to dialectical method that have been passed over in the present work.