Reading Althusser: Time and the Social Whole
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The works of Louis Althusser have influenced political and theoretical debates in Europe for several decades but have remained comparatively untouched by American political philosophers and historians. Perhaps because their style is polemical and frequently obscure, or perhaps because they present a political as well as an intellectual challenge, his views have not been as widely nor as deeply discussed as they deserve to be. This essay is a preliminary response to that problem.

I shall try to reconstruct elements of Althusser’s writings to capture the force of his arguments regarding the Marxist view of the social whole and the concept of historical time with which it is allied. Accordingly, this paper is both an exposition of Althusser’s point of view and an Althussrian account of Marx. In it I hope to show some of the political and theoretical implications of his position.

According to Althusser the Marxist conception of society did not arise out of a vacuum but developed from a critique of and break from all previous conceptions of the social whole. His analysis of Marx’s conception therefore demands an elaboration of the specific difference between Marx and his predecessors, the most important of whom was Hegel.¹ This demand is what first requires our attention.

"Truth is the whole." This well-known dictum of Hegel is not intended to be taken as the result of argument or insight but is instead the signal of a new orientation toward an object of study. It signifies the determination to comprehend any phenomenon as a dynamic part of a greater whole, and to understand any whole as the result-in-process of the development of its parts.

The objects of historical knowledge for Hegel are human societies, their genesis and decline, and the interrelations among the different institutions and practices that comprise the social whole. Correspondingly, two kinds of unity may be seen simultaneously in the historical process: a dynamic unity and a structural unity. The first designates the historical process itself: the genesis of a society, its development to maturity, its inevitable decline, and finally its pas-

sage from the stage of history. The second refers to the unity existing among
the different practices and institutions of the social whole, such as art, reli-
gion, politics, philosophy, material production, and family relations. A dy-
namic unity is thus the successive changes undergone by a society _compre-
hended as a single process_, while structural unity is the plurality of social prac-
tices comprehended as a single society. It is a mark of Hegel’s synthesizing
genius that both of these unities are achieved through the single conception of
the Idea of Freedom. How exactly is this brought about?

For Hegel, every historical whole is a “spiritual whole” and every historical
process a “spiritual process.” To understand what is meant by a “spiritual pro-
cess,” it is helpful to contrast it with what it is not, that is, a mechanical inter-
action. In a mechanical interaction change is effected from the outside, the ob-
jects changing as a result of being acted upon by forces external to them. In
a “spiritual process,” on the other hand, the principle of motion is located
within the very concepts of the objects themselves, so that a transition is con-
ceived as a development or an unfolding, a movement from what was implicit
to what is explicit, or from being-in-itself to being-in-and-for-itself.

Thus the term “spiritual” is demystified as soon as it is understood that in
the tradition of Western thought the spiritual is that which is self-activating,
as contrasted with the mechanical, which is other-activated. But to say that
something is self-activating, that the principle governing all its changes is con-
tained within its concept, is to say that it is free, free from external coercion
and restraint. The Idea of Freedom, then, is simply historical development it-
self, the historical process conceived as a structured dynamic containing within
itself its own principle of transition and mutation.

Before we can understand Hegel's conception of unity, both dynamic and
structural, we need to raise one further question: what, specifically, is the
Hegelian principle of historical development? In answering this question it
must be understood that the Idea of Freedom (henceforth simply the Idea) is
neither a subjective idea (either in the minds of men or in the mind of God),

2. For Hegel, as well as for Marx, there is nothing purely individual about the practices
comprising the social formation. Each consists of interrelated elements formed in a _structure_. The
word structure here implies a systematic interrelationship of elements whose defining character
can be designated. Knowledge of the different practices comprising the social whole requires,
therefore, that they be seen as structures rather than as nameless agglomerations.

3. For Hegel, social relations are logically prior to individuals and shape the character of the
latter. His theoretical object is therefore those relations, and hence his conception of society as
comprised of institutions and practices rather than of persons. This should not seem foreign to
anyone familiar with pluralism, whose object is “groups” rather than individuals.

4. Hegel, of course, recognized the limited validity of mechanical explanation as long as it was
not used to comprehend the totality of reality. Such explanations attempt to comprehend reality
in terms of the distinctness of its parts, whereas a truer level of comprehension results from taking
these separate parts to be deeply unified even as they remain distinct.

History, for Hegel, is therefore teleological in the special sense of having its _telos_ within itself.
For the best discussion of this concept, which Hegel calls Absolute Teleology, see J. N. Findlay's
essay entitled, “Hegel's Use of Teleology,” which is chapter eight of his book, _Ascent to the Ab-
nor an external ideal toward which history is tending. The Idea is the concrete historical process itself, in its totality. This means that any particular historical event or phenomenon, any stage in the history of civilization, is but a finite and momentary aspect of the Idea. There is thus always a contradiction between any finite historical phenomenon and the historical infinite which is the Idea; it is precisely the tension of this contradiction which is the principle of historical development, for the contradiction lies entirely within the Idea itself: it is a contradiction between the notion of the Idea, that is, what the historical process is in and for itself, and one of its finite (and therefore partial) realizations.

Every particular historical entity demonstrates its finitude by passing away, by transcending itself into a new and higher phase of the Idea, its positive contribution to the historical process both preserved and transformed. Each civilization must therefore perish, to exist merely as an echo in what follows it, for each is a living contradiction. In this way Hegel gives us the categories in which to think a dynamic unity: the autogenesis of history through the successive transcendence of the contradictions which necessarily pertain to all finite historical structures.

On the basis of this conceptualization of the historical process Hegel grounds his conception of the social whole—what I have called a “structural unity.” Just as “autogenesis” and “transcendence” are the technical metaphors used to theorize the unity of the historical process, so one might use the term “expression” to capture the unity that exists for Hegel among the various structures of a single society. Every society is a finite and determinate aspect of the Idea. Its determinateness is expressed in what might be called an essential differentia which distinguishes any society from all others. Thus the uniqueness of ancient Rome is characterized by its essential differentia, the Legal Personality. Every aspect of Roman society—not only its legal system but also its family structure, its religious institutions, its art, philosophy, and literature, its political hierarchy and imperial domination—are all taken to be expressions of the Legal personality. Every social structure of Roman civilization is considered to be the expression of a conception denoted by this term, and the term itself is taken to be a finite and therefore contradictory determination of the Idea. It is through their mutual expression of this single, contradictory conception that the plurality of social structures cohere into a unified totality known as Roman society.

Such a view of the social whole is labeled by Althusser an “expressive totality.” It is a view that allows one to make what he calls an “essential section,” which results from “an intellectual operation in which a vertical break is made at any moment in historical time, a break in the present such that all the

elements of the whole revealed by this section are in an immediate relation with one another, a relationship that immediately expresses their internal essence."9 Within the Hegelian framework, structural unity is the result of the mutual expression of a society's inner essence by all the social practices and institutions of that society. It follows that every practice and institution expresses every other, in that every one of them is, in Leibniz's sense, a *pars totalis*. Just as a Leibnizian monad reflects in its perceptions the whole universe from its singular point of view, so each social structure in the Hegelian totality expresses the entire determination of the Idea. Thus every social element assumes a harmony with every other. A cross section, or an "essential section," through a society at any moment in time therefore displays a *temporal homogeneity* wherein the contradictions in every social structure are perfectly coordinated with those in every other.10

But what is true for any "essential section" must of course be true for every such section. The result is that historical time is not only homogeneous; it is *continuous* as well: the tempo and rhythm of all the social structures display an absolute synchronization such that no structure can "out-run" or lag behind any of the others. That is why, for Hegel, thought cannot "run ahead of its time."11 And that is why the historical dynamic can only be known in retrospect: the Owl of Minerva flies only at dusk.

II

It is a widely held notion that the fundamental difference between the Hegelian conception of history and society and the Marxist one is between Hegel's *Idea* and the materialist conception of the mode of production. If the latter is substituted for the Idea, everything seems to fall into place. A plurality of social practices coheres into a unified society as a result of their expressing not the Idea, or some determinate stage of the Idea, but some determinate mode of production. Not the Legal Personality but the slave mode of production is the organizing principle of Roman civilization. While contradiction is still the dynamic of the historical process, it is not contradiction within the Idea but the contradiction that characterizes any mode of production that divides a society into classes. In this way the theoretical innovation originated by Marx is conceived as a synthesis of Hegelian philosophy and English political economy. From Hegel are taken, without modification, the categories in which to think structural and dynamic unity (totality and expression, con-


10. The notion of an "essential section" both issues in and results from this conception of historical time. If time is homogeneous and continuous it is possible to think of a unified "present" much as one might consider a single frame in a roll of movie film. On the other hand, if it is possible to conceive of a "present" in this way, then time must be homogeneous and continuous. The fact that these concepts are reciprocally necessary indicates that they share the same overriding conceptual structure, from which they both derive their meaning. One cannot affirm either concept independently.

tradiction and transcendence), while from the English political economists are borrowed the concepts necessary to analyze the bourgeois mode of production: exchange-value, labor, and the division of classes according to the appropriation and distribution of the surplus product.

According to Althusser, such a view of Marx's theory of history is not only incorrect, it constitutes a lethal danger to Marxism and to the world working-class movement. To see what he is driving at we must look beneath Hegel's conception of totality and uncover the epistemological premise on which the Hegelian problematic is founded.\footnote{Ibid., 40–41.}

Hegel is known to belong to the philosophical school of thought known as "idealism." This is true provided we keep in mind that it does not imply that he reduces material objects to subjective ideas. Hegel was quick to recognize that such a reduction is but a mirror image of the mistake committed by those "materialists" who see in "mere ideas" the insubstantial by-products of material states and processes. "We may learn from the present discussion," concludes Hegel in the First Part of the *Encyclopedia*, "the mistake of regarding the antithesis of subjectivity and objectivity as an abstract and permanent one. The two are wholly dialectical."\footnote{Hegel, *Encyclopedia*, §194; also §82.}

What this means for Hegel is that subjectivity and objectivity, here designating thought and the real, display a tendency toward unity wherein one term is always passing over into the other, so that neither term alone designates a reality having being-in-and-for-itself. An object is only an object for a subject, while a subject is only one insofar as it has an object. Neither is fixed, for each is what it is only in terms of the other; each has its being in the other. They require one another without absorbing each other: the requirements of knowledge are therefore the requirements of being and vice versa.

This unity of subjectivity and objectivity, of thought and being, appears on the epistemological level as the identification of the knowledge-object and the real object. The fundamental motif of all idealism consists of this identification (or, as Althusser would insist, confusion) of a concept with the reality it seeks to conceptualize.\footnote{Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 114; see also Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, transl. Graham Lock (London, 1976), 191, 193.} Such categories as contradiction, transcendence, and the Idea of Freedom are considered by Hegel to be qualifications of the real historical process they seek to grasp. Our knowledge of history is thus taken as a *reflection* and *revelation* of real history itself. And just as real history is a process of development, so too the categories of thought are taken to undergo a coordinate development. In this way the inner dynamic of every historical epoch is *reflected* in its cultural products; in its art, in its religion, and in its most revealing form, in its philosophy. The Idea, as the realized unity of subject and object, appears in the historical process as the manifest union of a civilization and its thought. And in the thought of Hegel it is just this process of revelation that is revealed: thought now knows itself to be the reflected
reality of the dynamic of world history. In Hegel the thinker, the Absolute knows itself as Absolute.

What is important to understand, according to Althusser, is that the logic of this historicist drama is underscored by Hegel's idealist problematic: the conflation of the object of knowledge with the real object. Marx broke from this problematic, Althusser observes, thereby distancing himself not only from Hegel and the Hegelian philosophers of history (such as Feuerbach), but from his own early works as well. From The German Ideology onwards, in Althusser's view, Marx struggled to articulate a theory of history based on the separation of the object of knowledge produced by that theory from the real object that is history itself. As he says in the 1857 Introduction to the Grundrisse:

The concrete totality is a totality of thoughts, concrete in thought, in fact a product of thinking and comprehending; but not in any way a product of the concept which thinks and generates itself outside or above observation and conception; a product, rather, of the working-up of observation and perception into concepts.

In this single sentence Marx repudiates every sort of theory that reduces knowledge to an expression of the historical process. In short, the object of knowledge ("the concrete totality . . . of thoughts") is the result of a process of intellectual production that must be distinguished from the real object of which knowledge is sought, in this case history itself. And because, as we have seen, Hegel's brand of historicism springs from his idealist problematic, the distance Marx takes from Hegel can be seen in the very next sentence, where he breaks irrevocably from idealism:

The totality as it appears in the head, as a totality of thoughts, is the product of a thinking head, which appropriates the world in the only way it can, a way different from the artistic, religious, practical and mental appropriation of this world. The real subject (i.e., the real object) retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before.

It could not be more clearly stated: the real object "retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before," which means that the knowledge-object is neither the dialectical result of the auto-development of the real nor the subjective aspect of the real through which the real reveals itself. Therefore, and this is the pivotal point, for Marx the relation between the knowledge-object and the real object is not a relation within the real itself. That is to say, the so-called "problem of knowledge," the demand that the terms and order of the concepts constituting a knowledge-object be shown to correspond to the content and structure of the real, is a pseudo-problem for Marx, for the express reason that the relation sought is an imagined one. The real and knowledge of the real are not the same thing, and to look for a real relation between what is real and what is not is to ignore this separation.

15. Althusser, For Marx, 55ff; also Althusser, Essays, 107ff.
17. Idem.
Consider Marx's own words again as he addresses the question of the order of thought and the order of the real with respect to the categories of bourgeois economy:

It would therefore be unfeasible and wrong to let the economic categories follow one another in the same sequence as that in which they were historically decisive. Their sequence is determined, rather, by their relation to one another in modern bourgeois society, which is precisely the opposite of that which seems to be their natural order or which corresponds to their historical development. The point is not the historical position of the economic relations in the succession of different forms of society. Even less is it their sequence "in the idea" (a muddy notion of historic movement). Rather, their order within modern bourgeois society.18

What this means is that knowledge of capitalism cannot be had by appeal to a set of categories “given” in the history of economic practice nor in the economic practice of bourgeois society itself. The categories through which capitalism can be known are produced by Marx in the act of analyzing the order of economic relations within capitalism; that is, they are categories which Marx, in his theoretical practice, builds into his knowledge-object. Whether or not this knowledge-object provides for an adequate appropriation of the real is a question, as Althusser claims it is for all science, of the criteria of validity internal to the science itself. As for the real object, bourgeois society, it “retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before.”

A conclusion may now be drawn from these brief reflections on the idealism of Hegel and the manner in which Marx broke from it. If, with Marx, we understand that historical knowledge, like all knowledge, is the result of theoretical production rather than the revelation of the real, we are no longer constrained to conceive of the structure and tempo of any social practice as being identical with those of any other. On the contrary, the specificity of each structure requires a very different concept, one which allows each practice or structure in a social formation to be known according to its peculiar character and unique rhythm. In a word, every structure of a social whole is seen to have its own history. This specificity means that it is no longer possible to take the structures of a social formation as expressions of one another or expressions of the whole, and so there is no longer the possibility of what Althusser has called an “essential section.”

But without the possibility of drawing an essential section there is no theoretical basis for a conception of historical time that is homogeneous and continuous, for the homogeneity and continuity of time was arrived at by the “simple” act of “reading” an “essential section.” Abandon the possibility of an “essential section” and you abandon the homogeneity and continuity of historical time. And this is precisely what Marx did when he broke from the idealist problematic: he rejected the entire constellation of idealist concepts whose effect was to turn the “obviousness” of the temporal flow into a theory of history. The question that now arises is this: what is the Marxist analysis of the social whole, how does this analysis differ from an idealist one, and,

accordingly, what is the theoretical and political significance of Marx's conception of historical time?

III

Everyone is familiar with the topographical schema Marx offers us in the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. Society is there divided into two regions: an economic infrastructure consisting of the relations of production and the material productive forces, and, rising from this economic base, a superstructure containing the legal, political, and ideological structures. Having given us the gross anatomical structure of society, Marx immediately proceeds to orient his analysis in its terms: "The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life." 19 A simple enough statement, yet around it have swirled the most persistent and tragic confusions in the history of Marxism. Everything hangs on the word "determines": how are we to comprehend theoretically the way in which the superstructure, the social, political, and intellectual life process, is determined by the mode of production of material life? The way one answers this question, according to Althusser, will decide whether or not one is a Marxist and, most importantly, what sort of Marxist. What is involved here is something more than intellectual subtlety. As we shall see, the stakes are political.

In breaking with the Hegelian problematic Marx distanced himself from something more fundamental than just the use of such terms as "expression," "essence," "reflection," and "transcendence." He separated himself from a certain way of conceptualizing the social whole, and in so doing set out a theoretical task that still exists: the task of specifying a new conception of structural effectivity, a conception of the causal relations that exist within and among the structures of society. For Hegel, social change is effected through the contradiction that exists between a society's essence and the Idea of Freedom. Any alteration within a Hegelian totality, at whatever site in the social whole, whether on the level of civil society or on the level of the state, whether economic, social, political, or cultural, expresses a central contradiction located in the essence of that social whole, in its Spirit. The dynamic of history, as we have seen, is determined by the unity of the social whole in its contradiction with the Idea, of which it is a finite realization.

By contrast, according to Althusser, the Marxist conception of a social formation is that of a decentered, complex whole. 20 There is no central concept of which the various social structures are merely expressions; each structure of society has an independent existence with a set of laws governing its own specific development. These independent structures cannot therefore be re-

20. Althusser and Balibar, Reading Capital, 97.
duced to some unifying principle. Unlike the simple unity of the Hegelian totality, the Marxist whole is essentially complex. Effectivity does not take place from the center outward but displays a mutuality through which any structure might have a determining influence on any other.\textsuperscript{21} A structure in a social formation is therefore characterized by an autonomous existence with respect both to what it is in itself and to the ways in which it interacts with other structures in that formation.

If Althusser's delineation of the Marxist conception of society stopped here it would be no different from a pluralistic one, for the distinguishing characteristic of pluralism is the absolute autonomy of the elements of society. But, as everyone knows, Marx had a holistic conception of society. Indeed, it is by emphasizing that holism exclusively that many have concluded that the Marxist conception is simply the Hegelian one inverted, the rational kernel of Hegel's thought without its mystical shell. Without jumping to any conclusions, the question must be asked about the Marxist whole that was asked earlier about the Hegelian: what gives the Marxist social whole its structural unity? When it was noted that in the Marxist whole each social structure displays an autonomous existence, an elaboration of the nature of this autonomy was deliberately omitted. This was done in order to emphasize, against the Hegelian conception of an expressive totality, the comparative independence of the elements of the Marxist structure. Now we must look at their simultaneous dependence. In Althusser's words, the structures of a social whole display a "relative autonomy."\textsuperscript{22} We must try to understand the specific meaning of this unusual expression.

The Marxist whole, according to Althusser, is a structure of social relations constituting a system of mutually effective practices arranged within a determinate hierarchy. This hierarchy does not determine the specific content of any of the practices, only their locus of effectivity; it defines the cross relations of dominance and subordination, of cause and effect.\textsuperscript{23} The various practices within a social formation are therefore related to one another not through the mediation of a mutually expressed essence, but through their positions in a hierarchy of effectivity. The hierarchy itself is articulated at any moment in time by the conjoint operation of two factors, one structural and the other conjunctural.

The structural factor is what unites the plurality of social practices into a single society; it gives a social whole its structural unity. For a Marxist whole this is the economic infrastructure. When Marx and Engels say that within the social whole it is the economy that is determinant, they are simply taking up their position on the theoretical terrain of historical materialism; but when

\textsuperscript{21} The developments in late capitalism, in which the state plays an increasingly obvious role in determining the process of accumulation, provide an apt illustration. The state, part of the superstructure, reacts on the infrastructure in ways which at times can be decisive and which, if not fully appreciated, can ruin a Marxist analysis and any subsequent political practice.

\textsuperscript{22} Althusser and Balibar, \textit{Reading Capital}, 100.

\textsuperscript{23} Idem.
Engels says that the economy is determinant in the last instance, he is guarding against an economistic interpretation of the materialist position.

The social whole is therefore a structured network of alternating dependence and determination. A specific form of political practice, for example, has its effect on the practice and institutions of religion, and vice versa; politics and religion have their effect on the style and content of cultural production—art, literature, music, philosophy—and are in turn influenced by these products; and all the elements of the superstructure affect, and are affected by, the economic infrastructure. But within this system of crisscrossing effectivity it is the economy that is determinant in the last instance. This means that whatever might be the form and consequence of a specific practice at a particular moment in time, the ultimate tendency of every practice is to support and reinforce the economic relations specific to that mode of production.

It is the mode of production—the unity of the relations of production and the productive forces—that defines a society, and, correspondingly, the set of categories required to comprehend it. Any fundamental alteration in the relations of production results in a new social whole, a new society, requiring a change in theoretical categories in order to comprehend the new social structure. By contrast, any change in the organization of any superstructural practice, however radical, will leave the nature of the social formation intact, provided that it does not result in a mutation of the existing production relations. Thus, for example, the transition in the structure of political practice from parliamentary democracy to fascism in Germany, or from constitutional monarchy to fascism in Italy, did not constitute a change of a social formation, but rather a change within a social formation, since the reorganization of political practice resulted in the reinforcement and not the disintegration of existing property relations.

For theoretical practice this means that both German fascism and (say) British democracy must be comprehended, and explicitly so, as specific political forms of the capitalist mode of production. It is here that Marxism, while recognizing the independent existence and mutual effectivity of the structures of society, parts company from all species of pluralism. For pluralism takes society as the summation of the myriad cross-links of cause and effect. An historical event is for it a mechanical resultant, in the sense in which the resultant of two physical forces is the mathematical result of their combined effect. And while the elements which enter into such a dynamic combination are admitted to be the effects of prior causes, and will in turn affect events in the future, this model of historical explanation cannot surpass mechanism.

To the question of why these specific social forces should have reacted on one another in the first place, pluralism can only respond by reapplying its explanatory model in an infinite regress. Since the social whole is seen as nothing more than the sum of these causal interactions, there can be no sense of an underlying social function which these interacting forces serve, and therefore

24. Ibid., 99.
no structure to their dynamic. Lacking a concept of this function, pluralism can see the totality of social interactions as constituting a single society only insofar as it occurs in the same geographical place and within the same (and necessarily arbitrary) span of time. That is why historians working within the pluralist paradigm may consider fascist Germany and democratic England to be two different societies; or, with equal plausibility, may consider them to be two geographically separate and politically divergent forms of a single social formation, twentieth-century Europe: the choice is in no way determined by the categorial strictures of this theoretical practice, that is, by the logic inherent in the pluralist conceptual apparatus.

For a Marxist historian this is not so. When Marxism says that in every social formation the economy is determinant in the last instance, it intends to orient our conception of history so that we see in every social practice and interaction either a tendency to support and reinforce the existing relations of production, or, on the contrary, a tendency to undermine and destroy them. And those relations, for a Marxist, are defined by the concept of class struggle, a struggle inherent in the economic practice of capitalism as it is in all other class societies. The concept of class struggle thus emerges as the fundamental category of historical materialism, for to say that the economy is determinant in the last instance is precisely to say that class struggle is the motor of history.

In a class society, the classes that benefit from the existing mode of appropriating and distributing wealth seek to construct all social practices in ways that support that mode, while those whose labor produces the wealth appropriated by others struggle to alter those practices in ways which, if taken far enough, are incompatible with the existing economic order. When, for example, in a conjuncture marked by heightened class antagonism the masses organize into workers' councils, neighborhood councils, soldiers' councils, and so on, the bourgeois sees nothing but the breakdown of all social order. What is taking place, however, is a reshaping of political practice into forms which threaten to undermine bourgeois production relations. Political practice organized around such councils is recognized by the bourgeois to be structurally incompatible with the private appropriation of the surplus product. For the bourgeoisie the struggle at this point focuses on the attempt, by whatever means, to rechannel political action into the structure of the state apparatus. Whether through promised reforms or police violence, or both, the state apparatus must be maintained as the sole location of politics.

While this example is especially forceful because of the intimate connection between economic appropriation and political power, the same dynamic can be seen in the other social practices as well. In the realm of culture and ideology, to quote Marx and Engels, "the ruling ideas in every epoch are the ideas of the ruling class." But this does not come about as a matter of course. The sector of cultural practice in class societies is also an arena in which antagonistic classes contend for ideological hegemony. Because of the dominant posi-

tion of the ruling classes, every social formation tends to construct its cultural products in ways which simultaneously reflect and support existing production relations.

But when the relation of class forces is such as to allow for the political organization of the oppressed classes, class antagonism appears in the cultural sphere as well. Take, for instance, the multitude of working class newspapers, magazines, and cultural organizations in any country with a viable communist, socialist, or even social-democratic party. The point here is that although developments within cultural and ideological practices proceed along currents guided by their own dynamics, they are nevertheless determined, *in the last instance*, by the struggle over control of the surplus product.

An implication of the above discussion is that there is no such thing as Class Struggle in general, only various antagonistic engagements between the classes within the different practices that comprise a social formation. There are a variety of class struggles taking place simultaneously within a society, each with its own rhythm and tempo, its own specific set of contradictions, its own history. From this point of view the various social practices can be regarded as sites of contention between antagonistic social classes. The class struggles conducted on these sites relate to one another according to their respective positions in a hierarchy of effectivity. As we have just seen, this hierarchy is formed into a whole, a social formation, through the determination in the last instance by the economy of that society. This is what I called the structural factor. I mentioned, however, that the momentary disposition of the practices within the hierarchy was subject to a second factor, one I called *conjunctural*. It is to this that we must now turn.

If each practice in a class society, regarded as a site of class antagonism, has its own history, it follows that the class struggle is essentially uneven. Unlike the Hegelian totality, in which the contradictions in every social structure develop in perfect harmony with those in every other, a totality wherein no aspect of society can "run ahead of its time," the Marxist whole is one in which disharmony and unevenness are the norm. It is no aberration that within the global economic system of late capitalism some countries show a marked underdevelopment compared with others; nor that within a single country some social practices, such as mass health care or welfare relief, may display a progressive structure compared with others. The use of terms like "unevenness," "disharmony," and even the pair "progressive-regressive," however, must not be taken to suppose a base historical time against which evenness and unevenness are measured. The point is that there is no such base time for the scientific understanding of history. Unevenness is not measured against a time within which the social formation exists, but in terms of the contrasts and contradictions, the various relations of subordination and dominance, *within* the structure of the social formation itself. Unevenness is a concept *produced* by Marxist theory to give knowledge of the current situation or conjuncture of prac-

tices not possible without that concept. As such it is an element of the object of knowledge and *not* the real object. It is a concept used for knowing history; it is not to be taken as a characteristic of the historical process itself. To ignore this is to fall back into the idealist problematic we have already discussed. The concept of a unified historical time is not an element of Marx's knowledge-object; it is an element of the knowledge-object of idealism. But all this is tangential here.

The essential unevenness of the Marxist whole is the result of its determination in the last instance by the economy. For Marx, the economy is the dominating structure in the social formation of capitalism, or, in Althusser's terms, it is the "structure-in-dominance."27 Now the very idea of a "structure-in-dominance" implies that the social formation is hierarchically ordered, but within that hierarchy the conjunctural factor I spoke of earlier becomes important in the following way.

That the economy is the structure-in-dominance of the hierarchy of social practices means that the relations between the various practices are set out by the history, tempo, and rhythm of economic practice. But each practice in that hierarchy has its own particular history, a history that is "relatively autonomous" and that has its own particular contradictions, rhythm, and tempo. The conjuncture of the histories of the various practices therefore depends not only on the hierarchical relations between them but also on the particular histories of each practice. The latter factor is not reducible to the former.

From this perspective the contradictions within one practice are seen to be affected by the contradictions within others, the specific intensity of these effects being determined by contradictions within the economy. In other words, the contradictions in some practices condense around the contradictions in another.28 This latter contradiction reflects the structure-in-dominance, that is, the economy, but its specific content is not reducible to economic practice. Thus each particular conjuncture of the histories of the various practices in the social formation depends on both the invariant domination of economic practice and the particular and relatively autonomous histories of the other practices. Hence the essential unevenness and complexity of the social whole.

While it is impossible to discuss all the theoretical implications of this view within the confines of an essay,29 it may nevertheless help to clarify Althusser's position if I sketch very briefly the way his conception of the Marxist social whole would orient our understanding of a particular historical conjuncture.

The first stages of the ongoing revolution in Iran appear on the surface to have centered around the ideological practice characterized as Islam. For historical materialism, taking the economy as determinant in the last instance, how can this be understood? The following is barely the beginning of an

27. Althusser, *For Marx*, 204, 209; and *Reading Capital*, 99.
29. For what Althusser himself has to say about this issue see *For Marx*, 99–104, 193–218; and *Reading Capital*, 106, 188; *Essays*, 175–178, 184–187.
answer, but it will illustrate the direction a Marxist analysis, from Althusser’s perspective, might take.

From the point of view of idealism, either in its Hegelian or pluralist form, nothing can be learned. Analyses based on the particular repressiveness of the shah’s regime, the so-called charisma of Khomeini, the “backwardness” of the Iranian population, that is, their alleged ignorance, fanaticism, irrationality, and so on, are all beside the point. These supposed “conditions” existed before in Iran and exist today in many parts of the world. They do not explain the events in Iran because, taken as so many mutually contemporary elements, they do not tell us why the revolution happened where it did, when it did, and in the way it did. Moreover, reducing the movement of masses of people to the state of their minds tends to be a mystification.

If, on the other hand, we utilize the Marxist conception of a decentered social whole whose elements have different histories and whose structure is dominated by the economy, the following becomes evident: The shah, supported by U.S. military aid and in possession of huge oil monies, forced a rapid industrialization upon a basically precapitalist, peasant society. Within a single generation he imposed an industrial revolution on a population unprepared for its onset. The requisite social dislocation and the repression of the resulting social unrest were facilitated by terror, and the destruction of Iranian culture took place in short order.

This did not happen all by itself. The shah was loaned vast amounts of capital by Western banks, mainly in the U.S., which sought to gain profits above the average rate by investing in Iranian industrialization and construction. The relatively low organic composition of capital in Iran, coupled with the cheap labor supply made available by uprooting the peasantry through “land reform,” made the rate of profit soar. Western banks could charge premium rates for their loans and American corporations could invest at an unusually high rate of profit, secure in the knowledge that these loans and investments would be protected by the shah and his armed forces.

On the other side of things, the uprooted masses seethed under the brutal repression that forced them out of their old way of life, a way of life which, relatively speaking, was a happier one. The loss of their culture and communities, their miserable living and working conditions in the cities, and their relative impoverishment rekindled fond memories of their pre-industrial past. Symbolic of this former life was Islam, the ideology that is as much a code for living as it is a religion. Moreover, the long-term alliance between the bazaar merchants and the clergy provided a petit bourgeois class base for this ideology, and in a terroristic society the mosques afforded the only meeting places and forms of communication not subject to complete censorship and repression. It is thus possible to see why Islam became the conduit for popular discontent and why the mullahs, with their ties to the bazaaris, became the leaders of a movement uniting the disparate factions opposed to the shah.

The scene was set by the development of the world economy but was played
out politically in terms of a reactionary ideology. When the dislocations resulting from economic practice increased, and the contradictions within the political practice supporting those dislocations became more explosive, armed struggle became inevitable and Islamic ideology was the obvious site for its occurrence.

Thus the shah was not overthrown by ideology but by political struggles that condensed around ideology. The contradictions in the economy affected political practice by exacerbating the contradictions of authoritarian rule, and these in turn affected the ideological contradictions experienced by the population when they had to square their altered conditions of life with the teachings of their faith.

The material character of ideological practice, as exemplified by the alliance between the bazaaris and the clergy as well as by the communications network of the mosques, allowed political struggles to be fought out around ideology. These struggles in turn exploded existing political institutions and thereby affected the economic practice they supported, forcing a conjunctural shift toward politics. The subsequent repressive character of the Islamic regime may be seen as resulting from the political divisions and class struggles that came to the surface once the unifying goal of overthrowing the shah was achieved.

All of this is admittedly very sketchy and is only meant to be an illustration of the direction an Althusserian Marxist analysis would probably take. It indicates in a preliminary way how the Marxist concept of the complex social whole would allow us to see the specific character of the Iranian revolution.

IV

I have set out two contrasting conceptions of the structural relations of society: the Hegelian conception of an expressive totality which takes each social structure to be an expression of the dynamic principle of the whole, and the Marxist conception, as interpreted by Althusser, of a decentered, complex whole which recognizes the relative autonomy of each structured practice. Furthermore, these different conceptions have been shown to be the result of two mutually exclusive ways of comprehending historical time and have been seen to be based upon specific epistemological assumptions: for Hegel the idealist assumption of the identity of the object of knowledge and the real object; for Marx the materialist characterization of knowledge as production, and the consequent distinction between knowledge and the real. In referring to idealism and materialism as "assumptions" I mean to affirm, with Althusser, that neither of these epistemological positions can be argued for within philosophical discourse.30 Two questions arise at once: first, why is it that no philosophical considerations can persuade us of the correctness of either

idealism or materialism; and second, if this is so, on what basis can a rational choice be made between the Hegelian and Marxist conceptions of history? I will deal with these questions in order.

By taking up a position on the terrain of materialism Althusser has brought upon himself the accusation of a regression to Kantianism. Some have seen in his insistence on the separation of the knowledge-object from the real object a reconjuring of the old philosophical nemesis, the thing-in-itself. The real object, real history, real societies, appears to be construed by Althusser as an unstructured “I-know-not-what,” upon which we impose certain categories to achieve knowledge. Nothing can be said or known about the real object as it is in itself, only as it appears through the framework imposed by the understanding: in itself the real is beyond the limits of human comprehension, ineffable and unknowable.

Every student of philosophy knows the inescapable course leading from this position. The philosophical literature from Fichte and Schelling to Hegel and Schopenhauer is filled with arguments demonstrating the fatal weaknesses of this conception: the absurdity of postulating the existence of a reality of which it is then said that nothing can be said; the realization that the very idea of a thing-in-itself is the height of abstraction, nothing more than the result achieved by extracting from the real every instance of concrete determination; and finally the insight that although the distinction between phenomena and noumena was engineered by Kant to guarantee the objectivity of knowledge, the actual result is the radical subjectivity of all knowing. The force of these philosophical polemics, and philosophy’s subsequent repudiation of the thing-in-itself, resulted in a single, if variously construed, conclusion: the unity of appearance and reality, of thought and being, of the knowledge-object and the real object.

Many have considered, and not without cogency, that these arguments offer convincing proof of the idealist premise. What the arguments indicate, however, is that the structure of all philosophical practice has been indelibly branded by an idealist problematic. Within philosophical discourse the idealist identification of thought and being is in fact guaranteed, but only because the activity of philosophy is carried out on the unspoken assumption that the limits of thought are the limits of reality. In this regard even philosophical materialism has been dominated by idealism, compromised by the conceptual structure on whose terrain it was forced to take up the debate. Those philosophers who have attempted to articulate a materialist position invariably end up reducing all thought to material processes. In doing so these “materialists” conflate the realm of thought and the realm of matter no less than those idealists who reduce matter to ideas, or who see in matter the “Idea objectified.” The underlying problematic of both these exercises is the same: it is the idealist problematic of identifying the order of thought with the order of the real. As long as the attempt to forge a distinction between thought and the real

is carried out within the problematic of traditional philosophy, there is nothing to prevent the distinction from being conceived as one between phenomena and noumena, and therefore nothing to prevent the ineluctable drift into Hegelian idealism. All this was seen quite clearly by Hegel, who stated baldly that “every philosophy is essentially an idealism.” No wonder he saw in his philosophy the summation and completion of the entire history of philosophical thought, for his own philosophy was just the complex articulation of the principle governing all philosophic practice.

When a Marxist such as Althusser draws a distinction between the object of knowledge and the real object, as when Marx himself distinguishes between the “thought-concrete” which is a “product of thinking and comprehending,” and the real object which “retains its autonomous existence outside the head,” it must not be assumed that yet another contribution is being made to the old philosophical debate between idealists and materialists. Rather, what is transpiring is the radical break from the entire tradition of Western philosophy, from all its underlying assumptions, its distinctive categories and logic, in short, from its idealist problematic. The insistence on the separation between the knowledge-object and the real does not place Althusser (or Marx, for that matter) in a neo-Kantian position for the reason that the distinction is drawn outside the problematic taken up by Kant.

This problematic, which has reigned in philosophy since the seventeenth century, is characterized by the elevation of epistemology to the pinnacle of philosophical discourse. Its central motif is what Foucault and his followers have called the “mirror-reflection” conception of knowledge, a conception which takes knowledge to be an isomorphic representation of the reality it reflects. Not only does this characterization commit us to the view that the structure, and therefore the limits, of knowledge are those of the real, it forces upon us the following question: how can we guarantee that any alleged piece of knowledge, or knowledge in general, is isomorphic with the reality it purports to know? It is in order to fulfill this guarantee that philosophers have identified knowledge with the real; knowledge will necessarily correspond to the structure of the real provided that thought and reality are not two separate and independent orders, but rather if one is the insubstantial mirror-image of the other; or, in a variation on the same theme, if both subjectivity and objectivity are both “vanishing moments” of a reality which is their realized unity (Hegel). What I wish to point out is that, first, the problem of an epistemological guarantee arises only on the assumption that in order to count as knowledge thought must be isomorphic with the real, and second, that this assumption commits us, prior to any argument, to the idealist premise of the structural identity between the knowledge-object and the real object.

To go a step further, the question of a guarantee is raised precisely so that the idealist identity of knowledge and the real can be foisted upon us as the only rational solution. But the solution to what? Why should knowledge need

32. Ibid., 154-155.
a guarantee? And why should the search for this guarantee take the form of an inquiry into the relation between knowledge and the real, a relation that has already been seen to be imaginary? Clearly the question of guarantees is meant only to accommodate a pre-given answer originating outside the discourse of any genuine knowledge and imposed on all knowledge in order to further extra-theoretical interests.  

We shall soon see what these interests are and the way they are served by the imposition of the idealist problematic. For the moment let it be noted that it is in virtue of this feature of idealism, namely, that its questions and problems function only to clear a space for an answer serving interests outside the domain of theory, that Althusser labels any idealism "ideology." Any theory situated within an idealist problematic is ideological in that its content is necessarily compromised by interests outside its theoretical discourse, such as economic, political, or religious interests.

According to Althusser, when Marx broke from the prevailing conceptions of history and society, and replaced such idealist concepts as "auto-genesis," "transcendence," "expression," with new concepts like "base-superstructure," "relations of production," "mode of production" and others, he established for the first time a scientific discourse for the investigation of social reality. In other words, he broke with ideology and founded the science of history. Simultaneously with the founding of this new science Marx laid the foundations for a new philosophical practice grounded in the categories of historical materialism, for "when reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence." In its comprehension of the social whole, historical materialism seeks to delineate the structural and conjunctural articulation of the various social practices. Included among these practices is the practice of philosophy as it exists in bourgeois society.

Now the anatomy of any society is determined in the last instance by the economy, which means that the fundamental category for understanding class society is class struggle. From its theoretical categories Marxism views philosophical practice, just as it views any social practice, as the site of contention among antagonistic classes. Thus it comes to understand that "philosophy is, in the last instance, class struggle in the realm of theory." The difference between the old philosophical practice and the new—and it is a difference that makes all the difference—is that Marxist philosophy is fully conscious of its place and function within the social order. Which is to say that it is self-conscious of the irreducible political nature of all philosophic discourse.

What all this amounts to is that the choice between idealism and materialism is not so much a philosophical choice as it is a political choice articulated and elaborated through the concepts of philosophy. Materialism and idealism are not simply opposing positions in an intellectual debate: they each constitute

33. Althusser, Essays, 117n.
35. Althusser, Essays, 72.
a problematic which defines the class position of any theory of history and society. Whether such a theory is based on a materialist problematic or an idealist one determines whether its conceptual apparatus exposes the class relations of society or whether it masks them and distorts them; whether it supports socially progressive forces by providing the basis for a strategic assessment of the class struggle, or whether it retards these forces through an identification of the real with the rational.

Within the Hegelian totality no practice, no thought (above all thought!) can "run ahead of its time." The historical dynamic for Hegel reveals itself only in retrospect. For this reason it is impossible for theory to uncover those tendencies present within a social formation which point toward a future radical transformation. That is why there never was, nor ever could be, an Hegelian politics. What is implicitly repudiated by the Hegelian conception are those conjunctural analyses, what Lenin calls "an analysis of the concrete situation," which track the shifting relations of class forces, those very forces which, being the real locus of social contradiction, propel society forward into history. But without the theoretical conditions for conjunctural analysis there can be no progressive politics.

Social theory, according to Althusser, is thus a weapon in the class struggle, and whether it serves progressive or conservative forces, whether it arms or disarms the exploited classes, is determined by the problematic that shapes its categories. And this is true regardless of the terms appearing in a theoretical discourse, for there are analyses which think themselves Marxist, which employ the terminology of Marxism, which speak of "relations of production," "class struggle," and "imperialism," but which are infused with an idealist problematic that places them outside the terrain of historical materialism and thus makes them foreign to Marxism.

Economism is such a "false Marxism." Economism is the way in which the theoreticians of the Second International interpreted Marx's conception of the social whole. Despite its use of Marxist terminology, its categories are oriented within an idealist problematic that is but a variant of the Hegelian totality. The economistic conception portrays the social whole as a simple unity in which all social practices are viewed as expressions of the economy. Society is conceptualized around the metaphor of essence/phenomena: the superstructures assume the form of circles of phenomena expressing the nature of an essential reality at their center, an essence whose dynamic they register.

No matter that for economism the essence coincides with a determinate social practice, the economic, while for Hegel the essence, Spirit, resides nowhere in the social totality because it resides everywhere. The point is that the economistic and the Hegelian conceptions of the social whole share the same conceptual orientation, the same problematic: the auto-development of the whole defined in terms of a central concept. For economism, social, political, and cultural relations are nothing but economic relations, and so changes in the superstructure are nothing but reflections of changes taking place in the base. Conversely, there can be no independent activity in the superstructure
which effects a fundamental alteration in the relations of production.

It follows immediately that revolutionary politics, conceived as a conscious practice designed simultaneously to destroy and recast the existing production relations, is theoretically impossible. The political practice which emerges from this view is one that rejects revolutionary politics in favor of a continuous struggle for progressive reforms until such time as the gradual auto-development of the economy transcends the structure of private ownership and ushers in a new era of socialism. The name for such politics is opportunism, and it has been ingredient in the defeat of working-class movements throughout Europe. Its history is the history of the Second International.

In tracing these defeats of the European working-class movement to the choice of a theoretical problematic, the point and relevance of Althusser’s analysis comes to light. The misguided politics of the Second International is not to be attributed mainly to craven or bureaucratic-minded leaders, just as the crimes and tragedies of the Comintern must not be attributed to the “cult of personality”: both are the result of the intrusion of bourgeois ideology into Marxist theory and practice. Idealist ideology tends to mask those forms of political practice which could lead to the rupture and restructuring of the existing order. By equating what is known with what is, idealism is locked into the historical present. For it, no prognosis of the future effects of present actions can be as luminous as the sheer givenness of the present. Viewed from the homogeneous contours of an expressive totality, revolution appears as the Irrational itself, erupting from the wells of history.

In a revolution, politics is no longer confined to the subordinate structure of the state apparatus but spills over into factories and into the streets. The order of the day is no longer “business as usual” but the explosion of the very infrastructure economism presumes invulnerable. No social theory whose categories assume the shape of an expressive totality can hope adequately to comprehend such historical ruptures. No theory which thus fails to capture the tendencies of an existing conjuncture, to read “the future in the present,” can do any better than commit revolution to some distant and hazy beyond.

Now we can clearly see the political nature of Marxist philosophy. The distinction between a materialist and an idealist problematic is not drawn from a space outside or above both positions, the so-called neutral space of “objective criticism,” but issues from the position of historical materialism itself. Marxist philosophy establishes itself in the very act of taking up a distance from what it is not. It is therefore not a conclusion resulting from philosophical debate but the staking out of a partisan position in the class struggle. Marxist philosophy, like the science of historical materialism it defends, is accordingly not for everyone. Its sum and substance, according to Althusser, is the struggle to uphold revolutionary theory and politics in a world domi-

37. “Precisely because it reveals the mechanism of class exploitation, repression and domination, in the economy, in politics, and in ideology, [historical materialism] cannot be recognized by everyone.” Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy, 8.
nated by the capitalist mode of production, and dominated as well by the tremendous and ubiquitous pressure of bourgeois ideology on every facet of social existence.

This is the import of Althusser's interpretation of Marx's conception of the social whole and the concept of historical time integral to it. An intervention of philosophy into politics, it is just as much a political intervention into philosophy. Its value must be assessed politically, since it is not a philosophy "for everyone."

*Perigord, France*