

LIFE AND DEATH: MARX AND MARXISM

On the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the death of Marx, has not the moment come at last to render an equitable judgment, of the type which only the passage of time allows us to formulate, on the man whom we do not know how to describe—philosopher, economist, historian, sociologist, politician, theoretician of the worker movement, reformer, revolutionary or prophet? And this judgment, which will take everything and examine it before putting all things in their proper place, could it not take the form of a response to the famous question: what is dead and what is still living today in that work which is as monumental as it is diverse since it touches every domain of knowledge and action?

Except that, unlike Hegel, whose speculative teaching Croce wanted to re-evaluate in the light of history, what Marx has brought to the history of humanity—apart from an equally immense corpus—is it not something quite different: an overturning not just of thought but of societies themselves, that is of the lives of hundreds of millions of individuals? And this conforms to his most explicit intentions: “philosophers have only interpreted the

Translated by R. Scott Walker.

world in differing manners; the truly important thing is to transform it". While every higher and developed form of understanding by man of his relation to the world, every religion, every mythology, every morality, every "*Weltanschauung*" only influence the mode of living little by little, through the mediation of consciences, here we find ourselves in the presence of a truly exceptional phenomenon, the direct, decisive and brutal action of a philosophy on reality in its most trivial and most profound sense: on everyday reality. Should we not turn toward those regimes and those peoples who claim to have organized themselves and to construct their destiny in the light of concepts formulated by Marx? Concrete results, a tangible historic situation, which can be analyzed objectively according to the multiple methods available to human sciences, developments which have effects in the domains which characterize a society essentially—economic, social, cultural: does not all this constitute a much surer and incontestable guide for judging the thinking and the work of Marx today than simple theoretical writings?

In no way. Here must be recalled that determinant but ever and again hidden fact, that Marx's teachings have no relation to Marxism, and that Marxism and it alone has served as model and guiding principle for the construction of those new societies which have sought to be and believe themselves to be socialism as conceived by Marx. The history of Marx's ideas after his death, which becomes the history of Marxism, in fact represents the most exceptional and most astonishing cultural phenomenon which can be perceived in modern times. True, every great doctrine, because of the inevitable play of influences and interferences, has been subject to more or less profound modifications or alterations. Take, for example, the saturation of Christianity with Greek thought. It is the task of historians and philosophers to unravel the tangled threads of these ideal, spiritual or moral sequences. In the case which concerns us here, there is something else at question: *The totality of the fundamental philosophical writings of Marx—the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, the Economic and Political Manuscripts of 44, the German Ideology in particular—remained unknown to those who constructed Marxist ideology and who built their world in light of this ideology.*

What theoretical and properly philosophical basis did they have,

they being Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao and several others, including intellectuals such as Plekhanov? Since the writings mentioned above had remained unpublished because they were unfinished, or because of an explicit refusal on the part of editors (for example, *German Ideology*), Engels, after Marx's death, undertook the creation of a summary of them which was then to serve as foundation for the entire Marxist theoretical structure. This was *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*.

It is an extremely weak document intellectually, and it essentially sets before us the following alternative: either the spirit creates matter, as Hegel and the idealists believed, or else matter creates the spirit, the reflection of itself in the consciousness of man, or in man's "brain", as Marx said. This is what inaugurates the new philosophy (new!) and determines the manner in which from now on it is necessary to approach all the great ideas of the past, distilling out of each of them those signs which are precursors of materialism and the future from the idealist and bourgeois elements which they contain.

It is a historically incorrect document in that, in the course of Marx's prodigious philosophical evolution over the years 1840-47, he inverted the decisive influences of Feuerbach and of Stirner, placing the latter before the former. It was reading *The Individual and His Property* which led Marx, at that time becoming fully conscious of his deepest thinking which was already formulated in the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, to break with Feuerbach and his *Gattungswesen* philosophy, one of the by-products of the Hegelian universal.

It is a philosophically false document because it places speculatively at the basis of each thing that matter which is the subject of physics and about which Marx never speaks. Marx uses the adjective "material", by which he designates reality, not the objective reality analyzed by science in its pursuit of an infinite elaboration, so that this reality is still today presented as an unknown X, the full knowledge of which is relegated to the ideal term of scientific progress. By "material" Marx meant that reality which we are and of which we are in ourselves the immediate proof, *individual phenomenological life*, that undeniable need whose pressure we feel and which changes itself spontaneously into an activity which it develops in order to satisfy itself.

However, it is this phenomenological life as it is itself experienced, as a sort of absolute, which constitutes the foundation of history and of economy in the sense that it produces the specific phenomena which will be studied by those sciences which we call history and political economy. Life is not the object of these sciences; it produces, as we have said, the phenomena which will be eventually submitted (for they existed when the sciences did not exist) to their investigations. It is the *naturans* of formations which will be made objective by the scientific approach but which in themselves, that is in the life which produces them and which does not cease producing them, are nothing of the such. “Historical materialism” if we wish to retain this term which is not from Marx (the *German Ideology* speaks of the “material foundation of history”), is not one particular concept of history among other possible ones, but a philosophy of history which assigns to “historical” phenomena an origin located outside of them, in life precisely, which appears thus as the metaphysical, or in any case the meta-historical, foundation of history itself. It is, in life, the indefinite reiteration of needs and of labor; it is passive and active individuals, “living people”, said Marx, who are “the first presupposition of any history of man”¹ and who thereby determine this history *a priori* and every possible society as a history and society which are and must necessarily be first of all a history and a society of needs, of labor, of production and of consumption.

On the other hand this life which appears as the principle of history and of society is not for Marx the object of an external designation; it does not propose itself as an empirical reality, the theme of a science which is itself empirical. And here is where it is necessary to attempt to recognize the originality and the extraordinary penetration of Marx the philosopher. For it is on the philosophical level, in a fully philosophical discussion with the greatest philosophers and with the one who incarnates them all—picking up and assuming their ideas in the *Aufhebung* of his system—with Hegel, that Marx’s particular contribution to Western philosophy can be defined, namely the interpretation of original being, of that which constitutes the basis of everything and

¹ *L’idéologie allemande (German Ideology)*, in Marx, *Oeuvres philosophiques*, Costes, Paris, 1937, VI, p. 154; Editions Sociales, Paris, 1968, p. 45.

particularly of history and of society, of life itself. What is still living in Marx is, first of all, that he is a thinker of life.

This is a unique position, indeed, and one which had to be carved out *against* classical philosophy which had been a philosophy of ideas, interpreting man as a thinking being, as the reasonable or rational animal. However, what was important in such a point of view was not that primarily the man identified with thinking set himself up at the same time as the Subject for whom all the rest was simply an object, his object—in such a way that this reversal of the primacy of the Subject to the benefit of the Object to the contrary was conceivable (as Engels had done in his manner)—it was, in a much more essential manner, that the relation of man to being was a relation of exteriority, the Subject-Object relation, whatever might finally be the sense in which it was to be read, the term which was to be favored in it.

However, if we consider more precisely the philosophical positions on which Marx was reflecting during his prodigious theoretical activity in the years 40-46, namely the *thought* of Hegel and the *intuition* of Feuerbach, we see that it is this relation to being as relation of exteriority which defines each of them and that it is precisely this relation which Marx is going to challenge abruptly. For Hegel's dialectic only describes this process of objectivation, an admirable critique of which is presented in the final chapter of the third *Manuscript of 44*, which at the same time forbids that reality be sought in it from then on. While Feuerbach's intuition (materialism) inverts the subject-object relation to the benefit of the latter (since, unlike Hegelian thinking, sensible intuition is no longer creative of its object but receptive with regard to it) by defining being as that to which one arrives through the mediation of the senses, it retains at least that decisive ontological determination of reality as external reality.

But the relation of life to itself is not a relation of exteriority. The person who desires, who is hungry, who carries a burden, who carves a stone, who uses his body through one of his powers, this person does not create between himself and his desire or his effort a distance through which it would be possible for him to escape from what he is doing or what he is. But immersed in himself instead and fundamentally passive with regard to his own being, he coincides with it to be what he is, insurmountably. Life is a

dimension of radical immanence by virtue of which it is itself tested without ever being separated from itself; and it is in fact as such, testing and retesting itself, that it is life. This original dimension of being, inasmuch as exclusive of all alienation and of all difference, inasmuch as life, is termed by Marx “praxis”.

If the *Theses of Feuerbach*, in which the concept of praxis emerges, are difficult to read, it is because in order to say what had never been said (and in this he was like every researcher put in that crucial situation in which a decisive discovery is about to be made), Marx naturally found himself unequipped with the appropriate conceptual means. To reject Hegel’s dialectic, all that he had available was Feuerbach’s materialism; just as in order to reject Feuerbach’s materialism, all that he had was Hegel’s dialectic. Materialism and dialectic, and this is at the heart of their common essence, represent that which should be radically and conjointly eliminated in order that the path can be opened to the Essential as conceived by Marx under the title of praxis. To express that essential element which is life itself by pronouncing that fundamental concept of Marxism, “dialectical materialism”, an expression combining two terms outlawed by Marx, represents the quintessence of absurdity.

If we want to measure the distance, or rather the abyss, which separates Marx’s thinking from Marxism, it should be added that praxis by its essence is individual, and this is so because it is first of all a corporal praxis, the development of an “organic subjectivity”, as it is called in the *Grundrisse*, which is always that of an individual and can never be thought of other than in relation to him. This concrete praxis, this organic subjectivity will become “living work” in *Das Kapital*. And here is the reason that, to say so immediately, every economic analysis will take as its exclusive criterion and its exclusive reference the work of a worker: what is valid for the work of an individual worker is valid—according to *Das Kapital*—for the work of the entire working class. Every economic analysis will be constructed from this singular work which appears as the point of departure and the point of completion of the entire economic system and as its only *naturans*.

But it is above all the sociological analysis which can only be intelligible when based in the living individual. The Marxist idea of the apparently evident primacy of society over the individual,

reinforced by the theses of the Durkheim school and recently reclaimed by structuralism, and the interpretation of the relation which unites society and the individual as similar to the relation of a Whole which determines its parts (an idea already dear to Hegel): all this had been derisively mocked by Marx in his polemic against Proudhon. For Proudhon had defended a Durkheimian thesis before the fact by affirming the specificity of laws and social phenomena irreducible to individual determinations or rather preceding them and thereby determining them like a cause. "Life in this society", wrote Marx ironically, "follows laws which are opposed to the laws which make man act as an individual".² It is, then, the laws of life in the individual, laws which "make him act", which determine, to the contrary, the structure of a society; and thus all social activity which seems to us to be taking place outside ourselves, following seemingly objective rules, in reality finds in us and in our living subjectivity its prefiguration and its laws. Men always follow pre-traced paths. These are not paths which we find outside ourselves or which other men have traced before us. The paths we follow are traced in us; the lines and impulses of our body and its paths do not lead us astray. They describe the circle of our possibilities and assign a destiny to our lives at the same time as they assign to every society its form.

The critique of the concept of society led back to social classes in Marx's thinking; however, contrary to that which was to occur in Marxism, these classes do not constitute the ultimate principles of explanation but are realities to be explained. And what explains them is precisely the concrete way of life of individuals, their praxis, in such a way that it is the properties of these individuals, their habits which form and determine those of their class. "In the bourgeois class, as in every other class, personal conditions have simply become common and general conditions".³ And again, "personal relations necessarily and inevitably become relations and establish themselves as such".⁴ Consequently it is the fallacy of "turning everything upside down" to claim to be able to deduce, to the contrary, the reality of an individual from the reality of the

² Marx, *Oeuvres complètes*, La Pléiade, Paris, I, p. 63.

³ *L'idéologie allemande*, *op. cit.*, Costes, VIII, p. 211; Editions Sociales, p. 394.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Costes, IX, p. 94; Editions Sociales, p. 480.

class to which he belongs, a fallacy committed by Stirner before being adopted by Marxism. Marx denounced this violently. “The statement that frequently it can be found in Saint Marx that ‘everything that one is, one is so from the State’ is basically the same as the affirmation that makes a bourgeois a model of the bourgeoisie, an affirmation which presupposes that the bourgeois class already existed before the individuals which make it up”.⁵

That it is the concrete way of life of an individual which determines the properties of a given class and not the other way around was decisively established by Marx with regard to one of these properties: ideology. For every class has its ideology, and what is more evident and more natural than to explain here again what a given individual thinks based on the “ideas” of his own class or even of his own era. However, it is true, and it is one of Marx’s fundamental theses, that, for him, the world of ideas in the broadest sense is not autonomous and finds its basis in life itself. This is because it is the representation of this life. This ensemble of ideas, of thoughts, of images, of representations of all sorts, this mental structure—this is what Marx called consciousness. Consciousness for him did not designate the immediate proof that each one makes of his own life, his suffering, his needs, his efforts, but the manner in which he represents and interprets his life spontaneously. And Marx’s decisive intuition is precisely that the manner in which man understands and interprets his own life is not free but depends on this very life and is rooted in it. This is the explanation of that famous quotation, “It is not the consciousness of man which determines his life, it is his life which determines his consciousness”. It is life, man’s own, personal and individual life, the concrete mode of his everyday activity, but in no way the pre-existing ideology of an objective class. For no objective reality, social class or Engels’ matter has the power to produce an idea; only life can do so. What Marx affirms is precisely the determination by the most profound modalities of life in us, which are affectivity and corporal praxis, of life’s representative, intellectual and spiritual modalities, of its “consciousness”, and the continuity which unites, in the subjectivity of an individual, the former to the latter, making of them, of ideology, according to the

⁵ *Ibid.*, Costes VI, p. 223; Editions Sociales, p. 92.

astonishing expression, “the language of real life”.

This is what was established in an incontestable manner in the analysis of the French peasant class in the middle of the 19th century, which plays in this respect the role of a crucial analysis.⁶ What characterized the situation of these peasants was the dispersal of families over a large number of isolated tracts, the non-existence among them of any relation other than a purely local one, the absence of any political, cultural or spiritual community, of any ideology in the sense of an ideal, objective and intersubjective reality, the lack of a set of representations or of ideas, consigned to books, transmitted by education, announced by newspapers, having in whatever form an effective existence and capable as such of defining that horizon from which could be explained the thinking of all those who are subject to it. How could an ideological horizon determine the thinking of French peasants in the middle of the 19th century when one did not exist?

And yet, all these peasants thought roughly the same thing. The identity of their views was expressed, for example in the political sector, by their support of Louis Bonaparte, making his *coup d'état* possible. This similarity of thinking and of “ideological reflex”, in the absence of any objective determinant, cannot be explained other than by its concrete subjective genealogy. It is the activity of each individual which immediately motivates his manner of understanding the world and of thinking about himself; this is what arises in his very life without the mediation of any transcendent ideological structure. It is because many individuals do the same thing and live in the same manner that they also think in the same manner and that all these similar thoughts form, *after the fact*, what might be termed the ideology of a class.⁷

This question of the status of the class concept in Marx is extremely important from the political point of view. We know what was the role assigned to the proletariat in the struggle to overcome all the forms of alienation which weigh man down, and

⁶ *Le 18-Brumaire de Louis Bonaparte (The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte)*, Pauvert, Paris, 1965, p. 349 ff.

⁷ Whatever its power, the ideological conditioning of its members by a modern society is, then, but a second phenomenon and one which is always secretly dependent on a conditioning by the way of life itself, as is proven by the inevitable fall, one day or another, of all ideologies.

the proletariat is a class. There are two ways to consider this: as an *a priori*, as a totality existing by itself and for itself, an autonomous entity endowed with its own life and acting as such, struggling in the manner of a global power against another power of the same kind, another “class” in fact: the bourgeoisie. History then assumes the form of a gigantic confrontation between antagonistic forces; it is the “history of class struggle”.⁸ This confrontation in turn masks a Messianic sweep because, in writings prior to 45, this is the significance of the proletariat itself. It is autonomous reality, but nevertheless a reality which is alienated in the system of exploitation of labor, but which must push this alienation to its limit and bear with it to the end so that out of this excess of misery and suffering salvation may emerge. It is the class “which is in a word the total loss of man and which cannot itself be regained other than by the total redemption of man”.⁹ The proletariat inaugurates a drama which is nothing other than the secular transposition of a sacred history from which it borrows all its prestige: that of Christ himself.

Yet if the proletariat is, like every class, but the result and the effect of the concrete practice of the many individuals who make it up, its nature, its possible role in history, its destiny need not be defined elsewhere, in the terms of German metaphysics and theology which discourse on other problems; they are themselves dependent on this praxis, and it is in this that they find the principle of their development. Let us suppose, for example, that this praxis, that is the activity and effort of living individuals to preserve and increase their life, arrives, by the inclusion in itself of increasingly powerful material and technological means, at the following situation described by Marx under the title of the evolution of productive forces: in this process of production, the share made up of objective elements, that is the means of production (raw material

⁸ I have shown elsewhere that this expression to which Marx’s ideas about history have been roughly reduced has but an empirical and artificial significance, concerns a certain segment of humanity’s past history and in no way constitutes the condition of all possible history, and even less so the principle of this history. If “historic materialism” is proposed as the principal theory of all possible history, the class struggle theory is not part of it; on this see our work in *Marx, I, Une philosophie de la réalité, II, Une philosophie de l’économie*, Gallimard, Paris, 1976, I, chap. III.

⁹ *Contribution à la Critique de la philosophie du droit de Hegel (Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right)*, in *Oeuvres philosophiques, op. cit.*, Costes, I, p. 106.

and instruments of labor) increases continuously, while living labor decreases. The proletariat, a term which designates the many laboring individuals, the sum of this "living labor", instead of increasing as at the time of Marx and enveloping new layers of population within its ranks, tends on the contrary to disappear. The idea of using this to define the motive and the meaning of human history would then be void of sense.

But there is another consequence of the hypostasis of classes and particularly of the proletariat which it is important to perceive clearly. As a class considered as a totality which transcends the individuals making it up, as an objective structure, the proletariat, like every reality of this kind, has no thought or will whatsoever. Nor does it have the power to act, if by this we mean effecting a concrete action. Never has a society or social entity been seen digging a ditch or building a wall. "To do all this", said Marx, "men are needed". Therefore, if the proletariat as an objective class is to accomplish in history that grandiose action to which it has been called, it cannot in reality be the class, which has no consciousness nor body, both of which always belong to individuals, which will accomplish it, but a group of men who will do all this in its stead and in its name. A party (and more precisely those who are at the head of a party) is the inevitable substitute for the "international proletariat".¹⁰ But its action on such a large mass of individuals could not be possible except by maintaining a pre-defined ideology, namely that concept of a History of the world in which the Proletariat is the agent and to which everyone must unite himself, going beyond and forgetting himself, to fuse into a grandiose process which, by the dialectic struggle of opposites (Proletariat—Bourgeoisie), will ensure the salvation of Humanity.

In such a way that each one no longer finds justification and meaning for his life in himself, in that life which is his own—

¹⁰ Maximilian Rubel has correctly denounced the replacing of the proletariat, which for Marx signified the people, by a party and then by a State which this party takes over and to which it confers a totalitarian nature (cf. *Marx, critique du marxisme*, Payot, Paris, 1974). That, working from an historical, sociological and political approach, which as such differs from our own which is essentially philosophical, this great scholar arrived at conclusions which are so often analogous to our own, particularly in this same opposition between the ideas of Marx and Marxism, is very significant.

according to the complaint which was constantly expressed by Marx throughout all his philosophical writings—but in the conformity of his action to this movement of History which alone is important: the conformity which is indicated to him by the nearest party commissary. In such a way too that he who refused to conform himself to this “line” which has been so solicitously traced out for him, or who is unable to do so because of his belonging to the bourgeoisie, making of him a “bourgeois”, this person must be eliminated.

In her admirable book *Contre tout espoir*, Nadejda Mandelstam¹¹ described what she calls “the ideas of 1920 in Russia”, which are in fact the ideas of Leninism which replaced, under the name of Marxism, the fundamental philosophical concepts of Marx, although, as we have explained before, remaining totally ignorant of these. The touching history of Nadejda and Ossip Mandelstam, the greatest Russian poet of the century, is but one manifestation among millions of others of the ravishing of the land to which such “ideas” led, and this in the double form of a political dictatorship and economic failure. How such a failure, far from being the simple consequence of Marx’s own thinking, could on the contrary result from misunderstanding and misconstruing this thinking can be explained by a brief glimpse at the so-called “economic” writings.

First of all, let us eliminate a doubt. Marx’s economic theories date in fact from more than a century ago. Are they still capable today of guiding the understanding of this infinitely more complex world which is ours? Have not other theories, more refined and more developed, born of contact with new realities, not cast those of Marx into that sort of conceptual death which attacks every form of scientific discourse inasmuch as science is a perpetual surpassing of itself?

What is still living in Marx’s economic thinking is precisely the fact that Marx is not an economist in the sense in which we normally understand this and that the theoretical corpus which he has constructed does not form an economic doctrine among others, destined like them to be surpassed. Marx is an economic philosopher. The initial theme of his research is not the analysis of

¹¹ Gallimard, Paris, 1972.

economic phenomena taken naively as such, like an area previously offered and in a certain manner offered of itself for scholarly investigation. The fundamental question which he raises—the properly philosophical question, the transcendental question is this one instead: how are economic phenomena in general possible? What is it in man's experience and in human history, that at a given moment causes something to spring up as an economic reality? This is a question which is prior to all economic *science* and political economy, since it is not possible to seek to analyze economic phenomena or to recognize their laws unless such phenomena already exist. Consequently this is the first question, and as such the decisive one, but its correlate should not remain hidden either. For the emergence within reality of specific economic phenomena can be proposed as an enigma and as that which should be elucidated first of all only if the original reality is not in and of itself economic. And this is precisely Marx's intuition, rejecting in advance the well-known Marxist-Leninist concepts which set the economy at the basis of society and of history as the substructure on which all the rest is built.

That the original reality is in itself in no way economic is what results from Marx's philosophical definition of it as the praxis of living individuals, i.e. as a reality which is that of life itself. Walking, running, breathing, imagining, thinking, loving do not in themselves contain an economic indicator. It is not possible to analyze eroticism, but if it were possible, we would not come up with prostitution. No more so than life, its organic correlate, nature, which is worked on to make it more homogeneous as a usage value—food, clothing, housing, etc.—is in no way economic either. “The usage value is not an economic concept of value”, said Marx in a fundamental statement.¹² We can analyze a cube of sugar, but we will not come up with its price. Reality is so unfolded, living individuals have lived, and no economic reality has arisen at the horizon of their world. They will perhaps live on, and still no economic reality will exist. To define reality as economic reality is what Marx called economic fetishism or economic materialism, that naive belief of economists that economic pheno-

¹² *Fondements de la critique de l'économie politique, (Grundrisse)*, tr. into French by E. Dangeville, Antropos, Paris, 1967, II, p. 425.

mena exist in themselves and that they need only be taken as such in order to study them. But for Marx it is a matter of understanding how a reality which is in itself non-economic, "extra-economic", has been able to become economic. Except that if progress is naturally possible in the analysis of economic phenomena and their increasing complexity and if, like every scientific theory, economic doctrines are arranged inevitably according to the law of a constant enrichment, then Marx's ingenious discovery is the transcendent genesis of economic reality from a reality which is in itself non-economic. It is a discovery which is as indifferent to time as it is to subsequent discoveries in political economy. This is what is eternally living in his thinking.

The genesis of the economy takes as its starting point in *Das Kapital* the analysis of merchandise. But merchandise is in fact an enigma, at once a reality associated with life as a usage value and with an economic determination as an exchange value. This is what must be explained, for "value does not have written on its forehead what it is", or rather its provenance as issuing from a reality which is by definition heterogeneous to it. It is in exchange that usage values become exchange values; but exchange—the first exchange historically which brought about economic reality in the world of men—is itself a mystery. For how can products which are qualitatively and quantitatively different be exchanged? We know the response of the English school: different products can be exchanged inasmuch as they result from the same labor. Labor, which is itself measured by the objective time it endures and by its nature (skilled labor or not), is the unit, the measure, the universal element which, by subsuming to itself qualitatively different products, allows overcoming their heterogeneity, establishing an equivalence among them and so making their exchange possible.

Except that in a philosophy of subjective praxis, *the* labor does not exist. There is nothing objective nor universal about it, no measure by which it might be other than it is; unable to be measured by anything else. It is the irreducibly unique deployment of the power of a body which is by essence individual, and in this mute actualization of the potentialities of organic subjectivity, delivered to the ineffability of its night, it alone "knows" what it is in itself, its effort and its suffering. This is why the temporality

of this radically subjective effort has nothing to do with the objective time of the universe, nor can it be measured by it. Also, when set before the variety of products brought out on the market, we attempt to determine their value and to be able to exchange them by going back to the labor from which they result, what we find is not a unity capable of dominating this diversity and of reducing it, but a more radical diversity, the irreducible diversity of “real work”, i.e. the work of isolated corporal monads.

Since it is impossible to find in the subjective activity of work and in its subjective temporality an evolution of evaluation of the products which result from it, an evaluation which would make exchange of these products possible, it is necessary to construct such an evaluation by giving to this subjective work, as Marx said, “a form different from itself”,¹³ by proposing some objective equivalent. The construction of this objective equivalent to real subjective labor is the transcendent genesis of the economy, the construction of what Marx called “abstract labor”. And this, by his own definition, is his great discovery: namely this reduplication of work as living work on the one hand and as economic work on the other.¹⁴ This reduplication is in turn the reduplication of life and of the economy which makes of this latter the simple objective representation of concrete activity of people. It is an abstract representation in the sense that it abandons all the real characteristics of this activity—pain, suffering, effort—substituting for them that ideal “equivalent” which is formed by the idea of labor, skilled or not, and the quantitative measurement, itself ideal, of their objective duration. The economy is thus not life, retaining none of life’s vital experiences, being only the total of those quantifiable substitutes through which it can be replaced in order for it to be calculable. And this is how Marx’s critique of the economy is radical. By exchanging actual lived determinations of praxis for a relational system of ideal entities, which is what he does, his critique is nothing less than the substitution of death for life.

However, there is here something quite different from a sort of

¹³ *Ibid.*, I, p. 108-109.

¹⁴ The two-fold nature of merchandise as usage value and as exchange value is but the consequence of this prior duplication of labor and its reflection in merchandise.

ethical judgment of the economy delivered from on high: the principle of his theoretical explanation. For if all economic phenomena—exchange value and its pure form: money; its increase: appreciation and capital; its distribution: income, profit, interests—are only ideal representations of the real process of work and production, then it is evident that they can hardly be explained by themselves but by the real process whose double they are. And a fantastic double they are as soon as they assume an actual autonomy. It is at this moment that value seems to appreciate by itself, and this self-appreciation of exchange value is capital in all its various forms. The critique of capital consists in the denunciation of its supposed autonomy and the laying bare of its illusory nature. For the production of value, and *a fortiori* its appreciation, refer in reality to the actual living work which produced this value, since the exchange value is the representation in the product of the abstract labor necessary to produce it, and the abstract labor is in turn nothing more than the representation of the actual Labor which has accomplished this production. Marx's entire economic problematic, "the critique of political economy", is thus seen as an analysis which cuts through economic reality to go to its source, to its true substance, its real determinants. And it seems each time that these real determinants are not themselves of the economic order but, under all the phenomena and their laws which economists take for a specific and independent reality, they are the praxis of living individuals who produce them and continue to produce them.

We must return to life in order to understand the apparent economic phenomena and their variations: appreciation, incomprehensible on the purely economic level and which can only be explained by this property of life in each individual to produce more usage values than are necessary during such production and thus a greater exchange value than the production costs. But it is above all the conservation of the exchange value, essential to every economic system, which refers back to that which must be termed a metaphysics or, better, a radical ontology of life. For exchange value cannot be preserved unless the usage value, which is always its base of support, can be preserved. But the usage value of an object, a fragment of nature, can in turn only be conserved if its form, the form of this object which shapes its use, is itself retained.

This retaining of the form of an object, this information of nature which makes it conform to one of life's desires, is the work of life itself, at the same time being its condition. Marx described in lyric terms this original embrace of life and the world, speaking of how the fragile power of the former, burning fire which twists matter and shapes it to its action, constantly imparts to it its form and thereby subjects it. Even more, it is this fragile life, holding all of nature in the grip of its praxis, which actually maintains it in being and snatches it from nothingness. For beyond this grip, as soon as it ceases for an instant, the form of the object is lost, its utility disappears, the instrument becomes rusty, subsistence fails, the harbors silt up, civilizations die.

Imagine, then, that time when, by the power of mysterious conditions which we are nevertheless permitted to glimpse, because great abstract entities—History, Society, the Proletariat, the Revolution, Central Planning or even the Bureaucracy which substitutes its own finalities for those of individuals¹⁵—would everywhere be preferred for those individuals themselves who are, and they alone, the bearers of praxis and life, or even because, in the terms of Nietzsche's terrible prophecy, this life would be turned against itself, giving birth to distaste for labor, denigration of talent, doing away with every difference, every form of superiority and invention: then this collapse and drifting of entire societies, particularly those which claim to be founded in Marxism, would become intelligible in the light of the very ideas of Marx.

To those ideas which see in life the principle and the foundation of everything that is also belongs the theme of progress, which is not only, according to the formulation so dear to the 19th century, scientific progress but the progress of life itself. Through the effects of scientific and technological progress, of course, but above all because of life's own dynamism for which scientific thinking is but a form, the production process is the theater of a decisive modification to which we have already alluded: the progressive diminishing of the place occupied by living labor, the liberation of life for other tasks. In Marx's eyes, these tasks were those of culture. "Free time"

¹⁵ In the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* there is a fierce denunciation of bureaucracy. Those regimes in which bureaucracy is permitted unbridled development cannot, in this respect as well, claim to descend from Marx.

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was not then a synonym for “leisure”, but, since life is essentially dynamism, movement, effort, tension, self-transcendence, it could only free itself of the material process of production in order to invest its energies in the highest activities of the mind: theoretical and aesthetic, says *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*. But when the diminution of human effort in the production of human life is accompanied, on the contrary, by the growing passivity of man’s existence, given up to the media and to imitation, then will come those distressful times which Marx’s optimism had not anticipated but which the lucidity of his vision, this “eagle’s eye of thought” of which the letter to his father speaks, unfortunately makes clear to us.

What is living today in Marx’s philosophy? That philosophy itself, as long as it is dissociated from those ideologies and regimes in which it has been lost. What is dead, what comes from death? Those ideologies and regimes which are throughout the world called “Marxism”.

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