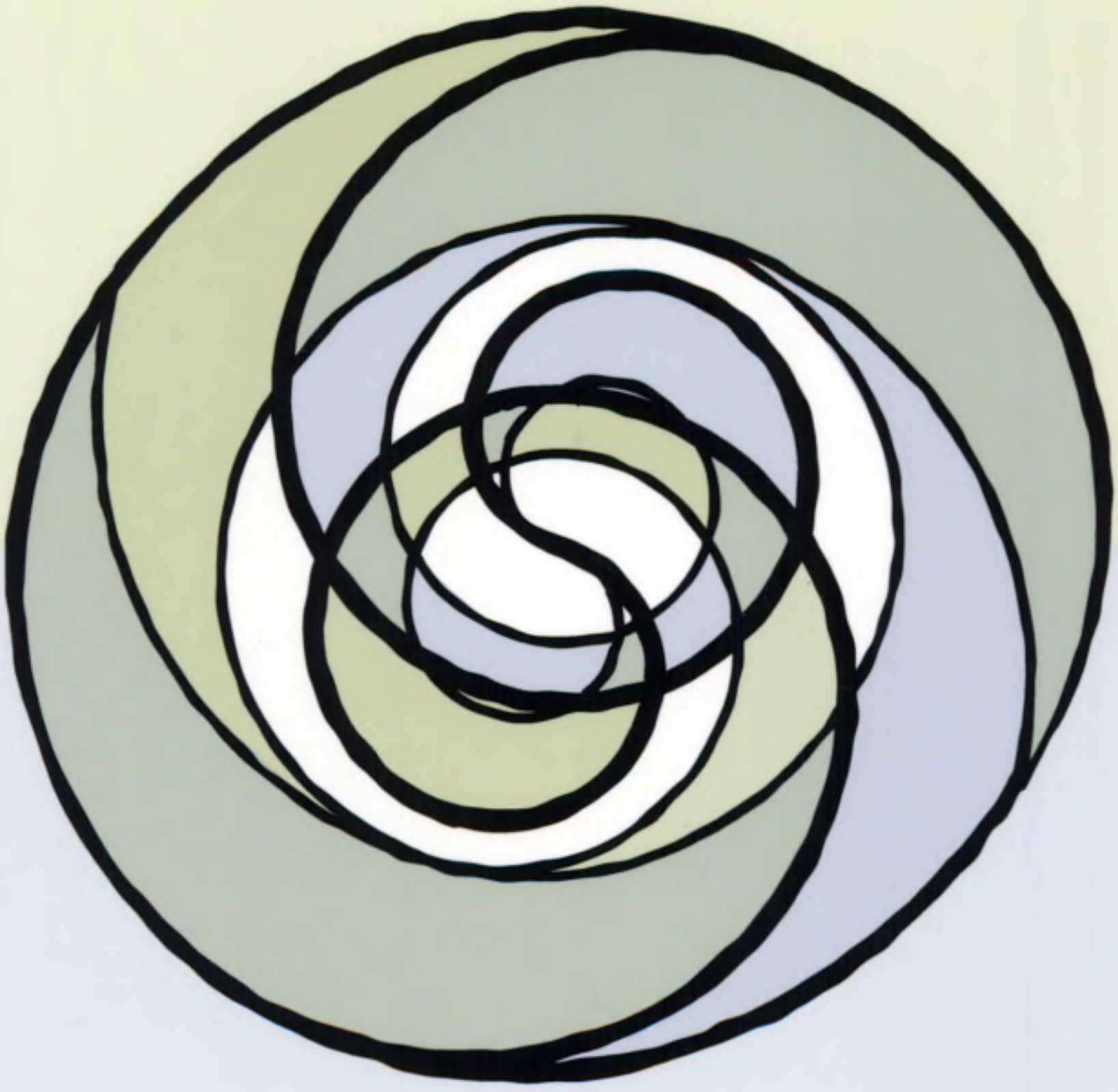
Dance of the Dialectic

STEPS IN MARX'S METHOD



BERTELL OLLMAN

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STEP 5

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the movie *Bizarre, Bizarre,* Claude Simon plays a famous Parisian mystery writer who gets all his best ideas for stories from his milkman, who tells them to his maid, who passes them on to Simon. While Simon never confesses, I feel the need to confess that I, too, have a milkman. And in this volume, which brings together the best of my life's work on dialectics, I should like to acknowledge the enormous contribution that Paule Ollman, my wife . . . and milkman, has made to all my thinking and writing as a scholar and political actor for over forty years. Her insights, enthusiasms, and careful critical judgments are to be found in everything I've done. It delights me no end to publicly recognize her influence and her role as my full intellectual partner and to dedicate my book, which is really our book, to her. Of the many scholars who have contributed to my thinking on dialectics over the years, I also want to single out Bill Livant and thank him for *all* his questions and even some of his answers. Finally, I wish to thank Hani Zubida for all the flexibility and good cheer he showed in helping me prepare this manuscript for publication.

* * *

The chapters that comprise *Dance of the Dialectic* first appeared in the following publications and have been at least partly revised for inclusion in this volume:

Chapters 1, 5, and 6—from my book *Dialectical Investigations* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 7—from my book *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society,* 2d ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976); reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

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DANCE OF THE DIALECTIC

INTRODUCTION

Marxism, This Tale of Two Cities

1

Marxism, understood as the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, offers us a tale of two cities: one that claims to have freedom but doesn't, and another that possesses bountiful freedom for all, but few know where it is or how to get there. The first city is called "capitalism." In this city, whose institutions are widely viewed as the very embodiments of freedom, nothing is free. Everything costs, and most things cost more than those who need them can afford. For most of its citizens, what is called "freedom" is having the right to compete for things that remain just outside their grasp. But no one keeps them from competing or from thinking that one day they (or their children) may succeed.

The other city is called "communism." Here, people enjoy the freedom to develop their potential as human beings in peace and friendship with each other. Their's is not the freedom to want what cannot be had but to do and be and become what they want. This city can't be found on a map, because until now it only exists in the shadows of the first city. It is, in effect, what capitalism could be, what it has all the means and conditions for becoming once the inhabitants of capitalism overthrow their rulers along with the rules that organize life in their city. The rulers are the capitalist class, or those who own and control the means of production, distribution, and exchange, and the principal rule by which they operate is profit maximization. The capitalists have managed to keep communism a well-guarded secret by using their power over the mike—for in this society you need a microphone to be heard—to ensure that no one learns that communism is really about freedom, while endlessly repeating the cannard that something called "communism" was already tried in a few underdeveloped countries and that it didn't work.

There is a lot in Marxism, of course, that cannot be captured by this tale of two cities, but it does help to bring out the singular nature of Marx's subject matter: it is not capitalism, it is not communism, it is not history. Rather, it is the internal relations between all of these. It is how communism evolves as a

still unrealized potential within capitalism and the history of *this* evolution stretching from earliest times to a future that is still far in front of us. Unaware of what exactly Marx has set out to study, most writers on Marxism, friendly and unfriendly, have great difficulty characterizing what he finds. For example, in so far as Marx describes and explains how capitalism functions, some writers consider Marxism a science. In so far as he presents capitalism as wanting, others insist that Marxism is essentially a critique of capitalism. In so far as he discovers a potential in capitalism for communism and outlines what that might look like, still others view Marx as mainly a visionary. And in so far as Marx advocates a political strategy for moving from here to there—and Lenin's question, "What is to be done?" is always lurking somewhere in his consciousness—Marxism gets treated as a doctrine on how to make the revolution.

Science, critique, vision, and strategy for revolution are ordinarily understood apart from one another—some would even maintain that they are logically incompatible—and most interpreters of Marxism have emphasized only one or a couple of these themes while dismissing or trivializing the others (or, in some cases, using them as occasions to berate Marx for inconsistency). Yet the evidence for the importance of all four currents in Marx's writings is overwhelming. Moreover, they are usually so intertwined and so mutually dependent that it is very difficult to separate them completely from each other. Hence, I am inclined to view Marxism as an unusual, perhaps unique, combination of all four—science, critique, vision, and recipe for revolution—and Marx himself therefore as a scientist, critic, visionary, and revolutionary, with each of these qualities contributing to and feeding off the others.

The problem this raises, of course, is—how is this possible? How does one mix things that don't appear to mix? What allows Marx to construct theories—for this is what I am claiming—that are at the same time scientific, critical, visionary, and revolutionary? For the tale of two cities presented above, this translates as—what allows Marx to discover communism inside capitalism, and how does what he finds constitute both a criticism of capitalism and the basis of a strategy to overturn it? At the core of every science is a search for relations, especially relations that are not immediately obvious, and in studying capitalism Marx uncovers relations between what is, what could be, what shouldn't be, and what can be done about it all. He finds all this, first of all, because it is there, but what *permits* him to find it—while most students of capitalism only come up with the appearances (mislabeled as "facts")—is his dialectical method. It is dialectics, and Marx's dialectics in particular, that not only allows but requires him to knit together what most others consign to separate mental compartments.

2

Dialectics, in one form or another, has existed for as long as there have been human beings on this planet. This is because our lives have always involved

important elements of change and interaction; our environment, taken as a whole, has always had a decisive limiting and determining effect on whatever went on inside it; and "today," whenever it occurs, always emerges out of what existed yesterday, including the possibilities contained therein, and always leads (and will lead), in the very same ways that it has, to what can and will take place tomorrow. In order to maximize the positive effects of these developments on their lives (and to reduce their negative effects), people have always tried to construct concepts and ways of thinking that capture—to the extent that they can understand it (and to the extent that the ruling elites have allowed it)—what is actually going on in their world, especially as regards the pervasiveness of change and interaction, the effect of any system on its component parts (including each of us as both a system with parts and as a part of other systems), and the interlocking nature of past, present, and future. The many ways our species has performed this task has given rise to a rich and varied tradition of dialectical thought, the full measure of which has yet to be taken.

Marx's version of dialectics was derived from his encounters on the philosophical plane with such giants as Epicurus, Aristotle, Spinoza, Leibniz, and especially Hegel, and through his lived experience with a capitalism that had only recently come to maturity. Capitalism, it is important to note, stands out from earlier class societies in the degree to which it has integrated all major (and, increasingly, most minor) life functions into a single organic system dominated by the law of value and the accompanying power of money but also in the degree to which it hides and seeks to deny this singular achievement. The fragmentation of existence together with the partial and one-sided character of socialization under capitalism have inclined people to focus on the particulars that enter their lives—an individual, a job, a place—but to ignore the ways they are related, and thus to miss the patterns—class, class struggle, alienation, and others—that emerge from these relations. More recently, the social sciences have reinforced this tendency by breaking up the whole of human knowledge into the specialized learning of competing disciplines, each with its own distinctive language, and then by studying almost exclusively those bits that permit statistical manipulation. In the process, capitalism, the biggest pattern of all and one whose effect on people's lives is constantly growing, has become virtually invisible.

I am painfully aware that many of those who reject Marx's analysis of capitalism don't simply disagree with it. That would make political discussions relatively easy. Instead, the typical reaction is to treat the capitalism Marx speaks about as if it isn't there. I'm reminded of the movie *Harvey,* in which Jimmy Stewart often converses with his friend Harvey, a six-foot, two-inch invisible white rabbit. Except he is the only one who sees Harvey; those around him see only an empty chair. Similarly, when Marx and Marxists refer to capitalism, the eyes of most of their readers glaze over. Well, capitalism is not an invisible rabbit, but neither is it something that is immediately apparent. For it to be noticed, let alone understood, people's attention has to be drawn to certain rela-

tions, the elements of which are not always obvious. But if most of its inhabitants don't even see capitalism, the system, any effort to explain how it works must be accompanied by an equally strenuous effort to display it, to simply show that it exists and what kind of entity it is. Widely ignored in the literature on Marx, revelation, therefore, is as crucial to Marxism as explanation, and indeed the latter is impossible without the former.

By allowing Marx to focus on the interconnections that constitute the key patterns in capitalism, the dialectic brings the capitalist system itself, as a pattern of patterns, into "sight" and makes it something real that requires its own explanation. In a world made up of mutually dependent processes, however, the interconnections between things include their ties to their own preconditions and future possibilities as well as to whatever is affecting them (and whatever they are affecting) right now. Consequently, the patterns that emerge and require explanation include material that will extend Marx's explanation, when it comes, into the hitherto separate realms of criticism, vision, and revolution. Consider once again the spread of relations unearthed in Marx's tale of two cities. The whole panoply of otherwise confusing dialectical categories such as "contradiction," "abstraction," "totality," and "metamorphosis" serve to avoid static, partial, one-sided, and one-dimensional (temporally speaking) understandings by making some part of these interconnections easier to think about and to deal with. All of Marx's theories have been shaped by his dialectical outlook and its accompanying categories, and it is only by grasping dialectics that these theories can be properly understood, evaluated, and put to use.

3

My own encounter with dialectics began when I was doing research for my doctoral dissertation, later published as *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (1971; 2d ed. 1976). Marx's writings were decidedly not one-sided; nor did he seem to have much trouble presenting a world in constant motion, where mutual interaction and interpenetration of temporal dimensions were the rule and even large scale transformations a frequent occurrence. That much was clear. What was less clear, especially to a young student steeped in linguistic philosophy, were the concepts he used to present such a picture. Despite the absence of definitions—Marx never offered any—it was not hard to know, in a general way at least, what he was talking about, but whenever I pressed a point the precision and clarity I had been trained to look for eluded me. And when I sought to construct my own definitions from the way Marx used his key concepts in his writings, I was shocked to discover that their apparent meanings varied with the context, often considerably. I was not the first, of course, to note or to be bothered by the elastic quality of Marx's meanings. Vilfredo Pareto, the Italian sociologist, provided the classic statement of this problem long ago when he said, "Marx's words are like bats. One can see in them both birds and mice" (1902, 332).

But once we recognize this problem, what are our choices? (1) We could ignore it. (2) We could treat what Marx means (or seems to) on most occasions, or on what we take to be the most important occasion, as what Marx really means by a particular concept. (3) We could use this inconsistency as a club with which to beat Marx for being hopelessly confused, or sloppy, or even dishonest. Or (4) we could seek an explanation of Marx's usage in his view of the world and the place that language and meaning have in that view. I had spent too much time puzzling over Marx's linguistic practice to ignore what I had found, and while it is possible to single out one main meaning for some of his concepts, this left too many other meanings unaccounted for. Even with this difficulty, however, I was already learning too much from Marx to dismiss him as irredeemingly confused or careless. That left an investigation into his view of the world that may have allowed and even required just such a use of language.

Taking the latter path, I soon arrived at the philosophy of internal relations, a carryover from Marx's apprenticeship with Hegel, which treats the relations in which anything stands as essential parts of what it is, so that a significant change in any of these relations registers as a qualitative change in the system of which it is a part. With relations rather than things as the fundamental building blocks of reality, a concept may vary somewhat in its meaning depending on how much of a particular relation it is intended to convey. Could this be the answer to the paradox stated so eloquently by Pareto? As it turned out, the philosophy of internal relations had received relatively little attention in the already extensive literature on Marx's dialectic. And while several major interpreters of Marx, such as Georg Lukács, Jean-Paul Sartre, Henri Lefebvre, Karel Kosik, Lucien Goldmann, and Herbert Marcuse, appeared to recognize that Marx's rejection of Hegel's idealism did not include his philosophy of internal relations, none saw fit to build their interpretation of dialectics around it nor to use it as a basis for explaining Marx's unusual use of language.[1] I did.

However, in what became *Alienation* my chief aim in reconstructing Marx's dialectic was to understand what he said about human nature and alienation. What served to explain a particular theory, though, was not enough to account for how he arrived at this theory nor to help people study other aspects of society in the manner of Marx. The philosophy of internal relations, after all, is only a philosophy. It underlies and makes possible a certain method for inquiring into the world and organizing and expounding what one finds, but an adequate grasp of this method requires that equal attention be paid to other elements of the dialectic, and especially to the "process of abstraction."

The philosophy of internal relations bans finite parts from Marx's ontology. The world, it would have us believe, is not like that. Then, through the mental process of abstraction, Marx draws a set of provisional boundaries in this relational world to arrive at parts that are better suited—chiefly through the inclusion of significant elements of change and interaction—to the particular investigation he has in mind. The resulting findings, encapsulated in the theories of

Marxism, all bear the imprint of these initial abstractions. Consequently, in my next major work on Marxism, *Dialectical Investigations* (1993), the philosophy of internal relations cedes its position at the center of my account to Marx's process of abstraction. Together—and, despite the evidence of my earliest writings, they must be used together—the philosophy of internal relations and the process of abstraction offer the greater part of what is distinctive about my approach to dialectics, an approach meant to advance current efforts to study capitalism (or any part thereof) as well as to help us grasp and make better use of Marx's own achievements.

Recent years have witnessed a modest renaissance of interest in dialectics, as a growing number of Marxist writers have adopted it as a priviledged vantage point from which to examine Marx's other theories. The latest stage of capitalism, what some have dubbed "globalization," and the collapse of the Soviet Union have also sent many of these same scholars back to the moment of method for help in explaining these phenomena. The result is that dialectical method is one of the liveliest areas of Marxist research and debate today, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world.[2] Word of this development is only beginning to reach the broader academy. Is it too much to hope that a serious exchange of views with at least some mainstream scholars may yet replace the benign (and not so benign) neglect and worse to which Marxist dialectics has traditionally been subjected by non-Marxist thinkers? My work on dialectics has also always been shaped, in part, by my strong desire to help make such an exchange possible.[3]

In the pages that follow, my fullest treatment of the philosophy of internal relations can be found in chapters 2, 3, and 4. Chapter 1 gives an introductory overview of our entire subject. Chapter 5, which is the longest and probably most important chapter in the book, details Marx's process of abstraction and shows its organic tie to the philosophy of internal relations. Chapter 6 explains how Marx used his method to study the past in its internal relation to the present. Chapter 7 presents the kind of inquiry and exposition that follows from Marx's adherence to a philosophy of internal relations. Chapter 8 expands on the work of the previous chapter to include all the different moments of Marx's method and shows how it helped him arrive at his understanding of the capitalist state. Chapter 9 explains how dialectical method is used to study the communist future in its internal relation to the present and provides the best summary of the earlier chapters. Here, one will also find most of the scaffolding with which Marx constructed his tale of two cities. In chapters 10 and 11, my interpretation of Marx's method is contrasted with that of two increasingly popular schools of dialectical thinking, Critical Realism and Systematic Dialectics. Finally, chapter 12 offers a case study in the use of some elements in Marx's dialectical method to analyze the more peculiar features of the Japanese state.

The essays and chapters (many considerably revised) from earlier books brought together in this volume span thirty years and represent the best of my life's work on dialectics.[4] If they often seem as if they were written as consecu-

tive chapters for this book, it is because the project of which they are all a part was formulated at the time of *Alienation,* and my fundamental views on dialectics have changed relatively little since then. This also accounts for the modest amount of repetition in some of the middle and later chapters as I try once again to link whatever is new to the philosophy of internal relations. Given most readers' lack of familiarity with this philosophy and the difficulty they are likely to have in applying it, the frequent return to internal relations and the practice of abstracting that it makes possible (and requires) also serves an important pedagogical function. Learning how to use Marx's dialectical method, especially becoming good at it, also requires a radical transformation in the way one *thinks* about anything, and the philosophy of internal relations—as we shall see—is the crucial enabling step in this process.

A final word on the role of Friedrich Engels. The extraordinary and even unique intellectual partnership that Marx enjoyed with Engels led practically everyone for a century and more to treat Engels as coequal spokesman along with Marx for the doctrines of Marxism. In recent decades, however, there is a growing body of scholarship that argues for important differences in the thinking of these two men, particularly in the area of dialectics. I do not share this position for reasons that were already given in some detail in *Alienation,* but that does not mean that I devote as much attention to Engels's writings on dialectics as I do to Marx's (Ollman 1976, 52–53). For the elements of dialectics with which I have been most concerned, chiefly the philosophy of internal relations and the process of abstraction, it is Marx who has provided the bulk of my raw materials. Yet I have not hesitated to use Engels's comments in arriving at my own interpretation of Marxism, including Marxist dialectics, whenever they seemed particularly helpful, and I have no problem encouraging readers to do the same.

Notes

1. The main works by these authors on dialectics can be found in the bibliography.

2. Among the more important contributors to this debate are David Harvey, Richard Lewin, Richard Lewontin, Fredric Jameson, István Mészáros, Enrique Dussell, Ruy Fausto, Michael Löwi, Lucien Sève, Jindrich Zeleny, Tom Sekine, Derek Sayer, Antonio Negri, Andrew Sayers, Erwin Marquit, Sean Sayers, Martin Jay, Scott Warren, Kosmas Psychopedis, Joachim Israel, Christopher Arthur, Tony Smith, Joseph O'Malley, Roy Bhaskar, Milton Fisk, Joseph Fracchia, John Allen, Terrell Carver, Rob Beamish, Roslyn Bologh, George E. McCarthy, Robert Albritton, John Rees, Carol Gould, David-Hillel Rubin, Joseph McCarney, Ira Gollobin, Howard Sherman, Nancy Hartsock, Paul Diesing, Guglielmo Carchedi, Patrick Murray, Fred Moseley, Paul Mattick Jr., Kevin Anderson, Michael A. Lebowitz, Stephen A. Resnick, Richard D. Wolff, Susan Buck-Morss, Ronald J. Horvath, Kenneth D. Gibson, N. Patrick Peritore, Graham Priest, J. W. Frieberg, Paul Paolucci, Bill Livant, Peter Skillman, Martin Nicolaus, Simeon Scott, and Paul Sweezy. And there are others. The main works by these authors on dialectics can be found in the bibliography.

3. An admirable example of what is possible in the way of a useful exchange on dialectics with non-Marxist thinkers is provided by the libertarian philosopher Chris Scibarra in *Total Freedom* (2000).

4. For readers interested in my other writings on and uses of dialectical method, see especially *Alienation* (1976), chaps. 1, 4, 5, and 33 and appendix 2; *Social and Sexual Revolution* (1979), chaps. 2, 5, and 6; *Dialectical Investigations* (1993), chaps. 3, 5, and 9; *Market Socialism: The Debate among Socialists* (1998), chap. 4; and "What Is Political Science? What Should It Be?" (2000).

STEP 1

CHAPTER 1

The Meaning of Dialectics

1

Have you ever tried to hop on a car while it was still moving? How different was it from entering a car that was stationary? Would you have been able to get into the moving car if you were blindfolded? Would you have been able to do it if you were not only blindfolded but didn't know in which direction it was moving or even how fast it was going?

Why all these silly questions? Obviously, we all agree on the answers, and anyone in his or her right mind would make sure to know how fast and in which direction a car is moving before trying to climb aboard. Well, what about society? Society is like a vehicle that every one of us tries to climb aboard to find a job, a home, various social relationships, goods to satisfy our needs and fancies—in short, a whole way of life. And who can doubt that society is changing. In fact, no century has experienced as much social change as ours, and no period has experienced faster change than the period since World War II. But just how fast is it changing and, more important, in what direction?

Will American, or British, or Japanese society as it is coming to be in the next few years be able to give you the things you want from it, that you are expecting, that you are preparing for? Being an optimist, you may answer "yes," but if so, you are looking—and none too closely—at things as they are now. But society, as you admit, is changing, and very fast. Have you studied what our democratic capitalist society is changing into, or are you like the blindfolded person trying to get onto a moving vehicle, not knowing either the speed or direction in which it is traveling?

How, then, does one study the infinitely complex organism that is modern society as it evolves and changes over time? Marxism enters the picture as the most systematic (though, obviously, still incomplete) effort yet undertaken to provide such an analysis. Focusing on how goods are produced, exchanged, and distributed in the capitalist era, it tries to account for the structure as well as the dynamics of the entire social system, including both its origins and likely future. We also learn how the few who benefit most from capitalism use a mix-

ture of force and guile to order the lives and thinking of the great majority who would benefit most from a radical change. Finally, Marxism also lays out a method (dialectics) and a practice (class struggle) for updating this study and helping to bring about the most desirable outcome. No one who is about to climb aboard the moving vehicle that is our rapidly changing society can afford to proceed without it.

2

What we understand about the world is determined by what the world is, who we are, and how we conduct our study. As regards this last, in our day the problems involved in grasping reality have been compounded by an approach that privileges whatever makes things appear static and independent of one another over their more dynamic and systemic qualities. Copernicus could have been speaking about the modern academy instead of the astronomers of his day when he said, "'With them it is as though an artist were to gather the hands, feet, head, and other members for his images from diverse models, each part excellently drawn, but not related to a single body, and since they in no way match each other, the result would be a monster rather than man'" (qtd. in Kuhn 1962, 83). The existing breakdown of knowledge into mutually indifferent and often hostile academic disciplines, each with its own range of problematics and methods, has replaced the harmonious enlightenment we had been promised with a raucous cacophony of discordant sounds. In the confusion, the age-old link between knowledge and action has been severed, so that scholars can deny all responsibility for their wares while taking pride in knowing more and more about less and less. It is as a way of criticizing this state of affairs and developing an integrated body of knowledge that a growing number of researchers are turning to Marxian dialectics.

With all the misinformation conveyed about dialectics, it may be useful to start by saying what it is not. Dialectics is not a rock-ribbed triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis that serves as an all-purpose explanation; nor does it provide a formula that enables us to prove or predict anything; nor is it the motor force of history. The dialectic, as such, explains nothing, proves nothing, predicts nothing, and causes nothing to happen. Rather, dialectics is a way of thinking that brings into focus the full range of changes and interactions that occur in the world. As part of this, it includes how to organize a reality viewed in this manner for purposes of study and how to present the results of what one finds to others, most of whom do not think dialectically.

The main problem to which dialectics is addressed is set out clearly in Marx's retelling of the Roman myth of Cacus (1971, 536–37). Half man, half demon, Cacus lived in a cave and came out only at night to steal oxen. Wishing to mislead his pursuers, Cacus forced the oxen to walk backward into his den so that their footprints made it appear that they had gone out from there. The next

morning, when people came looking for their oxen, all they found were footprints. Based on the evidence of these footprints, they concluded that, starting from the cave, their oxen had gone into the middle of a field and disappeared.

If the owners of the oxen had taken a methodology course at an American university, they might have counted the footprints, measured the depth of each step, and run the results through a computer—but they would have arrived at the same wrong conclusion. The problem here arises from the fact that reality is more than appearances and that focusing exclusively on appearances, on the evidence that strikes us immediately and directly, can be extremely misleading. How typical is the error found in this example? According to Marx, rather than the exception, this is how most people in our society understand the world. Basing themselves on what they see, hear, and bump into in their immediate surroundings—on footprints of various kinds—they arrive at conclusions that are in many cases the exact opposite of the truth. Most of the distortions associated with bourgeois ideology are of this kind.

To understand the real meaning of the footprints, the owners of the oxen had to find out what happened the night before and what was going on in the cave that lay just over their horizon. In a similar way, understanding anything in our everyday experience requires that we know something about how it arose and developed and how it fits into the larger context or system of which it is a part. Just recognizing this, however, is not enough, for nothing is easier than slipping back into a narrow focus on appearances. After all, few would deny that everything in the world is changing and interacting at some pace and in one way or another, that history and systemic connections belong to the real world. The difficulty has always been how to think adequately about them, how not to distort them, and how to give them the attention and weight that they deserve. Dialectics is an attempt to resolve this difficulty by expanding our notion of anything to include, as aspects of what it is, both the process by which it has become that and the broader interactive context in which it is found. Only then does the study of anything involve one immediately with the study of its history and encompassing system.

Dialectics restructures our thinking about reality by replacing the commonsense notion of "thing" (as something that has a history and has external connections with other things) with notions of "process" (which contains its history and possible futures) and "relation" (which contains as part of what it is its ties with other relations). Nothing that didn't already exist has been added here. Rather, it is a matter of where and how one draws boundaries and establishes units (the dialectical term is "abstracts") in which to think about the world. The assumption is that while the qualities we perceive with our five senses actually exist as parts of nature, the conceptual distinctions that tell us where one thing ends and the next one begins both in space and across time are social and mental constructs. However great the influence of what the world is on how we draw these boundaries, it is ultimately we who draw the boundaries, and people

coming from different cultures and from different philosophical traditions can and do draw them differently.

In abstracting capital, for example, as a process, Marx is simply including primitive accumulation, accumulation, and the concentration of capital—in sum, its real history—as part of what capital is. Abstracting it as a relation brings its actual ties with labor, commodity, value, capitalists, and workers—or whatever contributes to its appearance and functioning—under the same rubric as its constituting aspects. All the units in which Marx thinks about and studies capitalism are abstracted as both processes and relations. Based on this dialectical conception, Marx's quest—unlike that of his commonsense opponents—is never for why something starts to change (as if it were not already changing) but for the various forms this change assumes and why it may *appear* to have stopped. Likewise, it is never for how a relation gets established (as if there were no relation there before), but again for the different forms it takes and why aspects of an already existing relation may *appear* to be independent. Marx's critique of the ideology that results from an exclusive focus on appearances, on the footprints of events separated from their real history and the larger system in which they are found, is also of this order.

3

Besides a way of viewing the world, Marx's dialectical method includes how he studied it, how he organized what he found, and how he presented these findings to his chosen audience. But how does one inquire into a world that has been abstracted into mutually dependent processes? Where does one start, and what does one look for? Unlike nondialectical research, where one starts with some small part and through establishing its connections to other such parts tries to reconstruct the larger whole, dialectical research begins with the whole, the system, or as much of it as one understands, and then proceeds to an examination of the part to see where it fits and how it functions, leading eventually to a fuller understanding of the whole from which one has begun. Capitalism serves Marx as his jumping-off point for an examination of anything that takes place within it. As a beginning, capitalism is already contained, in principle, within the interacting processes he sets out to investigate as the sum total of their necessary conditions and results. Conversely, to begin with a supposedly independent part or parts is to assume a separation with its corresponding distortion of meaning that no amount of later relating can overcome. Something will be missing, something will be out of place, and, without any standard by which to judge, neither will be recognized. What are called "interdisciplinary studies" simply treat the sum of such defects coming from different fields. As with Humpty Dumpty, who after the fall could never be put together again, a system whose functioning parts have been treated as independent of one another at the start can never be reestablished in its integrity.

The investigation itself seeks to concretize what is going on in capitalism, to trace the means and forms through which it works and has developed, and to project where it seems to be tending. As a general rule, the interactions that constitute any problem in its present state are examined before studying their progress over time. The order of inquiry, in other words, is system before history, so that history is never the development of one or two isolated elements with its suggestion, explicit or implicit, that change results from causes located inside that particular sphere (histories of religion or of culture or even of economics alone are decidedly undialectical). In Marx's study of any specific event or institutional form, these two types of inquiry are always interwoven. The fuller understanding of capitalism that is the major result of such a study is now ready to serve as a richer and therefore more useful starting point for the next series of investigations.

4

Given an approach that proceeds from the whole to the part, from the system inward, dialectical research is primarily directed to finding and tracing four kinds of relations: identity/difference, interpenetration of opposites, quantity/quality, and contradiction. Rooted in his dialectical conception of reality, these relations enable Marx to attain his double aim of discovering how something works or happened while simultaneously developing his understanding of the system in which such things could work or happen in just this way.

In what Marx calls the commonsense approach, also found in formal logic, things are either the same/identical or different, not both. On this model, comparisons generally stop after taking note of the way(s) any two entities are either identical or different, but for Marx this is only the first step. Unlike the political economists, for example, who stop after describing the obvious differences between profit, rent, and interest, Marx goes on to bring out their identity as forms of surplus-value (that is, wealth created by workers that is not returned to them in the form of wages). As relations, they all have this quality, this aspect that touches upon their origins, in common. The interest Marx takes in delineating the special features of production or of the working class, without neglecting all they have in common with other economic processes and other classes, are good examples of his approaching identity and difference from the side of identity. The relations that stand in for things in Marx's dialectical conception of reality are sufficiently large and complex to possess qualities that—when compared to the qualities of other similarly constituted relations—appear to be identical and others that appear to be different. In investigating what these are and, especially, in paying extra attention to whichever half of this pairing is currently most neglected, Marx can arrive at detailed descriptions of specific phenomena without getting lost in one-sidedness.

While the relation of identity/difference treats the various qualities that are

examined with its help as given, the interpenetration of opposites is based on the recognition that to a very large degree how anything appears and functions is due to its surrounding conditions. These conditioning factors apply to both objects and the persons perceiving them. As regards the former, for example, it is only because a machine is owned by capitalists that it is used to exploit workers. In the hands of a consumer or of a self-employed operator, that is, conditioned by another set of factors, operating under different imperatives, it would not function in this way. As regards the latter, when people conditioned as capitalists look at a machine, they see a commodity they have bought on the market, perhaps even the price they paid for it, and something that is going to make them a profit. When people conditioned as workers, however, look at the same machine, they only see an instrument that will determine their movements in the production process.

The perspectival element—recognizing that things appear very different depending on who is looking at them—plays a very important role in dialectical thought. This doesn't mean that the truths that emerge from viewing reality from different vantage points are of equal value. Involved as they are in the work of transforming nature, workers enjoy a privileged position from which to view and make sense out of the developmental character of the system, and with his interest in the evolution of capitalism this is the vantage point that Marx most often adopts for himself.

The notion of the interpenetration of opposites helps Marx to understand that nothing—no event, institution, person, or process—is simply and solely what it seems to be at a particular place and time, that is, situated within a certain set of conditions. Viewing it in another way, or by other people, or under drastically changed conditions may produce not only a different but the exact opposite conclusion or effect. Hence, the interpenetration of opposites. A losing strike in one context may serve as the start of a revolution in another; an election that is a farce because one party, the Republicrats, has all the money and the workers' parties have none could, with an equalization of the conditions of struggle, offer a democratic choice; workers who believe that capitalism is an ideal system when they have a good job may begin to question this when they become unemployed. Looking for where and how such changes have already occurred and under what set of still-developing conditions new effects are likely to occur helps Marx gauge both the complexity of the part under examination and its dependence on the evolution of the system overall.

What is called quantity/quality is a relation between two temporally differentiated moments within the same process. Every process contains moments of before and after, encompassing both buildup (and builddown) and what that leads to. Initially, movement within any process takes the form of quantitative change. One or more of its aspects—each process being also a relation composed of aspects—increases or decreases in size or number. Then, at a certain point—which is different for each process studied—a qualitative transformation takes

place, indicated by a change in its appearance and/or function. It has become something else while, in terms of its main constituting relationships, remaining essentially the same. This qualitative change is often, though not always, marked by the introduction of a new concept to designate what the process has become.

Only when money reaches a certain amount, Marx says, does it become capital, that is, can it function to buy labor-power and produce value (1958, 307–8). Likewise, the cooperation of many people becomes a new productive power that is not only more but qualitatively different than the sum of individual powers that compose it (Engels 1934, 142). Looking for quantity/quality change is Marx's way of bringing into single focus the before and after aspects in a development that most nondialectical approaches treat separately and even causally. It is a way of uniting in thought the past and probable future of any ongoing process at the expense (temporary expense) of its relations in the broader system. And it is a way of sensitizing oneself to the inevitability of change, both quantitative and qualitative, even before research has helped us to discover what it is. While the notion of quantity/quality is in no sense a formula for predicting the future, it does encourage research into patterns and trends of a kind that enables one to project the likely future, and it does offer a framework for integrating such projections into one's understanding of the present and the past.

Of the four major relations Marx investigates in his effort to make dialectical sense out of capitalist reality, contradiction is undoubtedly the most important. According to Marx, "in capitalism everything seems and in fact is contradictory" (1963, 218). He also believes it is the "contradictory socially determined features of its elements" that is "the predominant characteristic of the capitalist mode of production" (1973, 491).

Contradiction is understood here as the incompatible development of different elements within the same relation, which is to say between elements that are also dependent on one another. What is remarked as differences are based, as we saw, on certain conditions, and these conditions are constantly changing. Hence, differences are changing; and given how each difference serves as part of the appearance and/or functioning of others, grasped as relations, how one changes affects all. Consequently, their paths of development do not only intersect in mutually supportive ways but are constantly blocking, undermining, otherwise interfering with, and in due course transforming one another. Contradiction offers the optimal means for bringing such change and interaction as regards both present and future into a single focus. The future finds its way into this focus as the likely and possible outcomes of the interaction of these opposing tendencies in the present, as their real potential. It is contradiction more than any other notion that enables Marx to avoid stasis and one-sidedness in thinking about the organic and historical movements of the capitalist mode of production, about how they affect each other and develop together from their origins in feudalism to whatever lies just over our horizon.

The commonsense notion of contradiction is that it applies to ideas about

things and not to things themselves, that it is a logical relation between propositions (if I claim "X," I can't at the same time claim "not X") and not a real relation existing in the world. This commonsense view, as we saw, is based on a conception of reality as divided into separate and independent parts—a body moves when another body bumps into it. Whereas nondialectical thinkers in every discipline are involved in a nonstop search for the "outside agitator," for something or someone that comes from outside the problem under examination and is the cause for whatever occurs, dialectical thinkers attribute the main responsibility for all change to the inner contradictions of the system or systems in which it occurs. Capitalism's fate, in other words, is sealed by its own problems, problems that are internal manifestations of what it is and how it works and are often parts of the very achievements of capitalism, worsening as these achievements grow and spread. Capitalism's extraordinary success in increasing production, for example, stands in contradiction to the decreasing ability of the workers to consume these goods. Given capitalist relations of distribution, they can buy ever smaller portions of what they themselves produce (it is the proportion of such goods and not the actual amount that determines the character of the contradiction), leading to periodic crises of overproduction/underconsumption. For Marx, contradiction belongs to things in their quality as processes within an organic and developing system. It arises from within, from the very character of these processes (it is "innate in their subject matter"), and is an expression of the state of the system (1973, 137).

Without a conception of things as relations, nondialectical thinkers have great difficulty focusing on the different sides of a contradiction at the same time. The result is that these sides are examined, if at all, in sequence, with one invariably receiving more attention than the other, their mutual interaction often mistaken for causality. A frequent criticism Marx makes of political economists is that they try to "exorcise contradictions" (1968, 519). By viewing capitalist forces of production and capitalist relations of distribution separately they miss the contradiction. A lot of effort of bourgeois ideology goes into denying, hiding, or otherwise distorting contradictions. Bad faith and class-interest politics, however, account for only a small part of these practices. For nondialectical thinkers, operating out of a commonsense view, real contradictions can only be understood as differences, paradox, opposition, strain, tension, disequilibrium, dislocation, imbalance, or, if accompanied by open strife, conflict. But without the dialectical notion of contradiction, they seldom see and can never adequately grasp the way processes actually interpenetrate and can never gauge the forces unleashed as their mutual dependence evolves from its distant origins to the present and beyond. For Marx, on the other hand, tracing how capitalist contradictions unfold is also a way of discovering the main causes of *coming* disruptions and *coming* conflict.

On the basis of what he uncovers in his study of identity/difference, the interpenetration of opposites, quantity/quality, and contradiction—a study that starts with the whole and proceeds inward to the part, and which conceives of

all parts as processes in relations of mutual dependence—Marx reconstructs the working of capitalist society. Organizing reality in this way, he is able to capture both the organic and historical movements of capitalism in their specific interconnections. The still unfinished results of this reconstruction are the particular laws and theories we know as Marxism.

5

It is clear that Marx could not have arrived at his understanding of capitalism without dialectics, nor will we be able to develop this understanding further without a firm grasp of this same method. No treatment of dialectics, therefore, however brief, can be considered complete without a warning against some of the common errors and distortions associated with this way of thinking. For example, if nondialectical thinkers often miss the forest for the trees, dialectical thinkers just as often do the opposite, that is, play down or even ignore the parts, the details, in deference to making generalizations about the whole. But the capitalist system can only be grasped through an investigation of its specific parts in their interconnection. Dialectical thinkers also have a tendency to move too quickly to the bottom line, to push the germ of a development to its finished form. In general, this error results from not giving enough attention to the complex mediations, both in space and over time, that make up the joints of any social problem.

There is also a related tendency to overestimate the speed of change, along with a corresponding tendency to underestimate all that is holding it back. Thus, relatively minor cracks on the surface of capitalist reality are too easily mistaken for gaping chasms on the verge of becoming earthquakes. If nondialectical thinking leads people to be surprised whenever a major change occurs, because they aren't looking for it and don't expect it, because it isn't an internal part of how they conceive of the world at this moment, dialectical thinking—for just the opposite reasons—can lead people to be surprised when the expected upheaval takes so long in coming. In organizing reality for purposes of grasping change, relative stability does not always get the attention that it deserves. These are all weaknesses inherent in the very strengths of dialectical method. Ever present as temptations, they offer an easier way, a quick fix, and have to be carefully guarded against.

Nothing that we have said in our account so far should be taken to deny the empirical character of Marx's method. Marx does not deduce the workings of capitalism from the meanings of words or from the requirements of his theories, but like any good social scientist he does research to discover what is the case. And in his research he makes use of the entire range of materials and resources that were available in his time. Nor do we wish to claim that Marx was the only dialectical thinker. As is well known, most of his dialectic was taken over from Hegel, who merely(?) filled in and systematized a way of thinking and an approach to studying reality that goes all the way back to the Greeks. And in our time there are non-Marxist thinkers, such as Alfred North Whitehead and F. H.

Bradley, who have developed their own versions of this approach. Despite its heavy ideological content, common sense, too, is not without its dialectical moments, as is evidenced by such insights as "every cloud has its silver lining" and "that was the straw that broke the camel's back." Elements of dialectics can also be found in other social science methods, such as structural functionalism, systems theory, and ethnomethodology, where it constitutes most of what is of value in these approaches.

What stands out about Marx's dialectical method is the systematic manner in which he works it out and uses it for the study of capitalist society (including—because the dialectic requires it—its origins and probable future), the united theory of knowledge (set out in the still incomplete theories of Marxism) to which it leads, the sustained critique of nondialectical approaches (suggested in our remarks on ideology throughout) that it makes possible, and—perhaps most striking of all—its emphasis on the necessary connection posed by dialectics itself between knowledge and action.

As regards this last, Marx claims, the dialectic "is in its essence critical and revolutionary" (1958, 20). It is revolutionary because it helps us to see the present as a moment through which our society is passing, because it forces us to examine where it has come from and where it is heading as part of learning what it is, and because it enables us to grasp that as agents as well as victims in this process, in which everyone and everything are connected, we have the power to affect it. In keeping in front of us the simple truth that everything is changing, the future is posed as a choice in which the only thing that cannot be chosen is what we already have. Efforts to retain the status quo in any area of life never achieve quite that. Fruit kept in the refrigerator too long goes rotten; so do emotions and people; so do whole societies (where the proper word is "disintegration"). With dialectics we are made to question what kind of changes are already occurring and what kind of changes are possible. The dialectic is revolutionary, as Bertolt Brecht points out, because it helps us to pose such questions in a manner that makes effective action possible (1968, 60).

The dialectic is critical because it helps us to become critical of what our role has been up to now. In Marxist terms, one doesn't advocate class struggle or choose to participate in it (common bourgeois misconceptions). The class struggle, representing the sum of the contradictions between workers, broadly defined, and capitalists, simply is, and in one way or another we are all already involved, often—as we come to discover—on the wrong side. On learning about it and where we fit into it, we can now decide to stop acting as we have been (the first decision to make) and what more or else we can do to better serve *our own* interests. What can be chosen is what side to take in this struggle and how to conduct it. A dialectical grasp of our socially conditioned roles and the equally necessary limits and possibilities that constitute our present provides us with the opportunity for making a conscious and intelligent choice. In this manner does knowledge of necessity usher in the beginnings of real freedom.

STEP 2

CHAPTER 2

Social Relations as Subject Matter

1

The only extensive discussion of Marx's concepts (or categories) and the conception of social reality that finds expression in them appears in his unfinished introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy.* This seminal work, which was first published by Karl Kautsky in 1903, has been unjustly ignored by most Anglo-Saxon writers on Marxism.[1] Here we learn that "in the study of economic categories, as in the case of every historical and social science, it must be borne in mind that as in reality so in our mind the subject, in this case modern bourgeois society, is given and that the categories are therefore but forms of expression, manifestations of existence, and frequently but one-sided aspects of this subject, this definite society" (Marx 1904, 302). This distinction between subject and categories is a simple recognition of the fact that our knowledge of the real world is mediated through the construction of concepts in which to think about it; our contact with reality, in so far as we become aware of it, is contact with a conceptualized reality.

What is unusual in Marx's statement is the special relation he posits between categories and society. Instead of being simply a means for describing capitalism (neutral vehicles to carry a partial story), these categories are declared to be "forms," "manifestations," and "aspects" of their own subject matter. Or, as he says elsewhere in this introduction, the categories of bourgeois society "serve as the expression of its conditions and the comprehension of its own organization" (1904, 300). That is to say, they express the real conditions necessary for their application, but as meaningful, systematized, and understood conditions. This is not merely a matter of categories being limited in what they can be used to describe; the story itself is thought to be somehow part of the very concepts with which it is told. This is evident from Marx's claim that "the simplest economic category, say, exchange-value, implies the existence of population, population that is engaged in production within determined relations; it also implies

the existence of certain types of family, class, or state, etc. It can have no other existence except as an abstract one-sided relation of an already *given concrete and living aggregate*" (1904, 294 [emphasis added]).

One of the more striking results of this approach to language is that not only the content but also the categories are evaluated by Marx in terms of "true" and "false." Thus, in criticizing Proudhon, Marx claims that "political-economic categories" are "abstract expressions of the real, transitory, historic, social relations" (Marx and Engels 1941, 12) and that they "*only remain true* while these relations exist" (Marx 1904, 301 [emphasis added]; also Marx n.d., 117–22). By deciding to work with capitalist categories, Proudhon, according to Marx, cannot completely disassociate himself from the "truths" these categories contain. According to the commonsense view, only statements can be true or false, and to use this same measure for evaluating concepts seems unwarranted and confused.

Three conclusions stand out from this discussion: that Marx grasped each political-economic concept as a component of society itself, in his words, as an "abstract one-sided relation of an already given concrete and living aggregate"; that it is intimately linked with other social components to form a particular structure; and that this whole, or at least its more significant parts, is expressed in the concept itself, in what it is intended to convey, in its very meaning. If these conclusions are unclear, it is because the kind of structure they take for granted is still vague and imprecise. To properly understand concepts that convey a particular union, we must be at ease with the quality of this unity, that is, with the way its components combine, the properties of such combinations, and the nature of the whole that they constitute. Only by learning how Marx structures the units of his subject matter, only by becoming aware of the quality and range of what is known when he considers he knows anything, will the relations between concepts and reality that have been set out in these conclusions become clear.

2

What is distinctive in Marx's conception of social reality is best approached through the cluster of qualities he ascribes to particular social factors. Taking capital as the example, we find Marx depicting it as "that kind of property which exploits wage-labor, and which cannot increase except on condition of getting a new supply of wage-labor for fresh exploitation" (Marx and Engels 1945, 33). What requires emphasis is that the relation between capital and labor is treated here as a function of capital itself and part of the meaning of the word "capital." This tie is extended to cover the worker as well, whom Marx refers to as "variable capital" (1958, 209). The capitalist is incorporated into the same whole: "capital is necessarily at the same time the capitalist . . . the capitalist is contained in the concept of capital" (1973, 512). Elsewhere, Marx asserts that "the means of production monopolized by a certain section of society" (1959a, 794–95), "the products of laborers turned into independent powers" (1958, 153), and "money,"

"commodities," and even "value that sucks up the value creating powers" are also capital (Marx 1958, 571). What emerges from these diverse characterizations is a conception of many tied facets whose sense depends upon the relations Marx believes to exist between its components: property, wage-labor, worker, work, product, commodities, means of production, capitalist, money, and value (the list can be made longer still).[2]

It is insufficient to accuse Marx of loose and misleading presentation for, as we shall see, all social factors are treated in the same manner. But if it is not incompetent writing, then Marx is offering us a conception of capital in which the factors we generally think of as externally related to it are viewed as co-elements in a single structure.

It is this system-owning quality of capital that he has in mind when he refers to it as a "definite social relationship." This conception is contrasted with Ricardo's, where capital "is only distinguishable as 'accumulated labor' from 'immediate labor.'" In the latter case, where capital "is something purely material, a mere element in the labor process," Marx claims, "the relation between labor and capital, wages and profit, can never be developed" (1968, 400). Marx believes he is only able to trace out these connections because they are already contained in his broad conception of capital. If they were not, he would, like Ricardo, draw a blank. *Every factor that enters into Marx's study of capitalism is a "definite social relationship."*

3

The relation is the irreducible minimum for all units in Marx's conception of social reality. This is really the nub of our difficulty in understanding Marxism, whose subject matter is not simply society but society conceived of "relationally." Capital, labor, value, and commodity are all grasped as relations, containing in themselves, as integral elements of what they are, those parts with which we tend to see them externally tied. Essentially, a change of focus has occurred from viewing independent factors that are related to viewing the particular way in which they are related in each factor, to grasping this tie as part of the meaning conveyed by its concept. This view does not rule out the existence of a core notion for each factor but treats this core notion itself as a cluster of relations.

According to the commonsense view, a social factor is taken to be logically independent of other social factors to which it is related. The ties between them are contingent rather than necessary; they could be something very different without affecting the vital character of the factors involved, a character that adheres to a part that is thought to be independent of the rest. One can logically conceive, so the argument goes, of any social factor existing without its relations to others. In Marx's view, such relations are internal to each factor (they are ontological relations), so that when an important one alters, the factor it-

self alters; it becomes something else. Its appearance and/or function has changed sufficiently for it to require a new concept. Thus, for example, if wage-labor disappeared, that is, if the workers' connection to capital radically changed, capital would no longer exist. The opposite, naturally, is also true: Marx declares it a "tautology" that "there can no longer be wage-labor when there is no longer any capital" (Marx and Engels 1945, 36). Max Hirsch is clearly right, therefore, when he points out that if "capital" is defined as a "means of exploitation and subjection of the laborer," a machine used by a farmer who owned it would not be capital, but it would be capital if he hired a man to operate it (1901, 80–81). Rather than an obvious criticism, which is how Hirsch intends it, this paradox merely illustrates the character of capital as a social relation.

In this study, I shall use the term "relation" in two different senses: first, to refer to a factor itself, as when I call capital a relation, and also as a synonym of "connection," as in speaking of the relation between different factors. Marx and Engels do the same. Besides calling capital a "social production relation [*Verhältnis*]" (1959a, 794), Marx refers to money as a "relation of production," the mode of production itself as the "relation in which the productive forces are developed" (1973, 120), and the list of such remarks is far from complete (n.d., 137). His use of "relation" as a synonym of "connection" is more extensive still, with the result that *Verhältnis* probably occurs more frequently than any other expression in Marx's writing, confounding critics and translators alike.[3] It is not entirely satisfying to use "relation" to convey both meanings, but, rather than introduce a new term, I accede to Marx's practice, with this single change: for the remainder of this book, I shall capitalize "relation" (henceforth "Relation") when it refers to a factor, as opposed to the connection between factors, to aid readers in making this important distinction. Besides, such obvious alternatives to "Relation" as "structure," "unit," and "system" suggest a closed, finished character, which is belied by Marx's treatment of real social factors. "Relation" appeals to me, as it must have to him, as the concept that is better adapted to take account of the changes and open-endedness that constitute so large a part of social life.

4

The outlook presented here must not be confused with the view that has found great favor among sociologists and others, which holds that social factors are *unintelligible* except in terms of relations. It is important to realize that Marx took the additional step indicated in his claim that society is "man himself in his social relations" (1973, 712). On one occasion, Marx specifically berates apparent allies who accuse economists of not paying enough attention to the connections between production and distribution. His complaint is that "this accusation is itself based on the economic conception that distribution exists side by side with production as a self-contained sphere" (1904, 276). Marx's own version of this

relationship is presented in such claims as, "Production is . . . at the same time consumption, and consumption is at the same time production" (1904, 278).[4]

For the average social scientist—starting with a conception of factors as logically independent of one another—the conjunction of parts in Marx's analysis is mechanical, an intrusion; it exists only where found and disappears once the investigator's back is turned, having to be explained and justified anew. One result is the endless attempts to account for causality and the accompanying need to distinguish between cause and condition. In such studies, one side of the interaction invariably wins out over the other (comes first) leading to "economic determinism" or "existentialism" or other partial positions.

In Marx's case, all conjunction is organic, intrinsic to the social units with which he is concerned and part of the nature of each; that it exists may be taken for granted. On this view, interaction is, properly speaking, *inneraction* (it is "inner connections" that he claims to study [1958, 19]). Of production, distribution, consumption, and exchange, Marx declares, "mutual interaction takes place between the various elements. Such is the case with every organic body" (1904, 292). What Marx calls "mutual interaction" (or "reciprocal effect" or "reciprocal action") is only possible because it occurs within an organic body. This is the case with everything in Marxism, which treats its entire subject matter as "different sides of one unit" (1904, 291).[5]

It is in this context that we must place Marx's otherwise confusing and confused use of "cause" and "determine." There are not some elements that are related to the factor or event in question as "causes" (meaning, among other things, that which does not condition) and others as "conditions" (meaning, among other things, that which does not cause). Instead, we find as internally related parts of whatever is said to be the cause or determining agent everything that is said to be a condition, and vice-versa. It is this conception that permits Engels to say that the whole of nature has "caused" life (1954, 267–68).

In practice, however, "cause" and "determine" are generally used to point to the effect produced by any entity in changing one or more of the relations that make up other entities. But as each one develops with the direct and indirect aid of everything else, operating on various levels, to single out any aspect as determining can only be a way of emphasizing a particular link in the problem under consideration. Marx is saying that for this factor, in this context, *this* is the influence most worth noting, the relation that will most aid our comprehension of the relevant characteristics.[6]

5

The whole at rest that I have been examining is but a limiting case of the whole in movement, for, in Paul Lafargue's words, Marx's "highly complicated world" is "in continual motion" (*Reminiscences,* n.d., 78).[7] Change and development are constantly occurring; structure is but a stage in process.

To introduce the temporal dimension into the foregoing analysis, we need only view each social factor as internally related to its own past and future forms, as well as to the past and future forms of surrounding factors. Capital, for Marx, is what capital is, was, and will be. He says of money and commodities, "before the production process they were capital only in intention, in themselves, in their destiny" (1971, 399–400).[8] It is in this manner, too, that labor is seen in the product it will soon become and the product in the labor it once was. In short, development—no matter how much facelifting occurs—is taken as an attribute of whatever undergoes development.

The present, according to this relational model, becomes part of a continuum stretching from a definable past to a knowable (if not always predictable) future. Tomorrow is today extended. To speak of such a relation between the present and the future within the context of formal logic would indicate belief in a vitalistic principle, divine will, or some other metaphysical device. But, here, all social change is conceived of as a coming-to-be of what potentially is, as the further unfolding of an already existing process, and hence discoverable by a study of this process taken as a spatial-temporal Relation. The "destiny" of money is rooted in its existing structure. So is the "destiny" of any society. What will become of it (or, more accurately, what is likely to become of it) is pieced together by an examination of the forces, patterns, and trends that constitute the major existing Relations. It is the result of such research into any particular factor or set of factors that is conveyed by Marx's concept of "law."[9]

The commonsense view recognizes two types of laws: inductive laws, which are generalizations based on the results of empirical research, and deductive laws, which are a priori statements about the nature of the world. For the first, evidence is relevant, and the predictions it occasions are never more than probable. For the second, evidence is irrelevant, and the predictions occasioned are necessary. Marx's laws possess characteristics that we associate with both of these types. Like inductive laws, Marx's laws are based on empirical research. Unlike them, however, his laws are not concerned with independent events whose ties with each other and with surrounding circumstances are contingent. Marx says that in political economy "law is chance"; the elements related have no ties other than those actually uncovered by research (Rubel 1959, 52). Whereas, for Marx, the relations he discovers are considered already present as real possibilities in the relations that preceded them (they exist there as temporally internal relations).

As regards deductive laws, Marx's laws also deal with the nature of the world, but they do so on the basis of evidence and are forever being modified by evidence. As a result, they cannot be encapsulated in simple formulae that hold true for all time. Still, strictly speaking, all Marx's laws are tautologies: given these are "A's" relations, this is what "A" must become, and in the becoming, "A" may be said to obey the law of its own development. Such laws express no more necessity than that contained in the particular group of relations for which they are standing in. The very uncertainties in the situation are their uncertainties. Yet,

by including within the law all possible developments prefigured by the relevant relations, the law itself may be said to be necessary. All that happens to a factor is the necessary working out of its law. Consequently, rather than coloring Marx's findings in any way, it is his findings that lend these laws their entire character.

The relations bound up in any factor generally make one kind of development more probable than others, and Marx often uses "law" to refer to this development alone. "Law" in this sense is the same as "tendency," and on one occasion, he goes as far as to say that all economic laws are tendencies (1958, 8).[10]

6

Until this point, the discussion has been limited to social factors that are generally recognized as such—capital, labor, class, etc.—though Marx's interpretation of them was shown to be highly unusual. However, in seeking favorable vantage points from which to analyze capitalism, a system contained relationally in each of its parts, Marx sometimes felt obliged to create new parts. This was simply a matter of mentally carving up the whole in a different manner for a particular purpose. The result is, in effect, a new social factor, a new unit in which to think about and refer to society. Perhaps the most important new social unit created in this way is the "relations of production," the core of which lies in the complex interaction of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. Another is "surplus-value." These two Relations occupy a central position in Marx's work.

The novelty of having the relations of production as a subject matter becomes evident when we consider the limited concern of most capitalist economists. The latter are interested in studying (more particularly, in measuring) what goes on in the "economy," a sector of life artificially separated from other sectors, whose necessary links with human beings as regards both preconditions and results are seldom investigated.

What *kind* of productive activity goes on in a society where people obtain what they want through the exchange of value equivalents? What *kind* of political, cultural, religious, and social life fosters such exchange and is, in turn, fostered by it? These questions are beyond the bounds of relevance established by capitalist economics, but they are well within the boundaries set by Marx. He tells us in *Capital* I, for example, that he wants to examine "*Why* is labor represented by the value of its product and labor-time by the magnitude of that value?" (1958, 80 [emphasis added]). This is really a question about how the particular "economy" that capitalist economists are content to describe came into existence and how it manages to maintain itself. By conceptualizing his subject matter as "relations of production," as a union of the main processes involved (as a factor centering upon this union), Marx facilitates his efforts to deal with this wide-ranging problem. The result, *Capital,* is not properly speaking an economic treatise but—as many readers have noted—a work on social praxis.

7

Returning to Marx's discourse, the problem of misinterpretation arises from what might be called his practice of making definitions of all his descriptions. Whatever Marx discovers about any factor, particularly if he considers it important, is incorporated into the meaning of its denoting term and becomes a part of its concept. Marx's concepts, then, are meant to convey to us the already structured information they express for him; it is in this way that they acquire a "truth value" distinct from that of the statements in which they are found (Marx and Engels 1941, 12).

Therefore, whatever Marx understands about his society, including its processes of change and the projections he has made from them, is already contained in each of the major concepts used to explain what it is he understands. Such meaning lies heavy on Marx's terms. It is this that allows Marx to equate "economic categories" with "historic laws" and makes "logic" a synonym for "law" in Marxism (Marx and Engels 1941, 12). "Law" refers to relations in the real world, while "logic," as Marx ordinarily uses it, refers to these same relations as reflected in the meanings of their covering concepts.

Marcuse offers the same insight when he claims that Marx's categories are negative and at the same time positive: "they present a negative state of affairs in the light of its positive solution, revealing the true situation in existing society as the prelude to its passing into a new form. All the Marxian concepts extend, as it were, in these two dimensions, the first of which is the complex of given social relations, and the second, the complex of elements inherent in the social reality that make for its transformation into a free social order" (Marcuse 1964, 295–96).[11] That readers make any sense of Marx's terminology at all suggests that many of the relations he sees in reality correspond, more or less, to our commonsense view of the world (which is not much to assume) and that it is these relations that constitute the core meanings of most of his concepts.[12]

Though each of Marx's major concepts has the theoretical capacity to convey the entire analysis made with its help, in practice Marx's current interest governs the degree to which the relations bound together in any social factor (and hence the meaning of its covering concept) are extended. As he moves from one problem to the next, whole new areas inside each social Relation become relevant, and some areas that were relevant in the previous context cease being so. In this way, what was formerly assumed is expressed directly, and what was expressed is now assumed. Class, for instance, has a vital role in explaining the state but only a small part in accounting for exchange, and the size of the Relation, class, in Marx's thought (and the meaning of "class" in Marx's writing) varies accordingly.

It is this practice that is responsible for the "manipulation" of classificational boundaries (both those that were generally accepted and those he himself seemed to lay down earlier) that so many of Marx's readers have found in his

work (see my introduction). Yet, each such restriction of the social whole is merely practical, a means of allowing Marx to get on with his current task. Should he ever want to extend the size of any factor, and hence the meaning of its concept, to its relational limits, he can do so. Thus, we learn, "Man, much as he may therefore be a particular individual . . . is just as much the totality—the ideal totality—the subjective existence of thought and experienced society present for itself" (Marx 1959b, 105).

8

If each of Marx's concepts has such breadth (actual or potential) and includes much of what is also expressed by other concepts, how does Marx decide on any given occasion which one to use? Why, for example, call interest (which, for him, is also capital) "interest" and not "capital"? This is really the same problem approached from the other side. Whereas before I accepted Marx's nomenclature and tried to find out what he meant, I am now asking—given his broad meanings—why does he offer the names that he does? The unorthodox answer given to the first question has made this second one of special importance.

It may appear that I have only left Marx a nominalist way out, but this is not so. The opposition between the view that the world gives rise to our conceptions and the view that naming is an arbitrary process is, in any case, a false one. The real problem is to discover the various precise ways in which what actually exists, in nature as well as in society, affects the ways we conceive of and label it; and how the latter, in turn, reacts upon what exists, particularly upon what we take to be "natural" structures. In short, this is a two-way street, and to be content to travel in only one direction is to distort. Marx's own practice in naming takes account of both the real world as it is and his conceptualization of it, which decides (as distinct from determines) what it can be. The former is seen in Marx's acceptance of the core notion of each factor, which is simply what the factor, being what it is, strikes everyone that it is (the idea is of necessity quite vague); and the latter stands out in the decisive importance he attributes to the function of each factor (grasped as any part of its core notion) in the particular subsystem of society he is examining.

In setting out what can and cannot be called "fixed capital," Marx says, "it is not a question here of a definition, which things must be made to fit. We are dealing here with definite functions which must be expressed in definite categories" (1957, 226). Thus, capital in a situation where it functions as interest would be called "interest," and vice-versa. However, a change in function only results in a new name (as opposed to a descriptive metaphor) if the original factor is actually conceived to be what it is now functioning as. That is, capital can only *act as* or *appear to be* interest and, hence, can never really deserve its name unless we are able to conceive of the two as somehow one. This, of course, is just what Marx's relational conception allows him to do. Through its inter-

nal ties to everything else, each factor is everything else viewed from this particular angle, and what applies to them necessarily applies to it, taken in this broad sense. Thus, each factor has—in theory—the potential to take the names of others (of whatever applies to them) when it functions as they do, that is, in ways associated with their core notions.

When Marx calls theory a "material force" (1970, 137), or when Engels refers to the state as an "economic factor" (Marx and Engels 1941, 484), they are misusing words only on our standard.[13] On the relational view, theory and state are being given the names of their own facets, whose core functions they are performing. Thus, Marx says, in the instance quoted, that theory becomes a material force "once it gets a hold of men," that is, once it becomes a driving factor in their lives, strongly influencing character and actions. This role is generally performed by a material force, such as the mode of production, but theory can also perform it, and when it does it is said to become a "material force."

To understand Marx's nomenclature, however, it is not enough to know that naming attaches to function, which in turn is conceived of within a relational whole. The question arises whether the particular function observed is objective (actually present in society) or subjective (there because Marx sees it to be). The answer is that it is both: the functions, according to which Marx ascribes names, exist, but it is also true that they are conceptualized in a manner that allows Marx to take note of them. Other people viewing the same "raw facts" with another conceptual scheme may not even observe the relation he has chosen to emphasize.

For example, when Marx calls the worker's productive activity "variable capital," he is labeling a function that only he sees; in this case, because this is how such activity appears "from the point of view of the process of creating surplus-value," a unit that Marx himself introduced (1958, 209). It is only after we finish reading *Capital* and accept the new concept of "surplus-value" that "variable capital" ceases to be an arbitrary name for labor-power. Generally speaking, we understand why Marx has used a particular name to the extent that we are able to grasp the function referred to, which in turn depends on how similar his conception of the relevant factors is to our own.

Marx's concepts, it is clear, have been tailored to fit both his unique vision of capitalism and his unusual conception of social reality. The great lesson to be drawn from all this is that Marx's concepts are not our own, no matter how much they may appear so. In short, the fact that Marx uses the same words as we do should not mislead us into believing that he has the same concepts. Words are the property of language and are common to all who use this language. Concepts, or ideas about the world that find expression in words (or words in so far as they contain such ideas), are best grasped as the property of individuals or of schools of thought. Expressing what he knows as well as how he knows it, Marx's concepts tell us much more (often), much less (sometimes), and much different (always) than we think they do. In his preface to the English edition

of *Capital* I, Engels says it is "self-evident that a theory which views modern capitalist production as a mere passing stage in the economic history of mankind, must make use of terms different from those habitual to writers who look upon the form of production as imperishable and final" (Marx 1958, 5). Whether the need for new terms (concepts) here is "self-evident" is debatable; that Marx felt such a need is not.

Moreover, as if this were not enough, the very sense conveyed by Marx's concepts is unstable. What he understands at any given time of the interrelations that make up social reality is reflected in the meanings of the words he uses. But these interrelations are constantly changing, and, further, Marx is forever learning more about them through his research. Hence, eight years later, in his introduction to *Capital* III (after a considerable volume of misinterpretation had passed under the bridge), Engels also warns that we should not expect to find any "fixed, cut-to-measure, once and for all applicable definitions in Marx's works" (Marx 1959a, 13–14).[14]

The lack of definitions (that is, of statements obviously meant as definitions) in Marx's writings has often been belabored, but it should now be clear what difficulty he had in providing them. Viewing the world as undergoing constant change and as devoid of the clear-cut classificational boundaries that distinguish the commonsense approach, Marx could not keep a definition of one factor from spilling over into everything. For him, any isolating definition is necessarily "one-sided" and probably misleading. There are critics, such as Sartre, who have accepted Engels's dictum.[15] More typical is the reaction of R. N. Carew-Hunt, who is so convinced of the impossibility of such an approach to meaning that he claims (against the evidence) that Marx does not manipulate language in this way, though his dialectic, according to Carew-Hunt, requires that he do so (1963, 50). Basically unaware of Marx's relational conception, most critics simply cannot take the concepts that are entailed by this conception for what they are.[16]

9

What emerges from this interpretation is that the problem Marx faces in his analysis is not how to link separate parts but how to individuate instrumental units in a social whole that finds expression everywhere. If I am right, the usual approach to understanding what Marx is getting at must be completely reversed: from trying to see the way in which labor produces value, we must accept at the outset a kind of equation between the two (the two social Relations express the same whole—as Marx says, "Value is labor" [1959a, 795])—and try instead to see the ways in which they differ. Marx's law of value is concerned with the "metamorphosis of value," with the various forms it takes in the economy, and not with its production by labor. This, and not what Smith and Ricardo had said before, is the economic theory illustrated in the massive volumes of *Capital.*

So, too, instead of seeking a strict causal tie between the mode of production and other institutions and practices of society that precludes complex social interaction, we must begin by accepting the existence of this interaction and then seek out the ways in which Marx believes that the effects proceeding from the mode of production and other economic factors (narrowly understood) are more important. Such interaction, as we have seen, is a necessary part of each social Relation. This, and not technological determinism, is the conception of history illustrated in all Marx's detailed discussions of political and social phenomena. If Marx is at ease with a foot on each side of the fence, it is because for him the fence does not exist. In light of this analysis, most of Marx's opponents are guilty of criticizing him for answers to questions he not only did not ask but—given his relational conception of reality—could not ask. Marx's real questions have been lost in the process. They must be rehabilitated.

Notes

1. Quite the reverse is the case in France, where Maximilien Rubel, Henri Lefebvre, and Louis Althusser—to mention only a few of the better-known writers—have all made heavy use of this work.

2. Marx also says, "Capital . . . is nothing without wage-labor, value, money, price, etc." (1904, 292).

3. Though generally translated as "relation," *Verhältnis* is sometimes rendered as "condition," "proportion," or "reaction," which should indicate something of its special sense. Maximilien Rubel has mentioned to the author that *Verhältnis,* coming incessantly into the discussion, was perhaps the most difficult term he had to deal with in his many translations of Marx's writings into French. As well as using the French equivalents of the words already listed, Rubel also rendered *Verhältnis* on occasion as *système, structure,* and *problème.* Another complication arises from the fact that *Beziehung,* another standard term in Marx's vocabulary, can also be translated into English as "relation," though it is generally translated as "connection." I intend the concept "relation" to contain the same complexities that I take to exist in Marx's concept *Verhältnis.*

4. Alfred G. Meyer has ventured close to this formulation by presenting Marxism as among other things a system of "reciprocally interdependent variables" (1963, 24ff.). But this still begs all the old questions regarding the quality of their interdependence: if the variables are logically independent, how can they reciprocally affect one another? If they are not, what does this mean? It is my impression that in this manner what is called "functionalism" is generally either inconsistent or incomprehensible. For too many writers on Marxism, friends and foes alike, talk of "interdependence" and "interaction" is simply a matter of papering over the cracks. But once these cracks appear (once we ascribe a logical independence to factors), they cannot be gotten rid of so easily; and if we take the further step and dismiss the notion of logical independence, the entire terrain of what is taken for granted has been radically altered.

5. The "totality" of social life that Marx seeks to explain is, as he tells us on another occasion, "the reciprocal action of these various sides on one another" (Marx and Engels 1964, 50).

6. It is highly significant, too, that in his political and historical works, as opposed to his more theoretical writings in economics and philosophy, Marx seldom uses *bestimmen* ("determine"), preferring to characterize relations in these areas with more flexible-sounding expressions. English translators have tended to reinforce whatever "determinist" bias is present in Marx's work by generally translating *bedingen* (which can mean "condition" or "determine") as "determine." Compare, for example, the opening chapter of *The German Ideology* with the German original.

7. Lafargue was Marx's son-in-law and the only person to whom Marx ever dictated any work. Consequently, Lafargue was in an excellent position to observe the older man's thinking. Of his subject matter, Lafargue says, Marx "did not see a thing singly, in itself and for itself, separate from its surroundings: he saw a highly complicated world in continual motion." Then, quoting Vico ("'Thing is a body only for God, who knows everything; for man, who knows only the exterior, it is only the surface'"), Lafargue claims that Marx grasped things in the manner of Vico's God (*Reminiscences* n.d., 78).

8. Elsewhere, Marx refers to the "destiny" of man being to develop his powers (Marx and Engels 1964, 315).

9. Of economic laws and the political economy of his day, Marx says, "it does not comprehend these laws—that is, it does not demonstrate how they arise from the very nature of private property" (1959b, 67–68). The changes occurring in private property (which he inflates here to the size of the economy) are said to be discoverable in its component relations.

10. Marx also speaks of "a general rate of surplus-value—viewed as a tendency, like all other laws" (1959a, 172).

11. Unfortunately, Marcuse does not attempt to explain how such a use of terms is possible, what it presupposes in the way of a conceptual scheme, and the problems of communication it necessarily poses. Without the foundations that I try to supply in chapters 2 and 3 of this work, such correct insights—of which there are many in the writings of Marcuse, Korsch, Lukács, Lefebvre, Goldmann, Dunayevskaya, Sartre, Sweezy, Kosik, the early Hook, and a few others—are left to hang unsupported, and are in the final analysis unconvincing.

12. Common sense is all that strikes us as being obviously true, such that to deny any part of it appears, at first hearing, to involve us in speaking nonsense. In this work, I also use "common sense" to refer to that body of generally unquestioned knowledge and the equally unquestioned approach to knowledge that is common to the vast majority of scholars and layman in Western capitalist societies.

13. Other striking examples of what most readers must consider a misuse of words are Engels's reference to race as an "economic factor" and Marx's reference to the community as a "force of production" (Marx and Engels 1941, 517; Marx 1973, 495).

14. Because the appearance of things is constantly changing, Engels declares, "the unity of concept and appearance manifests itself as essentially an infinite process" (Marx and Engels 1941, 529).

15. Sartre offers an enlightening comparison between Marx, whose concepts evolve with history and his research into it, and modern Marxists, whose concepts remain unaffected by social change: "The open concepts of Marxism have closed in" (1963, 26–34). On this subject, see also Lefebvre 1947, 204–11.

16. The conception of meaning presented here can also be found in Hegel. Hook is one of the few commentators who recognizes their common and unusual approach to meaning when, referring to the views of Marx and Hegel, he says, "Meanings must develop with the objects of which they are the meanings. Otherwise, they cannot be adequate to their subject matter" (1963, 65–66).

It is interesting to note that one of the major reasons that has led current linguistic philosophy to make a radical distinction between what a term means and what it refers to (between definitions and descriptions) is the alleged instability of the latter. To equate what a term means with what it refers to is, first, to have meanings that change with time and place (sometimes drastically) and, second, to get involved with those conditions in the real world that help make what is being referred to what it is. In short, this conception of meaning inclines one toward a conception of internal relations. It is from this exposed position that the question currently in vogue, "Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use," marks a total retreat.

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Dance of the Dialectic STEPS IN MARX'S METHOD

BERTELL OLLMAN

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Marx made extremely creative use of dialectical method to analyze the origins, operation, and direction of capitalism. Unfortunately, his promised book on method was never written, so that readers wishing to understand and evaluate Marx's theories, or to revise or use them, have had to proceed without a clear grasp of the dialectic in which the theories are framed. The result has been more disagreement over "what Marx really meant" than over the writings of any other major thinker.

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Bertell Ollman, a professor of politics at New York University, is the author of *Dialectical Investigations*, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*, *Social and Sexual Revolution: Essays on Marx and Reich*, and other books. In 2002 he won the first Charles A. McCoy Distinguished Career Award from the New Political Science Section of the American Political Science Association.

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