ECONOMY AND CULTURE IN MARXISM
TOWARDS A CRITICAL REEXAMINATION

Summary

The relation of "specificity and universality" presents problems to marxist theory and practice that are far from being resolved. The development of different marxist projects in the world has contributed to shed light on the eurocentric characters of classical marxism. On the different continents a new reading of MARX started that discovered "limits" in his theory — but also documents a growing awareness of these limits in Marx himself.

Classical historical materialism seemed to have discovered universal laws of society and history, independent from "culture" and "ideology" which were thought merely to "express" or to "reflect" the universal-fundamental relations.

The universal was conceived of in terms of the Marxian Critique of political economy. A framework of general concepts (productive forces, relations of production, social formation, basis and superstructure, etc.) served to articulate general laws (such as: productive forces determine the relations of production which determine a whole superstructure', etc.) and to conceive this wellknown idea of the fundamental types of social (or ‘societal’) formation necessarily and universally following each other in a given sequence.

Dogmatic and mechanistic deviations of marxism were based on such assumptions. The whole history of marxism is accompanied by periodic criticism of so called economism.

In the centre of the ideas of Antonio GRAMSCI we find the critique of economism. Economism is defeated, he taught, “by developing the concept of hegemony”. This meant — and still means — a thoroughgoing reinterpretation of marxist theory and practice. The concepts of culture and ideology become important. The cultural is no longer reduced to (and dissolved in) the economic. This allows a new conception of cultural specificities and their relation to universal factors. Society is now understood in terms of a "multiversal" structure.

In this paper some outlines of a critique of economistic marxism and of a new "hegemonial" (which is the contrary of hegemonistic, as we will see) concept of politics will be outlined.

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Anouar Abdel Malek has indicated a number of important problem areas. In relation to marxist tradition — to its strength as well as to its weaknesses — they demand a critical — or self-critical — reevaluation of "truths" that for a long time

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1 Presented at the University of the United Nations, Tokyo, 1981.
had been accepted as "self-evident". In the last decade many voices in the divided fields of international marxism could be heard that try to rearticulate marxism in the light of present experiences and necessities.

The problematic positions within marxism appear as specific incapabilities to deal with the main problematic areas of today's world. This is not only a problem for marxists but for the whole world, since marxism is indispensable for mankind as a 'comprehensive proposal' of what Marx called the 'humanization of the world'.

Marx discovered the inhuman dynamics of capitalist development. What he describes and analyzes as compulsive capitalization — i.e. compulsive permanent revolution of productive mode, human interactions, cultures, etc., following the dynamics of capitalist market relations — has to be completed, maybe refined in some respects, but in its main outlines it has shown to be exceptionally valid. Mankind has, in the last hundred years, produced no other vision and project that could in its comprehensive explanation of capitalist dynamics and in its appeal to conscious practice of humanization of the world, compete with Marxism. There are religions, philosophies, doctrines of all kinds that show a strong impact on political, cultural, and — last but not least — economic developments. But compared to the marxist project they prove to be much more particular, or even 'complementary' in relation to the dynamic core of capitalist economics. The essentials of a socio-political discourse cannot be found only in what positively is said, but also in what is not said. Every discourse is accompanied by a silent discourse, the articulation of its silences. A political — or religious, philosophical, etc. — discourse may be as influential as possible in a given conjuncture, still it is possible that its silences coincide with the most burning problem areas of its society. Very often indeed, there are political situations in which the 'vacuum' of a political discourse in relation to critical problems seems even to contribute to its success. As we all, alas, know, a political success doesn't necessarily mean a forthcoming substantially social success. Illusion is a highly important factor in politics, and to some extent it is more the
dialectics of des/illusion that explains certain developments than that of real
learning.

To appreciate the marxian project of 'scientific socialism' — not to be confounded
with what passed as such in the 20th century — to be an indispensable element of
universal relevance, by no means entails a noncritical attitude towards it. On the
contrary, there is no harder test than real necessity or need. That is why a
thoroughgoing criticism of marxist tradition(s) is of interest.

The most general question is: If marxism claims to present analyses and proposals
of universal relevance — could it be that this claimed universality were but the
disguised form of european specificity? A whole set of assumtions of classical
marxism, concerning a so-called 'iron law of development', unavoidably leading in
eyery part of the world through a succession of 'stages' to capitalist industrialization
and finally to socialism, had (or have) to be revised. But how? It seems to be
relatively easy to understand that the assumption of the same sequence of societal
formations, following each other, ruled by some universal evolutionary logic, is in
contradiction with historical evidence. But it would be too easy a victory — and a
too selfdamaging one — to surrender Marxism totally to this kind of evidences.

One way out from eurocentrism seemed to lead to the assumption that there was a
specific european project or 'logic',and that there were different 'logics' in different
cultural formations, just as romanticism had assumed the existence of different
national 'spirits' ('Volksgeister'). But how to conceive of these "logics" or "spirits"?
And how to avoid the trap to fall from occidentalism into orientalism? And in
addition to an oriental confession to go on believing nolens volens in 'occidental'
technology. For if ever facts proved to have normative power, technical
achievements — with all the economic, informational and military effects they are
entailing — display such normative effects, often in the contrary of what is wanted
or said. The power-effects of advanced technology have become so huge that 'it'
has aquired the status of a universal compulsive necessity that cannot any longer be
reduced to the status of a eurologic specificity. The search for new specific
volksgeister leads into a deadlock.

The hard core of the problem we must finally tackle with is the field of economic
dynamics of technical development, moreover of its allocation, and of the control
of its manifold power-effects. Quality, speed and direction of technological
development of today's world are still determined by capitalist valorization, mainly
in its most advanced form of multinational companies in a complex network of
direct and indirect exploitation-relationships. Important new sectors and projects
have merged in the world, but nevertheless the logics of the valorization process
[Verwertungsprozess], discovered by Marx and presented in Capital, works as the
compulsively dominant factor. There is no way out ignoring either technology or
economic relationships.

Are we at least supposed to surrender to some technological determinism? Or is
this meant to restore the old economistic version of Marxism? Neither — nor.
What is the error in economism? The error is not to see for instance in capitalism
the dominating position of capital. The error would be — and indeed has been —
to reduce everything to this dominating relationship. Economism is economic
reductionism, ignoring the inner logic of cultural formations.

Critique of economistic Marxism is vital for its emancipation from eurocentrism.
But this doesn't mean that the economistic version of Marxism is very helpful in
European politics. Antonio Gramsci called it 'economistic superstition':

The claim (as an essential of historical materialism) to conceive of every
political and ideological fluctuation as of an immediate expression of the
[economic] basis, must be combatted as a primitive infantilism... (Notebook 7,
§24)

In Gramsci's view — developed in his own errors and defeats — economism is a
hindrance to political articulation and to the development of a comprehensive
socio-political project. In his Prison-Notebooks he finds it evident that the rejection of compromises on principle is closely connected with economism; for this rejection is based on [...] the firm persuasion that for historical development there are objective laws of the character of natural laws. This is completed by a fatalist finalism, similar to the religious one. (Noteb. 13, §23)

Implicitely this remark represents also a critique of a tendency within Marx' own theory. In Capital, Marx writes (preface to the first edition):

Intrinsically, it is not a question of the higher or lower degree of development of the social antagonisms that result from the natural laws of capitalist production. It is a question of these laws themselves, of these tendencies working with iron necessity towards inevitable results. The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.

As we all know this has shown to become somehow true in relation to Germany to which this message originally was adressed and where the intellectuals and politicians thought capitalism to be an English specificity. But in a universal sense this assertion of Marx has shown to be erroneous. The industrially more developed countries do — under conditions of capitalist world market — certainly not show to the great majority of the less developed areas of the world the image of their own future. And this for many reasons. The first reason, well-known now, is the underdevelopment-effect of capitalist developement. The way the law of value works unavoidably tends to create the centre-periphery-structure with the fatal de-economization of the less developed countries at least in their majority.

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2 Three decades later, this critique (influenced by the dependencia-theory) has to be differenciated in the light of catching-up processes in capitalist-industrial terms by countries like China and India. Cf. my reflections on “Transnational High-Tech-Capitalism and the Future(s) of Marxism” (2005). (Note added 2010)
The second reason consists in a whole set of conditions, forces and instances that are other than economic. They certainly are not unconditioned by economic relationships, but they cannot be reduced to such relationships. A very important group of such factors can be conceived of as *cultural forms and practices*. If they are conditioned by the economic developments, there is in no way a one-way-relationship between these two 'dimensions' of societal life. The 'cultural' — and we have to make sure what we want to say by this concept — has proved to display a strong impact on economic relations and their dynamics. The 'same' economic relationships — and also the 'same' technologies — are not the same in different cultural traditions.

What can we understand by 'the cultural'? Does it subsume religious elements, for instance? And how do we conceive its relation to the political? To be sure, we shall not reduce the cultural to art. This would be the narrow and normative concept, linked to 'cultures' of ruling classes. On the other hand there would be no use in taking the overgeneralized concept of anthropologists, using 'culture' as a term to describe social structure or 'social value systems' as a whole. We need a concept allowing us to articulate the specific of the cultural dimension of societies; and we need this since we hope to become able to describe certain specificities as cultural. Now, how to conceive of the cultural distinction?

Working definition: By the “cultural” we understand all activities or dimensions of activities in which people translate the objective conditions of life into a fulfilled life. By 'fulfilled life' we want to grasp all dimensions of life activities in which the acting people treat themselves as purpose.

This approach is still very abstract and entails problems and possible misunderstandings. The first misunderstanding could be to interpret our working definition as a normative one. It is true that something like 'values' is implied, whenever people prefer certain ways of life to others. But this *cultural valuation* is part of their own action, not of our approach. So we may conclude that every
cultural distinction, made by people themselves, implies a 'valuation'. Analysis should find out this dimension, not add it.

Another objection may come from the opposite side. If in our working definition we refrain from valuation, doesn't this abstention open the door to everything and all? How can we distinguish selfish individualism from common necessities? The activities of the slaveholder, in which he is treating himself as his purpose, will they be subsumed under the same concept as the counterculture of the slaves? This objection is true and is not true. It is true that by our approach we don't get one culture, but a plurality of cultures. The antagonisms between these cultures must not be inserted by theory, but discovered.

An important implication of our approach is to conceive of the cultural as of a dimension or an aspect of the whole life. Life includes labour. The realm to which the concept of the cultural applies is thus coextensive with social life process, not the cultural itself however. The cultural in this sense is no particular realm, no distinguished practice, but a dimension or an aspect of all realms and practices. How then conceive of these diverse ‘cultural’ practices, that are often identified with culture? This objection leads us to the next step. If we identify as the cultural only a dimension of life activities, we must consequently have a look at the other 'dimensions' and at the relations between dimensions of different kinds.

So, in a very preliminary and abstract way, what other dimensions can we isolate? At first there is the economy with its two fundamental relations: the relation humankind/nature, the productive metabolism, on the other hand the relation among people, the social metabolism (mainly in the form of exchange). In both the economic elementary relations, of production as well as of exchange, the activities with all their elements are instrumental activities; the means are supposed to procure other means. By this the economic type of necessity is defined — often identified with necessity par excellence.
If we consider the relationships of production, we must deal with different kinds of antagonisms, the still prevailing type in our epoch being the class antagonism of labour and capital. So we must take into account a whole set of relationships, institutions and practices, destined to secure and to reproduce the relationships of economic domination. We must deal with the coercive apparatuses, but also with education and law, with morals and religion, etc. Very often these not directly coercive institutions are subsumed to the cultural. And indeed there are strong arguments to do so, even from the standpoint of our working definition. But there are stronger arguments against such a subsumption. Let us have a look at them. The argument pro can show elements of common concern and of humanistic orientations, directed against domination and against exploitation, maybe even against instrumentalizations. These aspects point at the cultural in the sense of our working definition. On the other hand, the arguments contra show us the functions of inner subordination, of voluntary acceptance of domination, of stabilization of the antagonist social order. Maybe this will bring us to see a split, an inner contradiction, running through apparatuses like schools, churches, etc. But we cannot close our eyes in front of these functions of domination, since these functions are dominant (at least normally) within these apparatuses. From this we conclude two things: First, we conceive of concrete phenomena not in ‘metaphysical’ terms of homogeneous qualities, but of an inner structure of different, very often contradictory elements, with a dominant relation. Second, as to the examples we were discussing, church, school, and so on, we shall not subsume their dominant relation to the cultural, but we shall introduce another term to designate their more than often dominating function in class societies: the ideological.

Working definition: By the ideological we understand *socialization from above* [Vergesellschaftung von oben]. We also could speak with the marxist classics of alienated socialization.

We take our central term from Engels who spoke in "The Origin of Family..." of
'ideological powers' (ideologische Mächte), understanding the State as the first ideological power. Engels conceives of these ideological powers as of social powers subordinating society, constituting a 'social transcendence' or 'celestialization'. We have developed this subject elsewhere and drop it here.

As a very rough model we may now differentiate economic, directly coercive, cultural and ideological relations. In regard to concrete phenomena we can analyse the inner relation of these dimensions, and we may identify the respective dominant element. This induces us to reconstruct the inner struggles of our phenomena. Relations are very rich, indeed. For example the ideological powers, aimed to reproduce subordination to economic domination, are — and must be — at the same time in a certain contradiction to what they have to protect. As to the cultural and the ideological, they are directly opposed to each other, because the cultural has its purpose in itself, whereas the ideological claims subordination to higher values or instances that demand absolute obedience as, in the last instance, God. On the other hand, opposed to coercion and to commercialization, the self-purpose orientation and the orientation towards absolute transcendent instances (God again) discover, within their contradiction, a common relation. A genetic theory of the ideological can show why this is necessarily so and why otherwise the ideological without its complementarity could not accomplish its specific functions.

If we accept what has been developed here, we come to understand the alternative between economistic Marxism and new assertions of civilizational specificities as problematic in itself. Both the competing positions assume one homogeneous quality, one internal 'logic' to express itself in all phenomena. If economistic Marxism claimed one general abstract universe, the new opposition claims a plurality of monolithic universes. We prefer to discover the world as a 'multiversal' reality, this ‘multiversity’ being a universal character. There is not one logic, but the

interference of different 'logics'. Even economic determination is not to be conceived of in reductionist terms, 'from the standpoint of resulting phenomena' [fertige Erscheinungen], as Marx says. Determinism in a historical materialist sense should not be understood in a quasi religious way, i.e. as predetermination. It must be brought together with creative human activity. If a certain phenomenon could be produced only on the basis of given economic relationships, still there would be many different phenomena that could be produced on this basis. The mere analytical-reductive method misses the decisive dimension, the instance of 'translation'.

If classical Marxism carried with itself a set of specific european self-evidences and overgeneralized experiences, these are brought to the surface — and subsequently can be eliminated — if we fully reconstruct reality in its contradictory relations. To do this, we must break with the reductionist logic in Marxism. In the works of the marxist classics we find many valuable hints, concepts and models for this purpose, but we also find simplistic and sometimes economistic formula that are in contradiction to the main principles. But if we consult Marx' chef d'oeuvre, 'Capital', we discover — less in the prefaces than in the concrete analyses — a conception that can help us a lot. For instance when he analyses capitalist production he shows very clearly the contradiction of quite heterogeneous elements. From the standpoint of work process he shows living human beings opposed to things; from the standpoint of capitalist valorization he shows ‘variable’ elements (labour) being opposed to ‘constant’ elements (material assets), both as elements of capital. There is as well a hierarchy as an inner contradiction between these relations. We shall not deepen this argument here and now. But in the center of Marx' method we find such a program of reconstruction of the contradictory relationships of heterogeneous factors. Marx' categories are to be understood as theoretical elements of reconstruction, as he says (in his famous fragmentary introduction to the Grundrisse), abstractions, that may never be understood in a
direct empirical way but are meant to be brought together in the reconstruction of the concrete in theory.

The link of hidden eurocentrism and economicism in marxist tradition has done a great damage also within Europe, within politics. Lenin had to struggle against economicism in order to be able to construct a comprehensive political approach to the problems of his country. Against class reductionism he introduced the concept of the *popular* in marxist politics. We cannot show the limits and contradictions in this orientation and above all the transformations of Lenin’s approach by his successors. Instead, to conclude, we want to give an idea of the transformations, Antonio Gramsci tried to introduce in the marxist approach to politics, culture, and ideology. As he saw,

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    economicism is combatted by developing the concept of hegemony.
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The core of this orientation towards a hegemonial approach to politics is, as we could say, the opposite of what has been called 'hegemonism'. Hegemonism means dependency, a relation of supremacy and subordination, control by power-relations, etc. The hegemonial approach bases politics mainly on consensus. The assumption here, again, is not that of a homogeneous reality nor of one that should or could be made homogeneous. Relationships are thought of in terms of difference and their articulation in a comprehensive approach to social problems.

Gramsci even introduced a radical innovation into the marxist conception of basis/superstructure. He divided the 'superstructure' into two realms of quite different logics. Between economics and the state (in a narrow sense) he introduced what he called 'civil society'. We could call it the society of citizens. This domain embraces both cultural and ideological formations in our sense (in order to avoid misunderstandings: we understand by 'cultural formations' those, in which the cultural is the dominating relation). The essential is, that in this sphere the processes must be understood 'from the bottom up', as activities of 'translation'.
The decisive preparation and fundamenting of a political power-bloc is working within this società civile.

I have tried to point out some consequences of the Gramscian approach through introducing the concept of *structural hegemony*. By this I understand the *activating effect* of hegemonial arrangements. The problems of such arrangements is that they must produce a common coherent — or better: articulating — element within the ongoing differences.

Years ago the french left has produced the slogan “union, not fusion”. To this we may add the complementary slogan “fusion leads to fission”.

In these slogans an experience is expressed that we want to relate to our more global question as to the contradictory relation of universality and specificity. In each comprehensive political formation an analogous relation is inherent. To emancipate Marxism from its hidden eurocentrism, linked to its emancipation from economicism, allows us at the same time a more productive application to culturally very different countries *and* to the development of political projects, last but not least in Europe itself.

Appendix

RE-READING THE TEXTS OF MARX AND ENGELS

I.

Why has socio-economic determination so often been understood in a reductionist way? As if concrete formations could be reduced analytically to economic conditions?

In the conception of Marx and Engels it was clearly understood that things should be approached in terms of human activity, practice. If we follow this rule, we understand that we must construct the concepts in the direction of the process and
taking into account creative activity.

Marx opposed his genetic-reconstructive method, "from the bottom up", as "the only scientific" method to the analytical-reductive method. In 'Capital' he indicates this general formula referring to criticism of religion:

Technology discloses man's mode of dealing with Nature, the process of production by which he sustains his life, and thereby also lays bare the mode of formation of his social relations, and of the mental conceptions that flow from them. Every history of religion even, that fails to take account of this material basis, is uncritical. It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly core of the misty creations of religion, than, conversely, it is, to develop from the actual relations of life the corresponding celestialized forms of those relations. The latter method is the only materialistic, and therefore the only scientific one. (CAPITAL I, chap.13, footnote 89 / MEW 23, p.393)

The quotation could be read as a proof of Marx' technological determinism; and indeed the beginning of our quotation is at least open to such an interpretation. What could 'technological determinism' possibly mean? It would mean the assumption that a given — for instance religious — formation could be analytically dissolved and reduced to a technological basis, i.e. 'explained' by such a 'basis'. But why should it be the only scientific method to reconstruct a development if it were much easier to find the explanation by analytical reduction? Marx' commentary is somehow confusing. In reality it doesn't make much sense to pretend the reductive way to be 'easier', if it is true that it will not lead to a scientific understanding at all. It still remains speculative. Very often the speculative reduction works by mere analogy or 'similarity'. Many of Lukács' writings show him looking for 'similarities' or 'correspondences' between 'basic' and 'superstructural' phenomena and then to claim the latter to reflect the first. To go the other way, to develop out of the actual relationships of life their celestialized forms, demands a genetic reconstruction in
the direction of the process. And since human history, as Marx in the quoted context says,

differs from natural history in this, that we have made the former, but not the latter,
this conception entails taking into account activity, practice.

In the last few years British culturalism, condensed with its very opposite, the Althusserian antihumanism, has led to enormously valuable contributions to a better 'dialectical' understanding of the way economical determinations work. The researchers of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies for instance, in many of their reports have shown, that in cultural processes the objective conditions of life are actively transformed into lived conditions. There is no automatic way in which f.i. class conditions lead to certain styles of living. The transformation of objective conditions into lived conditions has necessarily a creative impact (see, f.i., Willis 1977).

To break with economism in Marxist theory does not mean to abolish 'determinism' but to understand it dialectically, thus taking into account creative human activity. The methodical question is by no means a merely academic problem. It is linked to a quite different approach to 'specificity' in practice.

II.

In some of the famous letters of the old Frederic Engels we find this well known self-criticism. In a letter to Mehring (14 July 1893) he says, Marx and himself had been "all equally guilty" in this sense:

...we all laid, and were bound to lay, the main emphasis, in the first place, on the derivation of the political, juridical and other ideological notions, and of actions arising through the medium of these notions, from basic economic facts. But in so doing, we neglected the formal side — the ways and means
by which these notions, etc., come about — for the sake of the content.
First of all we must admit that the following generations of Marxists also
"neglected the formal side". Maybe already this self-criticism doesn't go far enough.
What does Engels mean by "neglecting of the formal side"? In the context of the
quoted letter he gives an example. At first he states a contradiction in the "so-called
thinker": He accomplishes the process of ideology consciously, but
the real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him [...]. Hence, he
imagines false or seeming motive forces.
By "real motive forces" Engels obviously understands "the basic economic facts".
As the imaginary motive forces of the "so-called thinker" Engels sees the elements
of the inner logic of the ideological. In the case of the "so-called thinker":
as all action is mediated by thought, it appears to him to be ultimately based
upon thought.
In his conscious doing, i.e., in what we could call his ideological practice, he is
working on and with inherited "thought material", as Engels calls it. If we look at
the European tradition we see at once the problem. During hundreds and hundreds
of years philosophers always interpret and reinterpret what the "Philosophus",
Aristotle, has written. 'Under' this level of the philosophical process the social
process is going on, feudalism is collapsing or at least being transformed into a
capital-dominated formation. The original assumption of Marx and Engels,
however, was that the philosophical process should "reflect" or be a mere "echo"
to the economic process. As Engels is aware, this is valid not only for philosophers
but for all kind of ideologists.
The ideologist [...] thus possesses in every sphere of science material which
has formed itself independently out of the thought of previous generations
and has gone through its own independent process of development in the
brains of these successive generations.
In my opinion Engels does not go far enough in his self-criticism. If at first he had assumed ideological processes to simply reflect economical processes he now seems to assume that to respect "the formal side" of the process only makes it necessary to look for "unknown" "mediations". He still seems to assume that in the long run the old thesis is valid, that ideological processes can be reduced to economic facts. Thus he only conceives of a modification within reductionism.

The error lies in the reductionist assumption itself. In the development of the theories of Marx and Engels we discover two struggling tendencies — sometimes there is no open struggle between them but a hidden coexistence of incoherent elements. In 'Capital', in the concrete historical analyses, of Marx, in the late writings (included the letters) of Engels, we find excellent pioneering work in the non-reductionist direction. A critical reexamination of Marx' and Engels' theories will have to be based on these elements, to analyse their implications and consequences — and to interpret them in the light of new historical experiences, also of the scientific developments, last but not least in the interest to augment the use-value of marxist theory in the approach to the most threatening problems of our world, to the danger of nuclear war, to the rapid immiserization of so many populations in the Third World, and of the destruction of natural environment, i.e. of the biosphere of humankind.

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