

THE “SCIENTIFIC”  
AND THE “IDEOLOGICAL”  
IN A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

It is the essence of a work such as Marx's to provoke new interpretations in the course of history. His work is, in fact, at once thought, and an action aimed at transforming the human and social world. The sudden appearance of a communist world, in historically unforeseen forms, its coexistence with a capitalist world—itsself quite different from its 19th century version—and the relationship between *developed* countries and those developing countries which were once colonies; this present state on our planet leads to new inquiries about Marxism and to a return to Marx's fundamental writings and texts, which are inseparable from Lenin's interpretations. Any reading and interpretation of Marx in a contemporary historical context is due, today, to Louis

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Althusser and his pupils. We are not, however, going to dwell on this actual (still unforeseeable) meaning, but on some of the major themes of this interpretation. What is the "scientific," what is this new science, *historical materialism*, that Marx had begun to form? what, in this light, becomes of philosophy, that is, with Marx and Lenin, *dialectical materialism*? and lastly what sort of relation is there between the *ideologies*, in a sense of which Marx is the instigator, and science or philosophy?

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A reflexion about science, or rather about the scientificity of science is called an *epistemology*. It is to Gaston Bachelard that we owe a notable initiation to this epistemology. By virtue of a history of the sciences, but a reconsidered, recurrent history, Bachelard brought to light the construction of concepts and scientific theories, and their realization in the laboratory in the form of a phenomeno-technique that creates its own phenomena in order to prolong as much as to confirm what one can well term a *theoretical practice*. This theoretical practice (an expression that L. Althusser applies to Marx's scientific work), this new scientific spirit, is as different as it could be from any empiricism or positivism, in the usual meaning of the term. The elaboration of the concepts of a science, or even of a particular field of physics, is the antithesis to a reading or immediate translation of the live experience, namely what we call the real in everyday life. Bachelard devoted all his efforts to this separation of scientific conception from empiricism. The end product is not, however, an Idealism, but a *relational materialism*. In his studies of the formation of scientific concepts, which alone can define rationality, Bachelard has ably described this *theoretical practice*—without recourse to those terms which are fully suited to his purpose—which is aware of the *obstacles* constantly encountered by the "scientific" in what is taken as being an immediate experience. There are, consequently, breaks and ruptures in the reconsidered history of a science. The history of the phlogiston is out of date, but the theory of heat, on the contrary, belongs to the real past. The idea of specific heat is a scientific idea. There is no positive dialectic that allows one to pass from one to the other: the one is ideological, a *fragment* of a representational system that is as-

sociated with experience as lived; the other is scientific, a *moment* of a theoretical elaboration that has its own dialectic—if one wants to use the word kept by G. Bachelard. There must, then, be a thorough purification—a psychoanalysis of fire—to overcome the obstacle, to pass from what is real and inextricably linked with our dreams and musings to a scientific concept. Before chemistry there was alchemy; before the discovery of the true nature of the ozone molecule, there was a strange history of this substance even among scholars; before the idea of electrical resistance, there was galvanism. Not only has G. Bachelard developed this conception of the “scientific,” but he has also explored this field of the imaginary; leading a double life, he followed the extension of the experience lived in dreams and poetic musings as much as the upheaval of the normative scientific concept in himself, thus opening up new problematics and making it possible to realize phenomena with powerful laboratory technics. Our consideration of G. Bachelard’s dualism and of what this philosophical genius did for epistemology as much as for poetics will not finish here. There is one field that seems to be overlooked in this double perspective: the *prose of the world*, and *history lived*—in a word what is called the real; but we are also beginning to know that this immediate real, so sought after by philosophers, be it Bergsonian or phenomenologist, is perhaps no more than an objective that is itself imaginary—an objective, not an object; it is inseparable from a group of practices that exclude, precisely, theoretical practice. G. Bachelard’s dualism must be reconsidered, and experience lived must itself be reintroduced either into more or less informed practices or into more or less organized representational systems, which determine our action and allow us to play our rôle in a practico-social whole, in a word into what Marx had called for the first time in 1845 *ideologies*, which are, if one can so call them, unconsciousness and consciousness.

The problematic that results from this over-brief diagram puts the *scientificity* of the sciences in opposition with social practices and *ideologies*. Any representational system that is not scientific theory is then, properly speaking, ideology; this does not mean that one must devalue ideology compared to science, in the way that a hoax is opposed to truth; it is not of the same order and it will always exist, even in a communist world (as we well know

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today). This break between the “ideological” and the “scientific” with the consequent refusal to recognize a humanism in Marxism (it is not of course the contrary, which would be another ideology) and an acknowledgment of a permanent quality of the ideology is one of the new perspectives of Marxism. By mentioning the contemporary epistemology of G. Bachelard, we are only making a detour—true, an essential one—to attempt to reconsider Marx’s epistemology. A certain Marxism—let us call it, as does A. Badiou, totalitarian<sup>1</sup>—has stressed the sciences, adding so-called dialectical laws, but it is still tied up with empiricism; however, when one refers to Marx’s Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy*, of 1857, one finds that, for Marx, science is not reading experience, with the concrete as a starting-point, but a re-establishment, with the help of abstractions, of concepts—the recognizable object. This elaboration is “a product of the thinking mind that adapts itself to the world in the only way possible and differently from the way in which art, religion and the practical mind do so.”<sup>2</sup> This production of concepts leaves the real object intact; it is not muddled up—as with Hegel—with the very genesis of things. The genesis of the real and the establishment of science, in particular history, are disassociated. We have here a conception of science that we can understand more easily thanks to contemporary epistemology and that Marx certainly anticipated. It is not an empiricism and it is similarly not a Hegelian dialectic. In the latter the *per se* is always present in the *in se*. As Marx says, the real for Hegel is the result of the thought “that is not concentrated in itself, becomes deeper in itself, is moved by itself, when the method that consists in rising from the abstract to the concrete is, for thought, only the way of possessing the concrete,<sup>3</sup> of reproducing it in the form of a considered concrete.”

One remark must be made, however, which extends the epistemology of G. Bachelard without perhaps heading in the direction of L. Althusser’s perspective. If it is true that science is the elaboration of concepts (with the whole mathematical apparatus for

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. A. Badiou’s article, “Le (re)commencement du matérialisme dialectique,” *Critique*, May 1967.

<sup>2</sup> K. Marx, Contribution to the *Critique of Political Economy*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

the physical sciences), and if it is true that it realizes its phenomena in the phenomeno-technics of the laboratory, then one must also be aware of the fact that it still *finds* these phenomena in *nature* (but should one use this term? does it belong to science or ideology? and if one should not use it, what other term is appropriate?). Rare elements, that are fundamental in the constitution of matter, which the laboratory realizes, are also present in interstellar space. There is a sort of empiricism of secondary strength there; but if constructive elements are then found in the real, after the event, it is not in the order in which theory sets them forth. For Marx, likewise, abstract ideas—which serve to understand concrete forms of economy but which do not present themselves as such—are present in a pure state in other economies. There thus exists a coincidental play of abstract and concrete which will always leave any idea of Nature and History in a state of ambiguity.

Marx's texts, that we have quoted, clearly show that he was fully aware of having elaborated a new science—distinct from political economy—which will be called *historical materialism*, a science of history conceived, and not read directly in experience. “The truth of history is not contained in its obvious discourse because the truth of history is not a text that can be spoken by the voice, and the *logos*, but by the inaudible and illegible notation of a structure of structures.”<sup>4</sup>

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The distinction should be made between this new science and Marxist epistemology, as it should between *dialectical materialism* and *historical materialism*. It is an important distinction and at the same time a difficult one to specify. Marx did not have time to draw up the theory of his theoretical practice. He discovered a new field of rationality, he began to give it a form, but his epistemology, his philosophy, that is, *dialectical materialism*, is still no more than a sketch. *Historical materialism* has not always been interpreted correctly. People have seen in it a straightforward economic explanation of history, others have found a historicism that is not properly speaking science but which, by being

<sup>4</sup> L. Althusser, *Lire le Capital*, Paris, Maspéro, t. 7, p. 16.

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muddled up with dialectical materialism, shows the realization of the human essence in history, thus making Marxism a *Humanism*. We can join A. Badiou in calling this interpretation *fundamental Marxism*: it disregards the evolution of Marx’s thought as it appears in the *Critique of Political Economy* of 1859. The discovery of this field of rationality can be compared to Freud’s discovery of the unconscious; it is still not recognized, although many historians since Marx have been inspired by it, sometimes unknown to them, and although Lenin developed and gave depth to its concepts in his analysis of the historical situation of Russia. This science determines the field of history starting with the implication of the relation between production and the forms or methods of production. In his texts of 1857-59 Marx shows how social distribution—*income, profit, salary*—is bound up with these forms. The far-reaching determination of history is not a result of particular historical events; the *determining* causality does not appear clearly up-stage; it is neither a mechanical causality, nor an expressible subject. The historical field, governed by the various demands, namely the inter-articulated practices, must be reconsidered with the help of a structural causality which disappears in its effects. Marx tried to give some idea of this causality by what is still only an image. “In every form of society a determined production and the relations produced by this appoint the rank and importance of all other productions and the relations produced by them; it is like a general lighting, in which all the colors are involved, and which modifies all their particular tonalities. It is like a special ether which determines the specific weight of all the existences that pour forth from it.”<sup>5</sup> The various demands that arise are not direct expressions of a subjacent totality, as with Hegel. The conjuncture is hallmarked by the dominance of one of them which might be political or ideological (as in the case of the anti-religious struggle in the 18th century, or in Lenin’s study of the weakest link); it can even happen that the economic demand, which represents the determining causality, but does no more than *represent* it, is as-it-were obliterated. “If, as Marx often says, what is concealed in capitalist society is clearly visible in feudal society or in a primitive community, it

<sup>5</sup> K. Marx, *op. cit.*

is in these latter societies that we can clearly see that the economic factor is not directly clearly visible.”<sup>6</sup> Each one of these demands can be the seat of an over-determination. Phenomena of displacement or condensation are produced which concern the historical field. Scientific knowledge of this field thus supposes an elaboration of thought which is quite different from Hegelianism; there is no epopee of history, but scientific knowledge is what makes both the tactics and the strategy of a political practice possible. To avoid being misunderstood, comment must be made on the nature of this science, of its theoretical practice, which must not be confused with the modern techniques of intervention in human societies. In our technocratic world, recognition of the scientificity of this science can remove some of the difficulties, as is also true in the case of psycho-analysis. If, today, it is comparatively easy, when compiling the history of the sciences, to discover epistemological breaks for all the physical or mathematical sciences—breaks which emerge from the empirical imaginary to comply with the appropriately scientific concept,—the same does not go for the human sciences. The rational field opened up by Marx, under the name of historical materialism, is neither a political economy, nor a history; it conceptually reunites the two; mathematical apparatus is purely secondary; it is therefore not just a positive technique starting from a recognized and insurmountable empiricism. This is why the resulting tactics and strategy must also be of another order.

If historical materialism is this science of human history along side other sciences, it only holds good in the face of this theoretical practice by the various practices, such as the political, the economic, and the ideological. It would seem then that everything that is not science in representation is ideological, in the sense Marx spoke of ideology in 1845.

Ideology will always exist, even in a communist social organization. “It is inconceivable that communism, a new method of production implying determined production forces and production relations can do without a social organization of production and the corresponding ideological forms.”<sup>7</sup> Even unknown to

<sup>6</sup> L. Althusser, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 154.

<sup>7</sup> L. Althusser, *Pour Marx*, Paris, Maspéro, p. 239.

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the consciousness that is living it, ideology expresses its way of relating to the real and acting on it; but in its practico-social character one cannot disassociate the real conditions and the imaginary conditions or objectives; ideology is the representational system lived by the consciousness; "It is as if human societies cannot exist without these specific formations, these representational systems of varying levels which is what ideologies are." In ideology "the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation: a relation that expresses a will (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary) even a hope or a nostalgia, more than it describes a reality."<sup>8</sup> Hegel had already opposed religion to positive knowledge, but for him religion, and especially Christianity, is the presentiment in representation of what knowledge as *its* truth will be. Hegel it is who talked of knowledge no longer knowing hope and nostalgia. In Marxism, on the contrary, there is a break between science and ideology, between knowledge of real conditions and men's live experience. The humanist interpretation of Marxism disregards this break. This humanist interpretation has Marx's early texts in its favor; one can still find traces of it in *German Ideology*, but the *Critique of Political Economy* and *The Capital* point to a different conception. Difficulties do arise, however, when one envisages what becomes of Marxist philosophy, *dialectical materialism*, in its relation to this science of history.

In a certain sense dialectical materialism is the contemporary philosophy of this science of history, just as Platonism is contemporary with the arrival of mathematics, Cartesianism with a mechanical physics, and Kantism with Newton's divine mechanics; but in another sense it ceases to be a *basic* philosophy: it is an epistemology that is not idealistic and thus *depends* in its turn on this science of history, the scientificity of which it registers and repeats. Men such as Fichte and Hegel had already wanted to substitute philosophy by an epistemology in the epistemological sense of the term; a science of science, but they were still prisoners of an idealistic conception. There can no longer be any epistemology that is independent of the history of the sciences, although this history is a recurrent history, a history

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

reconsidered in the light not of an idea of science and still less in the light of a transcendent or transcendental grounding of science, but in the light of real sciences.

The difference between historical materialism and its philosophy, dialectical materialism, is thus a difference that is always impure. If it is true, moreover, that previous philosophy has always been contaminated by ideologies (Plato's city comes to mind, together with his reflection on mathematics) what is the position of *dialectical materialism*? "The whole history of western philosophy is dominated not by 'the problem of knowledge' but by the ideological solution, namely that solution that is imposed in advance by practical interests,—religious, moral and political interests that are alien to knowledge,—and which this problem should accept. The problem itself is so formulated that it must, precisely, accept these solutions. It is a re-knowledge and not a knowledge. Ideological practice here is quite different from theoretical practice. But the knowledge of this difference devolves from *dialectical materialism*; it is the *non-ideological* as such. It is this, nonetheless, that produces the theory of any theoretical practice, and thus the theory of its own practice. It must be in a state to believe the break, to reflect its own difference when a science is only the developed act of this difference. This is why Marxism is not simply science of history (historical materialism) "but also and at the same time philosophy, capable of accounting for the theoretical formations and the history of those formations of nature, thus capable of accounting for itself, *by taking itself as the object*."<sup>9</sup> It is clear from this that the status of this dialectical materialism is difficult to grasp; and that it is close to a sort of absolute knowledge.

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One of L. Althusser's texts evokes certain possibilities of a really new ideology in a communist society. It is, besides, quite certain that Marx always thought of revolution as a liberation of previous ideologies in terms of the transformation of the conditions of men's existence. But how is one to envisage this ideology, and

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

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how link it with science? By quoting this text we leave the question of an ideology that is *more adequate* than others open. “This break between the old, even ‘organic’ religions or ideologies and Marxism, the latter *being a science* and destined to become the ‘organic’ ideology of human history by producing, among the *masses*, a *new* form of ideology (an ideology for once grounded in science, which is something quite novel); this break is not really reflected in Gramsci...”<sup>10</sup>

What, finally, will become of the other ideologies when the social conditions which engendered them have disappeared, or are deeply transformed? Will they live on under the same art form as Marx conveyed in a text contemporary with the *Critique of Political Economy* of 1859? He points out the difficulty “not of understanding that Greek art and the epopee are linked with certain forms of social development, but of the fact that they still give us artistic pleasure and that they still, in certain respects, hold for us a normative value and are inaccessible models.”<sup>11</sup> He adds that certain forms of constantly re-evolved development might hold a spell that is linked with a historical childhood of mankind. We have called to mind Bachelard’s poetic, as the double and reversal of his epistemology; in this sublimation we can find possible aspects. The essential point is to consider the problematic of these new relations in a Marxist perspective, *science*, *ideology* and *philosophy*. There is, in this perspective, at once a theoretical revolution and an awareness of ideology “which is neither an aberration, nor an excrescence of history,” which is not only an *instrument* of mystification which a ruling class would, in all lucidity, make use of to exploit another class, because in its ideology the ruling class itself constitutes its relation with the world as it is lived; no, ideology is indispensable to any society if men are to be moulded, transformed and put in a position where they can respond to the demands of their conditions of existence. Philosophy, in the end, stays at the centre of those differences that it is capable of repeating and conceiving, without, nonetheless, being able to purify itself completely of its own difference.

<sup>10</sup> L. Althusser, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 89.

<sup>11</sup> K. Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 175.