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FRIEDRICH ENGELS AND THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF IDEOLOGIES

BO GUSTAFSSON

I

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM as a general theory of the development of society was created by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. But they did not make it in a single day. As their investigations and those of others increased knowledge of the actual course of social development they expanded or reworked their conceptions.¹ In part, historical materialism was for them “a body of concrete truth,” but primarily it was “an engine for discovering concrete truth,” that is, their main interest was the concrete application of the theory. As a consequence, neither Marx nor Engels ever found the time or the occasion to give an elaborated presentation of historical materialism as a general theory. The present article aims at giving an account of Friedrich Engels’ latest formulations of historical materialism, the content of those formulations, and the circumstances under which they arose. Did Engels’ latest formulations complete or supplement historical materialism? Or was it that these formulations of his had the nature of “concessions” (to the “möchte-gern-Marxisten” among the young intellectuals of the German Social Democracy), which “deprived the theory of all precise meaning” and thereby converted it into a scientifically useless phrase?²

II

Something that is not always kept in mind is the fact that the immediate cause of Engels’ reformulations was a work by Paul

1 Cf. e.g., Friedrich Engels’ introduction to the 1895 German edition of Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848–1850*, in Marx-Engels, *Selected Works in Two Volumes* (New York, n.d.), Vol. II, pp. 169 ff.

2 Karl Korsch, *Karl Marx* (New York, 1963), p. 226.

Barth, a Leipzig philosopher, *Die Geschichtsphilosophie Hegels und der Hegelianer bis auf Marx und Hartmann*, published in 1890. Actually, it is surprising that Barth's wretched critique of Hegel's and Marx's philosophies of history could cause a stir. Despite the fact that Engels was a party in the case, his characterization of Barth's work is thoroughly justified. "He makes up a materialist theory of history for himself, which Marx is supposed, in his opinion, to have held, and then he finds something quite different in Marx's works. But from this he does not conclude that he, Barth, has foisted something distorted on to Marx: no, on the contrary, Marx contradicts himself and cannot apply his own theory! 'Yes, if people could only *read!*' as Marx used to exclaim at criticism of this kind."³ But since the book, nonetheless, gave rise to a certain reaction, even within the Marxist camp, it must have had something in it that was regarded as important.

The theme that runs through Barth's work is that Marx, Engels and the Marxists had particularly underestimated the historical role of the ideological superstructure. For Barth, historical materialism was a "one-sided" philosophy of history, to use a label that he later employed. According to the materialist conception of history, politics, law, morality, religion and philosophy were nothing but dependent reflections of economic relations, which unilaterally determined and affected them. But Barth rejected any such conception with indignation. Thus, for example, law was not merely the juridical expression of the property relations, "but the same relations of production can be conceived of under very different forms of law." Law, to continue with Barth, was "not merely a superstructure," since it "possesses an existence that is in part independent of economics and that becomes firmer and firmer in the course of history."⁴ Religion, too, lives a life that is separate from economics, and in essence independent; moreover, one can point out everywhere in history "a deep-lying influence of religion on the economy."⁵ In their judgment of philosophy as well, Marx and his followers had given far too little weight to the significance of ideology. At the outset, philosophy is undoubtedly "closely tied up

³ Letter from Friedrich Engels to Conrad Schmidt, July 1, 1891, in Marx-Engels *Selected Correspondence* (New York, 1942), pp. 487-88.

⁴ Paul Barth, *op. cit.*, pp. 52 ff.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56

with the life of the people." But subsequently it follows its "own laws without losing the power to react on the life of the people."⁶ In sum, the economy did not "unilaterally" determine the other phenomena of society. On the contrary, there is a general *interaction* between the various regions of the life of society.⁷ Barth did not allow that any sector of social life has special importance, and in any case not the economic base. For example, he regarded the voyages of discovery in the sixteenth century as being just as much a result of the "lust for conquest" as of the expansion of trade.⁸ Obviously, it was chiefly the fact that Marxism was "the [theory] unquestionably dominant within a party extending to all civilized countries" that led to Barth's critical revision.

The extremely meager content of Barth's criticism of historical materialism can be summed up more or less in these terms. What is striking is that within the German Social Democracy it was regarded as dangerous and significant.⁹ Franz Mehring made it the subject of a long and detailed discussion, in 1893, in an appendix to his book of history and literary history, *Die Lessinglegende*.¹⁰ He called Barth's work a "first attempt at scientific criticism of historical materialism."¹¹ Nonetheless, he entirely rejected the attempt. He had little difficulty in showing the gaps in Barth's reasoning. But it cannot be said that Mehring developed historical materialism further. Rather, he tended to emphasize the characteristic feature of the theory, namely the derivation of the ideological superstructure from the economic base. To be sure, he emphasized (following Engels) that Marxism does not by any means deny the importance of ideas in the historical process. "Historical materialism does not reject ideal forces but rather subjects them to fundamental investigation, in order to make it clear where ideas get their power

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 57 f.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 52. On this point Barth cites K. Th. v. Inama Sternegg, according to whom "the interaction between politics and economics" is "a basic trait in the development of all states and peoples."

8 *Loc. cit.*

9 As late as 1921 Heinrich Cunow felt it necessary to devote a large part of Ch. 7 of Part II of his work *Die marxische Geschichts-, Gesellschafts- und Staatstheorie* to a criticism of Barth.

10 The appendix has the title "Über den historischen Materialismus." Later editions of the *Lessinglegende* do not contain this appendix.

11 Hereafter, Mehring's article will be cited after the edition in Mehring's *Gesammelte Schriften und Aufsätze*, Band VI (Berlin, 1931).

from.”¹² He also showed that the power and influence of ideas increase in the course of history, in the degree that the human mind’s mastery over nature increases. Further than that he did not extend his analysis of the role of ideologies. In other words, he was satisfied with showing: a) that ideas are “products of the social process of production” and b) that an idea is more powerful the more exactly it reflects that process. But Mehring did not show *how* the economic base determines the ideological superstructure and he did not concede any independence in the historical process to the ideological superstructure or to parts of the ideological superstructure. Nor did the interaction between the economic base and the ideological superstructure appear as an element constitutive of historical materialism. This underestimation, on Mehring’s part, of the active role of the ideological superstructure came out especially clearly in his treatment of the role of religion. As he saw it, the result of the investigations of Marx, Engels and Kautsky is that “the spiritual power of Christianity as an independent creative and working factor” has disappeared “down to the last trace.” This absurd statement was followed by others equally absurd, such as that Christianity, in contrast to the pagan religions, had “a purely economic origin.” But despite this “purely economic origin,” alleged to have bound Christianity to the form of production that created it, Christianity as a world religion developed “a remarkable power to adapt to the most diverse economic conditions and their ideological needs.”¹³ According to Mehring’s view, philosophy was equally bound to the economic base. Barth’s assertion, which is true in and of itself, that philosophy follows its own laws of development, while at the same time affecting other regions of the life of society, is described by Mehring as an illusion, along with the fact that “from Heraclitus to Paul Barth a chain of mysterious entities hover over mankind, following laws of their own and giving the peoples philosophical pokes in the ribs from above.” Thus, Mehring seems to have refused to concede, e.g., that Rousseau, the philosopher of the Enlightenment, had any active historical significance for the French Revolution.¹⁴

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 291.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 322. This low opinion of the historical role of philosophy goes well with Mehring’s general view of philosophy. For him, philosophy was almost exclusively

III

Barth's critique of historical materialism, and Mehring's defense of it, showed two things: one was that even at its best the bourgeois-academic critique of Marxism made a caricature out of the object of its criticism; the other was that the first generation of Marx's and Engels' disciples had certain difficulties in developing the theory further. It did not take long before the positions of both Barth and Mehring were under attack. Barth's work was discussed at length, in 1894, by Ferdinand Tönnies, the philosopher and sociologist. According to Tönnies, Barth had misinterpreted the content of historical materialism. The simple, fundamental, correct but at the same time neglected content of this theory of society, Tönnies said, was that social being ("the facts of life," to use his term) constituted a necessary although not sufficient condition of social consciousness ("the facts of thought"), while the converse was not the case. This fact, he held, was as indisputable as that rooms in a house presuppose a foundation, while the existence of a foundation does not necessarily presuppose any rooms.¹⁵ If Marx had really

ideology in the sense of "false consciousness," or as he put it, "an ideological epiphenomenon on class struggles." See Franz Mehring's, "Wesen und Zeitbedingtheit der Philosophie," in *Neue Zeit*, Jahrg. XXIII, Bd. I (1904), pp. 129 ff. But of course philosophy also comprises actual knowledge and therefore philosophy affects the historical process in the progressive direction (at the same time that philosophy also obstructs this process the more "false consciousness" it contains).

- 15 Ferdinand Tönnies, "Neuere Philosophie der Geschichte: Hegel, Marx, Comte," in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, Band VII (1894), pp. 507 f. Even before Mehring published *Die Lessinglegende* in 1893, Barth and Tönnies on one side and Mehring on the other had been engaged in a polemic on the historical role of ethics. This polemic, which was conducted with a certain acerbity by Barth and Mehring, was surely one of the reasons why Mehring gave Barth's 1890 work so much attention in *Die Lessinglegende*. The background for the polemic was the organization in Berlin in October 1892 of *Die deutsche Gesellschaft für ethische Kultur*, an institution that naturally did not escape Mehring's cutting satire. Barth had published an article in the Berlin *Zukunft*, in which he attacked social democracy for its lack of interest in ethics and morality, which he attributed to historical materialism's want of "ethical principles." In the discussion that ensued, Barth had said expressly that when Marx wrote in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), that "the mode of production in material life determines the social, political and intellectual life processes in general," this is to be interpreted as meaning that mode of production of material life constitutes not only a necessary but also "the only sufficient cause of all higher life." Cf. Paul Barth, "Marxsche Geschichtsphilosophie und Ethik," *Deutsche Worte*, Jahrg. XIII, Nr. 4, pp. 240 ff. Using such methods of argument, it was not hard

underestimated the importance of ideologies, as Barth asserted, he would hardly "have devoted such enormous labor to economic history, a relatively subsidiary form of social consciousness."¹⁶ Some "Marxists" had undoubtedly oversimplified the connection between ideological superstructure and economic base, so that they perhaps underestimated the reaction of ideologies on economics. Tönnies likewise opposed the gnoseologically necessary distinction between the mental and the material. But all that does not affect the basic correctness and epoch-making significance of historical materialism.

Barth's reply to this criticism took the form of a verbose repetition of the positions he had advanced five years earlier; in fact, he carried them even further. He now maintained that according to Marx "the economic conditions cause everything that manifests itself in the world of social ideas, that the latter contains nothing that is not a direct copy, a form, a mask for an economic fact" and that there was no room in Marx for any interaction between ideology and economics.¹⁷ In the writings of Marx and Engels there is "not a trace of independence of politics, law or ideologies nor any interaction between these domains and the economy."¹⁸ It is true that Engels had remarked in his book on Feuerbach that tradition is a strongly conservative power, but this insight had not been of importance for the theory either of Engels or of Kautsky.¹⁹ Consequently, Barth insisted on "most decisively maintaining" the conception of the content of historical materialism that he had expressed originally.²⁰

to "refute" historical materialism. Among other things, Barth's article has some formulations that anticipate Bernstein's revisionism: "For the end does not justify the means, but the means justify the end. And a revision of the means with which political battles—including the Social Democratic one—are waged would certainly be highly useful." *Op cit.*, p. 245. "By itself—many of them [the Social Democrats] seem to believe—the machinery of capitalism will come to coincide with the mechanism of development or rather with the laws of dialectics, but with its last stroke it will, also by itself, strike the first hour of the new order." *Op cit.*, p. 247.

16 Tönnies, *op. cit.*, p. 505.

17 *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, Band VIII, Neue Folge, I. Band (1895), pp. 319 f. Cf. preceding note.

18 *Op. cit.*, p. 322.

19 *Op. cit.*, pp. 328 f.

20 *Op. cit.*, p. 335. Both Tönnies and Barth continued to maintain their respective positions. Barth did so in his article, "Die sogenannte materialistische Geschichtsauffassung," in *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik*, 3. Folge, Bd. IX (1896), pp. 1-34, which was a preliminary study for his main work, *Die Philosophie*

While within the academic world Tönnies was criticizing Barth "from the left," within the Social Democracy Franz Mehring was attacked "from the right" by Paul Ernst.²¹ Ernst's criticism of Mehring related chiefly to the evaluation of the factors that affected Lessing's literary profile; Ernst, referring for one thing to the insignificance of German capitalism in Lessing's era and for another to the influence of English literary models, called into question Mehring's central thesis, concerning Lessing as the literary representative of the German bourgeoisie and their striving towards emancipation. Mehring was able to parry this criticism very successfully. But Ernst also formulated a number of critical viewpoints on Mehring's way of conceiving historical materialism as a theory. Ernst's central thesis in this was that the economic structure does not directly and immediately influence men's historical action, but must first "be transformed into psychology."²² The historical process is a product of the interaction between man and man's environment. Certainly, ideology is based on the material conditions, Ernst said, but only "in the last analysis," and it goes through "a development of its own alongside the economic."²³ At times, ideology could come into conflict with economic needs and even dominate them, as for

der Geschichte als Soziologie (Leipzig, 1897), pp. 327 ff. Tönnies touched on the polemic in his annual reviews of sociological literature during the 1890's, reprinted in *Soziologische Studien und Kritiken* (Jena, 1929), Vol. III, pp. 196-232. Engels, in his letter to Conrad Schmidt and elsewhere (see below), gave "more than solid" support to Tönnies' conception, "which Barth does not refute" (*op. cit.*, p. 227). When Tönnies, a quarter century later, returned to the problem of the relationship between economic base and ideological superstructure in a more systematic form in his book on Marx, *Karl Marx: Leben und Lehre* (Berlin, 1921), especially pp. 139 ff., his point of view was unaltered but made a little more precise: "The proposition that man's social being determines his consciousness and not vice versa must be changed to say that being determines consciousness more strongly and more immediately than vice versa."

21 Paul Ernst, "Mehring's Lessinglegende und die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung," *Neue Zeit*, Jahrg. XII, Band 2 (1893-94), pp. 7 ff. and 45 ff. Paul Ernst along with Paul Kampffmeyer, Hans Müller and others, belonged to the *Die Jungen* group, which in the early 1890's criticized the German Social Democracy for being petty bourgeois. The critics were not always wrong, but they themselves were hardly called upon to be the doctors; they were rather a part of the disease. To use the phrase of Robert Michels, they were "intellectuals who shot up like rockets and disappear on the same trajectory." The episode is treated, e.g., by Richard Lipinski, *Die Sozialdemokratie von Ihren Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, Bd. II, pp. 142-145.

22 Ernst, *op. cit.*, pp. 7 f.

23 *Loc. cit.*

example, when "many peoples place taboos on a number of foods and let the tabooed products rot on the trees or in the fields rather than consume them, even in times of dearth." Factual reality is not reflected directly in men's consciousness but is filtered through a stratum of inherited ideas, and this stratum is more complex and irrational the lower the stage of civilization. It is not "what is but what is thought to exist that influences action and thinking. With how many ideological factors [Ernst always construes the term of ideology in the sense of false consciousness] was the bourgeoisie's struggle for emancipation laden, and how unadorned social democracy already appears!"²⁴

It is of interest to note that Mehring quite accepted Ernst's view of historical materialism. "Religion," he wrote, "has accomplished even greater things than Ernst ascribes to it: it has led untold numbers of men to prison, to torture chambers, to the stake and the gallows, to voluntary martyrdom, but what does that prove against historical materialism? Does not Paul Ernst realize that if the materialist conception of history denies *independent* historical existence to the various spheres of ideology, it does not deny them all historical *effect*? Paul Ernst thinks metaphysically, not dialectically, when he conceives of cause and effect as rigidly exclusive poles and he entirely ignores their interaction. When did historical materialism ever contest the fact that a historical factor, once it has come into the world by way of other, ultimately economic causes, also reacts on its environment and even on its own causes?"²⁵

Undoubtedly this position comprises something like a *volte-face* on Mehring's part; at any rate, one would look in vain for any such explicit formulations in his article on historical materialism. *But in point of fact he had very recently attained to this position. In this statement Mehring repeated, almost word for word, what Engels had pointed out to him in a letter dated July 14, 1893.*²⁶

24 *Loc. cit.*

25 Franz Mehring, "Zur historisch-materialistischen Methode," *Neue Zeit*, Jahrg. XII, Bd. 2 (1893-94), p. 175.

26 Marx-Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, pp. 510-12. In it Engels says: "Hanging together with this too is the fatuous notion of the ideologists that because we deny an independent historical development to the various ideological spheres which play a part in history we also deny them any effect upon history. The basis of this is the common undialectical conception of cause and effect as rigidly opposite poles, the total disregarding of interaction; these gentlemen often almost deliber-

IV

By this time, indeed, Engels had already explained, in detail, his idea of historical materialism as a theory, first and foremost in his book on Ludwig Feuerbach published in 1888, but likewise in his foreword to the English edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* of 1892. This foreword, which with the exception of the first six paragraphs was published separately in *Neue Zeit* under the title *Über historischen Materialismus*, had as its central theme the importance of religion for the actions of classes in English history. This article showed that Engels had a very fine feeling for the role of the ideological superstructure in the historical process, and the way in which it can accelerate or delay developments, without, however, definitively inhibiting them. But at this point, Engels took his leave of the "Marxists." In his correspondence of this period, his letters are full of judgments, mainly critical, of the way the young Marxists had been applying the Marxist "guidelines."²⁷ In a letter to Bebel in 1889 he complained in more general terms of "the relative weakness of the new growth," which he felt was "fatal on the theoretical level as well."²⁸ When in May 1890 Paul Ernst got involved in a polemic with Hermann Bahr, the Austrian literary critic, and asked for Engels' opinion, he was answered coolly enough that historical materialism cannot be applied "as a ready-made pattern on which to cut the historical facts."²⁹ This critical attitude towards the younger Marxists' way of applying historical materialism did not soften after Barth's critique, although Engels (rightly) did not think much of that criticism. But at the same time he realized that Barth's attacks were made easier by the external and mechanical

ately forget that once an historic element has been brought into the world by other elements, ultimately by economic facts, it also reacts in its turn and may react on its environment and even on its own causes."

27 Cf. e.g., Eduard Bernstein, *Die Briefe von Friedrich Engels an Eduard Bernstein* (Berlin, 1925), p. 118; Karl Marx-Friedrich Engels, *Letters to Americans* (New York, 1953), pp. 166, 168, 220, 234, 258 and 263; Friedrich Engels, *Briefe an Bebel* (Berlin, 1958), pp. 23, 58, 110, 112 and 223. Friedrich Engels, *Briefwechsel mit Karl Kautsky* (Vienna, 1955), pp. 13, 126 ff., 144 ff., 227, 232 ff., 247, 309, 364, 730, 384, 426 and 434 ff. Friedrich Engels—Paul and Laura Lafargue, *Correspondence* (Moscow, 1959–61), Vol. I, pp. 18 f., 229 f. and 368, Vol. III, pp. 37 f. Karl Marx-Friedrich Engels, *Ausgewählte Briefe* (Berlin, 1953), pp. 498, 500 f., 504 and 549.

28 *Briefe an Bebel*, p. 112.

29 Engels to Paul Ernst, June 5, 1890, *Ausgewählte Briefe*, p. 498.

way in which the younger Marxists had taken Marxism. They had turned historical materialism into a phrase—with which to cover up their own lack of knowledge. “And after that a Barth can come along and attack the thing itself, which in his circles had indeed been degraded into a mere phrase.”³⁰ But Engels laid a part of the blame on himself and Marx:

Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that younger writers sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasize this main principle in opposition to our adversaries, who denied it, and we had not always the time, the place or the opportunity to allow the other elements involved in the interaction to come into their rights. But when it was a case of presenting a section of history, that is, of a practical application, the thing was different and there no error was possible.³¹

Engels expressed himself in the same spirit of self-criticism three years later, in a letter to Franz Mehring dated July 14, 1893. Even when *Die Lessinglegende* was still in the form of articles, Engels expressed his admiration for Mehring’s work as an instance of concrete historical investigation. “It is a pleasure,” he wrote to Bebel on March 16, 1892, “to see the materialist conception of history finally begin to be utilized as the thing it in essence was: a guideline in the study of history, after it had been the rule for twenty years to degrade it into a high-sounding phrase in the works of the young party people.”³² On the other hand, he made critical comments on Mehring’s “metatheoretical” conception, i.e., his presentation of historical materialism as a theory. Mehring’s account of historical materialism lacked

a point that as a rule . . . was not brought sufficiently to the fore in Marx’s works and mine, and in respect to which all of us are equally at fault. That is, we all began, *as we had to*, by laying the principal stress on the *derivation* of political, juridical and other ideological ideas, and of the actions arising out of these ideas, from the economic basic facts. In doing so we neglected the formal side for the side of content: the way in which these ideas, etc., come into being. That gave opponents a welcome opportunity for misunderstandings or distortions, of which

30 Engels to Conrad Schmidt, August 5, 1890, *op. cit.*, p. 473.

31 Engels to Joseph Bloch, September 21, 1890, *op. cit.*, p. 477.

32 *Briefe an Bebel*, p. 223. Cf. also letters to Kautsky, Sept. 29, 1892 and June 1, 1893, *Briefwechsel mit Karl Kautsky*, pp. 284 and 370.

Paul Barth is a striking example. . . . This side of the matter, which I can only indicate here, was neglected by all of us, I think, more than it deserves. It is the old story: At the outset the form is always neglected for the sake of the content. As I said, I did it too, and the mistakes always occurred to me only *post festum*. And so not only do I not intend to make this into any kind of reproach to you—as an old fellow-offender I don't have the right to, quite the contrary—but I should like you to be on guard on this point for the future.³³

V

In these and other letters of this period Engels also develops his own positive view of the relationship between economic base and ideological superstructure in history. His scattered remarks may perhaps be summarized in the following manner. The development of the economic base (forces of production and production relations, brought together in the mode of production) is the ultimate cause and the decisive motive power in history. (By ultimate cause Engels does *not* mean a final cause; the only final cause that Engels accepted was the interaction between cause and effect, i.e., universal interdependence; what he meant by “ultimate” was “in the last analysis,” “in the long run,” “necessary presupposition,” etc.) This proposition applies with greater and greater force the more important the historical events, the longer the periods under consideration, the broader the field of observation. Complete correlation between base and superstructure is not present at each point along the time axis, but the longer the periods and the larger the regions that one observes, the more clearly there emerges the parallel between economic and ideological development. Not every element in the ideological superstructure can be referred back totally to economic conditions—the economy “creates nothing *a novo*”—but the economic conditions determine the way in which the existing conceptual material changes and develops further, but does even that indirectly through the mediation of politics, law, etc. Since the ideological superstructure, or parts thereof, have a relative independence, the ideological development can to an extent be determined by previous ideological development. Above all, ideologies determine the *forms* in which the struggles of history are

³³ Engels to Mehring, July 14, 1893, *Selected Correspondence*, pp. 510–12. We have made a fresh translation from the German.

fought out. Interaction on the basis of the economic necessities, which are decisive in the last analysis—this was the conception of the general content of historical materialism that Engels elaborated during these years.

There was no question of abandoning previous basic positions, as has been asserted by Karl Korsch, among others (see Note 2). Nor had Engels' view of the role played by interaction been influenced by Paul Barth's critique, as Barth imagined it had.³⁴ Engels had merely expanded the original "model" while retaining its previous structure.

In his letters Engels presents many brilliant suggestions for studying the relationships between economic base and ideological superstructure. One line of ideas, in particular (developed in a letter to Conrad Schmidt of October 27, 1890), is very fruitful and important for an understanding of historical materialism. To explain the relationship between economic base and ideological superstructure, Engels took the social division of labor as his starting point. It has two sides: on the one hand it comprises mutual dependence among the specialized tasks and branches; on the other, their relative independence. Hence, it follows necessarily that there must be interaction between, e.g., production on the one hand and trade, currency and finance on the other, as well as among these various branches. But we can also go a step further and ascertain a certain internal structure, a certain hierarchy among

³⁴ Barth drew this conclusion after the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* had published Engels' explanatory letter to Conrad Schmidt, October 27, 1890. Cf. Paul Barth, "Die sogenannte materialistische Geschichtsauffassung," p. 19. If Barth had known the object of his critique better, he would have known that interaction as a more comprehensive category than causality had already been indicated by Hegel, who wrote (*Wissenschaft der Logik*, II [Leipzig, 1963], pp. 263 f.): "Hence, interaction is merely causality proper; the cause not only has an effect, but is in relationship with itself in the effect as cause." The same conception of interaction is also found in Engels, e.g. in *Dialectics of Nature* (Moscow, 1954), pp. 224 f. and passim. An interesting formulation of the same conception is to be found in P. Lavrov, *Historische Briefe* (Berlin, 1931), p. 347: "Nonetheless, once these political forms, abstract ideas and concrete ideals, created by the economic forces, have arisen, once they have become elements of a culture, they often become independent social forces and, forgetting or denying their origin, take up the struggle for mastery against just those economic forces to which they owed their origin; thereby they have evoked new forms of economic needs, new economic forces on the stage of history." Lavrov's book was originally written in 1869; the second edition appeared in 1891.

the various branches. Trade, and currency and finance, arose on the basis of production, are linked up with it and dependent on it. If nothing is produced, there can be no trade, and if there is no trade, there is no reason for money to exist, and so forth. It can therefore be said that trade, currency and finance all arise as a superstructure on production. It follows that trade, e.g., within certain limits, follows its own laws of development. It likewise affects the development of production. But ultimately, that is, in the last analysis, the development of trade is linked with and dependent on the development of production. The development of world trade in the sixteenth century enormously stimulated agricultural and industrial production. But this upswing in trade had as a necessary precondition an upswing in production, which on the supply side provided the technology and ships for the trade voyages and on the demand side gave rise to a powerful demand for precious metals. Similar relationships of mutual interdependence can also be seen in the nineteenth century, between industrialization and the expansion of world trade. Under certain conditions the branches that are secondary to production, derivative with respect to it, can even be of decisive importance. Engels gives a very striking example of this dialectic:

As the money trade separates off from commodity trade, it has (under certain conditions set by production and commodity exchange) a development of its own, special laws determined by its own nature, and separate phases. Now if, in addition, the money trade expands to trading in securities as it develops further, if these securities are no longer only government obligations but industrial and commercial shares as well, then the money trade acquires a direct mastery over a part of production, which by and large dominates it, and in that case the reaction of the money trade on production becomes even stronger and more complex. The traders in money are owners of railroads, mines, steel mills, etc. These means of production take on a double aspect: They must be conducted, now in the interests of immediate production, but then again according to the requirements of the stockholders, insofar as they are traders in money. The most striking example of this: the North American railroads, whose operations are entirely dependent on the monetary stock exchange operations of a Jay Gould, Vanderbilt, etc., which are totally alien to the particular road and its interests as a means of transportation. And even here in England we have seen battles last-

ing decades between the several railroad companies over the border regions between pairs of them—battles in which enormous amounts of money were squandered, not in the interests of production and transportation but only due to a rivalry that for the most part had only the aim of facilitating stock exchange operations by the money traders who owned the shares.³⁵

What emerges from this presentation of the relationships among the primary, secondary, tertiary, etc., sectors of social economy is: 1) trade, currency and stocks have developed out of, on the basis of and along with the development of production; 2) since trade, currency, etc., are subordinate to production, it is production that ultimately, in the long run, etc., determines the development of trade, etc.; 3) despite their fundamental dependence on production, trade, currency, etc., nonetheless have a relative, conditional independence, since they have developed out of and separated from production and thereby have acquired characteristic structures of their own that are governed by special laws; 4) as a result of the mutual interconnections of the various branches on the one hand, and their relative independence, on the other, they must be in interaction with one another; 5) as a result of the relative independence of the various sectors, this independence may either contract or expand, depending on the concrete conditions, and if it expands to a sufficiently great extent, the dependent, derivative sectors may temporarily become the determining primary sectors for development.

It is easy to find instances that reinforce the correctness of this conception, e.g., the relationship between profit and interest. Under normal conditions, in the general case, in the long run, it is profit that determines interest, since interest is a derivative category as compared to profit. Consequently, in the long run the variations of interest tend to follow the variations in the rate of profit. But during times of economic crisis interest tends to rise as fast and uncontrolledly as the rate of profit sinks. The production that made the previous rate of profit possible has, by the development of production itself, turned into overproduction. This in turn has created the tightness in funds for lending that conditions the high rate of interest. At these high interest rates practically no investments are

³⁵ *Ausgewählte Briefe* (Berlin, 1962), p. 506.

profitable, and from this point of view it can be said that it is interest that determines the rate of profit. As Gillman says acutely, it is this strategic importance of interest during crises that has created "the illusion that it [i.e., interest] has an independent existence."³⁶

Engels also applies this way of looking at things to the relationship between economic base and ideological superstructure, in order to elucidate their interrelationship. For the state, politics and ideologies also arose as a consequence of the advancing social division of labor. Society "gives rise to certain common functions, which it cannot do without. The people assigned to this constitute a new branch of the division of labor *within the society*. Thereby they acquire special interest, even as against their principals; they become independent of them, and—there is the state."³⁷ Law, religion, philosophy and science arose in the same way. Each and every one of these domains is in the last analysis dependent on the development of the mode of production. But at the same time it is characterized by a development, and laws of development, of its own, by which its independence is manifested, and their capacity to react on one another and on the economic base is conditioned. By reason of the fact that the power of the state is ultimately founded on the economic base, that power is on the one hand dependent on the economic base, but on the other hand it is itself an economic power, the concentrated and therefore mighty expression of the power in the economic base that it serves.

In ancient Chinese society the apparatus of the state arose as a product of the social division of labor and the coordination that it gave rise to. Since this need for coordination (water regulation and canal construction) was especially strong, as the result of the geographic and climatological conditions, the development of the state apparatus was likewise strong, so strong that for a long time it blocked social development and forced it into a cyclical course that was only broken when the Chinese social system came into contact with the capitalism of the West. The Nazi state apparatus in Germany attained so high a degree of independent development that at one time it devastated at least the physical side of the eco-

36 "An Evaluation of J. M. Keynes," *Science & Society*, Vol. XIX, No. 2 (1955), pp. 112 f.

37 *Ausgewählte Briefe*, *loc. cit.*

nomic base that had created it. In the same way, military technology has reached so advanced a stage under capitalist conditions that it is theoretically possible, although not especially likely, for that technology to be used to annihilate the system that created it—before men change the system.

The importance of ideological consciousness appears very clearly in the class struggle of the present time: in the West the objective conditions for socialism have been present for half a century, while the development of the subjective conditions has been arrested and in part suppressed as the result of the strength of the bourgeois ideology's independent development; in the colonial and dependent countries the socialist-conscious struggle has rolled forward in repeated and ever stronger waves, despite the fact that the objective conditions were highly undeveloped. It was insight into this dialectic that led Lenin to point out, as strongly as he could, the necessity for the proletariat to engage first and foremost in political action—set up a dictatorship of the proletariat—in order to be able to change the capitalist economy. The same insight underlies Mao Tse-tung's celebrated saying that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." Overestimating and hypostasizing these "secondary" aspects that Lenin and Mao have given expression to could easily lead to "Blanquism" or "Dühringism," but underestimating them would be an equally sure sign of "syndicalism" or "economism." That is, interaction and mutual interpenetration of contradictories prevail within the life of society, but in the *general* case this is, as Engels put it, an "interaction of two unequal forces." Without this supplement the theory remains impotent and loses its explanatory value.

Engels also pointed out that precisely because the economic base is reflected only indirectly and "verkehrt" [distorted], it was necessary to establish the relationship between economic base and ideological superstructure by analysis. That is why it took thousands of years until the correct relationship between thought and social reality was discovered. From this point of view, the history of the rise of historical materialism is also the history of the way in which science permeates down from the surface phenomena of the life of society into the depths of society, from appearance to reality, in a word, the change from the idealistic conception of history to historical materialism.

It is interesting, and of the greatest importance for insight into the significance of historical materialism, that the same developmental history can also be traced in other sciences. Take, for example, the rise of cycle theory within the framework of economic theory. When the changes between good times and bad began to receive systematic attention during the nineteenth century, they were explained by references to surface phenomena, such as changes in the value of money or in the psychology of business life. For example, John Mills (not to be confused with J. S. Mill) conceived of crises as a monetary phenomenon, and explained the "credit cycle" by referring to a continuous rhythm in the psyche of the businessman: "the malady of the commercial crisis is not, in essence, a matter of the purse, but of the mind." Hence, the four phases of the credit cycle were caused by four phases in the businessman's psyche: "collapse, depression, activity and excitement." Even Alfred Marshall regarded fluctuations in business and cycles as at bottom psychological phenomena: ultimately, economic crises were reflections of crises of confidence. It was only at the turn of the century that crisis theory became a science with Tugan-Baranowsky and Spiethoff, in that they, following Marx, based their analysis on changes in production and capital accumulation. This deepening is an exact parallel to the deepening that the theory of history went through including the aspect that historical materialism replaced various shades of historical idealism.

VI

In what has preceded I have only desired to recall a line of thought in Engels that it would be worth while investigating further and developing in its consequences. If the relationship between economic base and ideological superstructure is considered from this point of view, as a function of the advancing social division of labor, it would seem that many interesting results could follow. To begin with, the relationship between base and superstructure and among the various components of the base or superstructure must become increasingly complicated and indirect, the further the social division of labor is carried. This has the consequence that the "model" must be extended further in order to explain these ever more complicated connections. It may be a reflection of this

need that has been expressed in the increasing interest in socialist countries for the more reasonable results of research by bourgeois-academic sociology. For another thing, it follows as a theoretical possibility that the reciprocal relationships between economic base and ideological superstructure, etc., can change with increasing division of labor. Thus, for example, it is quite evident that man's mastery over nature has gradually been extended, and that, therefore, the part of the ideological superstructure made up of natural science and technology becomes increasingly important in history. By the very fact that capitalism, within certain limits, simplifies and rationalizes the contradictions between classes, and by the very fact of the rise of socialist states and their influence on the colonial world, it is also evident that the part of the ideological superstructure that is made up of political consciousness likewise increases in significance. (This change is reflected in a comparison between, e.g., the military-political works of Friedrich Engels and Mao Tse-tung: in the former, a very strong emphasis on military technology and its dependence on production relations; in the latter, an equally strong emphasis on the political consciousness of the masses—a change in emphasis that reflects the historical change from capitalism to socialism.)

In Europe and, to an even greater extent, in the United States, where the strongly developed ideology of bourgeois society, coupled with temporary economic stability, has deprived large masses of the people of even the desire to rise up against the relationships that plague them, there is a great need for further development of historical materialism. I believe that such a theoretical further development is a necessary complement to the practical measures that must be taken to prevent the proletariat of Western Europe and the United States from playing the same infamous role with respect to "barbarian peoples" that was once played by Rome's proletariat, that is, allow themselves to be kept quiet by bread and circuses, passively waiting for decadence and destruction.

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