

LOUIS ALTHUSSER "CONTRADICTION AND OVERDETERMINATION" (1962)

In what is his first major essay, Althusser's target is the so-called 'Western' or 'Hegelian' Marxism, exemplified by Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, that predominated up to that point outside of the Soviet Union. His argument is that Marx is much less indebted to Hegel (see in particular his The Philosophy of History [1805-06; 1832] and The Phenomenology of Spirit [1807]) than many have assumed. He draws a distinction in this regard between an earlier Marx (of works like the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 or The German Ideology of 1845-46) who was more influenced by Hegel and a later Marx, epitomised by his opus magnum Capital, volume 1 of which was published in 1867 and which signalled, in Althusser's view, a decisive 'epistemological break' or rupture with Hegelian categories of thought.

Althusser's focus here is on understanding the precise nature (or, more accurately, the *structure*) of what he calls the 'social formation.' Althusser's thesis is that Marx sought in Capital to conceptualise the social formation not in the Hegelian terms of what some scholars today call an 'expressive totality' (a model of society in which a key Hegelian concept, the dialectic [sometimes referred to here as the 'contradiction'], plays an important role) nor in terms of a 'mechanical causality' (see Marx's discussion of Base and Superstructure in his Preface to a Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy published in 1859). Althusser's contention is, rather, that the later Marx strove to conceptualise the social formation in terms of what Althusser terms a 'structural effectivity: in this schema, the significance of any given element in a whole is a function of its relation to all the other elements that comprise that whole. (Althusser's indebtedness to Saussure's model of the sign system ought to be obvious.) In attempting to rethinking Marxism in such a fundamental way, Althusser went against the grain of much established Marxist scholarship and, in so doing, earned the lasting ire of many. For this reason, he was forced to revisit this argument in much expanded form a year later in "On the Materialist Dialectic."

Althusser's starting point here is two well-known comments by Marx on his relation to Hegel's idealist model of history and, in particular, his use of Hegel's concept of the 'dialectic' to describe the 'contradiction' or conflict which is the 'motor' or driving force of history:

With him [Hegel], it [the dialectic] is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell. (qtd. in Althusser, 89)

and

In principle, my dialectical method is not only distinct from Hegel's but its direct opposite. (89)

Althusser has a number of objections. Firstly, to merely invert idealism is to remain, he argues, "its unconscious prisoner" (90). Secondly, in response to the view that the "shell, the mystical wrapping (speculative philosophy) should be tossed aside and the precious kernel, the dialectic, retained" (90), he asks sensibly: "How can an extraction be an inversion? Or in other words, what is 'inverted' during this extraction?" (90).

Althusser considers a number of possibilities. Firstly, he contends, it is possible to "take over the dialectic" (91) from Hegel and "apply it to life rather than the Idea. The 'inversion' would then be an 'inversion' of the 'sense' of the dialectic. But such an inversion in sense would in fact leave the dialectic untouched" (91). Althusser argues that it is "inconceivable that the essence of the dialectic in Hegel's work should not be contaminated by Hegelian ideology or . . . *that the Hegelian dialectic should cease to be Hegelian and become Marxist by a simple, miraculous 'extraction'*" (91). Althusser's point

is that "in the remarkable encounter of the extraction and the inversion" (91), Marx "hints at something more than he *says*" (91). He contends that when Marx uses the term 'mystical shell,' he does not mean "speculative philosophy, or its 'world outlook' or its 'system,' that is an element we can regard as *external* to its *method*, but refers directly to the dialectic itself" (92). This is borne out by the fact that Marx stresses the "*mystification the dialectic suffered at Hegel's hands*" (93) to which he opposes the "*rational figure of his own dialectic*" (93). Althusser stresses that the mystical shell rejected by Marx is "not a relatively external element of the dialectic (e.g. the 'system') but an *internal* element, *consubstantial with the Hegelian dialectic*" (93). Hence, Marx's discussion of the need to invert the Hegelian dialectic is not concerned with

the nature of the objects to which a single method should be applied (the world of the Idea for Hegel – the real world for Marx), but rather the problem of the nature of the dialectic considered itself, that is, the problem of its specific structures. (93)

What is at stake, therefore, is the "*transformation of its structures*" (93): the *basic structures of the Hegelian dialectic* such as negation, the negation of the negation, the identity of opposites, 'supersession,' the transformation of quantity into quality, contradiction, etc. *have for Marx (in so far as he takes them over, and he takes over by no means all of them) a structure different from the structure they have for Hegel. (93-94)*

These "*structural differences*" (94) between the Hegelian and the Marxist dialectic can be "demonstrated, described, determined and thought" (94), something that is vital to the "*philosophical development of Marxism*" (94).

In an effort to understand the concept with which Marx sought to replace Hegel's notion of the dialectic, Althusser turns his attention to the question of the Russian Revolution. He ponders why it was that, of all the countries in Europe, a successful revolution came to fruition only in Russia. He points out that Lenin was of the view that it was made possible not only by the "contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production, essentially embodied in the contradiction between two antagonistic classes" (99) but by the eruption of the First World War. Lenin argued that the "unevenness of capitalist development led, via the 1914-1918 war, to the Russian Revolution because in the revolutionary system facing the whole of humanity Russia was *the weakest link in the chain of imperialist states*" (97). Lenin saw in these factors the "*objective conditions*" (97) for revolution, something which he facilitated by forging "*its subjective conditions*, the means of a decisive assault on this weak link in the imperialist chain" (98) in the subversive activities of the Bolshevik (or Communist) party which he had founded in exile. Lenin was of the Machiavellian view that "anyone who wants to control a given situation will look for a weak point, in case it should render the whole system vulnerable" (94). In other words, for Lenin, the *objective* conditions for revolution must be supplemented by consciously revolutionary activities (these are the *subjective* conditions) designed to exploit circumstances to hand.

Althusser concludes from this that, contrary to popular Marxist wisdom, the primary contradiction described above between the forces and relations of production is not sufficient to initiate revolution. Rather,

to become a ruptural principle, there must be an accumulation of 'circumstances' and 'currents' so that whatever their origin and sense . . . , they 'fuse' into a *ruptural unity*: when they produce the result of the immense majority of the popular masses *grouped* in an assault on a regime which its ruling classes are *unable to defend. (99)*

Such a situation "presupposes the 'fusion' of an 'accumulation' of contradictions" (99),

some of which are "radically heterogeneous – of different origins, different sense, different *levels* and *points* of application – but which nonetheless 'merge' into a ruptural unity" (100). This is why, he argues, "we can no longer talk of the sole, unique power of the general 'contradiction'" (100) or that all the various "contradictions and their fusion" (100) are "merely the *pure phenomena* of the general contradiction" (100). Rather, the "'circumstances' and 'currents' which achieve it" (100) are derived from the "relations of production" (100), which is "one of the *terms* of the contradiction" (100) at the same time that it is "its *conditions of existence*" (100), from the "superstructures" (100), from the "international conjuncture itself" (100):

the 'contradiction' is inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from its formal *conditions of existence*, and even from the *instances* it governs; it is radically *affected by them*, determining, but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the various *levels* and *instances* of the social formation it animates; it might be called *overdetermined in its principle*. (101)

Borrowing the notion of 'overdetermination' from Freud, Althusser contends that in it "we are dealing with something *quite different from the Hegelian contradiction*" (101).

For Althusser, the Hegelian model of contradiction is "*never really overdetermined*" (101) in the sense described above. This is because the complexity of the Hegelian notion of contradiction in a work such as The Phenomenology of Spirit which seeks to describe the "'experiences' of consciousness and their dialectic" (101), "is not the complexity of an *effective overdetermination*" (101). It is, rather, the

complexity of a cumulative *internalisation* which is only apparently an overdetermination. In fact, at each moment of its development consciousness lives and experiences its own essence (the essence corresponding to the stage it has attained) *through all the echoes of the essence it has previously been*, and through the *allusive presence* of the corresponding historical forms. Hegel, therefore, argues that every consciousness has a suppressed-conserved (*aufgehoben*) *past* even in its present, and a *world* (the world whose consciousness it could be, but which is . . . virtual and latent), and that therefore, it also has as its past *the worlds of its superseded essences*. But these past *images* of consciousness and these latent *worlds* (corresponding to the images) never affect present consciousness as *effective determinations different from itself*: these images and worlds concern it only as echoes (memories, phantoms of its historicity) of what it has become. . . . Because the past is never more than the internal essence (in-itself) of the future it encloses, this presence of the past is the presence to consciousness of consciousness itself, *and no true external determination*. (101-102)

Hence, Althusser concludes, what is really at stake in Hegel's model of human consciousness is a "*circle of circles, consciousness has only one centre, which solely determines it; it would need circles with another centre than itself--decentered circles--for it to be affected at its centre by its effectivity, in short for its essence to be overdetermined by their effectivity*" (102).

This is also true of Hegel's philosophy of history and the social formation advanced in The Philosophy of History where he only *seems* to be talking in terms of an overdetermination: "are not all historical societies constituted of an infinity of concrete determinations, from political laws to religion via customs, habits, financial, commercial and economic regimes, the educational system, the arts, philosophy, and so on?" (102), he asks. However,

none of these determinations is essentially *outside* the others, not only because together they constitute an original, organic totality, but also and above all because this totality is *reflected in a unique internal principle*, which is the *truth* of all those concrete determinations. (102)

Althusser's point is that Hegel conceptualised "historical mutation" (102-103) in terms of a "simple concept of contradiction" (103) which is made possible by the "simplicity of the *internal principle* that constitutes the essence of any historical period" (103) and to which it is "possible, *in principle, to reduce the totality*, the infinite diversity, of a historically given society" (103). From this perspective, it does not matter if a given people were to die once it has embodied the determinate principle of a moment of the Idea (which has plenty more to come), once, having embodied it, it has cast it off to add it to that Self-Memory which is History, thereby delivering it to such and such *another* people (even if their historical relation is tenuous!), who, reflecting it in their own substance, will find in it the promise of their own internal principle. . . . (103)

What matters is not the diverse ways in which Spirit manifests itself but the underlying unity and continuity of Spirit in and through its various manifestations.

Althusser argues that from a materialist Marxist point of view, however, this reduction

of *all* the elements that make up the concrete life of a historical epoch (economic, social, political and legal institutions, customs, ethics, art, religion, philosophy, and even historical events . . .) to *one* principle of internal unity, is itself only possible on the *absolute condition* of taking the whole concrete life of a people for the externalisation-alienation (*Entausserung-Entfremdung*) of an *internal spiritual principle*, which can *never definitely be anything but the most abstract form of that epoch's consciousness of itself: its religious or philosophical consciousness, that is, its own ideology*. (103)

This is why Althusser contends that it is not possible to separate Hegel's method from his outlook, both being contaminated by idealism: "this 'world outlook' cannot be cast aside without our being obliged to transform profoundly the structures of that dialectic" (104). This is why the Marxist inversion of the dialectic is not merely an extraction pure and simple.

At this point, Althusser returns once more to his earlier attempt to understand why the Russian Revolution which is, Lenin et al. argue, an "exceptional" (104) event, an out of the ordinary occurrence. What made it unique, he argues, is

that *the Capital-labour contradiction is never simple, but always specified by the historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised*. It is specified by the forms of the *superstructure* (the State, the dominant ideology, religion, politically organised movements, and so on); specified by *the internal and external historical situation* which determines it on the one hand as a function of *the national past* (completed or 'relapsed' bourgeois revolution, feudal exploitation eliminated wholly, partially or not at all, local 'customs,' specific national *traditions*, even the 'etiquette' of political struggles and behaviour, etc.), and on the other as functions of the existing *world context* (what dominates it--competition of capitalist nations, or 'imperialist internationalism,' or competition within imperialism, etc.). . . . (106)

The point of mentioning all this is that the "apparently simple contradiction is *always overdetermined*" (106) as a result of which the exception now becomes the rule. Every

"contradiction appears in Marxist historical practice and experience as an *overdetermined contradiction*" which "constitutes the specificity of Marxist contradiction" (107).

Althusser's goal is to put his finger on the "*necessary link* that unites the characteristic structure of contradiction for Marx to his conception of society and history" (107).

To answer this question, Althusser must ensure that Marx's model of history is also not a mere inversion of the Hegelian conception of history. At first glance, he argues, it might seem that Marx merely inverted Hegel's model of history:

Hegel explains the material life, the concrete history of all peoples by a dialectic of consciousness (the people's consciousness of itself; its ideology).

For Marx, on the other hand, the material life of men explains their history; their consciousness, their ideologies are then merely the phenomena of their material life. (107)

All Marx does, from this perspective, is "simply to *invert the relation of the terms (and thus to retain them)*: [Hegel's terms] civil society and state, [Marx's terms] economy and politics-ideology" (108) thereby transforming the "essence into the phenomena and the phenomena into essence" (108). Where "for Hegel, the politico-ideological is the essence of the economic, for Marx, the economic will be the essence of the politico-ideological" (108): the

political and the ideological will therefore be merely pure phenomena of the economic which will be their 'truth.' For Hegel's 'pure' principle of consciousness . . . , for the simple internal principle which he conceived as the principle of the intelligibility of all the determinations of a historical people, we have substituted *another single principle*, its opposite: material life, the economy. . . . [This] is the *exact mirror image of the Hegelian dialectic* – the only difference being that it is no longer a question of deriving their successive moments from the Idea, but the Economy, by virtue of the same internal contradiction. (108)

This results in the "radical reduction of the dialectic of history to the dialectic generating the successive *modes of production*, that is, in the last analysis, the different production *techniques*" (108) which is nothing more than "economism" (109).

Althusser contends that Marx did not merely invert and thus ultimately retain terms inherited from Hegel. Firstly, he argues, the terms are no longer the same. He may reuse Hegelian terms like 'civil society' (Hegel envisaged this part of society as the 'world of needs in which individuals are defined by their needs and wishes and which is derived from "political society or State and everything embodied in the State: religion, philosophy, in short, the epoch's consciousness of itself" [108]). However, he does so only as an "allusion to the past" (109) and in order to critique its presuppositions. Marx is more interested in the "anatomy" (110) of this world, in the "*abstract economic reality* . . . as the effect of a deeper, more concrete reality: *the mode of production of a determinate social formation*" (110) and its "*conditions of existence*" (110) such as the forces and relations of production. This is also true of Marx's concept of the State which is now "systematically thought as an instrument of coercion in the service of the ruling, exploiting class" (110). This notion of the State is linked to his entirely new "*concept of social class*" (100): the former is "no longer above human groups, but at the service of the ruling class; it is no longer its mission to consummate itself in art, religion and philosophy, but to set them to serve the interests of the ruling class" (110). The State is, thus, no longer the essence or "'truth of civil society" (110): rather, class is the 'truth' of the State.

Moreover, Althusser contends that, in Marx's hands, it is not only the terms which change but the "relations" (111) between the terms which are modified:

How are these new terms arranged? On the one hand, the *structure* (the

economic base: the forces of production and the relations of production); on the other, the *superstructure* (the State and all the legal, political and ideological forms). We have seen that one could nevertheless attempt to maintain a *Hegelian solution* (the relation Hegel imposed between the civil society and the State) between these two groups of categories: *the relation between an essence and its phenomena*. . . . (111)

Althusser contends that Marx substitutes for this tacit identity (phenomenon-essence-truth of . . .) of the economic and the political . . . a *new conception* of the relation between *determinant instances* in the structure-superstructure complex which constitutes the essence of any social formation. . . . Marx has at least given us the 'two ends of the chain' and has told us to find out what goes on between them: on the one hand, *determination in the last instance by the (economic) mode of production*; on the other, *the relative autonomy of the superstructures and their specific effectivity*. . . . We are really dealing with a *new relationship between new terms*. (111)

Althusser has in mind in this regard comments in a famous letter written to Joseph Bloch by Engels in 1890 after Marx's death that the Mode of Production is the determinant factor, but only in the final analysis, and that the

economic situation is the basis but the various elements of the superstructure – the political forms of the class struggle and its results: to wit constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and then even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, artistic, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas – also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles, and in many cases preponderate in determining their form. (qtd. in Althusser, 112)

Engels claims that "more than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted" (qtd. in Althusser, 112). Althusser argues that this important quotation by Engels sheds light on his own concept of 'overdetermination.' For Marx and Engels, Althusser contends, the superstructure exercises as much influence on the base as the other way around. The result is that

overdetermination is inevitable and thinkable as soon as the real existence of the forms of the superstructure and of the national and international conjuncture has been recognised – an existence largely specific and autonomous, and therefore irreducible to a pure *phenomenon*. [T]his overdetermination does not just refer to apparently unique and aberrant situations . . . but is *universal* . . .; in history, these instances, the superstructures, etc. – are never seen to step respectfully aside when their work is done, or when the Time comes, as his pure phenomena, to scatter before His Majesty the Economy as he strides along the royal road of the Dialectic. (113)

Althusser points out that the "*theory of the specific effectivity of the superstructures and other 'circumstances' largely remains to be elaborated*" (113) as does the "*theory of the particular essence of the specific elements of the superstructure*" (114). He believes that, after Marx and Engels, only Gramsci has contributed something significant and new in this regard. He describes Lukacs, by contrast, as "tainted by a guilty Hegelianism" (114).

Althusser concludes by turning his attention to the question of history, what he calls "*survivals*" (114), the existence of which cannot be disputed even within the Russian

Communist party of Lenin's day. What is a survival, what is its "theoretical status" (114), he asks? Are we talking about retained "economic structures" (114) or does the term refer to "other structures, political, ideological structures, etc.: *customs, habits, even 'traditions' such as the 'national tradition'*" (114)? Althusser argues that we need to reconceptualise 'retentions' in terms other than a "vague Hegelianism such as '*supersession'--the-maintenance-of-what-has-been-negated-in-its-very-negation* (that is, the negation of the negation)" (115). From a Hegelian perspective, the "survival of the past" (115) as the '*superseded*' . . . is simply reduced to the modality of a *memory*" (115): the "past survives in the form of a memory of what it has been; that is, as the whispered promise of its present" (115). From this perspective, "Rome lived happily in a world impregnated by Greece: Greece '*superseded*' survived as objective memories: its reproduced temples, assimilated religion, its rethought philosophy" (115). "Without knowing it" (115), by the same token, Greece "was already Rome" (115).

Althusser contends that "Marx's conception of '*supersession*' has nothing to do with this dialectic of historical comfort" (115). Rather, survivals are explained by reference to (i.e. they are determined by) the multiplicity of world-historical forces which he terms '*overdetermination*' at any given historical conjuncture, that is, synchronically rather than diachronically. At any moment, the process of overdetermination has an uneven effect, he argues, as a result of which a "revolution in the *structure* [economic base] does not *ipso facto* modify the existing superstructure and particularly the *ideologies* at one blow (as it would if the economic was the *sole determinant factor*), for they have sufficient of their own consistency *to survive beyond their immediate life context*, even to recreate, to '*secrete*' substitute conditions of existence temporarily" (116). In other words, because change is produced within one sector of society, this does not mean that all sectors are equally affected. Secondly, Althusser argues, it is also true that the "new society produced by the Revolution may itself *ensure the survival, that is, the reactivation, of older elements* through both the forms of its new superstructures and specific (national and international) '*circumstances*'" (116). In other words, a given configuration of circumstances (overdetermination) in the present may be responsible for and may even seek out the reactivation of particular patterns of belief, activity, etc. (survivals) for its own purposes. This explains why the

proud and generous Russian people bore Stalin's crimes and repression with such resignation; how the Bolshevik party could tolerate them; not to speak of the final question – how a Communist leader could have ordered them?
(116)

Althusser needs to argue that the excesses and even brutalities which marked Stalin's reign of terror are not explicable by reference to some Hegelian notion of essence manifesting itself historically through variable phenomena which retain within themselves the marks, for good or bad, of their previous incarnations. To argue this would be in effect to admit that there is a tradition of violence and even brutality within Marxism which, although manifest in the Russian Communist party is latent in other manifestations of Marxism, and ultimately reducible to some taint within the very essence of the philosophy. Althusser argues that this is where the Hegelian line of argument leads: to collusion with the critics of communism in the view that Marxism is inherently autocratic and totalitarian. However, the application of the notion of overdetermination leads in a different direction: Stalin's excesses is perfectly explicable with reference to the specific configuration of historical forces pertinent to a particular place and time alone. Marxism in other socio-historical contexts may not and probably would not take the same path.

SECONDARY SOURCES

For a useful explication of Althusser's quite difficult model of the social formation, see the following:

- Dowling, William C. Jameson, Althusser, Marx: an Introduction to the Political Unconscious. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984.
- Jay, Martin. Marxism and Totality: the Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984.

QUESTIONS

Preliminary Questions:

1. What do you understand by Hegel's concept of the 'dialectic' (what Althusser terms 'contradiction')? [see Hegel's The Science of Logic]
2. What role does the dialectic ('contradiction') play in human society, according to Hegel? [see Hegel's The Phenomenology of Spirit]
3. What role does the 'dialectic' play in the development of history, according to Hegel? [see Hegel's The Philosophy of History]
4. What do you understand by the Base / Superstructure model of society advanced by Marx? What role does the dialectic play in this model? [see Marx's Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy]
5. In what two ways has the relationship of the base to the superstructure been conceptualised by Marxists?
6. How does Marx conceptualise the development of history? [see Marx's The German Ideology]

Questions on "Contradiction and Overdetermination":

7. What two claims by Marx about Hegel draws Althusser's attention?
8. How are these claims usually interpreted by Hegelian Marxists?
9. How does Althusser, by contrast, problematise these two claims?
10. Why, according to Lenin, did revolution come to fruition only in Tsarist Russia?
11. How, according to Althusser, does Lenin's view refute Hegel's model of 'contradiction'?
12. What term does Althusser attribute to the conception of the social formation which he glimpses here in Lenin and, by extension, Marx? From whom does he borrow it? What do you understand by this concept? How is it related to Saussure's concept of the sign system?
13. How does Althusser conceptualise the development of history in his discussion of 'survivals'? What role does the concept discussed above play in this theory?
14. How are Althusser's views on the nature of the social formation and the process of history significantly different from that of Hegel and, more importantly, the Hegelian Marxists?