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A Response

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Despite his criticisms of my own work, Walder and I seem to share an appreciation for Marx's discovery of the identical subject-object in history. I suspect that Walder responds much more eagerly to a Lukacs' *Totalität* than to resounding teleologies. In any case, we both cite the identical passage from Engels's famous letter to Bloch to show that for Marx and Engels:

Human nature was only its history, *die Geschichte der Menschheit*; and they continuously refused even to reduce history exclusively to economic necessity. Engels reminded Bloch that, in the materialist conception of history, production was only *ultimately* the determining factor of change. [Wakeman, 1973: 234]

Yet while I certainly understand Walder's wish to underscore the Marxian conception of totality, especially in the conceptualization of reality as social process, I find myself balking at his efforts to minimize Marx's own economic determinism. Walder claims, for instance, that passages in which Marx seems to be using "presuppose" in the sense of "presume" (*annehmen*) or

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“assume” (*voraussetzen*) really suggest more than just anteriority. One would have to go to the German edition to be sure, but I doubt that Marx intended “presuppose” to mean “determine” in the sense that modes of production “determine” the specific relations between the ensuing economic and social phases of exchange. Think for a moment of the section in *Capital III* where Marx exposes “illusions created by competition,” showing that even the prices of goods ostensibly affected by the supply of variable capital are *ultimately* determined by the price of labor. “In order to determine wages, we cannot, therefore, presuppose capital, for the value of the capital is itself determined in part by wages” (Marx, 1959: 842). This, I would argue, is the way Marx most consistently uses “presuppose”: in the Chinese sense of *jiading*, which is a pretty faithful translation of the notion of a primary logical assumption rather than of an ultimate determining force.

Then, again, I felt the matter to be a shade less ambiguous than Walder makes it appear when he quotes from Marx's *Contribution*: “the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life-process in general.” To my eye this statement, especially in context, is unequivocally determinist. In the lines just prior to the above quote, Marx had made the statement that:

In the social production of their existence, men enter into definite, necessary relations, which are independent of their will, namely, relations of production corresponding to a determinate stage of development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which there arises a legal and political superstructure and to which there correspond definite forms of social consciousness. [Marx and Engels, 1951, 1: 328]

We must recognize, of course, that base and superstructure constitute a linked whole—a point to which Walder repeatedly returns (though he does not quote the passage just given). But the implication that there is a simple “reciprocal interaction”

(Walder's words) between "the real foundation" and the "legal and political superstructure" (Marx's dichotomy) is actually less dialectical than Marx's own formulation in the *Contribution*. Again, in lines four sentences after the portion Walder did quote, Marx goes on to say that:

With the change in the economic foundation the whole immense superstructure is more slowly or more rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic, in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. [Marx and Engels, 1951, 1: 329]

It seems plain that Marx thought it necessary to preserve that distinction in order to prevent the totality of relations from overwhelming those it enmeshes. Then, truly critical consciousness would be obliterated, and mere idealism or false consciousness would prevail. The Marxian dialectic, in other words, would yield to a Heraclitan or Taoist conception of interaction within what is given.

Obviously, it is very easy to lose one's footing on this kind of intellectual terrain. Interpretations consequently differ by small but significant degrees. In a work on Marx which was republished in China last year, Lenin (1975: 51) stressed the hard material core of Marx's economic reductionism:

Regarding the world and humanity materialistically, [Marx and Engels] perceived that just as material causes underlie all natural phenomena, so the development of human society is conditioned by the development of material, productive forces. On the development of the productive forces depend the relations into which men enter one with another in the production of the things required for the satisfaction of human needs. And in these relations lies the explanation of all the phenomena of social life, human aspirations, ideas and laws.

Lenin therefore flatly says—whatever his acts—that “political institutions are a superstructure on the economic foundation,” which must change first. Stalin, on the other hand, can sometimes sound more like Mao than Lenin (and not only when he calls for mass criticism of the party, as in his 1928 speech). In his *Dialectical and Historical Criticism*, Stalin (1972) points out that:

Thus social ideas, theories and political institutions, having arisen on the basis of the urgent tasks of the development of the material life of society, the development of social beings, themselves then react upon social being, upon the material life of society, creating the conditions necessary for completely carrying out the urgent tasks of the material life of society, and for rendering its further development possible. In this connection Marx says: “Theory becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses” (*Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*).

Yet while Stalin recognized the ultimate dialectical unity of economic structure and ideological superstructure, like Marx he also realized the importance of preserving the distinction between them.

Hence, in order not to err in policy, in order not to find itself in the position of idle dreamers, the party of the proletariat must not base its activities on abstract “principles of human reason,” but on the concrete conditions of the material life of society, as the determining force of social development; not on the good wishes of “great men,” but on the real needs of development of the material life of society. [Stalin, 1972]

Throughout these men’s writings, then, there is a common causal priority: material structures *do* determine ideological superstructures, or at least play a greater role in their collective dialectical development. And that message continues on into Chinese Communist texts which sometimes sound more economically deterministic than Marx himself.

Take, for example, that passage in Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1938: Part 1.3) where he attacks the Lassallean conception of welfare. “Right,” he says, “can never

be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby." The Chinese translation of that passage reads:

Faquan yong bu neng chaoguo shehui jingji zhidu yiji you ci jingji zhidu suo jueding de shehui wenhua fazhan chengdu. [Marx, 1958: 22]

Or, as I literally translate it back into English:

Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and the cultural development of society determined (*jueding*) by that economic structure.

One might suggest, then, that there at least exists the possibility of disagreement in a socialist society between those inclining more toward structural determinism on the one side, and what Mao's opponents have sometimes called Ernst Mach-ism on the other. We must in any case recognize the great contrast between a statement like Marx's above and, say, the recent flat assertion in China that "the line determines everything (*luxian jueding iqie*)" (Jen and Chao, 1976).

I thought that Walder made very effective use of Marx's fluid historical descriptions in *Capital* to offset sections in the *Contribution* which do present a deterministic, stages-of-history Marx. Here, too, we seem close to agreement, perhaps because we have both been influenced by Engels' *Anti-Dühring* (1939). In my own work I said that:

The tension between subjective perception and objective reality, between abstraction and specificity . . . characterized the foundation of Marxism itself. Engels had repeatedly insisted that dialectical materialism did not impose abstractions upon history. Rather it derived general laws by observing the connections between events. . . . At the same time—even in the language used here—Engels revealed his certainty about the correctness of Marx's perception of those dialectical laws, and in turn projected them onto history with enough assurance to create an illusion of necessity, making subjective action possible. . . . It is important to

note, then, that the heart of Marxism is the belief that knowledge is power. Once man *knows* correctly, once religion is unmasked, then he can begin to perform those acts which will finally bring social forces under the control of society. [Wakeman, 1973: 64-65]

Perhaps I have not fully understood Walder's argument, but it does not seem to me as though we are very far apart on this particular issue.

There is a distance, however, between our perceptions of mass campaigns, and especially our interpretations of the Cultural Revolution. In his critique, Walder argues that in the People's Republic of China mass campaigns entail a basic transformation of the relations of production, of the base of society. He then contends that:

Most of the literature in the China field, however, fails to recognize this. Wakeman, for example, sees the Cultural Revolution as an act of will limited to superstructural change: "The Cultural Revolution was an ideological paradox: a class war within the superstructure of public opinion" (Wakeman, 1973: 306). In fact, social change during the Cultural Revolution was not limited to the superstructure, but aimed for real changes in what are properly termed the relations of production.

The conception of class war within the superstructure of public opinion was suggested by Mao himself (Mao, 1967). As he pointed out in the address to the Tenth Plenum:

In order to overthrow a regime, [we] must first of all take control of the superstructure, the ideology, by preparing public opinion. [Mao, 1962]

According to this viewpoint, the superstructure is the arena of class struggle because it has sheltered within itself ideological remnants of the old order. As the *Fundamentals of the Party* (*Dang de jichu zhishi*) put it:

In socialist society, the bourgeoisie and all exploiting classes have already been overthrown, but the ideology of the exploiting

classes will not disappear immediately; they will rely on their long-held position in the superstructure to strike wildly at the proletariat. The class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the realm of ideology is, therefore, a prolonged and complex, sometimes even highly intense, struggle. [Perrole, 1977: 35]

Insofar as society is a connected whole, this struggle may ultimately affect the relations of production. But deliberate transformation of the economic base of society does not necessarily follow from the Maoist conception of ideological struggle in a cultural revolution. Hence the paradox mentioned in *History and Will*, which harkens back to Marx's conception that discordance between structure and superstructure is a fundamental cause of social progress (Marx, 1959: 861).

Incidentally, I doubt that many scholars would question the assertion that ideological conflict entails "real changes." In the passage immediately following the one just quoted by Walder from *History and Will*, I go on to point out that the Cultural Revolution stemmed from "genuine social causes," not the least of which was an elitist examination system and bureaucratic privileges.

Here and elsewhere in his essay Walder may too easily have blurred the finer points of other scholars' arguments. Some, like myself, will probably resist being homogenized as members of some vague entity known as "the China field." I, at least, would certainly like to question Walder's assertion that we all share a "conception of superstructure and base as separate factors, indeed as opposite poles of a determinist/voluntarist spectrum," which acts as a "barrier to understanding either Marx or Mao." Mr. Walder's critique may indeed prove to be a "point of departure" toward a more complex comprehension of the relation of Mao's thought to classical Marxism. Consequently, I do not think that he needs to create his own caricature of "the China field" in order to establish that claim.

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