

History, the totality of production and scientific method in the 1857

Introduction

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Introduction

In 1857 Marx was convinced that the financial crisis developing at international level had created the conditions for a new revolutionary period throughout Europe. He had been waiting for this moment ever since the popular insurrections of 1848, and now that it finally seemed to have come he did not want events to catch him unprepared. He therefore decided to resume his economic studies and to give them a finished form.

Where to begin? How to embark on the critique of political economy, that ambitious and demanding project which he had begun and interrupted several times before? This was the first question that Marx asked himself as he got down to work again. Two circumstances played a crucial role in determining the answer: he held the view that, despite the validity of certain theories, economic science still lacked a cognitive procedure with which to grasp and elucidate reality correctly;¹ and he felt a need to establish the arguments and the order of exposition before he embarked on the task of composition. These considerations led him to go more deeply into problems of method and to formulate the guiding principles for his research. The upshot was one of

the most extensively debated manuscripts in the whole of his oeuvre: the so-called ‘Introduction’ of 1857.

Marx’s intention was certainly not to write a sophisticated methodological treatise but to clarify for himself, before his readers, what orientation he should follow on the long and eventful critical journey that lay ahead. This was also necessary for the task of revising the huge mass of economic studies that he had accumulated since the mid-1840s. Thus, along with observations on the employment and articulation of theoretical categories, these pages contain a number of formulations essential to his thought that he found indispensable to summarize anew – especially those linked to his conception of history – as well as a quite unsystematic list of questions for which the solutions remained problematic.

This mix of requirements and purposes, the short period of composition (scarcely a week) and, above all, the provisional character of these notes make them extremely complex and controversial. Nevertheless, since it contains the most extensive and detailed pronouncement that Marx ever made on epistemological questions, the ‘Introduction’ is an important reference for the understanding of his thought² and a key to the interpretation of the *Grundrisse* as a whole.

History and the social individual

In keeping with his style, Marx alternated in the ‘Introduction’ between exposition of his own ideas and criticism of his theoretical opponents. The text is divided into four sections:

- (1) Production in general
- (2) General relation between production, distribution, exchange and consumption
- (3) The method of political economy
- (4) Means (forces) of production and relations of production, relations of production and relations of circulation, etc.

(Marx 1973: 69)

The first section opens with a declaration of intent, immediately specifying the field of study and pointing to the historical criterion: '[t]he object before us, to begin with, material production. Individuals producing in society – hence socially determined individual production – is, of course, the point of departure.' Marx's polemical target was 'the eighteenth-century Robinsonades' (Marx 1973: 83), the myth of Robinson Crusoe (see Watt 1951: 112) as the paradigm of *homo oeconomicus*, or the projection of phenomena typical of the bourgeois era onto every other society that has existed since the earliest times. Such conceptions represented the social character of production as a constant in any labour process, not as a peculiarity of capitalist relations. In the same way, civil society [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*] – whose emergence in the eighteenth century had created the conditions through which 'the individual appears detached from the natural bonds etc. which in earlier historical periods make him the accessory of a definite and limited human conglomerate' – was portrayed as having always existed (Marx 1973: 83).

In reality, the isolated individual simply did not exist before the capitalist epoch. As Marx put it in another passage in the *Grundrisse*: 'He originally appears as a species-

being, tribal being, herd animal' (Marx 1973: 496, trans. modified). This collective dimension is the condition for the appropriation of the earth, 'the great workshop, the arsenal which furnishes both means and material of labour, as well as the seat, the *base* of the community [*Basis des Gemeinwesens*]’ (Marx 1973: 472). In the presence of these primal relations, the activity of human beings is directly linked to the earth; there is a ‘natural unity of labour with its material presuppositions’, and the individual lives in symbiosis with others like himself (Marx 1973: 471). Similarly, in all later economic forms based on agriculture where the aim is to create use-values and not yet exchange-values,³ the relationship of the individual to ‘the objective conditions of his labour is mediated through his presence as member of the commune’; he is always only one link in the chain (Marx 1973: 486). In this connection, Marx writes in the ‘Introduction’:

The more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent [*unselbstständig*], as belonging to a greater whole: in a still quite natural way in the family and in the family expanded into the clan [*Stamm*]; then later in the various forms of communal society arising out of the antitheses and fusions of the clans.⁴

(Marx 1973: 84)

Similar considerations appear in *Capital*, vol. I. Here, in speaking of ‘the European Middle Ages, shrouded in darkness’, Marx argues that ‘instead of the independent man, we find everyone dependent, serfs and lords, vassals and suzerains, laymen and clergy. Personal dependence here characterizes the social relations of production just as much as

it does the other spheres of life organized on the basis of that production' (Marx 1996: 88). And, when he examined the genesis of product exchange, he recalled that it began with contacts among different families, tribes or communities, 'for, in the beginning of civilization, it is not private individuals but families, tribes, etc., that meet on an independent footing' (Marx 1996: 357). Thus, whether the horizon was the primal bond of consanguinity or the medieval nexus of lordship and vassalage, individuals lived amid 'limited relations of production [*bornirter Productionsverhältnisse*]', joined to one another by reciprocal ties (Marx 1973: 162).⁵

The classical economists had inverted this reality, on the basis of what Marx regarded as fantasies with an inspiration in natural law. In particular, Adam Smith had described a primal condition where individuals not only existed but were capable of producing outside society. A division of labour within tribes of hunters and shepherds had supposedly achieved the specialization of trades: one person's greater dexterity in fashioning bows and arrows, for example, or in building wooden huts, had made him a kind of armourer or carpenter, and the assurance of being able to exchange the unconsumed part of one's labour product for the surplus of others 'encourage[d] every man to apply himself to a particular occupation' (Smith 1961: 19). David Ricardo was guilty of a similar anachronism when he conceived of the relationship between hunters and fishermen in the early stages of society as an exchange between owners of commodities on the basis of the labour-time objectified in them (see Ricardo 1973: 15, cf. Marx 1987a: 300).

In this way, Smith and Ricardo depicted a highly developed product of the society in which they lived – the isolated bourgeois individual – as if he were a spontaneous

manifestation of nature. What emerged from the pages of their works was a mythological, timeless individual, one ‘posited by nature’, whose social relations were always the same and whose economic behaviour had a historyless anthropological character (Marx 1973: 83). According to Marx, the interpreters of each new historical epoch have regularly deluded themselves that the most distinctive features of their own age have been present since time immemorial.⁶

Marx argued instead that ‘[p]roduction by an isolated individual outside society ... is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living *together* and talking to each other’ (Marx 1973: 84).⁷ And, against those who portrayed the isolated individual of the eighteenth century as the archetype of human nature, ‘not as a historical result but as history’s point of departure’, he maintained that such an individual emerged only with the most highly developed social relations (Marx 1973: 83). Marx did not entirely disagree that man was a *ζώον πολιτικόν* [*zoon politikon*], a social animal, but he insisted that he was ‘an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society’ (Marx 1973: 84). Thus, since civil society had arisen only with the modern world, the free wage-labourer of the capitalist epoch had appeared only after a long historical process. He was, in fact, ‘the product on one side of the dissolution of the feudal forms of society, on the other side of the new forces of production developed since the sixteenth century’ (Marx 1973: 83). If Marx felt the need to repeat a point he considered all too evident, it was only because works by Henry Charles Carey, Frédéric Bastiat and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon had brought it up for discussion in the previous twenty years.⁸ After sketching the genesis of the capitalist individual and demonstrating that modern production conforms only to ‘a definitive stage of social development –

production by social individuals', Marx points to a second theoretical requirement: namely, to expose the mystification practised by economists with regard to the concept of 'production in general' [*Production im Allgemeinem*]. This is an abstraction, a category that does not exist at any concrete stage of reality. However, since 'all epochs of production have certain common traits, common characteristics' [*gemeinsame Bestimmungen*], Marx recognizes that 'production in general is a rational abstraction in so far as it really brings out and fixes the common element', thereby saving pointless repetition for the scholar who undertakes to reproduce reality through thought (Marx 1973: 85).

So, abstraction acquired a positive function for Marx. It was no longer, as in his early critique of G.W.F. Hegel, synonymous with idealist philosophy and its substitution of itself for reality (see Marx 1975a: 180ff.), or, as he put it in 1847 in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, a metaphysics that transformed everything into logical categories (Marx 1976: 163). Now that his materialist conception of history (as it was later denominated) had been solidly elaborated, and now that his critical reflections were operating in a context profoundly different from that of the early 1840s, Marx was able to reconsider abstraction without the prejudices of his youth. Thus, unlike representatives of the 'Historical School', who in the same period were theorizing the impossibility of abstract laws with universal value,⁹ Marx in the *Grundrisse* recognized that abstraction could play a fruitful role in the cognitive process.¹⁰

This was possible, however, only if theoretical analysis proved capable of distinguishing between definitions valid for all historical stages and those valid only for particular epochs, and of granting due importance to the latter in the understanding of

reality. Although abstraction was useful in representing the broadest phenomena of production, it did not correctly represent its specific aspects, which were alone truly historical.¹¹ If abstraction was not combined with the kind of determinations characteristic of any historical reality, then production changed from being a specific, differentiated phenomenon into a perpetually self-identical process, which concealed the ‘essential diversity’ [*wesentliche Verschiedenheit*] of the various forms in which it manifested itself. This was the error committed by economists who claimed to show ‘the eternity and harmoniousness of the existing social relations’ (Marx 1973: 85). In contrast to their procedure, Marx maintained that it was the specific features of each social-economic formation which made it possible to distinguish it from others, gave the impetus for its development and enabled scholars to understand the real historical changes (Korsch 1938: 78f.).

Although the definition of the general elements of production is ‘segmented many times over and split into different determinations’, some of which ‘belong to all epochs, others to only a few’, there are certainly, among its universal components, human labour and material provided by nature (Marx 1973: 85). For, without a producing subject and a worked-upon object, there could be no production at all. But the economists introduced a third general prerequisite of production: ‘a stock, previously accumulated, of the products of former labour’, that is, capital (Mill 1965: 55).¹² The critique of this last element was essential for Marx, in order to reveal what he considered to be a fundamental limitation of the economists. It also seemed evident to him that no production was possible without an instrument of labour, if only the human hand, or without accumulated past labour, if only in the form of primitive man’s repetitive exercises. However, while agreeing that capital

was past labour and an instrument of production, he did not, like Smith, Ricardo and John Stuart Mill, conclude that it had always existed.

The point is made in greater detail in another section of the *Grundrisse*, where the conception of capital as ‘eternal’ is seen as a way of treating it only as matter, without regard for its essential ‘formal determination’ (*Formbestimmung*). According to this,

capital would have existed in all forms of society, and is something altogether unhistorical. ... The arm, and especially the hand, are then capital. Capital would be only a new name for a thing as old as the human race, since every form of labour, including the least developed, hunting, fishing, etc., presupposes that the product of prior labour is used as means for direct, living labour. ... If, then, the specific form of capital is abstracted away, and only the content is emphasized, ... of course nothing is easier than to demonstrate that capital is a necessary condition for all human production. The proof of this proceeds precisely by abstraction [*Abstraktion*] from the specific aspects which make it the moment of a specifically developed *historical* stage of human production [*Moment einer besonders entwickelten historischen Stufe der menschlichen Production*].

(Marx 1973: 257-8)

In these passages Marx refers to abstraction in the negative sense: to abstract is to leave out the real social conditions, to conceive of capital as a thing rather than a relation, and hence to advance an interpretation that is false. In the ‘Introduction’ Marx accepts the use

of abstract categories, but only if analysis of the general aspect does not obliterate the particular aspect or blur the latter in the indistinctness of the former. If the error is made of ‘conceiving capital in its physical attribute only as instrument of production, while entirely ignoring the economic form [*ökonomischen Form*] which makes the instrument of production into capital’ (Marx 1973: 591), one falls into the ‘crude inability to grasp the real distinctions’ and a belief that ‘there exists only one single economic relation which takes on different names’ (Marx 1973: 249). To ignore the differences expressed in the social relation means to abstract from the *differentia specifca*, that is the nodal point of everything.¹³ Thus, in the ‘Introduction’, Marx writes that ‘capital is a general [*allgemeines*], eternal relation of nature’, ‘that is, if I leave out just the specific quality which alone makes “instrument of production” and “stored-up labour” into capital’ (Marx 1973: 86).

In fact, Marx had already criticized the economists’ lack of historical sense in *The Poverty of Philosophy*:

Economists have a singular method of procedure. There are only two kinds of institutions for them, artificial and natural. The institutions of feudalism are artificial institutions, those of the bourgeoisie are natural institutions. In this they resemble the theologians, who likewise establish two kinds of religion. Every religion which is not theirs is an invention of men, while their own is an emanation from God. When the economists say that present-day relations – the relations of bourgeois production – are natural, they imply that these are the relations in which

wealth is created and productive forces developed in conformity with the laws of nature. These relations therefore are themselves natural laws independent of the influence of time. They are eternal laws which must always govern society. Thus there has been history, but there is no longer any.

(Marx 1976: 174)

For this to be plausible, economists depicted the historical circumstances prior to the birth of the capitalist mode of production as ‘results of its presence’ with its very own features (Marx 1973: 460). As Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*:

The bourgeois economists who regard capital as an eternal and *natural* (not historical) form of production then attempt ... to legitimize it again by formulating the conditions of its becoming as the conditions of its contemporary realization; i.e. presenting the moments in which the capitalist still appropriates as not-capitalist – because he is still becoming – as the very conditions in which he appropriates *as capitalist*.¹

(Marx 1973: 460)

From a historical point of view, the profound difference between Marx and the classical economists is that, in his view, ‘capital did not begin the world from the beginning, but rather encountered production and products already present, before it subjugated them beneath its process’ (Marx 1973: 675). For ‘the new productive forces and relations of

production do not develop out of nothing, nor drop from the sky, nor from the womb of the self-positing Idea; but from within and in antithesis to the existing development of production and the inherited, traditional relations of property' (Marx 1973: 278).

Similarly, the circumstance whereby producing subjects are separated from the means of production – which allows the capitalist to find propertyless workers capable of performing abstract labour (the necessary requirement for the exchange between capital and living labour) – is the result of a process that the economists cover with silence, which 'forms the history of the origins of capital and wage labour' (Marx 1973: 489).

A number of passages in the *Grundrisse* criticize the way in which economists portray historical as natural realities. It is self-evident to Marx, for example, that money is a product of history: 'to be money is not a natural attribute of gold and silver', but only a determination they first acquire at a precise moment of social development (Marx 1973: 239). The same is true of credit. According to Marx, lending and borrowing was a phenomenon common to many civilizations, as was usury, but they 'no more constitute credit than working constitutes industrial labour or free wage labour. And credit as an essential, developed relation of production appears *historically* only in circulation based on capital' (Marx 1973: 535). Prices and exchange also existed in ancient society, 'but the increasing determination of the former by costs of production, as well as the increasing dominance of the latter over all relations of production, only develop fully ... in bourgeois society, the society of free competition'; or 'what Adam Smith, in the true eighteenth-century manner, puts in the prehistoric period, the period preceding history, is rather a product of history' (Marx 1973: 156). Furthermore, just as he criticized the economists for their lack of historical sense, Marx mocked Proudhon and all the socialists

who thought that labour productive of exchange value could exist without developing into wage labour, that exchange value could exist without turning into capital, or that there could be capital without capitalists (see Marx 1973: 248).

Marx's chief aim in the opening pages of the 'Introduction' is therefore to assert the historical specificity of the capitalist mode of production: to demonstrate, as he would again affirm in *Capital*, vol. III, that it 'is not an absolute mode of production' but 'merely historical, transitory' (Marx 1998: 240).

This viewpoint implies a different way of seeing many questions, including the labour process and its various characteristics. In the *Grundrisse* Marx wrote that 'the bourgeois economists are so much cooped up within the notions belonging to a specific historic stage of social development that the necessity of the objectification of the powers of social labour appears to them as inseparable from the necessity of their alienation' (Marx 1973: 832). Marx repeatedly took issue with this presentation of the specific forms of the capitalist mode of production as if they were constants of the production process as such. To portray wage labour not as a distinctive relation of a particular historical form of production but as a universal reality of man's economic existence was to imply that exploitation and alienation had always existed and would always continue to exist.

Evasion of the specificity of capitalist production therefore had both epistemological and political consequences. On the one hand, it impeded understanding of the concrete historical levels of production; on the other hand, in defining present conditions as unchanged and unchangeable, it presented capitalist production as production in general and bourgeois social relations as natural human relations. Accordingly, Marx's critique of the theories of economists had a twofold value. As well

as underlining that a historical characterization was indispensable for an understanding of reality, it had the precise political aim of countering the dogma of the immutability of the capitalist mode of production. A demonstration of the historicity of the capitalist order would also be proof of its transitory character and of the possibility of its elimination.

An echo of the ideas contained in this first part of the ‘Introduction’ may be found in the closing pages of *Capital*, vol. III, where Marx writes that ‘identification of the social production process with the simple labour process’ is a ‘confusion’ (Marx 1998: 870). For,

to the extent that the labour process is solely a process between man and Nature, its simple elements remain common to all social forms of development. But each specific historical form of this process further develops its material foundations and social forms. Whenever a certain stage of maturity has been reached, the specific historical form is discarded and makes way for a higher one.

(Marx 1998: 870)

Capitalism is not the only stage in human history, nor is it the final one. Marx foresees that it will be succeeded by an organization of society based upon ‘communal production’ (*gemeinschaftliche Production*), in which the labour product is ‘from the beginning directly general’ (Marx 1973: 172).

Production as a totality

In the succeed pages of the ‘Introduction’, Marx passes to a deeper consideration of production and begins with the following definition: ‘All production is appropriation [*Aneignung*] of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society [*bestimmten Gesellschaftsform*]’ (Marx 1973: 87). There was no ‘production in general’ – since it was divided into agriculture, cattle-raising, manufacturing and other branches – but nor could it be considered as ‘only particular production’. Rather, it was ‘always a certain social body [*Gesellschaftskörper*], a social subject [*gesellschaftliches Subject*], active in a greater or sparser totality of branches of production’ (Marx 1973: 86).

Here again, Marx developed his arguments through a critical encounter with the main exponents of economic theory. Those who were his contemporaries had acquired the habit of prefacing their work with a section on the general conditions of production and the circumstances which, to a greater or lesser degree, advanced productivity in various societies. For Marx, however, such preliminaries set forth ‘flat tautologies’ (Marx 1973: 86) and, in the case of John Stuart Mill, were designed to present production ‘as encased in eternal natural laws independent of history’ and bourgeois relations as ‘inviolable natural laws on which society in the abstract is founded’ (Marx 1973: 87). According to Mill, ‘the laws and conditions of the production of wealth partake of the character of physical truths. ... It is not so with the distribution of wealth. That is a matter of human institutions solely’ (Mill 1965: 199).¹⁴ Marx considered this a ‘crude tearing-apart of production and distribution and of their real relationship’ (Marx 1973: 87), since, as he put it elsewhere in the *Grundrisse*, ‘the “laws and conditions” of the production of

wealth and the laws of the “distribution of wealth” are the same laws under different forms, and both change, undergo the same historic process; are as such only moments of a historic process’ (Marx 1973: 832).¹⁵

After making these points, Marx proceeds in the second section of the ‘Introduction’ to examine the general relationship of production to distribution, exchange and consumption. This division of political economy had been made by James Mill, who had used these four categories as the headings for the four chapters comprising his book of 1821, *Elements of Political Economy*, and before him, in 1803, by Jean-Baptiste Say, who had divided his *Traité d'économie politique* into three books on the production, distribution and consumption of wealth.¹⁶

Marx reconstructed the interconnection among the four rubrics in logical terms, in accordance with Hegel’s schema of universality – particularity – individuality: (see Hegel 1969: 666f.) ‘Production, distribution, exchange and distribution form a regular syllogism; production is the universality, distribution and exchange the particularity, and consumption the individuality in which the whole is joined together’. In other words, production was the starting-point of human activity, distribution and exchange were the twofold intermediary point – the former being the mediation operated by society, the latter by the individual – and consumption became the end point. However, as this was only a ‘shallow coherence’, Marx wished to analyse more deeply how the four spheres were correlated with one another (Marx 1973: 89).

His first object of investigation was the relationship between production and consumption, which he explained as one of immediate identity: ‘production is consumption’ and ‘consumption is production’. With the help of Spinoza’s principle of

determinatio est negatio, he showed that production was also consumption, in so far as the productive act used up the powers of the individual as well as raw materials (see Spinoza 1955: 370). Indeed, the economists had already highlighted this aspect with their terms ‘productive consumption’ and differentiated this from ‘consumptive production’. The latter occurred only after the product was distributed, re-entering the sphere of reproduction, and constituting ‘consumption proper’. In productive consumption ‘the producer objectifies himself’, while in consumptive production ‘the object he created personifies itself’ (Marx 1973: 90-1).

Another characteristic of the identity of production and consumption was discernible in the reciprocal ‘mediating movement’ that developed between them. Consumption gives the product its ‘last finish’ and, by stimulating the propensity to produce, ‘creates the need for *new* production’ (Marx 1973: 91). In the same way, production furnishes not only the object for consumption, but also ‘a need for the material’. Once the stage of natural immediacy is left behind, need is generated by the object itself; ‘production not only creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object’ – that is, a consumer (Marx 1973: 92). So,

production produces consumption (1) by creating the material for it; (2) by determining the manner of consumption; and (3) by creating the products, initially posited by it as objects, in the form of a need felt by the consumer. It thus produces the object of consumption, the manner of consumption and the motive of consumption.

(Marx 1973: 92)

To recapitulate: there is a process of unmediated identity between production and consumption; these also mediate each other in turn, and create each other as they are realized. Nevertheless, Marx thought it a mistake to consider the two as identical – as Say and Proudhon did, for example. For, in the last analysis, ‘consumption as urgency, as need, is itself an intrinsic moment of productive activity’.

Marx then turns to analyse the relationship between production and distribution. Distribution, he writes, is the link between production and consumption, and ‘in accordance with social laws’ it determines what share of the products is due to the producers (Marx 1973: 94). The economists present it as a sphere autonomous from production, so that in their treatises the economic categories are always posed in a dual manner. Land, labour and capital figure in production as the agents of distribution, while in distribution, in the form of ground rent, wages and profit, they appear as sources of income. Marx opposes this split, which he judges illusory and mistaken, since the form of distribution ‘is not an arbitrary arrangement, which could be different; it is, rather, posited by the form of production itself’ (Marx 1973: 594). In the ‘Introduction’ he expresses his thinking as follows:

An individual who participates in production in the form of wage labour shares in the products, in the results of production, in the form of wages. The structure of distribution is completely determined by the structure of production. Distribution itself a product of production, not only in its object, in that only the results of production can be distributed, but also in its form,

in that the specific kind of participation in production determines the specific forms of distribution, i.e. the pattern of participation in distribution. It is altogether an illusion to posit land in production, ground rent in distribution, etc.

(Marx 1973: 95)

Those who saw distribution as autonomous from production conceived of it as mere distribution of products. In reality, it included two important phenomena that were prior to production: distribution of the instruments of production and distribution of the members of society among various kinds of production, or what Marx defined as ‘subsumption of the individuals under specific relations of production’ (Marx 1973: 96). These two phenomena meant that in some historical cases – for example, when a conquering people subjects the vanquished to slave labour, or when a redivision of landed estates gives rise to a new type of production (see Marx 1973: 96) – ‘distribution is not structured and determined by production, but rather the opposite, production by distribution’ (Marx 1973: 96). The two were closely linked to each other, since, as Marx puts it elsewhere in the *Grundrisse*, ‘these modes of distribution are the relations of production themselves, but *sub specie distributionis*’ (Marx 1973: 832). Thus, in the words of the ‘Introduction’, ‘to examine production while disregarding this internal distribution within it is obviously an empty abstraction’.

The link between production and distribution, as conceived by Marx, sheds light not only on his aversion to the way in which John Stuart Mill rigidly separated the two but also on his appreciation of Ricardo for having posed the need ‘to grasp the specific

social structure of modern production' (Marx 1973: 96). The English economist did indeed hold that 'to determine the laws which regulate this distribution is the principal problem in Political Economy' (Ricardo 1973: 3), and therefore he made distribution one of his main objects of study, since 'he conceived the forms of distribution as the most specific expression into which the agents of production of a given society are cast' (Marx 1973: 96). For Marx, too, distribution was not reducible to the act through which the shares of the aggregate product were distributed among members of society; it was a decisive element of the entire productive cycle. Yet this conviction did not overturn his thesis that production was always the primary factor within the production process as a whole:

The question of the relation between this distribution and the production it determines belongs evidently within production itself. ... [P]roduction does indeed have its determinants and preconditions, which form its moments. At the very beginning these may appear as spontaneous, natural. But by the process of production itself they are transformed from natural into historic determinants, and if they appear to one epoch as natural presuppositions of production, they were its historic product for another.

(Marx 1973: 97, trans. modified)

For Marx, then, although the distribution of the instruments of production and the members of society among the various productive branches 'appears as a presupposition of the new period of production, it is ... itself in turn a product of production, not only of

historical production generally, but of the specific historic mode of production' (Marx 1973: 98).

When Marx lastly examined the relationship between production and exchange, he also considered the latter to be part of the former. Not only was 'the exchange of activities and abilities' among the workforce, and of the raw materials necessary to prepare the finished product, an integral part of production; the exchange between dealers was also wholly determined by production and constituted a 'producing activity'. Exchange becomes autonomous from production only in the phase where 'the product is exchanged directly for consumption'. Even then, however, its intensity, scale and characteristic features are determined by the development and structure of production, so that 'in all its moments ... exchange appears as either directly comprised in production or determined by it'.

At the end of his analysis of the relationship of production to distribution, exchange and consumption, Marx draws two conclusions: (1) production should be considered as a totality; and (2) production as a particular branch within the totality predominates over the other elements. On the first point he writes: 'The conclusion we reach is not that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity' (Marx 1973: 99). Employing the Hegelian concept of totality,¹⁷ Marx sharpened a theoretical instrument – more effective than the limited processes of abstraction used by the economists – one capable of showing, through the reciprocal action among parts of the totality, that the concrete was a differentiated unity (see Hall 2003: 127) of plural determinations and relations, and that the four separate rubrics of the economists were both arbitrary and

unhelpful for an understanding of real economic relations. In Marx's conception, however, the definition of production as an organic totality did not point to a structured, self-regulating whole within which uniformity was always guaranteed among its various branches. On the contrary, as he wrote in a section of the *Grundrisse* dealing with the same argument: the individual moments of production 'may or may not find each other, balance each other, correspond to each other. The inner necessity of moments which belong together, and their indifferent, independent existence towards one another, are already a foundation of contradictions'. Marx argued that it was always necessary to analyse these contradictions in relation to capitalist production (not production in general), which was not at all 'the absolute form for the development of the forces of production', as the economists proclaimed, but had its 'fundamental contradiction' in overproduction (Marx 1973: 415).

Marx's second conclusion made production the 'predominant moment' (*übergreifende Moment*) over the other parts of the 'totality of production' (*Totalität der Production*) (Marx 1973: 86). It was the 'real point of departure' (*Ausgangspunkt*) (Marx 1973: 94), from which 'the process always returns to begin anew', and so 'a definite production determines a definite consumption, distribution and exchange as well as definite relations between these different moments' (Marx 1973: 99). But such predominance did not cancel the importance of the other moments, nor their influence on production. The dimension of consumption, the transformations of distribution and the size of the sphere of exchange – or of the market – were all factors jointly defining and impacting on production.

Here again Marx's insights had a value both theoretical and political. In opposition to other socialists of his time, who maintained that it was possible to revolutionize the prevailing relations of production by transforming the instrument of circulation, he argued that this clearly demonstrated their 'misunderstanding' of 'the inner connections between the relations of production, of distribution and of circulation' (Marx 1973: 122). For not only would a change in the form of money leave unaltered the relations of production and the other social relations determined by them; it would also turn out to be a nonsense, since circulation could change only together with a change in the relations of production. Marx was convinced that 'the evil of bourgeois society is not to be remedied by "transforming" the banks or by founding a rational "money system"', nor through bland palliatives such as the granting of free credit, nor through the chimera of turning workers into capitalists (Marx 1973: 134). The central question remained the overcoming of wage labour, and first and foremost that concerned production.

In search of method

At this point in his analysis, Marx addressed the major methodological issue: how to reproduce reality in thought? How to construct an abstract categorial model capable of comprehending and representing society?

The third and most important section of his 'Introduction' is devoted to 'the relationship between scientific presentation and the real movement' (Marx 1973: 86). It is not a definitive account, however, but offers insufficiently developed ways of theorizing the problem and barely sketches out a number of points. Certain passages contain unclear

assertions, which sometimes contradict one another, and more than once the adoption of a language influenced by Hegelian terminology adds ambiguities to the text. Marx was elaborating his method when he wrote these pages, and they display the traces and trajectories of his search.

Like other great thinkers before him, Marx started from the question of where to begin – or, in his case, what political economy should take as its analytic starting-point. The first hypothesis he examined was that of beginning ‘with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition’, ‘the foundation and subject of the entire social act of production’: the population (Marx 1973: 100). Marx considered that this path, taken by the founders of political economy, William Petty and Pierre de Boisguillebert, was inadequate and erroneous. To begin with such an indeterminate entity as the population would involve an overly generic image of the whole; it would be incapable of demonstrating the division into classes (bourgeoisie, landowners and proletariat), since these could be differentiated only through knowledge of their respective foundations: capital, land ownership and wage labour. With an empirical approach of that kind, concrete elements like the state would dissolve into abstract determinations such as division of labour, money or value.

Nevertheless, though judging this method inadequate for an interpretation of reality, in another part of the *Grundrisse* Marx recognized that it ‘had a historic value in the first tentative steps of political economy, when the forms still had to be laboriously peeled out of the material, and were, at the cost of great effort, fixed upon as a proper object of study’ (Marx 1973: 853).

No sooner had the eighteenth-century economists finished defining their abstract categories than ‘there began the economic systems, which ascended from simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market’. This procedure, employed by Smith and Ricardo in economics as well as Hegel in philosophy, may be summed up in the thesis that ‘the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought’; it was this that Marx described as the ‘scientifically correct method’ [*wissenschaftlich richtige Methode*]. With the right categories, it was possible ‘to retrace the journey until one finally arrives at population again, only this time not as the chaotic conception of the whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations’ (Marx 1973: 100-1). Hegel, in fact, had written in *The Science of Logic* that the first requisite for a synthetic and systematic science was to begin:

with the subject matter in the form of a universal. ... The *prius* must be
... something simple, something abstracted from the concrete, because in
this form alone has the subject-matter the form of the self-related
universal. ... It is easier for cognition to grasp the abstract simple thought
determination than the concrete subject matter, which is a manifold
connection of such thought determinations and their relationships. ... The
universal is in and for itself the first moment of the Notion because it is
the simple moment, and the particular is only subsequent to it because it is
the mediated moment; and conversely the simple is the more universal,

and the concrete ... is that which already presupposes the transition from a first.

(Hegel 1969: 800-1)

Yet, contrary to what certain commentators on the ‘Introduction’ have argued,¹⁸ Marx’s definition of the ‘scientifically correct method’ does not at all mean that it was the one he subsequently employed himself (Marx 1973: 101). First of all, he did not share the conviction of the economists that their logical reconstruction of the concrete at the level of ideas was a faithful reproduction of reality (see Dal Pra 1965: 461). The procedure synthetically presented in the ‘Introduction’ did, it is true, borrow various elements from Hegel’s method, but it also displayed radical differences. Like Hegel before him, Marx was convinced that ‘the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is the only way in which thought appropriates the concrete’, that the recomposition of reality in thought should start from the simplest and most general determinations. For both, moreover, the concrete was ‘the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse’; it appeared in thought as ‘a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure’, although for Marx it was always necessary to keep in mind that the concrete was ‘the point of departure for observation [*Anschauung*] and conception’.

Beyond this common base, however, there was the difference that ‘Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought’, whereas for Marx ‘this is by no means the process by which the concrete itself comes into being’. In Hegelian idealism, Marx argues, ‘the movement of the categories appears as the real act of production ... whose product is the world’; ‘conceptual thinking is the real human being’

and ‘the conceptual world as such is thus the only reality’, not only representing the real world in ideas but also operating as its constitutive process. For Marx, by contrast, the economic categories exist as ‘abstract relation[s] within an already given, concrete, living whole’ (Marx 1973: 101); they ‘express the forms of being, the determinations of existence’ [*Daseinsformen, Existenzbestimmungen*] (Marx 1973: 106). Exchange value, for instance, presupposes population and the fact that it produces within determinate relations. Marx emphasized several times, in opposition to Hegel, that ‘the concrete totality, [as] a totality of thoughts, [qua] concrete in thought, [is] in fact a product of thinking and comprehending’, but that it is ‘not in any way a product of the concept which thinks and generates itself’. For ‘the real subject retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before. ... Hence, in the theoretical method, too, the subject, society, must always be kept in mind as the presupposition’ (Marx 1973: 101-2).

In reality, however, Marx’s interpretation does not do justice to Hegel’s philosophy. A number of passages in the latter’s work show that, unlike the transcendental idealism of Johann Gottlieb Fichte and the objective idealism of Friedrich Schelling, his thought did not confuse the movement of knowledge with the order of nature, the subject with the object. Thus, in the second paragraph of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, he clearly writes:

[The] thinking study of things may serve, in a general way, as a description of philosophy. ... the strictly human and thought-induced phenomena of consciousness do not originally appear in the form of a

thought, but as a feeling, a perception, or mental image – all of which aspects must be distinguished from the form of thought proper.

(Hegel 1892: 4)

In the *Philosophy of Right*, too, in an addition to Paragraph 32 inserted by Eduard Gans in the second edition of 1827,¹⁹ some sentences not only confirm the error of Marx's interpretation of Hegel but actually demonstrate the way in which they influenced his own reflections (see Jánoska – Bondeli – Kindle and Hofer 1994: 115-9).

[W]e cannot say that property existed [*dagewesen*] before the family, yet, in spite of that, property must be dealt with first. Consequently you might here raise the question why we do not begin at the highest point, i.e. with the concretely true. The answer is that it is precisely the truth in the form of a result that we are looking for, and for this purpose it is essential to start by grasping the abstract concept itself. What is actual, the shape in which the concept is embodied, is for us therefore the secondary thing and the sequel, even if it were itself first in the actual world. The development we are studying is that whereby the abstract forms reveal themselves not as self-subsistent but as false.

(Hegel 1952: 233)

In the ‘Introduction’, Marx goes on to ask whether the simple categories could exist before, and independently of, the more concrete ones. In the case of possession or

property – the category with which Hegel had begun the *Philosophy of Right* – he maintained that it could not have existed before the emergence of ‘more concrete relations’ such as the family, and that it would be absurd to analyse ‘the individual savage’ as a property-owner. But the question was more complicated. For money existed ‘historically before capital existed, before banks existed, before wage labour existed’ (Marx 1973: 102). It appeared before the development of more complex realities, thereby demonstrating that in some cases the sequence of logical categories follows the historical sequence – the more developed as well as the more recent (see Marx 1973: 247) – and ‘the path of abstract thought, rising from the simple to the combined, would correspond to the real historical process’ (Marx 1973: 102).²⁰ In antiquity, however, money performed a dominant function only in trading nations. Hence it ‘makes a historic appearance in its full intensity only in the most developed conditions of society’; or, ‘although the simpler category may have existed historically before the more concrete, it can achieve its full (intensive and extensive) development precisely in a combined form of society’.

This conclusion applied even more to the category of labour. For, although it appeared with the first civilizing of human beings and seemed to be a very simple process, Marx underlined that, ‘when it is economically conceived ..., “labour” is as modern a category as are the relations which create this simple abstraction’ (Marx 1973: 103). The exponents of bullionism and mercantilism had maintained that the source of wealth was lodged in money, and that it therefore had greater importance than labour. Subsequently, the Physiocrats argued that labour was the ultimate creator of wealth, but only in the form of agricultural labour. Smith’s work finally put an end to any ‘limiting

specification of wealth-creating activity’, so that now labour was considered no longer in a particular form but as ‘labour as such’: ‘not only manufacturing, or commercial or agricultural labour, but one as well as the others’. In this way, the ‘abstract expression’ was discovered ‘for the simplest and most ancient relation in which human beings – in whatever form of society – play the role of producers’. As in the case of money, the category of ‘labour’ could be extracted only where there was ‘the richest possible concrete development’, in a society where ‘one thing appears as common to many, to all’. Thus, ‘indifference towards any specific kind of labour presupposes a very developed totality of real kinds of labour, of which no single one is any longer predominant’.

In capitalist society, moreover, ‘labour in general’ is not only a category but ‘corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference’. The worker’s labour then loses the corporate, craft character that it had in the past and becomes ‘labour in general’, ‘labour *sans phrase*’ – ‘not only the category, labour, but labour in reality’ (Marx 1973: 104). Wage labour ‘is not this or another labour, but labour pure and simple, abstract labour; absolutely indifferent to its particular specificity [*Bestimmtheit*], but capable of all specificities’ (Marx 1973: 296). In short, it is a question of ‘a purely mechanical activity, hence indifferent to its particular form’ (Marx 1973: 297).²¹

At the end of his discussion of the relationship between the simplest and the most concrete categories, Marx concluded that in the most modern forms of bourgeois society – he had in mind the United States – the abstraction of the category ‘labour in general’ was becoming ‘true in practice’. Thus, ‘the simplest abstraction, ... which modern

economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society' (Marx 1973 104-5). Or, as he reaffirmed elsewhere in the *Grundrisse*, the category 'becomes real only with the development of a particular material mode of production and of a particular stage in the development of the industrial productive forces' (Marx 1973: 297).²²

Indifference to the particular kind of labour is, however, a phenomenon common to a number of historical realities. In this case too, therefore, it was necessary to underline the distinctions: 'There is a devil of a difference between barbarians who are fit by nature to be used for anything, and civilized people who apply themselves to everything.' Once again relating the abstraction to real history,²³ Marx found his thesis confirmed:

'This example of labour shows strikingly how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity – precisely because of their abstractness – for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within these relations.

(Marx 1973: 105)

Having made this point, Marx turned to another crucial issue. In what order should he set out the categories in the work he was about to write? To the question as to whether the complex should furnish the instruments with which to understand the simple, or the other way round, he decisively opted for the first possibility.

Bourgeois society is the most complex historic organization of production.

The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allow insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanquished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along with it.

(Marx 1973: 105)

It is the present, then, which offers the indications for a reconstruction of the past.

‘Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape … [and] the intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species … can be understood only after the higher development is already known’ (Marx 1973: 105). This well-known statement should not, however, be read in evolutionist terms. Indeed, Marx explicitly criticized the conception of ‘so-called historical evolution’, based on the banality that ‘the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself’ (Marx 1973: 106).

Unlike the theorists of evolutionism, who posited a naïvely progressive trajectory from the simplest to the most complex organisms, Marx chose to use an opposite, much more complex logical method and elaborated a conception of history marked by the succession of modes of production (ancient, Asiatic, feudal, capitalist), which was meant to explain the positions and functions that the categories assumed within those various modes (cf. Hall 2003: 133).²⁴ It was bourgeois society, therefore, which provided the clues for an understanding of the economies of previous historical epochs – although, given the

profound differences between societies, the clues should be treated with moderation.

Marx emphatically repeated that this could not be done ‘in the manner of those economists who smudge over all historical differences and see bourgeois relations in all forms of society’ (Marx 1973: 105).

Although this argument is in line with those expressed in previous works, Marx here tackles differently the thorny question of the order to be assigned to the economic categories. He had already addressed it in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, where, in opposition to Proudhon’s wish to follow not ‘history in accordance with the order of events, but in accordance with the succession of ideas’ (Proudhon 1972: 184), he had criticized the idea of ‘constructing the world by the movement of thought’ (Marx 1976: 175). Thus in 1847, in his polemic with the logical-dialectical method employed by Proudhon and Hegel, Marx had preferred a rigorously historical sequence. But ten years later, in the ‘Introduction’, his position changed: he rejected the criterion of chronological succession for the scientific categories, in favour of a logical method with historical-empirical checks. Since the present helped one to understand the past, or the structure of man the structure of the ape, it was necessary to begin the analysis from the most mature stage, capitalist society, and more particularly from the element that predominated there over all others: capital. ‘Capital is the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society. It must form the starting-point as well as the finishing-point’ (Marx 1973: 107).’ And Marx concluded:

It would therefore be unfeasible and wrong to let the economic categories follow one another in the same sequence as that in which they were

historically decisive. Their sequence is determined, rather, by their relation to one another in modern bourgeois society, which is precisely the opposite of that which seems to be their natural order or which corresponds to historical development. The point is not the historic position of the economic relations in the succession of different forms of society. Even less is it their sequence ‘in the idea’ (Proudhon) (a muddy notion of historic movement). Rather, their order within modern bourgeois society.

(Marx 1973: 107-8)

In essence, setting out the categories in a precise logical order and the working of real history do not coincide with each other – and moreover, as Marx wrote in the manuscripts for the third volume of *Capital*, ‘all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided’ (Marx 1998: 804).

Marx, then, arrived at his own synthesis by diverging from the empiricism of the early economists, which yielded a dissolution of concrete elements into abstract definitions; from the method of the classical economists, which reduced thought about reality to reality itself; from philosophical idealism – including, in Marx’s view, Hegel’s philosophy – which he accused of giving thought the capacity to produce the concrete; from gnoseological conceptions that rigidly counterposed forms of thought and objective reality; from historicism and its dissolution of the logical into the historical; and, finally, from his own conviction in *The Poverty of Philosophy* that he was essentially following ‘the march of history’ (Marx 1976: 172). His aversion to establishing a one-to-one

correspondence between the concrete and thought led him to separate the two by recognizing the specificity of the latter and assigning to the former an existence independent of thought, so that the order of exposition of the categories differed from that which manifested itself in the relations of the real historical process (cf. Althusser and Balibar 1979: 47-8, 87). To avoid limiting the cognitive process to a mere repetition of the stages of what had happened in history, it was necessary to use a process of abstraction, and therefore categories that allowed for the interpretation of society in all its complexity. On the other hand, to be really useful for this purpose, abstraction had to be constantly compared with various historical realities, in such a way that the general logical determinations could be distinguished from the concrete historical relations.

Marx's conception of history thereby gained in efficacy and incisiveness: once a symmetry of logical order and actual historical order had been rejected, the historical became decisive for the understanding of reality, while the logical made it possible to conceive history as something other than a flat chronology of events.²⁵ For Marx, it was not necessary to reconstruct the historical genesis of every economic relationship in order to understand society and then give an adequate description of it. As he put it in one passage of the *Grundrisse*:

our method indicates the points where historical investigation must enter in, or where bourgeois economy as a merely historical form of the production process points beyond itself to earlier historical modes of production. In order to develop the laws of bourgeois economy, therefore, it is not necessary to write the real history of the relations of production.

But the correct observation and deduction of these laws, as having themselves become in history, always leads to primary equations ... which point towards a past lying behind this system. These indications, together with a correct grasp of the present, then also offer the key to the understanding of the past This correct view likewise leads at the same time to the points at which there is an indication of the overcoming of the present form of production relations – and hence foreshadowings of the future, a movement of becoming. Just as, on one side, the pre-bourgeois phases appear as *merely historical*, i.e. superseded presuppositions, so do the contemporary conditions of production likewise appear as engaged in *superseding themselves* and hence in positing the *historical presuppositions* for a new society.

(Marx 1973: 460-1, trans. modified)

The method developed by Marx had provided him with tools not only to understand the differences among all the modes in which production had manifested itself in history, but also to discern in the present the tendencies prefiguring a new mode of production and therefore confounding all those who had proclaimed the inalterability of capitalism. His own research, including in epistemology, never had an exclusively theoretical motive; it was always driven by the need to interpret the world in order to engage better in the political struggle.

In fact, Marx broke off the section on method with a sketch of the order in which he intended to write his ‘Economics’. It is the first of the many plans for his work that he

drafted in the course of his life, one that goes back over his reflections in the preceding pages of the ‘Introduction’. Before he actually began to compose the *Grundrisse*, he had intended to deal with:

(1) the general, abstract determinations which obtain in more or less all forms of society [... ; then] (2) the categories which make up the inner structure of bourgeois society and on which the fundamental classes rest [:] capital, wage labour, landed property [;] (3) concentration of bourgeois society in the form of the state. Viewed in relation to itself [;] (4) the international relation of production. ... International exchange [; and] (5) The world market and crises.

(Marx 1973: 108)

Such at least was Marx’s schema in August 1857, which subsequently underwent so many changes.

The uneven relationship between material and intellectual production

The last section of the ‘Introduction’ comprises a brief and fragmentary list of eight arguments that Marx intended to deal with in his work, plus a few considerations on the relationship between Greek art and modern society. On the eight points, Marx’s main notes concern: his conviction that the characteristics of wage labour manifested themselves in the army even earlier than in bourgeois society; the idea of a dialectic

between productive forces and relations of production; and what he calls the ‘uneven development’ (*ungleiche Entwicklung*) between relations of production and legal relations, particularly the derivation of the law of nascent bourgeois society from Roman private law. All this is by way of a memorandum, however, without any structure, and it provides only a vague idea of Marx’s thinking on these matters.

His reflections on art are somewhat more developed, focusing on the ‘uneven relationship [*ungleiche Verhältniß*] between material production and artistic development’ (Marx 1973: 109, trans. modified). Marx had already tackled the relationship between production and forms of consciousness in two early works. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* he had argued that ‘religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc., are only *particular* modes of production, and fall under its general law’ (Marx 1975b: 297), and in *The German Ideology* he had declared:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men appear at this stage as the direct efflux (*direkter Ausfluß*) of their material behaviour.

(Marx and Engels 1976: 36)

In the ‘Introduction’, however, far from affirming the kind of rigid parallelism that many ostensible Marxists later postulated, Marx stressed that there was no direct relationship between social-economic development and artistic production. Reworking certain ideas

in *The Historical View of the Literature of the South of Europe* by Leonard Simonde de Sismondi, which he had read and excerpted in one of his 1852 notebooks,²⁶ he now wrote: ‘In the case of the arts, it is well known that certain periods of their flowering are out of all proportion to the general development of society, hence also to the material foundation (*materiellen Grundlage*), the skeletal structure … of its organization’. He also pointed out that certain art forms – the epic, for instance – ‘are possible only at an undeveloped stage of artistic development. If this is the case with the relation between different kinds of art within the realm of the arts, it is already less puzzling that it is the case in the relation of the entire realm to the general development of society’ (Marx 1973: 110). Greek art presupposed Greek mythology, that is, an ‘unconsciously artistic’ representation of social forms. But, in an advanced society such as that of the modern age, in which people conceive of nature rationally, not as an external power standing over and against them, mythology loses its *raison d'être* and the epic can no longer be repeated: ‘Is Achilles possible with powder and lead? Or the *Iliad* with the printing press …? Do not the song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the printer’s bar, hence do not the necessary conditions of epic poetry vanish’ (Marx 1973: 111)?²⁷

For Marx, then, art and intellectual production in general must be investigated in their relationship to the material conditions of society, but without drawing a rigid correspondence between the two spheres. Otherwise one would fall into Voltaire’s error (recalled by Marx in his economic manuscripts of 1861-3) of thinking that ‘because we are further ahead than the ancients in mechanics’ we should ‘be able to make an epic too’ (Marx 1989a: 182-3).

Having considered the artist as a creating subject, Marx turned to artistic production and the public that derives enjoyment from it. This presented the greatest difficulties of interpretation. The difficulty was ‘not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development’, but ‘that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model’. The real problem was to understand why the artistic creations of antiquity were still a source of enjoyment for modern men and women. According to Marx, the answer was that the Greek world represents ‘the historic childhood of humanity’, a period that exercises an ‘eternal charm’ as ‘a stage never to return’ (Marx 1973: 111). Hence the conclusion:

The charm of their art for us is not in contradiction to the undeveloped stage of society on which it grew. [It] is its result, rather, and is inextricably bound up ... with the fact that the unripe social conditions under which it arose, and could alone arise, can never return

(Marx 1973: 111)

The value of Marx’s statements on aesthetics in the ‘Introduction’ does not, however, lie in the sketchy and sometimes unconvincing solutions they offer, but rather in his anti-dogmatic approach as to how the forms of material production are related to intellectual creations and behaviour. His awareness of their ‘uneven development’ involved rejection of any schematic procedure that posited a uniform relationship among the various spheres of the social totality (Marx 1973: 109). Even the well-known thesis in the ‘Preface’ to *A*

Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, published two years after Marx wrote the ‘Introduction’ – ‘the mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life’ (Marx 1987a: 263) – should not be interpreted in a determinist sense;²⁸ it should be clearly distinguished from the narrow and predictable reading of ‘Marxism-Leninism’, in which the superstructural phenomena of society are merely a reflection of the material existence of human beings.²⁹

Conclusion

When Marx embarked on the *Grundrisse*, he intended to preface his ‘Economics’ with a section on his research methodology. The ‘Introduction’ was not composed simply for the purpose of self-clarification; it was supposed to contain, as in the writings of other economists, the author’s preliminary observations on his general subject. In June 1859, however, when Marx sent the first part of his studies for publication as *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, he decided to omit the section setting forth his motivation:

A general introduction, which I had drafted, is omitted, since on further consideration it seems to me confusing to anticipate results which still have to be substantiated, and the reader who really wishes to follow me will have to decide to advance from the particular to the general’ (*von dem Einzelnen zum Allgemeinen aufzusteigen*)

(Marx 1987: 261)

Hence, the guiding aim of 1857 – ‘rising from the abstract to the concrete’ (Marx 1973: 101) – changed in the text of 1859 to ‘to advance from the particular to the general’ (Marx 1987a: 261). The starting-point of the ‘Introduction’ – the most abstract and universal determinations – was replaced with a concrete and historically determined reality: the commodity, but, since the text of 1857 had remained unpublished, no explanation was given of the change. In fact, already in the last passage of the *Grundrisse*, after hundreds of pages in which he had scrupulously analysed the capitalist mode of production and the concepts of political economy, Marx asserted that ‘the first category in which bourgeois wealth presents itself is that of the *commodity*’ (Marx 1973: 881). He would devote to its investigation the first chapter both of the *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and of *Capital*, where the commodity is defined as the ‘elementary form’ (Marx 1996: 45, trans. modified) of capitalist society, the particular with whose analysis the research had to begin.

Instead of the planned introduction, Marx opened the work of 1859 with a brief ‘Preface’ in which he succinctly outlined his intellectual biography and the so-called materialist conception of history. Subsequently he no longer engaged in the discourse on method, except on very rare occasions and with a few swift observations. Certainly the most important of these was the 1873 ‘Postscript’ to the first volume of *Capital*, in which, having been roused by the reviews that accompanied its publication, he could not refrain from expressing himself about his method of investigation and revisiting some of the themes present in the ‘Introduction’. Another reason for this was the need he felt to assert the difference between method of exposition and method of investigation:

whereas the former could start with the general, moving from the universal form to historically determined forms and hence – in a confirmation of the formulation of 1857 – ‘rising from the abstract to the concrete’, the latter had to start from the immediate reality and, as he put it in 1859, move ‘from the particular to the general’:

the method of presentation [*Darstellungsweise*] must differ in form from that of inquiry [*Forschungsweise*]. The latter has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyse its different forms of development, to trace out their inner connexion. Only after this work is done, can the actual movement be adequately described.³⁰

(Marx 1996: 19)

In his work after the 1857 ‘Introduction’, then, Marx no longer wrote on questions of method in the open and problematizing way that had characterized that text but expressed his finished ideas on them without betraying the complex genesis through which they had been worked out (cf. Carver 1975: 135). For this reason, too, the pages of the ‘Introduction’ are extraordinarily important. In a close encounter with the ideas of some of the greatest economists and philosophers, Marx there reaffirms profound convictions and arrives at significant theoretical acquisitions. First of all, he insists again on the historical specificity of the capitalist mode of production and its social relations. Second, he considers production, distribution, exchange and consumption as a totality, in which production constitutes the element predominating over the other parts of the whole. Moreover, with regard to the reproduction of reality in thought, Marx does not resort to a merely historical method but makes use of abstraction, having come to recognize its

value for the construction of the path of knowledge. Finally, he underlines the uneven relationship that obtains between the development of the relations of production and intellectual relations.

In the hundred years since they were first published, these reflections have made the ‘Introduction’ an indispensable theoretical text as well as a fascinating one from a literary point of view, for all serious interpreters and readers of Marx. This will surely be the case also for those who come anew to his work in future generations.

[Translated from the Italian by Patrick Camiller]

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¹ In a letter to Ferdinand Lassalle on 12 November 1858, Marx wrote that ‘economics as a science in the German sense of the word has yet to be tackled’ (Marx and Engels 1983: 355).

² The voluminous critical literature on the ‘Introduction’ is one token of its importance. Since its first publication in 1903, all the main critical interpretations, intellectual biographies and introductions to Marx’s thought have taken account of it, and it has been the object of numerous articles and commentaries. Among the latter, see in particular Carver 1975: 88-158.

³ Marx dealt with these themes in detail in the section of the *Grundrisse* devoted to ‘Forms which Precede Capitalist Production’ (Marx 1973: 471-513).

⁴ This conception of an Aristotelian matrix – the family preceding the birth of the village – recurs in *Capital*, vol. I, but Marx was said later to have moved away from it. Friedrich Engels pointed out in a note to the third German edition of 1883: ‘[s]ubsequent very searching study of the primitive conditions of man led the author [i.e. Marx – MM] to the conclusion that it was not the family that originally developed into the tribe, but that, on the contrary, the tribe was the primitive and spontaneously developed form of human association, on the basis of blood relationship, that out of the first incipient loosening of the tribal bonds, the many and various forms of the family were afterwards developed’ (Marx 1996: 356). Engels was referring to the studies of ancient history made by himself at the time and by Marx during the final years of his life. The main texts that he read or summarized in his anthropological notebooks, which are still unpublished, were *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization* by

Edward Burnett Tylor, *Ancient Society* by Lewis Henry Morgan, *The Aryan Village in India and Ceylon* by John Budd Phear, *Lectures on the Early History of Institutions* by Henry Summer Maine and *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man* by John Lubbock.

⁵ This mutual dependence should not be confused with that which establishes itself among individuals in the capitalist mode of production: the former is the product of nature, the latter of history. In capitalism, individual independence is combined with a social dependence expressed in the division of labour (see Marx 1987b: 465). At this stage of production, the social character of activity presents itself not as a simple relationship of individuals to one another ‘but as their subordination to relations which subsist independently of them and which arise out of collisions between mutually indifferent individuals. The general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital condition for each individual – their mutual interconnection – here appears as something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing’ (Marx 1973: 157).

⁶ The economist who, in Marx’s view, had avoided this naïve assumption was James Steuart. Marx commented on numerous passages from Steuart’s main work – *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy* – in a notebook that he filled with extracts from it in the spring of 1851 (see Marx 1986).

⁷ Elsewhere in the *Grundrisse* Marx stated that ‘an isolated individual could no more have property in land and soil than he could speak’ (Marx 1973: 485); and that ‘[l]anguage as the product of an individual is an impossibility. But the same holds for property’ (Marx 1973: 490).

⁸ In his editorial commentary on the ‘Introduction’, Terrell Carver points out (see Carver 1975: 93–5) that Marx’s remarks concerning Bastiat’s use of Robinson Crusoe do not correspond to what the author actually says. For, according to Bastiat, ‘Daniel Defoe would have deprived his novel of every trace of verisimilitude if ... he had not made necessary social concessions by allowing his hero to save from the shipwreck a few indispensable objects, such as provisions, gunpowder, a rifle, an axe, a knife, rope, boards, iron, etc. – decisive evidence that society is man’s necessary milieu, since even a novelist cannot make him live outside it. And note that Robinson Crusoe took with him into solitude another *social* treasure worth a thousand times more ... I mean his ideas, his memories, his experience, and especially his language.’ (Bastiat 1964: 64) Nevertheless, Bastiat displays a lack of historical sense in other parts of his work, where the actions of the individual seem dictated by rational economic calculation and are presented in

accordance with the splits peculiar to capitalist society: ‘An individual in isolation, provided he could survive for any length of time, would be at once capitalist, entrepreneur, workman, producer and consumer’ (p. 174). And so Crusoe once again becomes the economists’ prosaic stereotype: ‘Our Robinson Crusoe will not, therefore, set about making the tool unless he can foresee, when the work is done, a definite saving of his labour in relation to his satisfaction, or an increase in satisfactions for the same amount of labour’ (p. 175). Most probably these were the assertions that attracted Marx’s attention.

⁹ See, in particular, the work of its main representative, Wilhelm Roscher (Roscher 1972). In *Capital*, vol. I, Marx made fun of Roscher’s ‘anatomico-physiological method’ (Marx 1996: 216).

¹⁰ Shortly after the publication of Marx’s ‘Introduction’ in 1903, and with various analogies to Marx’s formulations, Max Weber stressed the utility of ‘abstract economic theory’ in synthesizing historical phenomena (see Weber 1949: 48f.). In its ‘conceptual purity’, he wrote, an ‘ideal typical concept is not a description of reality but aims to give unambiguous expression to such a description. … This mental construct cannot be found anywhere in reality. It is a utopia. Historical research faces the task of determining in each individual case the extent to which this ideal-construct approximates to or diverges from reality’ (p. 48). The abstract ideal type represents ‘a conceptual construct which is not the historical reality … it serves neither more nor less than as a schema in which reality is taken as an example: it has the significance of a purely ideal limiting concept, whose reality has to be measured and compared, for the explication of certain significant parts of its empirical content’ (p. 51) (trans. modified).

¹¹ A similar idea had already been expressed by Marx in *The German Ideology*, where he and Engels wrote that: ‘[t]hese abstractions in themselves, divorced from real history, have no value whatsoever. They can only serve to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata. … On the contrary, the difficulties begin only when one sets about the examination and the arrangement of the material – whether of a past epoch or of the present – and its actual presentation’ (Marx and Engels 1976: 37).

¹² The more elaborate exposition of this idea is to be found in John Stuart Mill (Mill 1965: 55f.).

¹³ See Marx’s criticisms of Proudhon on this point (Marx 1973: 265).

¹⁴ These statements aroused Marx’s interest, and in September 1850 he wrote notes on them in one of his notebooks of extracts: (see Marx 1983: 36). A few lines further on, however, Mill partly disavowed his

categorical assertion, though not in the sense of a historicization of production. ‘Distribution,’ he wrote, ‘depends on the laws and customs of society’, and since these are the product of ‘the opinions and feelings of mankind’ – themselves nothing but ‘consequences of the fundamental laws of human nature’ – the laws of distribution ‘are as little arbitrary, and have as much the character of physical laws, as the laws of production’ (Mill 1965: 200). His ‘Preliminary Remarks’ at the beginning of the book may offer a possible synthesis: ‘[u]nlike the laws of production, those of distribution are partly of human institution: since the manner in which wealth is distributed in any given society depends on the statutes or usages therein prevalent’ (Mill 1965: 21).

¹⁵ Hence, those like Mill who consider the relations of production as eternal and only their forms of distribution as historical ‘show that [they] understand neither the one nor the other’ (Marx 1973: 758).

¹⁶ Marx knew both texts very well: they were among the first works of political economy he studied, and he copied many extracts from them into his notebooks (see Marx 1981a and Marx 1981b).

¹⁷ ‘For the truth is concrete; that is, whilst it gives a bond and principle of unity, it also possesses an internal source of development. Truth, then, is only possible as a universe or totality of thought; and the freedom of the whole, as well as the necessity of the several sub-divisions, which it implies, are only possible when these are discriminated and defined’ (Hegel 1892: 24).

¹⁸ The interpretations of Althusser, Negri and Della Volpe, for example, fall into the error of equating this with Marx’s method (see Althusser and Balibar 1979: 87-8; Negri 1991: 47; Della Volpe 1971: 177).

¹⁹ The ‘additions’ (*Zusätze*) inserted by Gans, whose philological scruple has always been doubted by many commentators, are based on certain of Hegel’s manuscripts and on transcriptions of his lectures on the philosophy of right after 1821, the year of publication of the first edition.

²⁰ Reflecting on Peruvian society, however, Marx pointed out the opposite: that ‘there are very developed but nevertheless historically less mature forms of society, in which the highest forms of economy, e.g. cooperation, a developed division of labour, etc., are found, even though there is no kind of money’ (Marx 1973: 102)

²¹ In another passage, Marx wrote that ‘the developed principle of capital is precisely to make special skill superfluous ... to transfer skill, rather, into the dead forces of nature’ (Marx 1973: 587).

²² In the *Grundrisse* Marx showed how ‘capital in general’ was also no mere abstraction but a category that had ‘real existence’ in capitalist society. Just as particular capitals belong to individual capitalists, so does capital in its general form – which is accumulated in banks, as the capital of a particular nation that can be loaned and thereby valorized – become ‘damn real ... While the general is therefore on the one hand only a mental mark of distinction, it is at the same time a particular real form alongside the form of the particular and the individual’ (Marx 1973: 450).

²³ In a letter to Engels of 2. April 1858 Marx wrote: ‘[o]n closer examination, the most abstract definitions invariably point to a broader, definite, concrete, historical basis. (Of course, since to the extent that they are definite they have been abstracted there from)’ (Marx and Engels 1983: 302).

²⁴ Hall rightly notes that the theory developed by Marx represented a break with historicism, though not a break with historicity.

²⁵ The complexity of the method synthesized by Marx is apparent in the fact that it was misrepresented not only by many students of his work but also by Friedrich Engels. Not apparently having read the theses in the 1857 ‘Introduction’, Engels wrote in 1859, in a review of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, that once Marx had elaborated his method he could have undertaken the critique of political economy ‘in two ways – historically or logically’. But, as ‘history often moves in leaps and bounds and in zigzags, and as this would have [had] to be followed throughout, ... the logical method of approach was the only adequate one’. Engels wrongly concluded, however, that this was ‘indeed nothing but the historical method, only stripped of the historical form and of interfering contingencies. The point where this history begins must also be the starting-point of the train of thought, and its further progress will be simply the reflection, in abstract and theoretically consistent form, of the course of history’ (Engels 1980: 475). In short, Engels held that there was a parallelism between history and logic, which Marx had decisively rejected in the ‘Introduction’. And, having been attributed to Marx by Engels, that position later became still more barren and schematic in the Marxist-Leninist interpretation.

²⁶ Sismondi had noted that the highest moments in the older French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese literature coincided with periods of decline in the very societies that had expressed them. Marx’s extracts from Sismondi’s work are due to be published for the first time in volume IV/10 of the MEGA². I am grateful to Klaus Pezold for the information regarding Marx’s manuscripts.

²⁷ Friedrich Theodor Vischer, in his *Ästhetik oder Wissenschaft des Schönen*, discussed the power of capitalism to dissolve myths. Marx drew inspiration from this work and summarized parts of it in his notebooks, scarcely three months before he wrote the ‘Introduction’. But the approaches of the two authors could not have been more different: Vischer treated capitalism as an unalterable reality and deplored in romantic style the aesthetic impoverishment of culture that it brought about; whereas Marx, though constantly fighting for the overcoming of capitalism, emphasized that both materially and ideologically it represented a more advanced reality than previous modes of production (cf. Lukács 1956: 267-8).

²⁸ Evidence of this is the fact that, when Marx quoted this statement in a note to the 1872-5 French edition of *Capital*, he preferred to use the verb *dominer* for the German *bedingen* (more usually translated as ‘déterminer’ or ‘conditionner’): ‘Le mode de production de la vie matérielle domine [dominates] en général le développement de la vie sociale, politique et intellectuelle’ (see Marx 1989b: 62), emphasis added). His aim in doing this was precisely to avoid the risk of positing a mechanical relationship between the two aspects (cf. Rubel 1971: 298).

²⁹ The worst and most widely disseminated interpretation of this kind is Joseph Stalin’s in *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*: ‘the material world represents objective reality ... [and] the spiritual life of society is a reflection of this objective reality’; and ‘whatever is the being of a society, whatever are the conditions of material life of a society, such are the ideas, theories, political views and political institutions of that society’ (Stalin 1941: 15).

³⁰ Marx added that when this is completed ‘it may appear as if we had before us a mere a priori construction’, but in reality the outcome is the representation of the concrete in thought. See the letter of 1 February 1858 to Engels, in which Marx makes the following important assertion with regard to Lassalle: ‘[h]e will discover to his cost that it is one thing for a critique to take a science to the point at which it admits of a dialectical presentation, and quite another to apply an abstract, ready-made system of logic’ (Marx and Engels 1983: 261).