

## NOTES ON MARXISM IN 1968

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### I

A HUNDRED and fifty years after his birth Karl Marx is universally regarded as one of the most important men who ever lived, and far the most important who in modern times has taken the affairs of mankind for his subject instead of the sweet simplicities of art or science. For a century the world's moneygrubbers have thought of him nervously as a Guy Fawkes lurking in the cellars of civilization with barrels of gunpowder. All the worst scoundrels of our age, from Hitler down to McCarthy, have been his worst enemies. If all the last nails knocked into his coffin by the latest pamphleteer were laid end to end they would stretch from Highgate to Vdashington. Yet Marx was the herald of a revolution that has not come, or has come only once in eastern Europe and once in Asia, on lines quite different from what he anticipated. In the homelands of capitalism where he lived in expectation of the overthrow of class society in his own lifetime, it now appears stronger than ever, part of the order of nature. The working class on which he pinned his faith has turned out to be, once acclimatized to life among factory chimneys, as unrevolutionary as the French peasantry after 1789. Marx's vision of workngmen overturning the Bank of England may look scarcely less fanciful today than the dreams of those Calvinist zealots before the Thirty Years War who wanted to march on Rome and then Constantinople and overthrow Pope and Sultan. It might well seem time for him to be dismissed as simply one more great man of a bygone day, and kicked upstairs into an academic pantheon as elastic as the Hindu heaven.

### II

Hazlitt was right to say that to decry Burke was the mark of a vulgar radical, and that no-one saw deeper into the apocalyptic events of the French Revolution. Yet in his estimate of the Revolution as a whole and its place in history Burke was fundamentally wrong. From his opposite standpoint Marx may have made some equal miscalculations of the direction of history (though it is always, in such cauldrons of time as his, moving in several directions at once), but he had a still more penetrating vision into the depths where human destinies take

shape. Columbus was a great explorer in spite of discovering America by mistake for India. Marx too missed his Indies but learned a great deal on the way, or put others in the way of learning it. Much as Columbus and those who came after him convinced men once for all that the earth was round, Marx brought recognition of an order and priority of relationships among all human concerns, from money-grubbing to mysticism; he revealed forum, temple, workshop as parts of one complex, joined by a hundred secret passages. He gave men the rudiments of a new language in which to discuss intelligibly the experiences of a new age, richer in them than any before it, and in their light the entire past and the possible future. He did change the world; that of today may not be the one he designed, but it is different because of him—as, in other ways, because of Jesus, or Mahomed.

### III

Again like Burke, Marx was always, at his best, a man reasoning in a passion. The most formidable intellect cannot work at full stretch on human problems, except passionately, and all original and intense thought must be one-sided; the eye that sees every aspect of a question sees none of them vividly. Several factors have hindered later Marxism in its efforts to acquire more balanced and comprehensive views. No Marxist could be well posted about all its lines of thought, in history and economics and the rest, any more than a soldier can know what is happening all over the battlefield. Valid criticisms were not taken seriously enough because far the greatest bulk of criticism was mere ignorant abuse or transparent casuistry. Marx had contemplated off and on a variety of patterns of socialist party, but the unique success in its own sphere of Lenin's caused it to be imitated too generally and closely. Bolshevism has not prospered outside Russia, nor Maoism, so far, outside China; each was too closely linked with national tradition or instinct, even while each claimed most loudly to be supranational or universal, and "tissue-rejection" takes place with political as well as medical transplantations. Parties of this highly organized mould cannot very well foster free development of ideas, because ideas become for them a programme, a badge, a battle-cry; not lightly to be altered. Among Marxist intellectuals there must have been few who in the consulship of Stalin did not feel at times like soldier; marching in over-elaborate uniforms under a load of impedimenta. As a result of all this, too much Marxism has been mere repetition, some of it positively harmful. It was right for Marx to point out the reactionary motives lurking in Malthusianism, but the Soviet government has gone on woodenly repeating Marx on Malthus when Moses on Methusaleh would be as much to the point, and official Marxism elsewhere has

felt in duty bound to go on following Moscow-on-Marx-on-Malthus. It is less than two years since *Marxism Today* printed a discussion about whether control of population might not after all be necessary<sup>1</sup>—a question to which everyone not shackled by secular or religious dogma, including liberal Catholics, had seen the answer long ago.

#### IV

The time has come, or rather has long since been coming, when Marxism needs a thorough spring-cleaning, or a throwing overboard of mouldy stores. This will never be accomplished by a General Council, because of official conservatism, the piety of any movement towards its past, disagreement about what ought to be jettisoned, and timid doubts about whether anything will be left after the overhaul. It is being done instead, as in a smaller degree even in the Catholic Church, unofficially, by all those who are trying to pick out the vital ideas and liberate them from the encrustations. This may involve changes of theory as sweeping as the practical one made by Mao, the most successful practical Marxist of the last generation, when he achieved a socialist revolution with a peasantry instead of a working class. In the field of action the argument of success silences all others; in that of theory a new argument can only gain acceptance slowly. In the meantime everyone who chooses to regard himself as a Marxist is free to do so, and everyone else is free not to regard him as a Marxist. Socialist thinking was in a state of flux before Marx, and lately it has been returning to a state of flux. It may be a normal condition of a stream of thought to alternate between loose spreading out and narrow concentration like a river in a gorge, deeper as well as broader when it spreads out again beyond.

#### V

No Anglican who understood them ever believed all of his thirty-nine Articles, and the quantity of Marxism, reduced to doctrinal form, that all Marxists could subscribe to might look meagre. Yet they would all feel that what they had learned from this source was far more than they could have gained from any other. A prism that breaks light up into the colours of the spectrum—which is what a Marxist has to try to do with the artificial lighting of history—is only a block of glass. Marxist literature from Marx and Engels onward contains a wealth of scattered ideas and insights; what it needs now is a set of more generalized statements to draw these together. This would be a repetition at a higher level of its initial task, which was to fuse a mass of pre-Marxist commonsense observations on history and society into a

body of thought, something more than their mere sum. It would have got further by now if there had not been too much reliance on the ready-made patterns of Hegelian logic as a unifier, whose inadequacies were slow to be recognized: Marxists dissatisfied with it usually ignored it, as Marx did when writing history. Besides this there is the task of examining inconsistencies within Marxism. In every mode of looking at things there are concealed incongruities or difficulties that gradually become apparent, but it is the test of a living philosophy like Marxism that these when frankly faced do not reduce it to nonsense, but point the way to further advances.

## VI

Baffled by his problems, a Marxist may feel that he has nothing worth saying to say, but as soon as he hears a non-Marxist talking about his subject he knows that he has. Marxism is invaluable if only as a touchstone. Whatever it may have owed to passion and imagination, Marx's universe owed nothing to fantasy, but possessed like Shakespeare's an indubitable solidity or tangibility: it cannot be mistaken, as the world of his near-contemporary Nietzsche often can be, for one existing only in a philosopher's mind. Marx liberated us from the hypnotism of abstractions, by clothing "thrones, dominations, virtues, wisdoms, powers" in their historical flesh and blood. To ignore his revelation is to invest life with the unreality that a Victorian novelist like Trollope lent to the airy fancies of his heroines. No-one acquainted with Marx could fail to see current politics in the West as more than half sham, mystification, a game of politicians pretending to walk in their sleep and pull cards out of their sleeves without waking up. Non-Marxist scholarship often has an ingenuous air, when it ventures out of the burrow of its private speciality; anti-Marxist scholarship shares at times the artless craftiness of the politicians. There is a vogue at present in some quarters of what might be called the Drainpipe theory of history, according to which man, being a social animal, requires above all sanitation, and progress is measured by the extent to which enlightened rulers or civil servants appreciate his needs and lengthen the sewers.

## VII

Communism has on the whole talked too much about "the masses", too little about individual men. Its formative years were those of the huge conscript armies, today being dismantled. In England the looseness of left-wing politics paralleled the freedom from conscription, and had some good as well as bad consequences. Throughout the West

now, and it would seem in Communist Europe too (unlike China, which is enjoying the excitements of mass mobilization for the first time), there is a revulsion from the uniformed mass, the human steamroller or juggernaut, akin to the Romantic mood of withdrawal from the obliterating conflict of mass forces that was felt during and after the wars of 1792-1815. It is a fumbling search for the self, which modern towns and technology and mass media as well as mass parties have been threatening to bury alive, but which telephones and motor-cars can also help to rescue, and drugs—many young people seem to think—can help to reveal. In the West where Marxism faces a long future as a minority movement, a new Nonconformity, its ideas may be able to provide a more subtle binding-force or integrator to make up for the looser forms of political association that conditions appear to prescribe; and they can help the individual to expand as an individual, without losing contact with social reality—to grow genuinely, and not merely in daydreams or opium-dreams. Humanism, one of today's most hopeful currents, needs to see Man in a realistic setting such as Marxism provides if it is to be more than a vague anthroposophy. And a serious re-examination of ideas can make for a genuine exchange with others, now that everyone who thinks seriously, from the Marxist at one end of the scale to the Catholic at the other, has had to admit that he does not know as much as he thought he did; an interplay instead of a "battle of ideas" as it used to be conceived, a contest ending in victory for one side and surrender by the other, which in practice meant most often a battle of slogans.

## VIII

Altogether the experience of Western socialism has pointed towards a need to take ideas, as distinct from potatoes and stockbrokers and other brute facts of life, more and more seriously. It is not the primacy of brute facts that is in question, but the degree of autonomy of ideas, their self-sustaining power, their ability to grow and recombine among themselves by a volition of their own, not slavishly dependent on what is happening down below on the ground. It would in a way be strange if this were otherwise, in view of the segmentation of life and consciousness that man has been condemned to, the harmful but also saving ability he has been forced to acquire of living on separate levels, of keeping the doors bolted between one room of his mind and another. Not intellectuals alone, but practical working socialists as well, have in one way or another come to feel that they were confronted by a much greater inertia or resilience of ideas—religion, nationalism, culture—than they expected to meet with; and, conversely, that the further spread of socialism must owe more to its expression

in new thinking, writing, art, than Marx and Engels supposed when they assigned the task of revolution to a working class driven by misery rather than beckoned by an ideal.

## IX

The practical socialist, in practical (or philistine) England above all, has often viewed the intellectual's relish for theories and speculations as a luxury, a self-indulgence. Every great movement of thought has been alive to the danger of letting thought become an object in itself. Buddhism was careful in principle to treat its intricate metaphysics as no more than a temporary bridge to get human beings across the river and then be discarded. There would be no bridges, however, if there were no engineers with a keen love of bridge-building, and Marx and Engels in their endless stream of letters to each other are first and foremost a pair of intellectuals, revelling in ideas, exploring the world of knowledge partly for its own sake as Livingstone in those same years roamed Africa because he loved exploration as well as to spread the gospel. There was even perhaps an unconscious element of self-denial, of asceticism, in the very little share of sovereignty that these two great thinkers allowed to thought; an outlook shared by young socialists in the 1930s, when revolution and manifest destiny once again seemed to be just round the corner. It has had a narrowing effect on the mentality of party leaders, themselves often intellectuals by origin. Certainly no true admirer of Marx could wish to see him reduced to a mere professor, a museum guide. He must be a revolutionary or nothing. But in the realm of ideas he remains as much a revolutionary as in politics. And Marxism unlike Buddhism was not building a bridge for man to escape from his vale of tears by, never to return, but a road leading into an inexhaustible future, of which the past would always be a living part. To go on exploring and refining its ideas is as useful a business for the socialist movement as any other.

## X

The past is not abolished by being disregarded, but turned into a dead weight of habit, stultifying the present. This is apt to happen whenever progress flags: countries like old Spain dragged their history behind them like convicts with a cannon-ball at their ankles. It is only by trying to comprehend the past rationally that we can transform it from a shapeless mass into a platform, or draw energy from it like the giant Antaeus from contact with his mother Earth. The maxim that only active involvement in the present can develop the right sense of touch for the past is a true one, but so is the converse, that only

familiarity with the past can impart the right touch for the present. We cannot act on things gone by, but they continue to act on us, and past and present combine to make the future.

## XI

Marx was an amateur historian, whose output of finished work on history amounted to three or four pamphlets on recent French or German events; though in *Capital*, and in his newspaper articles, letters, and unpublished studies, his mind roved over world history at large. History was only on the threshold of becoming an academic subject taught by professional scholars, narrowed by specialization and also, as the society forged by the Industrial Revolution lost its momentum, by conservatism. Without an eagerness to influence men's present doings, otherwise than to encourage them to believe that they are living in the best of possible worlds, there will be no eagerness to understand the past in any such way as to make sense of it; historians came to be content with it as a heap of bric-a-brac in a curio-shop, each item interesting in itself, but gathered there by mere accident. Marxist criticism and public impatience have both done something of late years to disturb this dilettantism. Marx belonged to an earlier day, when men like Carlyle and Macaulay too wrote history as a means both of comprehending and of guiding their own age. History for them was no more separate from politics than economics had been for Adam Smith. It still had close links, besides, with literature. These men, and Marx among them, were all first-rate writers, and did not forget, as most professional historians and too many Marxists have forgotten, that if history is to impress and instruct it must first (as Wordsworth said of poetry) please and entertain.

## XII

History has influenced men hitherto chiefly by misrepresentation or self-deception. Southern-Rhodesian whites have talked lately of England's "betrayal" of them as "another Munich", and such arbitrary associations, like those of surrealist poetry, can be discovered inexhaustibly. Men's social consciousness must at all times have been choked with similar bizarre "lessons" or caricatures of history, easy to draw on for emotional reinforcement to causes either good or bad. Marxism wanted to draw on it instead for rational guidance; it hoped to see its interpretation of history having a direct, clarifying effect on the men making history now, socialist leaders first and foremost. But leaders everywhere are too much taken up with their archaic function of leading: and while it is something that Marxist parties have in principle elevated history into a guiding philosophy, it is hard to

believe that many of their executives, especially of parties in power, have been much guided by knowledge of the past except, like other politicians, of a very general or stereotyped sort. Those who grew up in the Stalin school of leadership were less inclined to learn from history than to make history learn from them, in other words to rewrite it. It is the golden rule of academic scholarship to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, though not necessarily all the truth; this unfortunately is a higher standard of virtue than history-writing has sometimes observed in the country where Marxism first came to power. And any falsification of the past must point a wrong way to the future.

### XIII

Marxism expected ordinary men, and the working class in particular, to learn with its aid from living experience, to be matured by contact with the realities of their own time. There are more obstacles than it allowed for to any such cumulative learning. Individuals and groups have ordinarily an ingrained desire not to learn, because learning means changing. They have developed reflexes, regulators, that enable them to disarm or neutralize fresh experience by translating it into familiar terms, much as a sleeper weaves the sound of his alarmclock into his dream in order to go on sleeping. Many people came through the two World Wars staggeringly little altered in belief or outlook. For those who are struggling to get their eyes open, the great obstacle is the bewildering succession of modern events. Lenin expected the Curragh Camp mutiny—the obstructing of Home Rule for Ireland in 1914 by army officers abetted by conservative leaders—to have a permanent effect on British workers by undeceiving them about the realities of the British Constitution. But it was forgotten within a few months, when the Great War broke out. Events as electrical as the Suez crisis of 1956 fade away quickly among a blurred mass of impressions, partly because there is always another crisis about to begin, partly because of the ceaseless drip of conservative soft soap and water washing away the traces. There is a newspaper each day, and what happened yesterday has ceased to exist. The discredited old "National Government" crew of the 'thirties were able to reappear on the stage again in the 'fifties with no more than a few perfunctory changes of costume or whisker.

### XIV

Youthful Marxism was apt to plume itself on a gift for predicting the future; the failure of Mar-x's prediction of the downfall of capitalism in the West has chilled this, and may even make it seem that his success lay far more in illumining the past than the future, so that his value now is chiefly for historians; that here is one more case of the owl

of Minerva only flying after dark. There was some confusion between the notion of foreseeing the future so exactly as to state inevitabilities, and the more valid one of recognizing tendencies clearly enough to be able to recommend the best choice among limited alternatives. Marx and Engels themselves in their later years were compelled to see as a complicating factor that no communities or economies develop nowadays along lines strictly their own, because all regions act on all the others, at every angle or tangent. Science adds new variables. But to reject history for not being able to tell fortunes like a gypsy would be the philistinism of the "practical man", which Marxism with its pride in practicality has not always been free from. The better we understand our past the less stupidly we shall make our future. Negative prophesy has of course proved much easier. A Marxist needs no crystal ball to foretell with 95 per cent accuracy what a new Labour Government will not do. This is not to be sneezed at; the process of learning is to a great extent this same recognition of nullities, of wigs not being real hair and fine words buttering no parsnips.

## XV

Marx and Engels, as the latter was at pains to point out, had to stress the economic factor one-sidedly, in order to establish its bedrock importance. It should be a warning to Marxists today that whereas other historians used to be all for abstractions, religions, great men, as the directing forces of history, some of them are now finding it quite congenial to adopt explanations very close to a literal, mechanical rendering of economic determinism. On this showing men and parties have no motivation beyond their own immediate material interest or that of their class. It can go comfortably with a conservative bent of mind, because if all politicians are mercenary self-seekers they can all be written off, leaving private property where it is. It also simplifies history, and allows it to be dissected, usefully up to a point, with an air of complete objectivity. If men were always ruled by their purses no more would be required. But even professors writing history are not quite such simple, unicellular organisms, and the men and women who have made history were still less so.

## XVI

"Marx," wrote that profound historian H. G. Wells, "like most of his contemporaries, was profoundly ignorant of historical science, and addicted to a queer 'dialectic' devised by the pseudo-philosopher Hegel." It has undeniably been awkward for historical Marxism to have its relations with Hegelianism so anomalous and ill-defined. In the great bulk of his writings, Marx himself would seem to have left the

scholastic logic of his nonage behind. A musician engaged in composition does not work consciously in second inversions and Neapolitan sixths: he may have forgotten most of the rules he learned about them, as Napoleon had forgotten the drill manual by the time he was fighting battles. If any part of their student exercises did either of them any good, it was only what sank into the intuitive thinking, became part of their minds; and this may be supposed to have happened in some degree with Marx. But there was more than a touch of the anarchist in him, impatient of all rules. Engels, who made a splendid foil to him because they were so very different, was on the contrary a man of method, keen on amateur soldiering, full of military lore, a staunch upholder of drill and discipline. Hegelian logic appealed to this side of him: it brought world history under discipline, and might even be able to harness the realm of natural phenomena as well, to make planets and tides and atoms stand to attention. Lenin carried his experimental applications of it further, and through him it passed into Soviet orthodoxy and came to be held mandatory on **all** Marxists. Those who have been working historians, in or out of the USSR, have mostly treated it as part of the scaffolding of Marxism still waiting to be cleared away; though with some uneasy feeling from time to time that perhaps it was, as the philosophers insisted, part and parcel of the fabric. A philosopher versed in **Hegel** can pick out historical triads without leaving his armchair, as easily as blowing smoke-rings; the historian has to turn a library upside down to identify the significant points of his problem, and when he has found them it does him no extra good to fix Hegelian labels on them, except possibly by way of a short-hand summary of a few results, which like **Marx's** handwriting would be intelligible to very few besides himself. What is of solid worth in Marxism lies in its theory of history, its theory of politics, of economics, or art, and its promise if not yet performance of a psychology and an ethic. It may well stand in need of a more comprehensive framework, a "philosophy", to hold them together; but it is not likely to get one by turning back to **Hegel**.

## XVII

There survives from the "dialectic", as something that the experience of every epoch, the sensation of every hour, seem to confirm afresh, its fundamental concept of contradiction, of the interpenetration of opposites. Hegelian language lends this omnipresent thing a somewhat mystical disguise. Contradictions meaningful for men do not reside in the thing-in-itself, but in their way of looking at it or feeling it. This subjectiveness can be detected most plainly in our thinking about physical Nature. Light is said to be both wave and

corpuscle. Both these words are images into which we translate aspects of invisibilities, in terms of our own everyday life. To the eye of Omniscience light would be neither wave nor corpuscle, but some third, more complex entity. Similarly Napoleon appears to us "a bundle of contradictions", benevolent statesman and ferocious militarist: whereas to his creator, if he had one, he would be not at all mysterious. True, in him the contradictions became part of his own consciousness, because he was a thinking (and reading) man faced with decisions to build harbours or bombard cities; but whatever struggle went on in his mind was called forth by competing pressures on him and his conscience—whatever this may have been—of Europe's interests, hopes, fears. Contradiction in short means consciousness of contradictoriness, and we all, singly and collectively, grow more aware of life by growing aware that what we believe to be a thing one and indivisible—Sirius, and *the* spider, and *your thoughts at this moment*—was really a duality. In primitive times the good or bad actions of a despot are felt by his subjects in the mass as neither good nor bad, but simply as exertions of power; and by the same primitive reasoning elevated (as often happens) into theology. God damns A and redeems B for no reason but to exult in the exercise of His own will. When social consciousness expands, the behaviour of all these autocrats is called in question, and then looks contradictory because it affects men discordantly. **Marx** may have been misled in a measure by the Hegelianism of his formative days into attributing to capitalism intrinsic, ineradicable defects, contradictions purely objective, independent of human will or desire, by which therefore it was as irretrievably doomed as the damned soul by the decree of absolute reprobation. But it is as true of capitalism as of everything else that there's nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so. Like any productive system it can function in a number of gears, at various intensities; it may strive, because it is expected to strive, towards maximum production and full employment, or it may drag its feet as it did during the World Slump when mankind was still willing to take slumps as acts of God. Objective factors are doubtless involved, such as the top-heaviness of iron and steel in the German economy of the Slump years; but the decisive ones are social, psychological, subjective, representing the attitudes that a particular society has built up. The "contradictions of capitalism" only become active and explosive when they are felt in human consciousness.

## XVIII

If everything is contradictory, and contradictions generate movement and change, we ought to see change everywhere in history, but

we do not. Individuals may be full of contrarities visible to all their friends and neighbours, yet remain serenely unconscious of them, and much the same is true of societies. France in the seventeenth century was full of strife and bustle and change, while neighbouring Spain, with the same kind of social structure and government, vegetated. Every form of communal living generates a surplus of energy in emotion and excitement, as well as of goods, but in normal times this is drained harmlessly off by the moral lightning-conductors that every society contains: fist-fights, folk-dances, Church parades, wars of the type that represent a substitute for meaningful collective activity, for any activity liable to disturb the equilibrium. One index of how averse man's nature is to change is the fact that Christianity, the religion destined to inspire or accompany far more and deeper changes than any other, has a far more fantastical theology than any other, a more irreconcilable tension between contorted dogma and welling emotion. This theology was carried to its furthest, weirdest extreme by Calvinism, that creed of man in motion, at the same time that it was toned down and semi-rationalized by the conservative Counter-Reformation. Men's hatred of doing anything they have not done a thousand times already makes it appear very often in history that only collision with an external force has been able to stir internal contradictions into life, or raise them to a higher temperature. If no consciousness of them at all has yet developed, collision may, as between two solid objects, have only mechanical results. Invasion of Spain at the beginning of the eighteenth century stirred nothing more than old-fashioned patriotism or Catalan separatism; at the beginning of the next century it started the long struggle of a Liberal middle class against the old régime. Western intrusion found China already in the grip of class conflict, India only in the grip of feudal anarchy; and the final outcome, even though Western contact was much closer with India, was a much deeper transformation of China. (Chinese culture was penetrated by the sense of history, India was permeated instead by custom and tradition; this too is not unconnected with the more creative reception of Marxism in China than in India.) The zigzag as well as sporadic movement of history owes much to the tendency of countries to stand still until interfered with from outside, formerly as a rule by violence, in the future perhaps increasingly by ideas.

## XIX

Because of its origins and ambitions, Marxism has been preoccupied with study of periods of rapid transition, and this has predisposed it to think of history at large in the same terms, which is like picturing a river from a few waterfalls along its course. Most of the past has been static

or very sluggish, as Marx perceived as soon as he looked out of his Western window at Asia, at any rate so far as production, and the life of the masses involved in it, has been concerned: there have always been Tamberlanes and Nadir Shahs galloping about. In Marx's later years he also perceived, as we do now, that political advance in his own Europe was going far more slowly than he had hoped, and it must be more than coincidence that his own historical speculations came to be concerned with the vast open spaces and immobilities of world history, rather than with French Revolutions. He took note of common features as well as of contrasts between Europe and Asia, and when he theorized about an "Asiatic mode of production" he was not confining it to geographical Asia. Besides stagnation there is also to be considered the phenomenon of running down, as we see it in southern Europe after the Counter-Reformation, an area of history rich in illustrations of the mentality of old ruling classes very gradually losing their social functions, and with them their hold on reality; the reflexes that come into play when men are submitting to forces outside them that they despair of controlling, and illusion, make-believe, quackery, every species of "false consciousness" flourishes. Our own epoch, more heterogeneous than any before, with all its ancestral elements jostling together, belongs in part to this category; western Europe in the twentieth century like southern Europe in the seventeenth century is suffering from having failed to grasp opportunities, or recognize turning-points, and is politically drifting. To counteract this we should try to understand the torpid or decadent epochs that make up the bulk of human history, as well as Levellers and Jacobins and Bolsheviks.

## XX

Marxist exploration of history outside Europe was started by Marx, but his pioneer efforts have been only haltingly followed up. Recent discussions have made Marxists uncomfortably aware of how little progress the mapping out of world history into a sequence of stages, or "modes of production", has made since Marx initiated it. It has been commonly assumed that each of four or five modes of production was born under the roof of its predecessor and then supplanted it, as Cronos dethroned his father Uranus and was dethroned by his son Zeus. But there was no clear evidence of this ever having happened in fact, except the bourgeois revolution (itself confined to two or three countries) that marked the coming to power of capitalism, and gave Marx his starting-point. Earlier historical situations could be linked with one like 1789 only by conjectural analogy. And given the special inhibitions against change that every social order builds up, it is hard to see how, for instance, a slave society could ever transform itself

into anything else. Successful slave revolt is almost unknown, and possession of slaves appeals to more appetites than the merely utilitarian. Conquest of ~~or~~ intrusion on one society by another, on the other hand, may occasionally result in a new combination. Mediaeval European feudalism may be explainable as a fusion of German tribalism with Roman slavery, each society beforehand harbouring tendencies towards change but neither capable by itself of evolving into this or any other new pattern.

## XXI

It might be more instructive to think of only two broadly distinct types of class society, the first occurring twice. In this, a ruling class or group organizes production, on new lines; in the other and much commoner type, it is parasitical on production. What first arose out of primitive society was of the former type, and was represented by the ancient civilizations of the Near East with their monarchies or priestly corporations directing agriculture based on water-control in river valleys, and the industry that such an agriculture could support. It was a sort of early "state socialism", and can be found again in the state-organized irrigation system of the Incas. It was never widespread, but was decisive for the transition from pre-history to history because its inventions and ideas could be borrowed by other peoples, and could be carried on later without centralized control by private landowners or village communes. When it had served its purpose, it gave way to a multitude of variants of the second type of society, distinguished less by different "relations of production" than by different methods of appropriation of wealth from producers, mostly peasants, by whoever held power. Rulers went on imitating the political structure and imperial ambitions of the first empires, but for the most part they stood outside the productive process and were superfluous to it. Only at odd moments during this longest tract of history did they contribute to productive resources, as Chinese emperors did when they had an irrigation canal built, or took a hand in organizing production, as they necessarily did whenever they deprived the producer of his freedom instead of being satisfied to fleece him. A slave or serf would not produce surplus wealth of his own accord. When a Roman landowner employed a gang of slaves to grow cash crops for export, or a feudal baron ran his demesne with serf labour, they were "entrepreneurs" of a sort, as the temple-priests of Sumeria were before them and the chimney-barons of the Ruhr after. This happened in response to a growth of money circulation and of a market, in other words under the stimulus of merchant-capitalism. Apart from such exceptions, the only service that rulers professed to render to the com-

munity was to guarantee order, a settled existence within which production could be carried on peacefully and protected against interference from outside. One succeeded another, each levying his tribute in turn; Roman, Gothic, Moorish, feudal rule arose in Spain and passed away, while the same wooden plough in the hands of the same peasant scratched the same soil. At length with the coming of industrial capitalism there was a return to the first pattern, of production organized from above. Capitalism gathered up and built on the accumulated technical innovations of the long intermediate epoch, as the ancient "technocracies" may be said to have gathered up and built on the advances of the "Neolithic revolution", the discoveries of nameless men without lords or masters—improved tools, agriculture, pottery, weaving.

## XXII

Production organized from above is likely to result in additional output, which may, and in the case of mature capitalism obviously does, leave the worker as well as the master better off. In the long interval between the organized production of ancient times and of today, the worker was necessarily worse off for having a master, except as he may have benefited from protection from outsiders or from collective welfare services such as monastic charity. Marxists have felt as it were in their bones that most of history had a common flavour, and they have got into the habit of listing practically all non-capitalist class societies as *feudal*, but without a clear definition of what their generic character consisted in. The common factor was the parasitic appropriation of wealth by rulers with political, social, ideological, but no economic functions; a relationship between patrician and plebeian that pervaded the being of all such societies, affected every tendril of their thoughts, and fixed a limit to their potential development. But to see this fundamental identity is only a starting-point. To get beyond it, and see "feudal" societies in their teeming variety, we have to take account of the procedures by which the producer was sheared of his wool, and of the social arrangements, primarily religious, that helped to reconcile him to his lot. What Marxist terminology has most regrettably obscured is the very exceptional, or rather unique, nature of the feudalism of mediaeval Europe, for this was the incubator of modern capitalism and of the whole world-civilization of today. In Indian history quite other feudal patterns can be found, and a slow rhythm of alternation between centralized appropriation of wealth by State and standing army, as tax or tribute, and its distribution by the State—and decentralized appropriation by individuals scattered over the country and owning tracts of it, in fact if not in law, themselves. Geographical factors, or the docility or refractoriness of the peasantry,

would favour one mode or the other. The former, or as it might be called State-feudalism, was renewed periodically by conquest; in the latter, use and wont tended to replace naked coercion, and peasant and lord came socially and psychologically closer, though the lord participated no more in production where he lived in the village than when he lived at Delhi five hundred miles away. Force of neighbourhood produced likenesses, sometimes sympathies; cultural patterns were affected by them.

### XXIII

Nothing can be traced to a single cause, and the more remote a thing is from man's primary activity of belly-filling the more influences have helped to mould it and the harder it is to evaluate them. Marxism has approached this problem by way of its familiar distinction between "base" and "superstructure", and has seen institutions and ideas of all kinds as derived from the organization of production. But if through most of history production has really been organized only by the working masses, many interpretations founded on this model are weakened. To speak of "base and superstructure" has often been censured as partaking too much of the mechanical; yet in many contexts it is more appropriate than "roots and branches" or any other vitalistic metaphor would be. Feudal societies of complex type have been characterized habitually by a dead, rigid division between peasant and ruler, between production and everything else: the dichotomy that impressed Marx, when he was studying India, as the determining factor in all its pre-British history. Above the unchanging routine of the village one civilization after another came and went, much as Saxons, Normans, Elizabethans built their houses over the foundations of Roman London.<sup>8</sup> "Base and superstructure" becomes a misleadingly mechanistic image only at those times of upheaval and crisis that Marxism has oftenest been concerned with, when inert elements come to life and enter into chemical reactions with each other.

### XXIV

Just as there was only, at bottom, a single social structure between the ancient civilizations and the latest, so there was only one real religion of the common man, one version or another of primitive animism or magic surviving from times before class division arose, on top of which official religions reared themselves in the same way as kingdoms were built on top of the village. This universal cult, or a good part of it, grew directly out of economic life: it was a tangle of fertility rites, harvest festivals, and so on; whereas official cults were concerned with, or conditioned by, relations between classes, rather

than between cultivator and Nature. But men high or low were interested in their own fertility, their own cycle of life and death, not only those of their fields and crops. Having its roots in the deepest levels of human existence, in life itself as well as in the means of livelihood, religion always had a pervasive or plastic quality that made it the chief intermediary between high and low, the chief integrator of divided societies, the meeting-ground of all thoughts. A sediment of theology drifted down to the countryside, rustic superstitions ascended into the nostrils and brains of the educated. Religion has too often been bundled up by Marxists with political or legal relations and the rest of the "superstructure"; its place in history is really unique. Neither their own bent of mind nor their environment led Marx and Engels to appreciate fully its significance.

## XXV

Sex and its social psychology is another branch of history where Marxism still has far to go. Much as diverse social structures may rest on the same method of production, a multitude of types of family have rested on one and the same biological mode of reproduction but have been shaped by many extraneous influences. Economic influences are among these, since marriage may be also an economic partnership or a system of exploitation. Widely in Africa the polygamous household, with land worked by the wives while the husband drank beer or went to war, was the nuclear point in the distribution of wealth. Here sex coincided with class, as in other situations class may coincide with race, and the family with its parasitic relationship of men to women (sweetened by male "protection" from other males, religious guidance, and such fringe-benefits) was unmistakably a feudal society in embryo. It may be, at the same time, that the ease with which men subjugated women and harnessed them to agricultural production inhibited the emergence of more complex societies based on exploitation of men by men. Conflicting interests of men and women, continual friction between them, must be reckoned among the motive forces that have pushed history along, as well as friction between classes; above all in Europe, where they had most free play. In Asia as well as Africa women's ability to resist was damped down more heavily by religion, custom, and the general sluggishness of evolution. But because of the lesser emergence there than in Europe of social or political institutions, except for monarchy at the top and village council at the bottom, the family is of all the more interest as the mirror of society, or as the seismograph registering its tremors. These need not denote the advent of a new class. Every class in a society as complex as old China, and every individual in it, is itself complex and unstable; it conducts a run-

ning commentary on itself through the medium of art and thought, which helps to keep it in health. Many of the themes of romantic love that were to reach their apogee in the western European poetry of the early bourgeois epoch—the right of free choice, the pillorying of the heavy father—were leading themes of Chinese opera ages before Romeo and Juliet or any bourgeois revolution. The inmost contradictions of human history lie in man himself, so close in physiology to other mammals, in brain infinitely removed from them; in the family they expose themselves most clearly.

## XXVI

We have been inclined to rest on Lenin's definition of the State as Marxism's last word, but it is as well to remember that its first words, in works like *The German Ideology of 1845-46*, pointed in a number of directions, which have not all been explored. Marx and Engels themselves can hardly be said to have worked out their views completely at any time. Lenin took much less interest than they did in history, and he was planning a revolution, not a historical study, when he wrote about the State; his analysis fitted Tsarist Russia more closely than other regions both more and less advanced. In this as in other matters his views, taken up and applied too indiscriminately, have over-simplified Marxism. And it has been hindered from studying particular forms of State up and down the world by getting stuck in the mud of its five modes of production, and losing sight of the fifty or five hundred modes of appropriation.

## XXVII

One remark in *The German Ideology* is instructive from another point of view: that according to all modern Western writers "the State exists only for the sake of private property, so that this fact has penetrated into the consciousness of the normal man".<sup>1</sup> It is a reminder that on several topics, not only the theory of surplus value, Marxism and the industrial bourgeoisie in its youthful confidence and candour spoke the same language, and that Marxism today only repeats what was once plain common sense for all except decadent aristocracies and monarchies. Once in power, or in partnership with these old interests, and faced with criticism from below, the bourgeoisie or its spokesmen saw that it would be folly to go on telling the truth on the housetops, and set to work to edit, revise, bowdlerise. If the "normal man" of Marx's youth was really so clear-sighted about the State, one can more easily understand why Marx was so hopeful of its speedy consignment to the dustbin.