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# Marx on Culture

Raymond Williams



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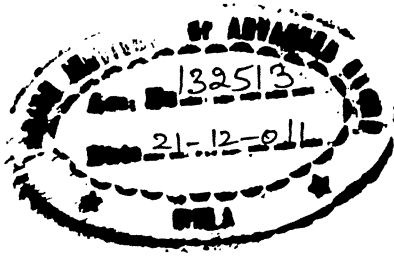


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Raymond Williams

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## MARX ON CULTURE

There is an initial paradox. Few would remember Karl Marx for any direct contributions he made to cultural theory. Yet it is clear that the contribution of Marxism to modern cultural thought is widespread and influential. This problem can be interpreted in very different ways. Thus it is often said that the influence of Marxist cultural thought is a by-product of the success of Marxism as a critique of the capitalist social order and as the decisive philosophy of revolutionary socialism. This can then be either a recognition or a dismissal: an acknowledgment of the major effects which this body of thought and this transforming movement have had on an area of human practice to which they have always, in fact, given considerable attention; or, conversely, a rejection of the distortions which this primarily political, economic and sociological theory and practice have imposed on work and interests which they can only misunderstand and damage.

Or again it is said that while the practical success of Marxism has for obvious and integral reasons been primarily in the political and economic spheres, its central contribution has always been much wider and indeed that the distinctive effects of its political and economic influence can only be understood when it is seen that these are the expression of a much more general interpretation of all human activity and of ways of understanding and changing it. From this emphasis it follows that Marxist cultural theory is not a by-product of a political and economic movement but one of the main areas of the theory and practice as a whole. It can then of course still be rejected as wrong, and even among those who are broadly in sympathy with it there can be divergent attitudes. There have been many, including too many in power, who, while repeating the most general claims, have in practice reduced cultural theory to a relatively dogmatic application of political and economic positions. There have been others who have seen the preoccupation with cultural theory, which has been a feature of Western Marxism since the 1920s, as an indication of the (temporary) failure, in such societies, of the central revolutionary political and economic movement. On the other hand, an increasing number of Marxists now believe that cultural theory has become even more important, in modern social and cultural conditions, than it was in Marx's own day.

Finally it is said that the evident influence of Marxism in modern cultural thought is indeed a *contribution*, whether welcome or unwelcome: that it has, in combination with some other intellectual and social traditions, established certain distinctive positions and interests but has in practice combined these with other

forms of thought which have no particular basis in Marx but which can still be swept up in the general Marxist classification. This would be one kind of explanation of the fact that there are now not only divergent but contending and incompatible schools of Marxist cultural thought. On the other hand, from either of the earlier positions outlined, what is emphasised is not the combination with other forms of thought but this or that *interpretation* of what Marx really said or meant, and the consequent argument against other interpretations. This happens even in areas in which Marx wrote extensively and systematically, so it is not surprising that it also happens in relation to the more scattered and less systematic indications of a cultural theory.

It is not likely that any of these problems can be authoritatively resolved in a relatively brief essay. Yet perhaps something can be done, if its purposes are declared and its limits acknowledged. My main interest will be in what Marx himself wrote in this general area. Yet this is not an interest determined by some wish to provide legitimacy for any subsequent position. Necessarily, as a way of understanding what Marx wrote, I shall refer to what others have understood him to have written, but I am not attempting, here, a history of the Marxist tradition of cultural thought, which is not only a vast subject in itself but in which there are writers who, on these matters, are at least as important as Marx himself. If all were in one way or another inspired by Marx, still the most important of them looked to his work not for legitimation of their own, or for some title of authority, but as to a great colleague, in a social and intellectual enterprise much wider than any individual contribution. That enterprise is now part of a continuing and necessarily conflicting world history. We look at Marx in that context but still primarily, for present purposes, at Marx himself.

We can define three aspects of Marx's contribution to cultural thought. First, there are his own incidental but very extensive comments on a wide range of writers and artists. Second, there is the effect of his general position on human development, which can be taken as at least the outline of a general cultural theory. Third, there are the unfinished problems, the questions raised and set aside or only partly answered, some of which are still important in their own right.

The first aspect needs emphasis, against many hostile or merely ignorant accounts. It is not only that he was an intense and lifelong reader of so many of the great works of world literature. Professor Praver's *Karl Marx and World Literature*<sup>1</sup> gives extraordinary evidence of this, of a kind to impress even those who knew the general fact. It is also that much of his early writing was directly concerned with literary and aesthetic subjects, and that as late as 1857, with other major work in progress, he planned and read for an essay on aesthetics, though he did not write it.

What has then to be asked is how these facts bear on his more general work. It is a difficult question to answer. The student poems, the fragment of a novel, the sketch of a Platonic dialogue, the projected but unrealised journal of dramatic criticism, are too slight and local to sustain any positive indications. They testify to his intense interest in writing and can be said to show two characteristics - a Promethean daring and an irrepressible critical irony - which are central in the mature writer. On the other hand it is too easy to read back such characteristics, from the later achievement. There must have been thousands of student writers who did as much but did not go on to the very different work of the mature Marx.

Can we say the same of the lively early journalism, and in particular the *Rheinische Zeitung* articles on censorship and freedom of the press? Not really. The attack on the Prussian censorship is rather more than conventional liberal protest:

"The law permits me to write; it asks only that I write in a style other than my own! I am allowed to show the face of my mind, but, first, I must give it a prescribed expression!"<sup>2</sup>

This becomes a shrewd analysis of the familiar pressure or demand for 'moderation' of tone:

"Freely shall you write, but let every word be a genuflection toward the liberal censor who approves your modest, serious good judgement."<sup>3</sup>

Or again, in a far-reaching comment:

"The moderation of genius does not consist of the use of a cultivated language without accent or dialect; it lies rather in speaking the accent of the matter and the dialect of its essence. It lies in forgetting about moderation and immoderation and getting to the core of things."<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, in his observations on the freedom of the press, an important but relatively familiar position -

"In no sense does the writer regard his works as a means. They are ends in themselves; so little are they means for him and others that, when necessary, he sacrifices his existence to theirs."<sup>5</sup>

- is set in the context of a more original and still relevant argument:

"It is startling to find *freedom of the press* subsumed under *freedom of doing business*... *The first freedom of the press consists in its not being a business.*"<sup>6</sup>

There is shrewd insight, also, in the essay on Sue's *Les Mysteres de Paris*, which Marx contributed to *The Holy Family*. The essay works, with some inconsistency, at several levels of analysis, but is especially interesting in the use of analysis of vocabulary to clarify what would later be called the ideology of the tale, and in analysis of its internal contradictions.

These are the more isolable pieces of Marx's early literary and cultural writing. They are still, at their best, important now only because of the later work of their author. The same is true, really, of the evidence of Marx's wide knowledge of world literature, not only from documentary records but in the long use of allusions, quotations and references, and in the use of certain writing techniques in his major philosophical and historical works. That Marx was such a man learned and cultivated, deeply devoted to literature, is a fact against certain ignorant travesties. But the centre of the argument about Marx and culture cannot be displaced to such a dimension. Marx himself would have been among the first to say that it doesn't primarily matter how well-read a man is, a fact that is often only the indication of his social and cultural position and mode of life. What matters much more is what is done with that reading and knowledge, a levels more decisive than learned and apt allusion and habits of style. If Marx was, indeed, an exceptionally cultivated *bourgeois*, he gave most of his energy to becoming or making possible something different: never in a renunciation of reading and learning, but always in the transition from a possession of knowledge to its transforming use.

One further observation on this aspect of Marx is necessary. It has been so widely alleged against Marxism, both as theory and as some twentieth-century practice, that it is an enemy of culture, especially in respect of the freedoms of its creation, that it has been tempting for some Marxists to produce the old man himself, reading and re-reading Aeschylus and Ovid and Dante and Shakespeare and Cervantes and Goethe and so on, as if that were sufficient answer. But it would be a guilty admission of the faults of Marxist cultural theory and practice if the central argument were shifted to the private or semi-public cultivation of their founder. On the other hand it is true that it should be necessary for some of those who claim the authority of Marx, either for their own bureaucratic illiberalism or for that reduced version of Marxism which treats culture as *a priori* marginal or dependent, to come into contact with his mind in this vigorous, uncompromising and persistent part of its range. Except of course, that the early work especially can be conveniently diagnosed, by friends and enemies, as pre-Marxist, with special bearing on the fierce (and in fact lifelong) assertions of the liberty and autonomy of cultural work. There is a serious question waiting there, as a mature theory is seen to develop, but it cannot in any case be solved, from any position, by the assembly of facts about his reading or by the tactical use of this or that quotation. It will be solved, if at all, by direct inquiry into the long, massive, unfinished, often contradictory work which we now call Marx.

There is a preliminary problem, of wider import than either Marx or Marxism. I have been using the term *culture*, in this essay, in one of its predominant twentieth-century senses, as a general term for artistic, literary and intellectual



work. There is no comparably adequate general term, so the use can be readily justified. But it is well known that *culture* is also used, in anthropology and sociology but also more generally, to describe a distinctive way of life, then including arts and learning but also much more general practice and behaviour. The complexities of the word are in fact even wider than this, and have been explored elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

Now from certain positions it can be objected that any particular use of *culture* is misleading: too broad, too narrow, or simply too confusing. Yet the difficult history of the word is in fact an indication of a very general and complex intellectual movement, which happens to be especially, though by no means exclusively, relevant to Marx and Marxism. The variations and conflicts around the meaning of *culture* are central elements of a long, specifically modern inquiry. It is precisely the relations between, on the one hand, the arts and learning, and on the other hand a more general way of life, that are argued through, beyond and behind this term, in what in any local instance can seem intolerably confusing ways. Moreover the relations between *culture*, either as the arts and learning, or as a more general way of life, and that state or process widely defined as *civilisation*, have also been intensively explored and argued, again through, beyond and behind the vital words. There has been the use of *culture* as inner spiritual development, best externally exemplified in the arts and religion and responses to them, in contrast with the external and material achievements of *civilisation*. On the other hand the distinctiveness of particular ways of life, in their more general aspects but including their arts and ideas, has been emphasised as the diversity of *cultures* by contrast with the often unilinear and uniform version of *civilisation* (or as some would now say, *development*). Again, however, and in fact in the work of a German contemporary of Marx, G.F. Klemm in his *Allgemeine Kulturgeschichte der Menschheit* (1843-52), the general progress of mankind was traced through phases of cultural history, in which basic forms of social life were seen as rooted in historically changing and developing conditions. Such phases were also traced through the key word *society*, as in the American Lewis Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1877), which so impressed and directly influenced both Marx and Engels.

This actual history quickly shows us that it is not possible, in any simple way, to answer or even ask the question: what does Marx say about culture? Yet at the same time it shows us that the questions he actually asked, in this initially indeterminate area, belong to a very widespread and active area of philosophical, aesthetic and historical inquiry, which undoubtedly preceded him and which has certainly continued after him, not only 'inside' and 'outside' the Marxist traditions but of course primarily as a central issue in itself, where the effects of any particular intellectual tendency are for obvious reasons difficult to disentangle.

What this means in practice, for the study of Marx himself, is that the real history is not one of isolated innovative work: that it finds, in Marx, certain strikingly original questions and answers, but finds also his answers to the questions of others, questions persistent from work with which he otherwise disagrees, to say nothing of borrowings, provisional syntheses, notes and sketches. This in no way diminishes him, but it restores, as against the isolated authoritative master, that which he was himself always concerned to show: a concrete, shifting, at times contradictory historical process, temporarily and provisionally high-lighted in this great and singular figure.

'There is no history...of art.' Or, to give the sentence in full, 'There is no history of politics, of law, of science etc., of art, of religion.'<sup>18</sup> This is a manuscript note, rather than a considered statement, but it at once introduces a major emphasis in Marx's thought and raises a central problem in interpretation. The intended emphasis becomes clear in its full context. It had been and is still commonplace to generalise certain human activities as if they were distinct and autonomous, and from this to assert that they can be regarded as having their own independent history. And this had been especially the case in cultural activities, which had been regarded not only as the originating, directive impulses of all human development but also, in certain powerful intellectual traditions, as themselves originating, by revelation or by inspiration, by forces beyond human beings. The whole thrust of Marx's reading of history was then, first, *to insist that all cultural processes were initiated by humans themselves, and, second, to argue that none of them could be fully understood unless they were seen in the context of human activities as a whole.* That is the initial and least controversial sense of the argument that 'there is no history...of art': that the real history is always of human beings making art, from their own human resources, as distinct either from the history of a 'reified' Art - the sum of certain human activities seen as if it were a self-evolving product or an internally developing abstraction or a result of extra-human direction - or, where these more extreme projections were not in question, from that kind of specialising history which deliberately ignored the general conditions within which the specialised activity was practised. It is an important part of the legacy of Marx, but then also of a wider movement of modern thought, that these initial emphases are now very widely accepted.

But there are then further and more controversial senses of Marx's argument. These can be seen from the way in which the argument was put by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* (1845-6):

"Morality, religion, metaphysics, and other ideologies, and their corresponding forms of consciousness, no longer retain therefore their appearance of autonomous existence. They have no history, no development; it is men who, in developing their material production

and their material intercourse, change, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking.”

It is here that the central problem is joined. But we should first be clear about a problem of formulation, which is potentially very misleading. It is easy to read such sentences as 'they have no history, no development' or 'there is no history...or art' in the irrelevant and obviously untrue sense that these activities do not change and develop and thus have no history. This would be directly contrary to what Marx meant, but the rhetorical form of the statements, made as they were within explicit polemic against those who taught that the history of these 'spiritual' activities was the essential history of all human development, can in some respects mislead. What is at least initially being argued is that these activities are not separate and autonomous, and that they have all been carried out by actual human beings, in the whole real conditions of their existence.

Yet this readily acceptable sense of the argument is also, evidently, not Marx's whole sense. This can be seen in the sentences, which immediately precede those quoted:

"We begin with real, active men, and from their real life-process show the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms of the human brain also are necessary sublimates of men's material life-process, which can be empirically established and which is bound to material preconditions."<sup>10</sup>

Sympathetically read, this can be taken as little more than a strong form of the argument that all human activities, including the 'cultural' and the 'spiritual', have their origins in the whole real conditions of human existence. This general argument would be widely accepted. Yet it is obvious that other distinctions are being made: notably between 'real' on the one hand, 'reflexes', 'echoes', 'phantoms' and 'sublimates' on the other.

There are again strong and weak senses of this argument. The weak sense offers little more than the argument that the most refined forms of human thought necessarily occur within more general human activities in definite material preconditions: that human beings have to gain the resources for physical existence as a condition of doing anything else. In this weak sense there is no room for serious doubt. Yet the language of at least this early formulation indicates a stronger and more controversial sense. The language of 'reflexes', 'echoes', 'phantoms' and 'sublimates' carries the inescapable implication of secondary activity. We have again to remember that this was part of a polemic against the assumption that the whole of human history was determined by ideas, whether human or extra-human in origin: an assumption which complacently and cruelly ignored the long history and present facts of human labour, through which the necessary physical existence

and survival of human beings were gained and assured. The counter-emphasis, that human labour is central, necessary and thus genuinely originating, remains as Marx's major contribution to modern thought. But what can then be seen as happening is a way of formulating this emphasis which, ironically, is in danger of converting human labour - its 'material preconditions', 'material production' and 'material intercourse' - to, in its turn, a specialised and even reified element of human totality.

This comes out clearly in the next preceding sentences in *The German Ideology* (the argument is being deliberately read backwards, as a way of progressively analysing its assumptions):

"In total contrast to German philosophy, which descends from heaven to earth, we here ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, or conceive, nor from what has been said, thought, imagined or conceived of men, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. (We begin with real, active men...etc.)"<sup>11</sup>

As a statement of philosophical presupposition this is clear and admirable. It is wholly consistent, in its general emphasis, with the argument that we must begin any inquiry into human development and human activities from actual human beings in their actual conditions. But then rather more than this is actually said. The rhetorical reversal of metaphysical thought, in the proposal to 'ascend from earth to heaven', has the extraordinary literal effect, if we are reading it closely, of shifting 'what men say, imagine or conceive' and 'what has been said, thought, imagined or conceived or conceived of men' from earth to...heaven! Of course Marx did not literally believe this. It is a by-product of that particular polemical rhetoric. Yet a more serious question underlies the idiosyncrasy of the particular formulation.

In this way of seeing the problem, and in fact against other emphases by Marx elsewhere, there is a real danger of separating human thought, imagination and concepts from 'men's material life-process', and indeed of separating human consciousness from 'real, active men'. Taken crudely and literally, as indeed it has sometimes been taken, this is, ironically, a familiar position of bourgeois philistinism, of the kind satirised by Brecht as 'eats first, morals after', or more seriously of the kind now regularly propagated by apologists of capitalism, in the argument that we must first 'create wealth' and then, on the proceeds, 'improve the quality of life'.

Marx's central emphasis was so much on the necessary totality of human activity that any reduction of this kind has to be firmly rejected. In the matter of human labour in general it is indeed from him that we can most clearly learn a more adequate conception. Thus:

"We presuppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi*, and to which he must subordinate his will."<sup>12</sup>

This convincing account of the specifically human character of work includes, as will be seen, not only the foreseeing concept of what is being made but ideally integrated concepts of how and why it is being made. This is intended to enforce Marx's conception of what is truly human in labour, and thus to provide a standard from which it is reasonable to describe certain forms of human work - those in which the worker has been deprived, by force or by the possession by others of his means and conditions of production, of the necessary human qualities of foresight, decision, consciousness and control - as degraded or sub-human, in no hyperbolic sense. Thus 'real, active men', in all their activities, are full of consciousness, foresight, concepts of how and why, or to the degree that they are not have been reduced from this fully human status by social and economic conditions which practically diminish their humanity, and which it is then a central human task to change. The revolution of labour, to achieve this fully human status, is of course Marx's central political perspective.

But then it remains very strange that in the early writings, in which he wrote most directly of what we now call 'cultural' activities, Marx worked with so reduced and so vulnerable a definition of consciousness. It can of course be argued that what he then had mainly in mind was not the integrated consciousness of necessary human labour and genuine production, but what he and others could see as the phantasmagoria of religious and metaphysical speculation or the self-justifying systems of law, politics and economic theory which ratified oppression, privilege and exploitation. What he wanted to argue, we can agree, was that any and all of these impressive systems of ideas must be placed or replaced in their true social and material context, and that in that sense we should not first listen to what men 'say, imagine or conceive' - thus limiting ourselves to these selected and abstracted terms - but should rather look at the whole body of activities and conditions within which these ideas and systems were generated. When we put it like that, we are in fact describing Marx's central and most influential argument.

Yet, with many serious subsequent effects, this was not all that he actually said.

His contempt for what some kinds of men 'say, imagine or conceive' - self-justifying, indifferent or fantasy-ridden accounts of a world that was after all open to fuller and more direct examination, and especially that world of necessary labour which underpinned and made possible all such apologia and speculation - rushed him into weakening his own most essential case. This case was that

"the whole previous conception of history has either completely neglected this real basis of history (the real process of production, starting out from the simple material production of life) or else has considered it as a secondary matter without any connection with the course of history. Consequently, history has always to be written in accordance with an external standard; the real production of life appears as ahistorical, while what is historical appears as separated from ordinary life."<sup>13</sup>

That received and fundamental error was massively corrected, but at the cost, in some formulations, of making intellectual and cultural production, of any kind, appear to be 'immaterial'.

For, of course, even for the historical record of the real processes of production, 'the simple material production of life', it is necessary to attend, critically, to what men have said, imagined and conceived. There is important non-verbal evidence of human material production, as, most notably, in the total absence of verbal evidence, in the essentially material inquiries of prehistoric archaeology. But we have only to move from those illuminating analyses of pots, tools, weapons, work in earth and stone, to analyses which are able to include verbal records of production, social relations and change, to realise that Marx's positive emphasis, on the inclusion of material production as historically central, is greatly enriched when we have evidence of what men of the time, in ways that of course need critical interpretation, quite materially 'said, imagined' and conceived' - in practice necessarily in material ways, in writing and in work with stone, pigment and metal. The persuasive philosophical presupposition, that we must begin from active human beings, in all their evident social and cultural diversity, rather than from some abstractly imagined and conceived concept of Man, must not be weakened by what would in the end be the philistine dismissal or relegation of what actual people, in definite material conditions and by unarguably material processes - writing, printing, painting, sculpting, building - said, imagined and conceived.

Thus, at the root of the problem of Marx's contribution to a theory of culture, and with critical effect on the subsequent development of a Marxist tradition, we have to restore the practical activities, which we now generalise as culture to the full social material process on which he insisted. Against the tone of some of his formulations, and against much influential subsequent interpretation

of these activities as merely reflective of and secondary to the then abstracted and specialised 'material production', we have to emphasise cultural practice as from the beginning social and material, in ways with which in fact he might have been among the first to agree.

It is possible to clarify these difficult problems and arguments by making a distinction which obviously comes to mind: between those intellectual and cultural processes which, as we have seen Marx arguing, are necessary elements of any form of truly human labour, and those other forms of intellectual and cultural production which are undertaken in their own terms, not as elements of another more general process but as what Marx had called in his *Rheinische Zeitung* articles 'ends in themselves?'

The distinction seems to give us some early advantages. We can all see the difference between the exercise of intelligence and foresight in ploughing a field or planting a crop or breeding a certain type of animal and, on the other hand, the processes involved in writing a poem or composing a symphony or making a piece of sculpture. It is true that there are some obviously intermediate cases, such as making and decorating a cooking pot, or building a house with attention not only to its function as shelter but also to its appearance and style, or making clothes which not only cover us but are intended to enhance our appearance or to signify some social position. Yet it might still be possible to distinguish between work which is intended to satisfy a manifest physical need and work which, whatever its other uses, is not directly related to manifest physical need in anything like the same way.

Yet the distinctions being made here have in the end to be submitted to Marx's conception of the totality of the social process, which makes any simple extraction of certain practices as 'ends in themselves' very doubtful. There is some genuine uncertainty here in what Marx meant. The central difficulty is a confusion or slide between a simple and overwhelming assertion of the fact that human beings must eat and ensure the material conditions for their physical survival and reproduction, and the only apparently similar argument that human labour is the production and reproduction of real life in this persuasively restricted sense. It is not only that in modern economies the greater part of human labour is applied for purpose which go far beyond the assurance of food and of the conditions for survival and reproduction. Marx in fact showed very clearly that the satisfaction of basic needs, through a definite mode of production leading to certain definite social relations, *produced* new needs and new definitions of need, which in their turn became, beyond the bare necessities, the forms and objects of further production.

But it is also and more fundamentally, from the historical, anthropological and archaeological records, that even at stages of minimal or subsistence production,

though then in highly variable ways, human beings apply energy not only to the isolable physically necessary tasks but, in varying degrees of connection with these, to social and cultural purposes which are from the beginning part of their distinctively human organisation. We may now think we can separate their carved 'cult' or 'fertility' objects, their ceremonial practices in initiation and burial, their 'symbolic' presentation or representation of facts of kinship and identity, their dances and masks, their narratives or 'myths' of human and natural origins, as 'magical' activities or, in some of the surviving objects (the famous cave paintings are an obvious example) as 'art'. But it should be clear, if we have taken Marx's sense of the total social process, which is richly justified when any of these practices are seen in living and lived relationships with other practices, that the external categorical distinction between 'necessary material production' and other forms of activity and practice is radically misleading. On the contrary, just because the necessary material production is human and social, it is cast from the beginning in whole human and social forms: indeed precisely in those forms, which are at root forms of the practical organisation and distribution of interest and energy, which we now call 'cultures'.

In its central sense, Marx would not only accept but emphasise this position:

"The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc., - real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process."<sup>14</sup>

Yet there are in fact still several problems, if we are to get this full central sense, and its complex implications, clear. First, in an area that has already been discussed (for this passage again directly precedes the 'earth to heaven' and 'reflexes and echoes' formulations previously examined), there is the description of conceiving and thinking as 'efflux', which, when read in association with the later formulations, is undoubtedly reductive, not only from the observable record but from the much more acceptable earlier formulation of 'directly interwoven'. It is in the movement from a sense of the simultaneous and fundamentally indissoluble human process of conception and labour, labour and conception, to the narrower polemical sense of what is in effect a two-stage process - associated human labour, but then as its 'efflux' or 'echo', or,



worse, 'phantom', the consciousness which might be seen as the very process and condition of association but which can now be virtually a by-product - that all the difficulties of Marx's own and many Marxist conceptions of culture can be seen to begin.

Then, second, there is a very puzzling combination of historical and categorical argument. The historical element is initially very clear: 'at *first* directly interwoven'. This connects with one of Marx's most important cultural arguments that the real relations between culture and society, or between art and labour, have always to be seen in terms of the particular mode of production and social order within which the relations practically occur. Thus the emphasis on 'at first directly interwoven' has to be understood in relation to his arguments about the effects of a historically subsequent *division* of labour, to the point where, very notably in modern class societies, 'mental labour' - intellectual and artistic work - can be both categorically and practically separated from 'manual labour'. This results not only in the degradation of what is marked off, in dominating and exploiting ways, as 'mere manual labour', deprived of its human conditions of conscious purpose and control, but in the false separation of 'mental labour', now held to be restricted to a certain class. The effect is not only the undervaluation of manual labour - in practice of the millions of manual labourers - on whom in fact the maintenance of human life still absolutely depends. The effect is also on the character of 'mental labour' itself. In its separation from the basic process of assuring human existence it is inherently more likely to develop false conceptions of both general and specific human conditions, since it is not as a matter of necessary practice exposed to and tested by human activity in general. Even more, since the fact of the division of labour, in this basic class sense, is not just a matter of different kinds of work but of social relations which determine greater rewards and greater respect for 'mental labour', and of these relations as established in and protected by a specifically exploiting and unequal social order, the operations of 'mental labour' cannot be assumed in advance to be exclusively devoted to 'higher' or 'the highest' human concerns, but are in many or perhaps all cases likely to be bound up, in greater or lesser degree, with propagation, ratification, defence, apologia, naturalisation of that exploiting and unequal social order itself.

This is one of Marx's most powerful arguments, and we must return to it. But at this stage it is necessary to notice that what is already, at least in embryo, an historical formulation of the variable relations between necessary material production and 'what men say, imagine or conceive', becomes, too quickly, a categorical assertion of a merely 'reflexive' relation between what is primary and what is its 'efflux'. This loss of direction in the argument is, however, in practice less important than the apparent conceptual scheme which then distances the argument from real history, by the implicit postulation of two

states: 'at first directly interwoven' and then 'in conditions of the division of labour'. The contrast is rhetorically striking, as in many Romantic and Utopian (and as it happens also Christian) conceptions of a primal integration and a later fragmentation or fall. But so broad a contrast cannot in fact be substituted for the more complex and differentiated history of different kinds of integration and different kinds and degrees of division of labour, which are not the categorical but the practical and historical forms of the 'activities of real men'.

Marx would not have disagreed with this. In his studies of economic history he continually sought and exemplified the processes of specific development, within his central emphasis.

"This method of approach is not without presuppositions, but it begins with the real presuppositions and does not abandon them for a moment. Its premises are men, not in some imaginary condition of fulfillment or stability, but in their actual, empirically observable process of development under determinate conditions. As soon as this active life-process is delineated, history ceases to be a collection of dead facts as it is with the empiricists (themselves still abstract) or an illusory activity of illusory subjects, as with the idealists. Where speculation ends - in real life - real, positive science, the representation of the practical activity and the practical process of development of men begins."<sup>15</sup>

Yet, because of the directions he gave to his major work, in an understandable choice of emphasis on the crisis of poverty and exploitation, the recommended kind of inquiry is not carried out in relation to art and is only partly carried out in relation to intellectual systems and ideas. It would be absurd to blame Marx for this, in view of the massive achievement of the work to which he gave his primary attention, but the result has been that his occasional relatively general pronouncements in these other areas have frequently been taken in a sense quite contrary to his own emphasis on method: have been taken, that is to say, as general and then abstract presuppositions about the relations between the material process and art and ideas. The worst consequence of this is in fact the neglect of the real social and material history of the *production* of art and ideas: a form of production, which, like everything else, has to be studied as 'the practical activity and the practical process of development of men'. Yet, before we can do this, in anything like Marx's terms, we have to look again at his underlying position on the division of labour.

It is clear that, at different times, Marx meant rather different things by this crucial concept. His most influential use, in relation to culture, could hardly be more emphatically expressed:

"The division of labour only becomes a real division from the moment

when the distinction between material and mental labour appears. From this moment, consciousness can really imagine that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it is *really* conceiving something without conceiving something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of 'pure' theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc."<sup>16</sup>

It is a powerful emphasis, with important possibilities for analysis, but it is clear that its formulation involves two intellectual operations, which actually work against Marx's central emphasis. The first of these is the significant term 'moment': a received concept from schemes of universal history and in this kind of use essentially idealist. The effect of such a term is to flatten or altogether evade the highly variable relations between 'material' and 'mental' labour, in actual history, and to substitute an ideal and an historical contrast, of a simple kind. It is then not surprising that, within the language of the same mode of thought, the second operation follows, in which not actual people, in specific social relations, but 'consciousness' - that now ideal category - begins to 'imagine' and to 'conceive' and can even 'emancipate itself from the world'. Even when, as before, we have allowed for the polemical intention, in an argument against the proponents of 'pure' theory, the effect of this way of thinking, even when it has reversed the relative valuation of the categories, is to confirm their prepotency, and then in practice to hide the continuing determinate and thus variable social and material conditions of all 'mental labour', including that which is offered as the most 'pure'.

Indeed we do not have to go beyond Marx to make the point. In thinking about production in general, he was clear that historical evidence must prevail over categorical assumptions:

"The organization and division of labour varies according to the instruments of labour available. The hand mill implies a different division of labour from that of the steam mill. To begin with the division of labour in general, in order to arrive at a specific instrument of production - machinery - is therefore to fly in the face of history."<sup>17</sup>

But then this same point is highly relevant to the actual processes of 'mental labour'. Even if we retain, at this point, his categorical distinction between 'material' and 'mental' labour (overriding, as we shall see, the diverse social and historical conditions within which this distinction is variably practised and theorised), it soon becomes clear, from historical evidence that the productive forces of 'mental labour' have, in themselves, an inescapable material and thus social history. Thus there are obvious differences between 'mental labour' which is still fundamentally oral in its production and distribution, and 'mental labour'

which is produced and distributed through systems of writing and printing. The most obvious difference is that in predominantly oral conditions the actual process of 'mental labour' is at least in principle accessible to all normal members of society. The faculty of speaking and of understanding speech has been a normal function of the most general socialisation. The faculties of writing and reading, on the other hand, have to be specifically acquired, for the purposes of taking part, in whatever degree, in the social processes of 'mental labour'. It is then no surprise that one of the most common forms of the division between 'manual' and 'mental' labour is socially and materially specified in the capacity or incapacity to write and read. What in general argument may appear to be a categorical division has this precise social and material set of conditions. A history of writing and reading, not in the narrow technical sense but in its full social and material conditions, is then a necessary element of any 'real, positive science, the representation of the practical activity and the practical process of development of men'.

But then the division of labour, though fundamentally influenced by such developments in the forces of production, cannot be reduced to a history of technical means alone. It would, for example, be rash to claim that before the invention of writing there was no 'division between material and mental labour' in the important sense that Marx intends, which is at root a form of class division between those who have practically appropriated the general human faculties of consciousness, intention and control and those who have been made the objects of this appropriation, as the manual instruments - the 'hands' - of these other men's 'mental' decisions and intentions. The whole record of slavery in predominantly 'oral' conditions, to take no further case, argues against this. At the same time it is evident that the invention of a specific technical system, writing, provides obvious conditions in which an increasing part of the historical records, the laws and the ideas of a society, is embodied in a communicative system to which the majority of people have no or no independent access. That is a very practical form of a socially and materially inherent division of labour.

Yet again it would be rash to assert that the results of the long popular struggle for literacy - a struggle which still today is very far from complete - have abolished the underlying division between 'manual' and 'mental' labour. To be able to write and to read is a major advance in the possibility of sharing in the general culture of a literate society, but there are still typically determinate conditions in which the exercise of these faculties is differentially directed. Thus in late eighteenth-century England it was argued that the poor should be taught to read, but not to write. Reading would enable them to read the Bible, and to learn its morality, or later to read instructions and notices. Having anything to write on their own account was seen as a crazy or mischievous idea. Again, in

our own time, there is an enforced division of labour, even among literate people, in the organisation of modern newspapers, in which there is one class of men - editors, journalists, correspondents - who write, and another class of men whose proposed sole function is to *print*. Any attempt by the printers to have a say in what is written is denounced as interference with the 'freedom of the press', although it is then obvious that this freedom has been wholly formulated within the enforced division of labour. It is ironic that the possessors of capital, who can buy or hire whole newspapers - the material means of production and the services of journalists and printers alike - are able in practice to intervene and define the conditions of this supposed freedom, enforcing an even more fundamental form of the division of labour, between those who possess or can purchase these means of intellectual production and those who do or can not. It is not 'consciousness' which is in a position to emancipate itself, in the production of 'pure' news or a 'free' press; it is a precise class of men, within conditions which do not at all derive from the sphere of 'mental' labour alone but from the whole social and economic relations between capital and labour of any kind.

Further, that once critical form of an historically specific shift in the division of labour, in the long and varied change from oral or primarily oral to literate and authoritatively literate material and social conditions, is not categorically reversed when, as increasingly through the twentieth century, modern 'oral' forms, in radio and television, become as important as and in the end probably more important than print. One general condition is restored, at a higher level. The capacity to receive and to transmit, through speech, is again a function of normal general socialisation; it does not depend, as in the case of writing and reading, on particular forms of instruction, which may be differentially distributed or altogether withheld from actual majorities. In this sense the cultural shift is radical. More people can and do express their ideas directly, and more people, with measurable social and political effects, find themselves listening to *other men and women* rather than reading, at first or second hand, written opinions described and prescribed as authoritative.

Yet a fundamental division of labour still exists, at two levels. First, because the ownership and control of these powerful systems of transmitted speech are subject to the general conditions of political and economic organisation, and are in practice normally directed by state or capitalist institutions. Second, because, as a form of this, there is an attempted and typically successful distinction between those who have 'something to say', in their own right - leaders, personalities, celebrities, presenters, official performers - and what is then called 'the public' - 'the listening or viewing public' - who if they speak at all speak in that assigned capacity.

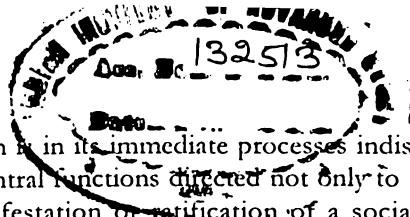
Marx would have understood the spectacle of the degeneration of that phrase of the democratic ideal - *vox populi*, the voice of the people - into the resigned or

cynical *vox pop* of professional broadcasters: the essentially random selection and collection of voices at a different level of substance and recognition from those who, within the division of labour, have 'something to say'. He would also have understood, very clearly, these negative versions of an undifferentiated public, a 'mass', which find their most memorable expression in the use of 'you' to describe everyone who is not a professional journalist or broadcaster, or the limited group they recognise as individuals. 'You Write', they write, above a selection of letters from some readers, whether 'you', reading it, have written or not. 'Your Reactions', they say, introducing similar selections, whether 'you', listening, have reacted or not. There was an old radical recognition of fundamental social divisions, based in the division of labour, as 'Them' and 'Us'. Within the altered conditions of modern communications systems, there is a profoundly unradical recognition of that division of labour which has persisted even after the generalisation of basic communicative skills and the development of new, relatively direct media: 'Us' (writing or speaking); 'You' (reading or listening). This is not a categorical 'moment'; it is a precise social and material form.

What then of the relation between the 'division of labour' and the attempted distinction between forms of mental labour which are aspects of more general productive processes and those forms which were seen, at least by the young Marx, as 'ends in themselves'?

The examples taken thus far belong mainly to an area, which is not easily distinguished by a simple contrast between 'general production' and what can be specialised, on the basis of 'ends in themselves', as 'high culture'. Most of them belong, in fact, to an area of quite material production, which is yet distinguishable from certain obvious kinds of 'material production' in Marx's most limited sense. We have already looked at the problem this limited sense raises, in its too easily taken implication of 'material labour' as (only) the production of the absolute material necessities of life. In all his practical analyses, Marx was quite exceptionally aware of the profound, prolonged and intricate interaction between these basic productive processes and the social order to which, in his view, they gave rise. His famous or notorious metaphor of 'base' and 'superstructure', to express this fundamental relationship, has the effect, it is true, of underemphasising or even hiding the forms of interaction which he characteristically recognised. If we take the metaphor literally we find that what we have, ironically, is a classic and memorable assertion of a categorical, as distinct from an historical, division of labour. The material activities all occur in the 'base': the mental activities all in the 'superstructure'. As a polemical point against the general assumption that all human history was directed by autonomous ideas the metaphor retains its relevance and force. But as a method, or as a set of tools for analysis, it leads us in wholly wrong directions.

What we have seen in the case of general communicative (cultural) institutions



is a form of activity which in its immediate processes indissolubly mental and material, and in its central functions directed not only to the production of ideas but to the manifestation or justification of a social order within which, necessarily, all the most basic material production is in practice carried on. It is possible, as a hypothetical 'moment', to define an initial situation in which human beings can do no more than provide for their absolute physical needs, and then to see all history as dependent from that material necessity. But it was Marx more than anyone else who showed 'man making himself', affecting and eventually transforming both human and natural conditions, by the processes of associated labour. Then in the fact of that association there is the outline of this or that social order, and as one of its central elements - in story, dance, marks of community and identity - a set of cultural processes. If we can begin from this real situation, in all its actual historical variety, we can avoid the pointless play of categorical priorities and begin to examine what is really in question: the process of *determination* within different but always and necessarily connected activities.

This analysis of real determinations is inevitably complex. We should not assume in advance that the basic structural relations between different kinds of activity are themselves ahistorical, yielding regular uniformities and laws, which can then be applied to any specific social and historical situation. Marx had already in effect recognised this when he described the 'moment' - which in his perspectives can only be a moment in human history - 'when the distinction between material and mental labour appears'. And it is again in practice unlikely that he would have held to the idea that this is a single moment, a categorical shift, rather than the diverse and complex historical process, illuminated but neither explained nor examined by the categorical distinction, in which the true social relations even between the extremes of 'manual without mental' and 'mental without manual' labour but more significantly between the very variable degrees of 'manual with mental' and 'mental with manual' can alone be discovered.

This argument bears heavily against the most widely known cultural proposition in Marx, in the formula of 'base and superstructure'. Yet of course it bears just as heavily against the dominant modern proposition that there are forms of 'mental labour' which can be assumed, categorically, to be 'ends in themselves': that proposition which, as we saw, Marx in his earliest writing picked up and repeated. It is then not a matter of trading adversary quotations within Marx's own work. The least useful form of the important argument which these alternative propositions introduce is also, unfortunately, the most common form, in which indiscriminate and absolute, non-historical positions are pitted each against the other. What Marx himself did, to make possible a more discriminating inquiry, was in this area relatively sketchy and unfinished. But we can look in more detail at what he actually did, first in relation to art and then in relation to ideas.

Two discussions of art stand out: that on Raphael and others in *The German Ideology*, and that on Greek art in the *General Introduction* (1857) to the *Critique of Political Economy*. First, on Raphael, where he is arguing against Stirner:

"(He) imagines that Raphael produced his pictures independently of the division of labour that existed in Rome at the time. If he were to compare Raphael with Leonardo da Vinci and Titian, he would know how greatly Raphael's works of art depended on the flourishing of Rome at that time, which occurred under Florentine influence, while the works of Titian, at a later period, depended on the totally different development of Venice. Raphael as much as any other artist was determined by the technical advances in art made before him, by the organisation of society and the division of labour in all the countries with which his locality had intercourse. Whether an individual like Raphael succeeds in developing his talent depends wholly on demand, which in turn depends on the division of labour and the conditions of human culture resulting from it."<sup>18</sup>

This, as far as it goes, is an identifiable 'sociological' position, readily translated into a particular kind of 'art history'. It would be very difficult to deny its most general propositions, which are now in effect commonplace. It is useful that Marx includes 'technical advances in art' as well as more general social and historical conditions, but this is not much more than a passing reference, to what within Marx's general perspective should be seen as a central fact: the material history of painting itself, of which the painters themselves were very much aware in its immediately accessible form as techniques of work (labour). More emphasis is given to general factors of social environment and demand, which can certainly be confirmed from this and similar histories. But there is then an evident gap, between the briefly mentioned technical dimension (in fact the 'manual labour' of painting) and a general environment. And in fact it is in that gap, in that area of actual intersections between a material process, general social conditions, and the unmentioned assumptions about the purposes and content of art within those conditions, that the decisive questions about the art itself are to be found. By including the specific social and historical conditions Marx has usefully broadened the scope of the inquiry, but he has not then made it.

In fact, in his argument against Stirner, he passes at once to a different though related case:

"In proclaiming the uniqueness of work in science and art, Stirner adopts a position far inferior to that of the bourgeoisie. At the present time it has already been found necessary to organise this 'unique' activity... In Paris, the great demand for vaudevilles and novels brought about the organisation of work for their production,



organisation which at any rate yields something better than its 'unique' competitors in Germany."<sup>19</sup>

This is a potentially important point, but it is hurriedly and even carelessly made. It is indeed a fact, against simple assertions of all works of art as 'ends in themselves', that a major part of modern cultural production is commercially organised, and that at least some work has from the beginning this commercial intention - the work of art as a saleable commodity - while much other work has a mixture of commercial and other intentions. Moreover this is an historically traceable development, from conditions of state and ecclesiastical patronage to the conditions of a developing capitalist market (I have described these historical conditions and phases in *Culture* [London: Fontana, 1981]).

But then, precisely because these conditions have a real history, with consequently variable relations between artists and their societies, the argument cannot be conducted, positively or negatively, around simple general propositions. Moreover, Marx's persuasive recognition of the extent to which modern cultural production has been 'organised by the market' remains relatively external. What does it mean to say 'the great demand for vaudevilles and novels'? Everything that Marx wrote elsewhere about 'demand', in the complexities of changing modes of production, must prevent us accepting any 'great demand' of this kind as some sort of primary cause. The conditions not only of demand but of production, and these within much more general social conditions, need to be specifically analysed before the argument can be rationally pursued, and the danger of course is that the merely polemical position can become, quite quickly, a reductive account of the making of art, against which, in its turn, a sublimated account, taking little or no notice of conditions which have unquestionably influenced and often determined actual production, is complacently reasserted. This is the more likely in the tone of Marx's remark about 'a position far inferior to that of the bourgeoisie', which gives bourgeois arrangements altogether too much credit and merely evades the persistent problem: that at least some art, made within determinate social conditions, is not reducible to their most general character but has qualities which attract such descriptions as 'uniqueness' or 'ends in themselves'.

In a later argument, Marx seems well aware of this:

"It is well known that certain periods of highest development of art stand in no direct connection with the general development of society, nor with the material basis and the skeleton structure of its organisation. Witness the example of the Greeks as compared with modern art or even Shakespeare. As concerns certain forms of art, e.g., the *epos*, it is even acknowledged that as the production of art as such appears they can never be produced in their epoch-making, classical aspect and accordingly, that in the domain of art certain of

its important forms are possible only at an undeveloped stage of art development. If that is true of the mutual relations of different modes of art within the domain of art itself, it is far less surprising that the same is true of the relations of art as a whole to the general development of society. The difficulty lies only in general formulation of these contradictions. No sooner are they made specific than they are clarified."<sup>20</sup>

This is some of Marx's most developed thinking about art, yet it is obviously still uncertain and unfinished. It has the great merit of recommending specific analysis, and of recognising the problem, which he had defined in an earlier note as 'the unequal relation between the development of material production and, e.g., artistic production'.<sup>21</sup> Yet it is limited by what are really preconceptions rather than ideas of 'progress' and 'development'.

Marx did not want to apply the idea of material progress to the history of art; his attachment to early Greek art was much too strong for that. All he can then fall back on, however, is the extraordinary proposition that 'in the domain of art certain of its important forms are possible only at an undeveloped stage of art development', which, insofar as it means anything, leads straight to an identification of art with naivety, and is then no more than a familiar kind of reactionary Romanticism. In fact he goes on to explain the continuing aesthetic appeal of Greek art in terms of the Greeks as 'normal children', its 'eternal charm' as inseparably connected with 'unripe social conditions'. He even generalises this as 'the historical childhood of humanity'.

It is difficult to believe that this is the Marx of the major work. His recognition of the problem is important. It belongs to the breadth of interest that we recognised at the beginning. But his offered solution is absurd. It is not only that Classical Athens was not, by any timescale, the 'historical childhood of humanity'; it is altogether too late for that. It is, more crucially, that the forms of Greek art and writing of which we have knowledge are unarguably mature, in their own terms. It is their long prehistory, only sketchily available, that might attract analysis of development, but even then it would be real development, in specific social and material processes, rather than the hazy idealism of an 'undeveloped stage of art development'.

There is indeed need to recognise what Marx called 'unequal relations' of development. But the underlying problem here is the two possible senses of 'unequalness' or, better, 'unevenness'. Thus it can be argued and indeed demonstrated that in particular social orders there is uneven development of various human faculties and practices. Such unevenness is wholly open to Marxist analysis, which can show how particular social orders and particular modes of production select certain faculties and practices for development within determinate general conditions, and by the same token neglect or even

repress certain others. Moreover this can also be seen as more than conscious selection, or neglect and repression. In some important cases the character of the basic material production processes makes possible the development and extension of certain kinds of art (steam-machinery, the chemical industry, electronics are obvious examples), and there is almost always some significant relation between material production in general and the material processes in art. In either case, the uneven development of human faculties and practices has a discoverable social and material history.

On the other hand 'unevenness' can be construed, as in fact in Marx's argument about the Greeks, in terms of a generalised world history, where the problem is the evident lack of correlation between increased material production and *qualitatively better* art. But it must then be asked why this is seen as a problem at all. It is only from a very crude and indiscriminated idea of progress that it could ever be assumed that there is a regular relation between increased production as an index of general human progress (obviously in some senses a reasonable idea but at times involving ambiguities and even absurdities in the historical judgment of social orders which have increased production through increasing exploitation) and at the same time deeply committed to an idea of the general development of all human faculties and resources. When he took this uncertainty, between what are at times incompatible ideas, into the question of art, he would do little more than restate or evade it, though the necessary way through the problem, in terms of *contradiction*, was elsewhere one of his major methods of analysis.

For it is a fact of historical variation that art in general, and then arts of different kinds, are differentially valued in different social orders and in their own internal phases. It is this historical specificity, rather than a generalising progress, which is the ground for any history or historical analysis of the arts. There is still the problem of quality, but here Marx simply reverts to the received idealist notion of absolute, indeed 'classical', quality. It is not necessary to deny the effectively permanent value, within traceable historical and cultural continuities, of certain works of art from many historical periods, to be able to argue that *judgement* also, in its real terms of accessibility, recognition, understanding of theme and form, comparison, is itself an historical process. This need not mean that all judgements are relative, though that many of them are, including some of the most confident, is easily proved from the record. But it does mean, in ways which Marx elsewhere would quickly have recognised, and indeed in some other areas discovered and taught, that the processes of reception and judgement, quite as much as the processes of original production, occur within definite social relations.

Moreover, in the case of art, where simple physical consumption is not in question, no work is in any full practical sense produced until it is also received. The social and material conditions of the original production are indeed stable:

the material object (painting, sculpture) or the material notations (music, writing) are there, if they survive, once for all. Yet until a further (and in practice variable) social and material process occurs, necessarily including its own conditions and expectations, the objects and the notations are not fully available for response. Often the varying conditions and expectations of response actually alter the object or the notation as it is *then* perceived and valued. Yet there are also some important continuities, which in Marxist terms do not relate to some unchanging pre-given human nature, nor to notions of the 'childhood' or 'maturity' of humanity, but to a range of human faculties, resources and potentials - some of the most important based in a relatively unchanged human biological constitution; others in persistent experience of love and parentage and death, qualified but always present in all social conditions; others again in the facts of human presence in a physical world - with which certain works connect, in active and powerful ways, often apparently beyond the limited fixed ideas of any particular society and time.

Thus the question of value, in Marxist terms, while often a matter of direct and immediate social analysis - as in practice Marx exemplified - can be also, in more complex cases, a combination, in varying proportions, of such direct and immediate analysis and a more extensive, more open recognition and analysis of forms of material production - *works* of art - which embody and activate elements of that range of human faculties, resources and potentials which is factually wider than the determinations of any particular social order and which, both as historical evidence and as revolutionary aspiration, is the practical expression of actual and possible human development. This ultimate point of reference, not ideal but practical in those forms of material production which we distinguish as major art, is of course very relevant to Marx, who drew from it, sometimes with explicit reference to art as its evidence, his ideas of the overcoming of human alienation (from its own possibly fully human conditions and resources) and his most general ideas of the necessity and object of social revolution.

To move from Marx on art to Marx on ideas is to enter a very different and much more authoritative dimension. It is here his major contribution to cultural theory was made.

"In order to study the connection between intellectual and material production it is above all essential to conceive the latter in its determined historical form and not as a general category. For example, there corresponds to the capitalist mode of production a type of intellectual production quite different from that, which corresponded to the medieval mode of production. Unless material production itself is understood in its specific historical form, it is impossible to grasp the characteristics of the intellectual production, which corresponds to it or the reciprocal action between the two."<sup>22</sup>

We have already looked at some of the fundamental difficulties in the *categorical* distinction between, and then separation of, 'intellectual' and 'material' production. Yet, while retaining the necessary emphases that were then made, we can look at this part of Marx's work as a way of understanding his critical concept of *determination*.

It is already, as this passage shows, a matter of historically specific determinations, rather than some categorical law of regular determination, of the kind indicated by crude application of the 'base-superstructure' metaphor. But then this recognition is relevant to some of his other arguments on this matter. Thus:

"The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the dominant *material* force in society is at the same time its dominant *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that in consequence the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are, in general, subject to it." <sup>23</sup>

This early formulation can be read as a categorical proposition, but it can more usefully be taken as an *historical* proposition, which can then be tested by specific evidence. As such it is in practice of great value. Marx's welcome emphasis, here, on 'the means of mental production', as distinct from other abstract uses of 'mental production' as if it were an unlocated 'consciousness', shows us where to look for certain fundamental conditions of intellectual production and distribution. And then we do find, again and again, that such conditions and controls are practically decisive, indeed determining. It is the point which Marx's enemies can never forgive him for making, and that yet, from repeated practical experience - down to the contemporary controls exercised by corporate capitalism, most notably in the press - has quite relentlessly to be made.

Yet it is necessary even here to recognise socially specific and differential forms of determination. The weakest case is that which Marx actually goes on, in this passage, to make:

"The dominant ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas, and thus of the relationships which make one class the ruling one; they are consequently the ideas of its dominance."<sup>24</sup>

The fact that this is often true, especially in systems of law and political constitution, but at times also more generally, should not hurry us into accepting the assertion that such ideas are 'nothing more than' the ideal expression of dominance.

For, first, the argument is too static. It is often the case, as even in law and political theory, to say nothing of natural philosophy and moral argument, that there are historical continuities and effects in certain bodies of thinking which make them more than locally determined by specific and temporary forms of dominance. None of them can ever be put *above* history, but the historical process, in this as in other respects, includes both *residual* and *emergent* forms of thought and belief, which can in practice enter into very complex relations with the more specifically and locally dominant. In any developed social order, we can expect to find not only interaction but also actual conflict between residual, dominant and emergent forms of thought, in general as well as in special areas. Moreover there is often conflict, related to this complexity, between different versions of the dominant, which is by no means always a ready translation of a singular material class interest.

This point connects, second, with the fact that, in class-dominated social orders, there are not only variable relations between different classes, with varied effects in intellectual work (of the kind Marx indeed later recognised in his observation that 'the existence of revolutionary class'<sup>25</sup>) but also complex relations between *fractions* of the dominant class, which in highly developed orders is more often a coalition or amalgam of particular material interests than a quite singular interest. This internal complexity, within dominance, has to be related to an internal division which Marx himself describes:

"Within [the ruling] class one part appears as the thinkers of the class (its active conceptualising ideologists, who make it their chief source of livelihood to develop and perfect the illusions of the class about itself), while the others have a more passive and receptive attitude to these ideas and illusions... This cleavage... may even develop into a certain hostility and opposition between the two parts, but in the event of a practical collision in which the class itself is endangered, it disappears of its own accord..."<sup>26</sup>

This is suggestive but too simple. The division of labour between ideologists and active members of the ruling class is already subject to the fact of fractional interests. But also, within such a division of labour, specialised intellectual institutions come to develop not only their own local material interests but more crucially their internal intellectual criteria and continuities. These lead often to evident asymmetries and incongruities with more general institutions of the class, and indeed to conflicts, including internal and external intellectual conflicts. Very complex relations then occur, in much more than 'two parts', and these kinds of 'hostility and opposition' do not, on the record, 'disappear of their own accord'. Such relations are much affected by the fact of variable distance, as Engels later noted, between different forms of thought and direct political and material interests. But the complexity is not reducible to the facts

of relative distance (as between, say, philosophy and law) alone; this can be seen, for example, in the serious internal divisions within modern capitalist *economic* thought.

Nevertheless, though needing these major qualifications as the means to any veridical analysis, Marx's central insistence on determining pressures, exercised by the material relations of a social order on both the practice and the nature of many if not all kinds of intellectual work, is to be welcomed as a revolutionary advance. Yet it is not only a matter of direct or indirect pressures. It is also, as the other crucial process of determination, a matter of practical and theoretical limits. Marx expressed this position in a remarkable analysis of mid-nineteenth-century France:

"What makes them representatives of the petty bourgeoisie (though 'according to their education and individual position they may be as far apart as heaven and earth') is the fact that in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not get beyond in life, that they are consequently driven, theoretically, to the same problems and solutions to which material interest and social position drive the latter practically. This is, in general, the relationship between the *political* and *literary representatives* of a class and the class they represent."<sup>27</sup>

This can be taken too simply, but it is the source of the important modern Marxist conception of *homology*, or formal correspondence, between certain kinds of art and thought and the social relations within which they are shaped. This conception can reveal determining relations at a quite different level from the bare proposition that 'ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships'; among other reasons is the fact that something more than reflection or representation is then often in question, and art and ideas can be seen as structurally formed, but then also actively formed, in their own terms, within a general social order and its complex internal relations.

Marx's other productive emphasis, which can in general be taken as decisive, is his argument that dominant ideas (and, we might add, dominant artistic *forms*) take on, in the period of their dominance, the appearance of universality: a dominant class employs

"an ideal formula, to give its ideas the form of universality and to represent them as the only rational and universally valid ones."<sup>28</sup>

The immense pressure of these notions of universal validity has been so major a factor in intellectual history, their deeply graved habits of mind so difficult to escape from, not only in intellectual work but in everyday practice and assumption (the ruling but in fact historically conditioned 'common sense' which Gramsci identified as the central element of *hegemony*, within and beyond direct

dominance) that it is in this great challenge by Marx that much of his most general intellectual importance is to be found.

To learn from Marx is not to learn formulae or even methods, and this is especially the case, as has been argued, in those parts of his work, on art and ideas, where he was not able to develop or to demonstrate his most interesting suggestions, or was actually still limited by the dominant ideas of his time. The two areas in which this lack of development has been most limiting are, first, the history of the social and material means and conditions of cultural production, which needs to be established in its own terms as a necessary part of any historical materialism; and, second, the nature of language, which Marx recognised, briefly, as material, and defined as 'practical consciousness', but which for just these reasons is a more central and fundamental element of the whole social process than was recognised in the later propositions of 'manual' and 'mental', 'base' and 'superstructure', 'reality' and 'consciousness'. It is only from the most active senses of the material production of culture and of language as a social and material process that it is possible to develop the kind of cultural theory which can now be seen as necessary, and even central, in Marx's most general theory of human production and development. That he did not develop such a cultural theory, and indeed that from some more limited formulations misleading forms of 'Marxist' cultural theory were developed and propagated, in ways that actually blocked the inquiry, must now be acknowledged. Yet it remains true that the thrust of his general work is still, apart from social life itself, the most active inspiration for the making of such a cultural theory, even where we have not only to interpret but to change it.

1983

#### End Notes :

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  27. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1962), vol. 1, p. 275.
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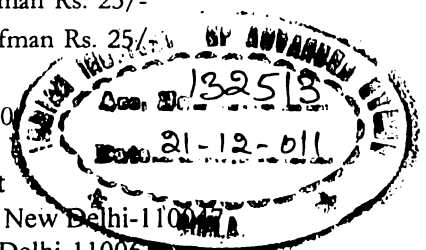
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Raymond Williams (1921-1988) was a highly influential Welsh academic, novelist and critic. A committed socialist, he was greatly interested in the relationships between language, literature and society. Author of several books on these and other issues, Williams is a founder of an important stream of Cultural Studies.



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