CHAPTER 6

Base and Superstructure

What are the particular relations between the ‘economic structure of society’ and its political and juridical ‘superstructure’, between ‘social existence’ and ‘social consciousness’? In what definite forms is the material connection between the various fields of social life realised? What is their significance for a materialist investigation of the different spheres of a given economic order of society?

We know already that all these apparently separated and widely different spheres together form a universe of society in which, just as in a living organism, every part is connected with every other part. This ‘just as’, by the way, is to be read to mean ‘just as much and just as little’. In either case, the author does not want to be seen as adhering to that mystic and unscientific theory of ‘whole-ism’ according to which this connection is previously given and only needs to be discovered in detail by the endeavours of the investigator. He would rather, with old Kant, regard the idea of whole-ism as a working principle which guides our strictly empirical research and may or may not hold good even in a given instance. The position today is different from that which prevailed at the time when Marx had first to establish the materialist principle against a host of deep-rooted idealist prejudices. Marx himself nowhere discussed the question in a general way.¹ But it follows from his criticism of the equally metaphysical bourgeois concept of evolution,² from the principles of specification and change underlying his whole work and, even more, from the methods he actually applied in the investigation of the economic sphere in Capital, that he would have ruled out the words ‘all’ and ‘every’ just as well from that broader universe of a strictly empirical and critical research which he alternately called alternately ‘history’, ‘society’ or the realm of ‘practical action’. He would have replaced those vague and meaningless generalities by a specific description of a given state of society, its historical genesis and its inherent developmental tendencies from the practical viewpoint of the working class.

Marx had not passed in vain through the school of Hegel which had been the great school of philosophical thought for the whole generation of the revolutionaries of the 1830s and 1840s. He brought to his materialist research a

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¹ For a discussion of Marx’s attitude towards the ‘whole-ism’ of Hegel, see Cooper 1925, pp. 178 et seq., and Hook 1936, pp. 62 et seq.
² See above, pp. 51 et seq.
method of inquiry ranging from the most exact theoretical to the most direct practical knowledge. Unfortunately, that broadness and subtlety of Marx’s thought has been less and less understood by its later exponents and opponents. Thus one group fell into the error that, according to the materialist theory, full material reality pertained only to economic phenomena, while all other social phenomena – the state, law and forms of consciousness possessed a lesser and lesser degree of ‘reality’ and ultimately were lost in pure ‘ideology’.3 According to this first misconception, which we will henceforth call the ‘economistic’ tendency, it is only the economic struggle of the workers and the forms of social struggle springing directly from it which are recognised as directly proletarian and revolutionary action, whereas all other forms of struggle, and more especially ‘political action’, are regarded as an undesirable deviation from the real revolutionary aims. This economic tendency was represented during Marx’s lifetime, within the Working Men’s International Association, by the adherents of Proudhon, Bakunin and other ‘anti-authoritarian’, ‘anti-political’, and ‘anti-party’ groups of the day. The violent battle waged by Marx and his followers against that heterodoxy led to the formal expulsion of the dissident groups from the ‘International’ and, finally, to the dissolution of the whole organisation. A direct descendant of this earliest form of an economistic and anti-political tendency is that second current of socialist thought which was represented by revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism, and is actually responsible for that second great rallying of proletarian forces after the Russian Revolution of October 1917, which in the last seven years formed the real driving force of the revolutionary movement in Spain.4 The same revolutionary economistic tendency was represented, in a weaker form, within the Marxist movement itself.

We do not mean here that pseudo-economistic school of the German and other European Social Democratic parties and trade unions which, under the pretext of an ‘economistic’ principle, actually contested all forms of the workers’ movement going beyond the mere ‘economic’ wage-struggle within the framework of bourgeois production and of the bourgeois state. On the basis of that pseudo-economistic principle, in the period before World War I they opposed, among other political activities of the workers, the Social Democratic campaign for the abolition of the property-qualification for the franchise in Prussia, the militant Liebknecht campaign against militarism, and the so-called ‘révolution Dreyfusienne’ in France. They did so not out of any particular dislike of the very moderate political aims of those campaigns, but on the

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3 For a more detailed discussion, see Korsch 1930.
4 See Korsch 1931c.