



The Conjuncture

A Concept Necessary to the Theory of Communisation

There are no miracles in nature or history, but every abrupt turn in history, and this applies to every revolution, presents such a wealth of content, unfolds such unexpected and specific combinations of forms of struggle and alignment of forces of the contestants, that to the lay mind there is much that must appear miraculous. (Lenin, ‘The First Stage of the First Revolution’)¹

... That the revolution succeeded so quickly and—seemingly, at the first superficial glance—so radically, is only due to the fact that, as a result of an extremely unique historical situation, *absolutely dissimilar currents*, *absolutely heterogeneous* class interests, *absolutely contrary* political and social strivings have *merged*, and in a strikingly ‘harmonious’ manner. (*Ibid.*)

According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Other than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure—political forms of the class struggle and its

¹ Lenin, V. I., ‘Letters from Afar, First Letter, “The First Stage of the First Revolution”’, in *Lenin Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), pp. 297–308 <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/lf afar/first.htm#v23pp64h-297>.

results, to wit: constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas—also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*. (Engels, *Letter to Joseph Bloch*)²

A few citations and a little provocation in their signatures. But the chief provocation is theoretical in nature and defines the object of this text, which is to rework the concept of contradiction.

Genesis of a Concept

Everything was simple: capital was the moving contradiction and this contradiction was the essence of everything. It had a simple and homogeneous form. It included everything, explained everything, but... like an avalanche, it sweeps up everything in its path.³ The rest were appearances [*phénomènes*] and accidents, contingencies. Besides the economy, all other instances of the capitalist mode of production played minor roles, doing walk-on parts. The segmentation of the proletariat, the multiplicity of contradictions in which these segments were engaged—the contradiction between women and men, or again the other classes pulled into the struggle, all with their own objectives—were nothing but shadows cast on the wall of the cave by the substantial reality of class unity and of the becoming of capital, a reality and a unity always already real, always already unified. To posit this contradiction was, *ipso facto*, to grasp the process of its abolition and the production of its overcoming.

² 'Engels to J. Bloch In Königsberg, London, September 21, 1890', in *Historical Materialism (Marx, Engels, Lenin)* (Progress Publishers, 1972), pp. 294–296 http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_09_21.htm.

³ 'Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth.' Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 706.

Until the crisis of the end of the 1960s and the restructuring which ensued from it, capital as the moving contradiction was indeed the content of the contradiction between the proletariat and capital. The production and confirmation, within this moving contradiction, of a working-class identity organised the cycle of struggles as a competition between two hegemonies, two managements, two modes of control of reproduction. It was also the content of the gender contradiction through women's struggle caught in the paradoxical situation of affirming feminine identity and simultaneously demanding independence and equality with men (on the basis of recognition of this identity).⁴

The present cycle of struggles had a double originality. Firstly, with respect to class struggle, the contradiction between the proletariat and capital was renewed, and this renewal itself—that is, the identity between the constitution and existence of the proletariat as class and its contradiction with capital—conferred upon it as its essential content. In its contradiction with capital, which defines it as a class, the proletariat is in contradiction to its own existence as a class. Secondly, with respect to the contradiction between women and men, their essential content and basic problem became the natural existence of the feminine body, of sex, and of sexuality. Demands for women's rights, independence, and equality, inextricable from the question of the body, produced and encountered their own limits in the fact of being woman. Not only are labour and population as productive force a problem for capital, but, in this phase of the capitalist mode of production characterised by the failure of programmatism, both have lost anything that could have been made into the content of a political demand or of an anti-capitalist self-affirmation. When work and the population become a problem in themselves, 'nature' is brought into question and will not remain natural for long. 'Being woman' becomes perplexing. Gender puts itself before sex.

Programmatism, as a historically specific theory and practice of the struggle of classes, was the overcoming of capital as the moving

⁴ To demand equality and the end of differences in the name of, and through the action of, a group which is defined as a particular one. Joan W. Scott, *Only paradoxes to offer* (Harvard University Press, 1996).

contradiction through the *liberation* of work, the *affirmation* of the proletariat and the *emancipation* of women as mothers by nature and free workers. The resolution of the contradiction between women and men was evacuated towards an indefinite post-revolutionary future, through the configuration of the contradiction between classes, but equally through the configuration of the contradiction between women and men, since work remained, more than ever, the primary productive force.

Thus, the theory of communist revolution could for a long time be satisfied with the *one and only* contradiction between the proletariat and capital. Because this contradiction could be resolved by the victory of one term over the other, it was enough just to grasp it and state it in its *simple* and *homogenous form*, leaving aside the multiple, diverse, and immediate forms of its existence, by which it *distributes itself* in the multiple existences of the relation of exploitation (though it *only* exists in this distribution), and the multiple levels of forms of appearance in diverse instances of the mode of production, as accidental circumstances and mere appearances. The simple enunciation of this contradiction was adequate to account for the dynamic of the capitalist mode of production and the movement of its abolition. We did not need anything else.

The programmatist theorists of the conjuncture situated their reflections in the frame of this reality.

‘Such, and only such, is the view that can be taken by a politician who does not fear the truth, who soberly weighs the balance of social forces in the revolution, who appraises every “current situation” not only from the standpoint of all its present, current peculiarities, but also from the standpoint of the more fundamental motivations ...’, Lenin wrote in the *Letters from Afar*. We now have to write this sentence backwards: ‘not only from the standpoint of the more fundamental motivations, but also and above all taking all its present, current peculiarities into account.’ The question of the conjuncture existed before but it was just the husk and bursting envelope of the essential contradiction, revealing itself. The situation was separated into an invariant, substantial character, and particular historical circumstances, into the essential and the phenomenal, into

potentiality and actuality.⁵ But nothing exists otherwise than in actuality and that which exists in actuality is the whole of the concrete or the real.

So there was the course of capital as the moving contradiction. We know Marx's definition, from the *Grundrisse*... it is insufficient.

As the moving contradiction, capital is the dynamic unity that the contradictions of classes and genders construct. The contradiction between women and men is itself other than the contradiction between the proletariat and capital. No surplus labour without labour, no labour without population as primary productive force.⁶ Wherever there is exploitation, there is the construction of the categories woman and man and the *naturalisation* that is inherent to what is constructed; there, also, the

⁵ Within Being, Aristotle distinguished between the 'potentiality' that is its essential principle and the 'actuality' that is the present manifestation of this principle (between the two, 'form' intervenes.) Most contemporary theories of the capitalist mode of production and of class struggle are Aristotelian, that is, idealist. For such theories, the concept, that is, a *concrete in thought*, is for them a concrete part of the real, the existent, which can be separated into this nuclear conceptual matter (an oxymoron) and the mineral crust of circumstance. As in all idealisms, the process of thought and the concrete are assimilated and even confused.

⁶ To start from (biological) reproduction and the specific place of women within this reproduction is to presuppose as a given what is the result of the social process. The point of departure is what makes this specific place a construction and a social differentiation, that is to say, the modes of production until today. Up until and including capital, where this becomes contradictory, the principal source of surplus labour is of course labour, which means the increase of population. The increase of population as a principal productive force is no more of a natural relation than any other relation of production. But to possess a uterus does not mean to 'make children'; to move from one to the other requires a social apparatus of appropriation, of the *mise-en-scène* of 'making children', an apparatus through which women exist. To possess a uterus is an anatomical *characteristic* and not already a *distinction*, but 'to make children' is a social distinction which transforms the anatomical *characteristic* into a *natural distinction*. It is typical of this social construction, of this apparatus of constraint, to constantly send back what is socially constructed, i.e. women, to biology. The necessary appropriation of surplus labour, a purely social phenomenon (surplus labour does not originate in a supposed over-productivity of labour) creates genders and the social relevance of their distinction in a way which is sexual and *naturalised*.

appropriation of all women by all men. The simultaneous and interdependent construction of the contradictions of genders and classes introduces the fissures of each category into the other. Inextricable, experience is always impure. But it is not enough to say that no experience and no subject is pure, as a mere observation; this 'impurity' must be felt out and constructed in its intimacy.

Men and women are born of surplus labour. Of the same surplus labour they are born in their distinction and their contradiction. The existence of surplus labour is the existence of two contradictions. Each contradiction has its condition in the other, but more still, that which makes it a contradiction, that is, a process that puts into question its own terms in their relation. Four elements, two contradictions, one dynamic: that of capital as the moving contradiction.

This correlated existence of two contradictions is no mere encounter or sum, but exists for each contradiction in its proper terms, in its 'language'.

The conflict between the proletariat and capital becomes a contradiction in the existence of labour as productive force (the contradiction between men and women which, in the terms of the relation, is the transformation of this conflictual relation into a contradiction): labour as the only measure and source of wealth transforms class struggle into a dynamic of the abolition of classes, which is capital as the moving contradiction.

The conflict between men and women becomes a contradiction in the existence of surplus labour and in its relation to necessary labour (the contradiction between classes which, in the terms of the relation, is the transformation of this conflictual relation into a contradiction): surplus labour and its relation to necessary labour transform the conflict between men and women into the dynamic of the abolition of being a woman and of being a man as conditions inherent to individuality. This also is capital as the moving contradiction. In other words, the population as primary productive force (the gender distinction) is abolished as a necessity by the contradiction between surplus labour and necessary labour. The revolution is not 'contingent on the abolition of gender', because

it is not by chance if these contradictions arrive together, entangled, in all revolutionary moments, if they confirm one another, or, more often, confront one another.

This redefinition of capital as the moving contradiction *indicated* the response to a question whose sole fault was to never have been posed. As soon as one considers capital, the moving contradiction, as the construction of two contradictions that, though correlated, remain distinct, it is possible to designate a revolutionary situation or crisis as a *conjuncture*. In a kind of misunderstanding, by responding to the question of capital as the moving contradiction, we indicated the presence of another question in our answer: that of the nature of its overcoming and not only the nature of its course.

Thus, the question is to be reformulated adequately:

(1) In part, we know that capital as the moving contradiction is a 'tension towards the abolition of the rule' but this tension alone does not explain the possibility or the necessity of the overcoming, nor what this overcoming is.⁷

⁷ By way of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, exploitation is *a process constantly in contradiction with its own reproduction*: the movement of exploitation is a contradiction for the social relations of production of which it is the content and the movement. Valorisation, the contradiction between the proletariat and capital, is the mode in which labour exists socially. Defined by exploitation, the proletariat is in contradiction with the necessary social existence of labour as capital, that is, value autonomised which can only remain by valorising itself: *the fall of the rate of profit is the contradiction between classes*. The proletariat is constantly in contradiction with its own definition as a class: the necessity of its reproduction confronts it as *constantly necessary and always in excess*: that is what the tendency of the rate of profit to fall means, the contradiction between surplus labour and necessary labour (which becomes the contradiction of necessary labour itself). Exploitation is this peculiar game, always won by the same player (because it is subsumption), but at the same time, and for the same reason, *it is a game in contradiction with its own rules, and a tension towards the abolition of these rules*. The object as totality, the capitalist mode of production, is *in contradiction with itself in the contradiction of its elements* because for these elements each contradiction with the other is a contradiction with itself, insofar as the other is its other. In the contradiction that exploitation is, its asymmetry alone gives the overcoming. *When we say that exploitation is a contradiction for itself we define the*

(2) In part, we know that the step that class struggle and the women's struggle must take (with respect to class belonging and the distinction of the genders as an external constraint) is precisely the content of what makes up the overcoming, but this content does not tell us how the 'tension' becomes an effective, efficient reality within this content.

(3) Finally, we know that if we are able to speak of revolution as communism in the present tense, it is because the present class struggle contains, within itself, the production of class belonging as an external constraint: it contains rifts:⁸ 'Currently, the revolution is predicated on the supersession of a constitutive contradiction of the class struggle: for the proletariat, being a class is the obstacle that its struggle as a class must get beyond / abolish' ('The Present Moment', *Sic* no. 1). The present cycle of struggles had a double originality. Firstly, with respect to class struggle, the renewal of the contradiction between the proletariat and capital—that is, the identity between the constitution and existence of the proletariat as class and its contradiction with capital—was conferred upon it as its essential content. In its contradiction with capital, which defines it as a class, the proletariat is in contradiction to its own existence as a class. Secondly, with respect to the contradiction between women and men, their essential content and basic problem became the natural existence of the feminine body, of sex, and of sexuality. Demands for women's rights, independence, and equality, inextricable from the question of the body, produced and encountered their own limits in the fact of being woman. Not only are labour and population as productive force a problem for capital, but, in this phase of the capitalist mode of production characterised by the failure of programmatism, both have lost anything that could have been made into the content of a political demand or of a self-affirmation against capital. When work and the population

situation and the revolutionary activity of the proletariat.

⁸ To act as a class means, today, to lack any horizon beyond capital and the categories of its reproduction, and, for the same reason, to be in contradiction with the reproduction of one's own class, to question this reproduction. We call the situations and practices that experience this duality 'rifts'.

as primary productive force become a problem in themselves, nature is brought into question and will not remain natural for long. Being woman becomes perplexing. Gender puts itself before sex.

After the first two propositions, the concept of conjuncture follows immediately from this third.

Not only is revolution not the result of an overgrowth of the power of the class, the victory and affirmation of its place in the capitalist mode of production, but, moreover, the content of this qualitative leap is to turn against that which produces it. This turn against is the overthrow of the hierarchy of the instances of the mode of production that is the mechanic of its self-presupposition. The causalities and *normal* order of these instances (economy, gender relations, justice, politics, ideology...), which concur in its reproduction under normal conditions, is undermined.

The theory of revolution as communisation is not a prediction, but it is the present class belonging as the limit of struggling as a class, and the present contradiction between men and women, which puts their very definition into question. Therefore, it renders a certain theoretical paradigm obsolete: that of the simple and homogenous contradiction which resolves itself in the victory of one of its terms.

Under the shock of the redefinition of capital as the moving contradiction, these three responses produce a new question. How can the contradictory structure of the capitalist mode of production, this 'tension towards the abolition of the rule', transform itself into a revolutionary situation? Obviously the question is not to know when and where such a thing will occur: it is to know the nature of this transformation; not what will produce it—this has already been defined as 'the tension towards the abolition of its own rule', that is, capital's game as the moving contradiction—but the *nature of what will be produced*.

Conjuncture and the Unity of the Dynamic of Capital as Contradiction in Process

The nature of what is produced is a *conjuncture*, a *present moment*. That is, this situation *that characterises periods of crisis*, in which the movement of capital as the moving contradiction is no longer a single contradiction (between classes), nor even the simple, homogenous unity of two contradictions (between classes, between genders), but the moment where capital as the moving contradiction no longer imposes itself as the meaning, always already present, of every one of its forms of appearance.⁹

The Contradiction of capital as the moving contradiction, a dynamic unity of the contradictions of classes and of genders is *one* and *essential*, but already in its definition, its construction indicates that, in its *historical efficacy*, it can only exist in its *forms of manifestation*. None of its forms, political, juridical, diplomatic relations, ideological, etc., none of the forms of relations between the functional instances of capital (industrial, financial, commercial), none of the particular forms of its effect on each part of the proletariat and on the assignation of gender, by which this contradiction refracts itself on every level of the mode of production—refractions that are the very condition of its existence—none of these forms are pure phenomena without which *The Contradiction* could exist just as well. The immediately existent conditions are its conditions of existence. It does not produce its own overcoming, its negation, the ‘negation of the negation’ of excessive renown, as ‘ineluctable as the laws of nature’ (and of dialectics), as if it *ought to be* simply because the *The Contradiction* is posed. The dynamic of the contradictions of classes and of genders becomes a revolutionary situation in all of the forms in which it actually exists and in their combination at a given moment, in a *conjuncture*. Otherwise, it is only a concept.

⁹ It is important to note that capital as a contradiction in process is the basis of any capacity of capital to be a counter-revolution. Indeed, it is on this ground that the capitalist mode of production, as a contradiction to value in its own perpetuation, is the adequate answer to a revolutionary practice.

All of the forms of existence of this moving contradiction should be grasped as its own conditions of existence, in which alone it exists. It is nothing other than the totality of its attributes. Its essence is its own existence.

At stake now is our understanding not only of the contradiction between the proletariat and capital, but also of capital in its *historical efficacy* as a contradiction in process. Not only do ‘classical’ formalisations of capital as the moving contradiction limit themselves to the theory of class struggle, but they propose to dissolve all the forms of appearance in an essential inner unity. In fact, these formalisations are unable to comprehend these forms as *forms of appearance* of this inner essence (as if one could speak of capital without competition, of value without market price). ‘The advantage of my dialectic is that I say everything little by little—and when [my critics, author’s note] think I’m at the end, and hasten to refute me, they do nothing more than display their foolishness’ (Marx to Engels, June 27th, 1867).¹⁰

The fundamental contradictory process is active in all contradictions within the forms of appearance, and it would be absurd and *idealist* to claim that these contradictions and their fusion in a conjuncture which is a *unity of rupture* are just its *pure phenomenon*. All these contradictions merge into a unity. In this fusion—in the revolutionary rupture—they constitute this unity *on the basis of what is specific to each of them*, on the basis of their own efficacy. In constituting this unity, they reconstitute and accomplish the fundamental unity that animates them, but in this process they also indicate the nature of this contradiction, which is inseparable from society as a whole, inseparable from the formal conditions of its existence. This unity is internally affected by these conditions

¹⁰ Translator’s footnote: This quotation is taken from Althusser’s citation of this letter in his *Reading Capital*. But, in fact, the actual quote is a bit different, and goes like this: ‘Now if I wished to refute all such objections in advance, I should spoil the whole dialectical method of exposition. On the contrary, the good thing about this method is that it is constantly setting traps for those fellows which will provoke them into an untimely display of their idiocy.’ ‘Marx To Engels In Manchester, London, 27 June 1867’, in *Collected Works of Marx and Engels* (New York: International Publishers, 1988), p. 389.

which are its conditions of existence, that is, more immediately, the *existent conditions*. That this unity is internally affected always implies that it is a hierarchised structure (and not just a collection across which a single principle would diffuse itself, homogenously and always the same—nature in Egypt, politics in Greece, law in Rome, religion in the Middle Ages, economy in modern and contemporary times, etc.) with a determinant, sometimes also dominant instance,¹¹ dominant instances which are designated by the latter, in hierarchical permutations, etc. The *unity* of the contradiction exists only in this hierarchy, in the dominant and/or determinant character of one or another level of the mode of production, in the designation of the other dominant instances.

It is impossible to reduce this complexity and multiplicity to the simple and unitary, as if to an origin, or as if from appearance to truth (here we are at the antipode of the Hegelian model of development: there is no original, simple unity). The conjuncture always has a dominant instance by which it finds unity in its very complexity and multiplicity. In the course of class struggle, according to the momentary results which need to be overcome, according to the shifting aspects of power relations, and according to the ‘gains’ through which communisation ossifies, this dominant instance changes. The contradictions reposition themselves within the totality. Thus, to break up the existing order, what might momentarily be the nodal point must be attacked. But though the dominant instances are in constant permutation (political, economic, ideological, polarisation of the contradictions on some specific struggle or some specific part of the proletariat), the conjuncture is by no means a mere pluralism of determinations, indifferent to one another, stacked together.

This mutual conditioning of the existence of contradictions is not purely circular; it does not efface the totality as a structure with a determinant, crumpling into a facile, additive eclecticism or an *undifferentiated* inter-construction. This conditioning is, within the very reality of the conditions of existence of each contradiction, the manifestation of this structure with a determinant (that is the main difference between our

¹¹ It all depends on the modalities of extraction of surplus labour in each mode of production: see Marx, *Manuscripts 1861–1863*.

theory and that of the Hegelian totality) which makes up the unity of the whole. Thus it is theoretically possible to speak of 'conditions' without falling into the empiricism or irrationality of the 'it's so' and of 'chance'. Conditions are the real (concrete, actual) existence of the contradictions that constitute the whole because their role is assigned by the contradiction in its essential sense. In this role, these conditions are not mere appearances beside the contradiction in its essential sense, as if the contradiction could just as well exist without them, because they are the very conditions of its existence. When we speak of the conditions of existence, we speak of the *existent conditions*.

If the forms of appearance and essence do not coincide, it is because *it belongs to the nature of the structure of the whole to be its effects* (the laws of capital must be competition between capitals, value must be price, surplus-value must be profit, the gender distinction must be nature, etc.). The relation between the appearances and the concept is not limited to a difference between diversity and generality or abstraction, but is also one between mystification and comprehension. The concept, says Marx in his 1857 *Introduction (Grundrisse)*, is elaborated 'starting from the immediate point of view and from the representation', but 'the concrete totality as a thought totality, as a mental representation of the concrete, is in fact a product of thought, of conception'. Essence does not correspond immediately to its appearance, a disordered opposition of terms between which the relations appear contingent. Nonetheless, essence is in this disorder, and nowhere else.

There is a surface of capitalist society, but it is a surface without depth. The essence is in this surface alone, even though it does not correspond to it, because the effects of the structure of the whole (the mode of production) can only be the existence of the structure if they invert it through their effects. Here we encounter *the reality of ideology*; it does not occult the structure: it is a necessary development of it.

Essence is neither a real thing (really existing and particularised), nor a simple word. It is a constitutive relation. Surplus value is not an idea or an abstraction under which specific differences can be arranged, and thus the reality, which resides in these specific objects (rent, profit, interest).

Nor is it a universal abstracted from the primary reality of the specific forms. Essence is not what exists ideally in each specific form or what allows the external classification of these specific forms—in that case, ideology would be nothing more than a deformed reflection of this essence. The relations are essential (including the objective and effective illusion); active relations that the specific forms establish between themselves, which define what they have in common: the essence. Essence does not replace the various and finite beings by absorbing them into some kind of exterior unity, or by negating them in favour of their ‘inner truth’.

Conjuncture: A Mechanics of the Crisis of the Self- Presupposition of Capital

Conjuncture, then, is not an encounter between the two contradictions we have presented. There is no encounter; they are always already joint. Conjuncture is, instead, the multiplicity of the forms of appearance of this unity on every level of the mode of production, and, more precisely, the crystallisation of multiple contradictions in a single instance of the mode of production, which the multiple contradictions designate (momentarily) as dominant.¹² In this crystallisation, the conjuncture is also a *unity of rupture*.

Conjuncture is simultaneously *encounter* and *undoing*. It is the *undoing* of the social totality that, until then, united all the instances of a social formation (political, economic, social, cultural, ideological); it is the undoing of the reproduction of the contradictions that form the unity of this totality. Hence the aleatory aspect, the presence of encounters, the quality of an *event*, in a conjuncture: *a disentangling which produces and recognises itself in the accidental aspect of specific practices*. To such a moment belongs the power to make of ‘what is’ more than what it

¹² ‘This much, however, is clear, that the middle ages could not live on Catholicism, nor the ancient world on politics. On the contrary, it is the mode in which they gained a livelihood that explains why here politics, and there Catholicism, played *the chief part* [our emphasis].’ *Capital Vol I* (Penguin, 1976), p. 176 (Chapter 1, footnote 35).

contains, of *creating* outside of the mechanistic sequences of the causality or the teleology of finalism.

A conjuncture is also an *encounter* between contradictions that each had their own course and their own temporality, between which the only relations were interactions: workers' struggles, student movements, women's movements, political conflicts within the state, conflicts within the capitalist class, the global trajectory of capital, reproduction of this trajectory in a single nation, ideologies in which individuals carry out their struggles. The conjuncture is the moment of the multiple crash of these contradictions, but this multiple crash *sets and acquires its form* according to a dominant determination designated by the crisis which unfolds in the relations of production, in the modalities of exploitation. The conjuncture is a crisis of the self-reproductive determination of the relations of production that defines itself by an established and fixed hierarchisation of the instances of the mode of production.

A theory of conjuncture is a theory of revolution, which takes seriously the fact that 'the solitary hour of "determination in the final instance"—the economy—never sounds' (Althusser, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', *For Marx*).¹³ All the instances that compose a mode of production do not follow the same rhythm; these instances occupy an area of the global structure of the mode of production, which ensures their status and efficacy through the specific place assigned to one of these instances (neither monadic, nor a significant totality). It happens to be the case that in the capitalist mode of production, the economy is both the determinant and dominant instance, which was not the case in other modes.¹⁴ A conjuncture is a crisis in this assignation, and can therefore be a *variation of the dominant instance* (political, ideological, diplomatic relations) within the global structure of the mode of production, on the basis of the determination by the relations of production.¹⁵

¹³ Translator's footnote: The actual quote from Althusser is slightly different, and reads like this: 'From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes.' Trans. Ben Brewster (Vintage, 2005), p. 113.

¹⁴ See the Marx quote in footnote no 9.

¹⁵ For example the Paris Commune of 1871 or the seizure of the Tuileries [August 10th, 1792, TN].

In the crisis of reproduction, this displacement of the *dominants* and *determinants* across instances is the *how*, the mechanism, of the tension towards the abolition of the rule, through which the actual questioning of class belonging and gender assignation take place. Thus, capital as the moving contradiction is no longer the simple and homogenous automatism which always resolves itself into itself. When unity is undone (from the relations of production which are its determination), the assignation of all the instances of the mode of production enters into a crisis. The dominant instance shifts, from then on, according to a kind of game in which nothing is fixed: the *bomb* is passed from hand to hand. A conjuncture is the effectivity of the game which abolishes its own rule.

The conjuncture is a moment of crisis that upsets the hierarchy of instances—the hierarchy which fixed for each instance its essence and role, and defined the unequivocal meaning of their relations. Now roles are exchanged ‘according to circumstances’. The ‘determinant contradiction in the last instance’ can not be identified with the *role* of the dominant contradiction. One or another ‘aspect’ (forces of production, economy, practice...) cannot eternally be assimilated to the main *role*, and another ‘aspect’ (relations of production, politics, ideology, theory) to the secondary *role*. The determination in the last instance by the economy exercises itself, in real history, in the permutations of the primary role *along with* economics, politics, ideology (it would be necessary to demonstrate that this is already contained in the definition of the economy itself within the capitalist mode of production).¹⁶

This rigidity of the hierarchy among the instances of the capitalist mode of production constructs a linear time, a causal connection which progressively creates a link between the events in a purely quantitative

¹⁶ Criticising capitalist social relations as economy takes their autonomisation as economy at face value. A certain social relation, capital, presents itself as an object, and this object presents itself as the presupposition of the reproduction of the social relation. The critique of the concept of economy, which in this concept includes its conditions of existence, does not manage to pose the overcoming of the economy as an opposition to the economy, because the reality of economy (its *raison d'être*) is exterior to it. The economy is an attribute of the relation of exploitation.

temporality: it is the given, what simply is. But the time of the self-presupposition of capital also carries a crisis in itself, a moment of rupture in homogeneous time, the collapse of the hierarchy of instances and of economic determination, discontinuity of the historical process—a crisis which this temporality of the self-presupposition of capital holds in itself, a disruption in the hierarchised instances of the economic determinations, a discontinuity in the historical process: a conjuncture. The conjuncture is an exit from the repetitive—the narrow door, quickly closed, by which another world can arrive. The conjuncture is the conscious practice that it is *now* that this is played out, as much the heritage of the past as the construction of the future; it is a present, the moment of the *at present*.

Conjuncture: A Necessary Concept

The concept of conjuncture is necessary to a theory of revolution as communisation. In fact, the revolution is not only a rupture, but also a rupture *against that which produces it*, which can also be expressed in the terms of the self-transformation of the subject, or again in the form Marx gives it in the *German Ideology*: ‘the class overthrowing it [the ruling class] can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages.’¹⁷ The conjuncture is inherent to the revolution as communisation: self-transformation of proletarians. All the manifestations of social existence, that is, for each individual, the ‘conditions inherent to individuality’ (ibid.), leave their hierarchised relation within the mode of production and recombine—moving, as they create new situations—in their relation of determination and dominance. These manifestations thus become the object of contradictions and struggles in their specificity, and not as the effect and manifestation of a fundamental contradiction through which these manifestations would only be eliminated ‘in consequence’.¹⁸

¹⁷ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/germanideology/cho1.d.htm>.

¹⁸ This could be the family, as being of the city or the countryside.

When the struggle as a class is the limit of class struggle, the revolution becomes a struggle against that which produced it, the whole architecture of the mode of production, the distribution of its instances and of its levels are pulled into the overthrow of the normality/fatality of its reproduction defined by the determinative hierarchy of the instances of the mode of production. Only if the revolution is and accomplishes this overthrow can it be the moment when proletarians disburden themselves of the muck of ages which sticks to their skin, men and women of that which constitutes their individuality.¹⁹ This is not the consequence, but the concrete movement of the revolution, in which all the instances of the mode of production (ideology, law, politics, nationality, economy, gender, etc.) can become, in turn, the dominant focalisation of the ensemble of the contradictions. If, as we say, the solitary hour of determination in the last instance—the economy—never sounds, this is because it is not in the nature of revolution to strike it. Changing circumstances and changing oneself coincide: this is revolution.²⁰

We rediscover what makes the concept of conjuncture fundamentally necessary to the theory of revolution: the overthrow of the determinative hierarchy of the instances of the mode of production. A conjuncture designates the mechanism of crisis as a crisis of the self-presupposition

¹⁹ ‘The conditions under which individuals have intercourse with each other, so long as the above-mentioned contradiction is absent, are conditions appertaining to their individuality, in no way external to them; conditions under which these definite individuals, living under definite relationships, can alone produce their material life and what is connected with it, are thus the conditions of their self-activity and are produced by this self-activity. The definite condition under which they produce, thus corresponds, as long as the contradiction has not yet appeared, to the reality of their conditioned nature, their one-sided existence, the one-sidedness of which only becomes evident when the contradiction enters on the scene and thus exists for the later individuals. Then this condition appears as an accidental fetter, and the consciousness that it is a fetter is imputed to the earlier age as well.’ *The German Ideology*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/germanideology/cho1d.htm#d4>.

²⁰ ‘The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.’ *Theses on Feuerbach*, Thesis III, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>.

of capital, and the revolution as a produced overcoming of the preceding course of the class and gender contradictions, as a rupture against that which produced it.

The question of the unity of the proletariat, a question which is inherent to the revolution as communisation, is equally at stake in the concept of conjuncture.

The contradictions which oppose the middle classes, the unemployed and the precarious, the surplus masses of the periphery or the ghettos, the 'core' of the working class, the employed but constantly threatened workers, etc., to capital, to its reproduction, to exploitation, to austerity, to misery, etc., are not identical each to the next, and even less to the contradiction between women and men. The unity qua class of those who have nothing to live on but the sale of their labour power is something that the proletariat finds and confronts as objectified, against them, in capital; for themselves, this definition is only their separation. Equally, the capitalist class is not a unique and homogenous block, nor are the nations or regional groupings that structure the global trajectory of the valorisation of capital. It would be extremely simplifying to pretend that these two groups of contradictions (those internal to 'the haves' and those internal to 'the have-nots') do not interpenetrate each other, that the Brazilian proletarian is a stranger to the conflict between emergent capitalism in her country and the United States and the 'old centres of capital', that men against women could not equally be proletarians against capitalist exploitation.

The unity of the proletariat and its contradiction with capital was inherent to the revolution as affirmation of the proletariat, to its effort to erect itself as dominant class, generalising its condition (before abolishing it...), just as it was inherent to the liberation of women as women. The diffuse, segmented, shattered, corporate character of conflicts is the necessary lot of a contradiction between classes and of a contradiction between genders that situate themselves on the level of the reproduction of capital. A particular conflict, according to its characteristics, the conditions in which it unfolds, the period in which it appears, *whatever its position in the instances of the mode of production may be*, can find itself in

a position to polarise the whole of this conflictuality that up until then appeared irreducibly diverse and diffuse. This is the *conjuncture as unity of rupture*. What takes place at this point is that, in order to unite, the workers must break out of the wage relation by which capital ‘groups’ them, and if in order to become a revolutionary class, the proletariat must unite, it cannot do so otherwise than in destroying the conditions of its own existence as a class.

The dictatorship of the social movement of communisation is the process in which humanity as a whole is integrated into the vanishing proletariat. The strict delimitation of the proletariat with respect to the other layers, its struggle against all commodity production is at the same time a process that *constrains* the layers of the salaried petite bourgeoisie, of the ‘class of social management’ to join the communising class; thus, it is a definition, an exclusion, and, at the same time, a dividing line and an opening, the erasure of borders and the withering away of classes. This is no paradox, but the reality of the movement in which the proletariat defines itself in practice as the movement of the constitution of the human community, and in this movement the fixed and hierarchised relations that defined the reproduction of the mode of production, its self-presupposition, are undone. How can production be used as a weapon, if it is always what defines all the other forms and levels of relations between individuals, and if it itself exists as a particular sector of social life?

All contradictions are reconstructed, they unite in a *unity of rupture*. Revolutionary practice, communist measures, overthrow the hierarchy of the instances of the mode of production whose reproduction was the immanent meaning of each instance. Beyond this immanence—this self-presupposition that contains and necessitates the established hierarchy of instances—there is something aleatory, something of the event.

Conjuncture and Event

The activity of class struggle is not simply a reflection of the conditions which constitute it.²¹ It creates discrepancy: '... proletarian revolutions [*unlike bourgeois revolutions which 'storm more swiftly from success to success ... soon they have reached their zenith', A/N*], like those of the nineteenth century, constantly criticise themselves, constantly interrupt themselves in their own course, return to the apparently accomplished, in order to begin anew; they deride with cruel thoroughness the half-measures, weaknesses, and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their opponents only so the latter may draw new strength from the earth and rise before them again more gigantic than ever, recoil constantly from the indefinite colossalness of their own goals – until a situation is created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves call out: *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*' (Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, part I).²²

This could be the description of a conjuncture as matrix of the event, that is, of a situation that exceeds its causes, *that turns against them*. The event is the most immediate element, the atom of the conjuncture, it is when the conjuncture produces discontinuity and novelty. It cannot therefore be reduced to a simple moment in a serial, continuous process as the prolongation of its own causes: in revolutionary crises, revolutionaries are busy transforming themselves, themselves and things, creating something totally new, as Marx writes at the beginning of the *18th Brumaire*: 'The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content.' The event goes against its causes: *hic Rhodus, hic salta*.

At the very beginning of *Wage Labour and Capital* (1849), Marx writes: 'The June conflict in Paris, the fall of Vienna, the tragi-comedy

²¹ Further down we will come to the role of subjectivity and of the action of the subject.

²² <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/cho1.htm>.

in Berlin in November 1848, the desperate efforts of Poland, Italy, and Hungary, the starvation of Ireland into submission—these were *the chief events in which* the European class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the working class *was summed up* [our emphasis] ... But now, after our readers have seen the class struggle of the year 1848 develop into *colossal political proportions*, it is time to examine more closely the economic conditions themselves upon which is founded the existence of the capitalist class and its class rule, as well as the slavery of the workers [our emphasis].²³

However ambiguously, Marx poses here a difference between conjuncture and general abstract analysis—and, simultaneously, he poses the unity of the two. The conjuncture is the process of this ‘summary’ (‘the chief events in which ... the class struggle ... was summed up’), of this *concentration* in one place, or in one instance—here, politics—in one moment, in events.

The conjuncture is the mechanics, the intimate gears of the qualitative leap that breaks the repetition of the mode of production. The concept of conjuncture has therefore become necessary to the theory of the contradictions of classes and genders as a theory of revolution and communism.

Revolution: Conjuncture and Ideology

Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic—in short, *ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out*. (Marx, 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, our emphasis)²⁴

²³ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/wage-labour/cho1.htm>.

²⁴ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-poleconomy/>

After exposing the broad articulations of what would become books II and III of *Capital*, Marx concludes a letter to Engels, dated April 30 1868, thus: 'At last we have arrived at the *forms of manifestation* [underlined in the text] which serve as the starting point in the vulgar conception: rent, coming from the land; profit (interest), from capital; wages, from labour [the well-known 'Trinity formula'—the fetishism specific to capital—presented at the end of Book III, A/N] ... Finally, since those 3 items (wages, rent, profit (interest)) constitute the sources of income of the 3 classes of landowners, capitalists and wage labourers, we have the *class struggle*, as the conclusion in which the movement and disintegration of the whole shit resolves itself.'²⁵ It is remarkable that Marx, in the architecture of *Capital*, should introduce the classes and the struggle of classes *on the basis of forms of manifestation*, after having consecrated thousands of pages to showing that these forms were not the essence, the concrete in thought, of the capitalist mode of production. Actually, these forms of manifestation are not simply phenomena which could be shoved aside to find, in the essence, the truth about what exists and about the right practice. We begin to understand Marx's strange turn of phrase: '*ideological* forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.'

Ideology is the way men (and women...) experience their relation to the conditions of their existence as something objective that confronts them as subjects. Reality appears as *presupposed* and as *presupposing*, that is to say, as *world*, as *object*, confronting the activity that, faced with the world, defines the subject. The main fault of all the materialisms criticised by Marx in his first thesis on Feuerbach is not simply a theoretical error; this fault is the expression of everyday life.²⁶ As we have said before, essence is nowhere else than on this surface, but it does not corre-

preface.htm.

²⁵ http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1868/letters/68_04_30.htm.

²⁶ 'The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively.' <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>.

spond to it, because the effects of the structure of the whole (the mode of production) cannot be the existence of the structure except on the condition that they invert it through their effects. This is the *reality of ideology*. ‘The categories of bourgeois economy are forms of thought that have an objective truth insofar as they reflect real social relations.’ (*Capital Vol 1*)²⁷ In short, ideology is everyday life.

This definition of ideology integrates ideologies which are usually grasped as intellectual problems. Even in this case, ideology is not a lure, a mask, a collection of falsehoods. It is well known that this kind of ideology is dependent on the social being, but this dependency implies its autonomisation; this is the paradoxical power of ideas. The theory of ideology is not a theory of ‘class consciousness’ but a class theory of consciousness. The division between material and intellectual labour traverses all class societies and all individuals; if ideology always exists in forms of abstraction and the universal, then it is by way of this division which, placing intellectual labour on the side of the dominant class, gives the product of this labour the form of the universal that is the garb of all class domination. The paradoxical power of ideas and their universality, this inversion of representations and their foundations, is parallel to the real inversion that presides over the organisation of production. The exploitation of the class of producers really turns the production of material life upside-down, within itself, in the production itself of material life. If it is true that ‘life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life’,²⁸ it is no less true that *life is what ‘makes believe’ that it is consciousness*. Bourgeois representations are ideologies, quite functional ones too, and they become perfectly real institutions. Justice, right, freedom, equality are ideologies, but heavily material when one finds oneself before a tribunal, in prison, or in a voting booth. The bourgeoisie, says the *Manifesto*, fashioned the world in its image, but then the image is the thing: the production of ideology participates in the production and the

²⁷ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/cho1.htm#212>.

²⁸ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/cho1a.htm>.

conditions of material life. Representations are not a more or less well-fitting double for reality but are active instances of this reality which assure its reproduction *and permit its transformation*.

Ideology circulates everywhere in society. It is not just the appendage of a few specialised 'cutting-edge' activities. The relation of the exploited class to the process of production is also of an ideological nature; since this relation cannot be completely identical to that of the dominant class, it seems at first that these two ideologies would confront one another. And this is true to a certain extent. This 'second' ideology is critical, even subversive, but only insofar as it is the language of demand, of critique and of the affirmation of this class *in the mirror afforded by the dominant class*. Ideology is always the ideology of the dominant class because the particular interest of this class is the only particular interest that can *objectively* produce itself as universal.

In this sense ideology is not so much a deformed reflection of reality in consciousness as it is the ensemble of practical solutions, which resolve this separation of reality into object and subject, thus justifying and reinforcing it (see Marx, first thesis on Feuerbach). Ideological representations are effective because they reflect to individuals a realistic image and a credible explanation of what they are and what they are experiencing; they are constitutive of the reality of their struggles.

So, then, what about the revolutionary practice as communisation? It is the production of the new, not as the development or victory of a term which pre-exists the contradiction, nor as the reestablishment of a prior unity (negation of the negation), but as the determinate abolition of the old and, in this abolition, the abolition of the abolishing subject. If, at this last instant, the relationship of contradictory implication between proletariat and capital remains determinant, in these very particular circumstances (those of the conjuncture), the instances designated in turn as the locus of the dominant contradiction will always be constituted by ideology.

In its movement, in the forms it takes and leaves, the revolutionary struggle criticises itself. This struggle is, until the end, split between, on the one hand, that which remains an objective movement which is

not an illusion—the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production—and, on the other hand, within this objectivity, the practice of its abolition that disobjectifies this movement. For that reason, the struggle remains structurally ideological. It lives off the separation between object and subject. Because the dissolution of objectivity constitutes a *subject* in itself, a subject which considers itself as such, ideology (invention, freedom, project and projection) is inherent to its definition and its action.²⁹

The revolutionary conjuncture is the internal transgression of the rules of the mode of production's reproduction, because these rules which direct the development of the capitalist mode of production have no finality *beyond that which they have for the agent interior to these rules*.³⁰ The rules which direct capitalism to its ruin do not produce some ideal that one should await fatalistically. They are a practical organisation of struggles according to the targets and stakes of the moving crystallisation of the dominants, of their relation and autonomy vis-à-vis the determination by the relations of production—this is a revolutionary conjuncture: a finality which produces itself and recognises itself in the accidental of such or such a practice, in the ideological practice of the proletariat as *subject*, as a term of the contradiction.

Without any previously developed objective basis, communism is a production caught in the contradiction of an objective relation whose

²⁹ However, one must be very careful with the status conferred to this distinction between subject and object, none of which exists by itself or even through their reciprocity. In fact, the struggle of the proletariat and even the revolution are not the sudden emergence of a more or less free, more or less determined, subjectivity, but a moment of the capitalist mode of production's relation to itself—to see objectivism in this would be to forget that the proletariat is a class of the capitalist mode of production and that the latter is the struggle of classes. The question of the relation between the objective situation and subjectivity is raised in the self-contradiction of the capitalist mode of production. The subject and the object we speak of here are moments of this self-contradiction, which in its unity goes through these two opposed phases (a unity of moments destined for autonomy).

³⁰ It is as practice of the proletariat that the game abolishes its rule: '*When we say that exploitation is a contradiction for itself, we define the situation and the revolutionary activity of the proletariat.*' ('The Present Moment', *Sic* no. 1). See also footnote 5 above.

overcoming should produce itself as the conscious and voluntary formalisation of a project, because the process of revolution always rejects its present state as being its result. This project is an *ideological* one because it rejects its objective foundation in its present state as its *raison d'être*, and places the future, what *ought to be*, as the comprehension of the present and as practice, in the present moment. In the objectivity of the revolutionary process, communism is a project, the *ideological* form of combat in which it is carried through to the end.

In Conclusion

When our Greek comrades present the events of the November 19th, 2011 protest in Athens in their text 'Without You, Not a Single Cog Turns', this helps us come closer in a situation to what we call a conjuncture.

They present a situation which makes it possible to speak of programmatisation, workers' identity, class unity, asystematicity of the wage demand, communist measures, the cycle of struggles, and they do this all in an *'evental'* way.

This presentation grasps the movement of the burst of a situation into multiple contradictions, the conjunction in a 'present moment' of opposed and heterogeneous interests which are produced, specified and overcome in their confrontations—in a word, it is the very essence of what a *conjuncture* could be which is condensed in these three pages and grasped as such. Under the effect of the crisis and of the 'step to be taken' by class struggle, the contradiction between proletariat and capital as it is grasped *in its immediacy* is no longer the simple and homogenous contradiction that was our theoretical object; this contradiction has become the ensemble of its own determinations, of all its forms of appearance, including its political, ideological, juridical forms, which are not mere phenomena, but precisely that within which only it exists. All the classes and especially all the dynamics and functions that had been, up until then, kept as absorbed into a simple contradiction between the proletariat and capital are now revealed to themselves and to others. This heterogeneity of 'agents' and of projects, these conflicts, all are the conditions of existence of this contradiction. It becomes clear that even the economic

definition of the crisis and of the situation is determinant only in the measure in which it designates itself as political confrontations, as heterogeneity and conflicts in the struggle between proletariat and capital and within the proletariat itself. This economic determination imposes itself as effective in the course of history as politics and as ideology.

On the basis of a particular situation, of an event, these few pages sketch up what a conjuncture can be. Humorously, but without irony, one could say that they are as beautiful as Lenin's in the months preceding October.

R.S.

