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**ON SOCIAL BASIS AND POLITICAL SUPERSTRUCTURE  
IN SOCIALISM (1977)<sup>1</sup>**

Translated by Dick Hyland  
and Peter McLaughlin (1979)

**Preliminary remark, 34 years later**

The world to which the following considerations refer  
definitely belongs to the past.

The problems that I dealt with then will eventually belong to the future.

If there is to be a future it has to be begun with now.

W.F.H., April 2011

**I. Avoiding both economism and politicism**

"Socialism and political systems"<sup>2</sup> — it is useful to consider the topic in  
Marxist terms.

In the terms of historical materialism, it is the question about the relation  
between social basis and political superstructure in socialism, between socialist  
relations of production and the state. From the standpoint of the working  
class and in the light of the Marxist historical method, this question is posed  
in the perspective of the ultimate dismantling of the state.

The subject's topicality results from the burning question of the relation  
between general law—like tendencies of the transition to and building up of

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<sup>1</sup> The English version was published in: *Revolutionary World - An International Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 34/35, 113-23, Amsterdam, 1979; — The original German version appeared under the title "Zur Dialektik von gesellschaftlicher Basis und politischem Überbau im Sozialismus", in: *Das Argument* 106/1977, 780-94; again in W.F.Haug, *Pluraler Marxismus*, vol. 2, Berlin/W 1987, 169-88.

<sup>2</sup> "Socialism and Political Systems" was the general topic of the II. International Round Table "Socialism in the World", Cavtat/Yougoslavia, Nov. 1977, where these reflections were presented.

socialism and the respective national and historical particularities. It is in socialism's political superstructure that the differences over the road to socialism are fought out. The political superstructure is in fact nothing other than the concrete organizational form of the socialization process.

Let's observe the dialectics of two undialectical positions: economism and politicism.

In our field, *economism* consists in declaring socialization in the form of nationalization and the establishment of a planned economy to be so decisive that the question of a specifically socialist form of its mediation, in other words, the question about the system of political forms and rights, is neglected. The *politicianist* approach consists in declaring certain political rules and forms to be essential and in giving economics only secondary weight.

In both positions, functional groups in society create what they perceive to be optimal conditions: on the one side the "politicians" and "ideologists", on the other the actual organizers and directors of the economic process.

In practice economism means a political system rigorously reduced to a subordinate role. Precisely because politics passes for something unessential to socialism, the political structure which is adequate to the management of the economic processes appears spontaneously to be the correct one: a managerial structure of politics. This structure is constantly in danger of degenerating into one which is adequate not primarily to the management of the economic process but rather to the spontaneous interests of the managers. Economism avoids all politics that could lead to a destabilization of the management of the economic process.

Politicism means in practice a bourgeois superstructure in the colors of socialism. It establishes an "ideological market" corresponding to the interests of intellectual commodity production. The ideologists tend to celebrate the

free pursuit of their interests as freedom plain and simple.

In economics, politicism means avoiding every development that could lead to the destabilization of the political system.<sup>3</sup> Every revolutionary transformation of the economic relations, however, leads inevitably to the destabilization of the political system.

Economism treats the entire ideological sphere just like the political. It degrades it in theory to the mere "ideological reflex" or "expression" of the relations of production. In practice this conception leads to directing the ideological sphere by way of "political" power. There is obviously no confidence in the automatic nature of the "reflex" or "expression" in practice. Rather the "reflex" is, as it were, "booked in advance". The administratively controlled "reflex" serves as an instrument of social control. On the other hand, the activity of control, planning, and direction merely is passed off as merely the reflex of the basis.

## **II. Basis-superstructure theory and the derivation of the form of politics in the works of Marx and Engels**

Marx and Engels discovered that political systems are to be comprehended as superstructures above the respective economic bases or structures. By "basis" in this context, as is well known, they meant the process of the production of material life, as determined by the form of the relations of production. The conception of the political sphere as a superstructure above this economic sphere has a genetic, a functional, and an economic sense.

The *genetic* sense of basis-superstructure theory can be summarised on the

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<sup>3</sup> It is not implied here that the two positions ever reach their respective goals. Every one-sidedness evokes a crisis, which opposes it and forces it to reactions which endanger its "determining purpose" (Marx, *CI*, 250). Thus, economism becomes an impediment to economic development, and politicism leads to the formalist undermining of the political sphere and to the deliverance of the masses into the hands of a political caste.

example of the state as follows: The state has arisen out of society and is accordingly to be comprehended socio-genetically. "Society" here means fundamentally the whole of production and the relationships of human life immediately connected with it. It is society's cleavage (in developed form: its class antagonism) that lead Marx and Engels to comprehend the state as a "power arisen out of society but placing itself above it, and alienating itself more and more from it".<sup>4</sup> "Super" in the term "superstructure" has the concrete meaning of a 'superordination' mediated by a repressive apparatus.

The *functional* sense of basis—superstructure theory emphasizes the *necessity* of the state's development: This superstructure has the function of securing the reproduction of the social relations (and therefore of the relations of class domination which they include). Externally it is war which necessitates the repressive apparatus. Internally, the necessity of this function arises especially from the struggle between antagonistic interests and classes which threaten the relations of social domination. Based on the repressive apparatus, administrative and ideological++ apparatuses are established to this end.

Finally, the *economic* sense of the basis—superstructure theory refers to the tangible fact that the *condition* for the origin and continued existence of such a superstructure is the existence of a surplus product. The superstructure lives from the social surplus. The forms in which the superstructure appropriates this surplus are closely connected to the form in which it exercises its functions. Although its function is the maintenance of the relations of social domination (relations of production), the superstructure must, to a certain extent, make itself autonomous of and stand in opposition to the entire society, "alienate" itself from society, as Engels says. This determines its basic contradiction. Therefore one must constantly and sharply distinguish between

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<sup>4</sup> Engels "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State", Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Selected Works in One Volume, London, 1970, p. 576.

class content and superstructural form.

The state apparatus defines a violence-free and in a certain way regulated space, which is, so to speak, surrounded by the state's armed agencies, and within which the social antagonisms are to be fought out without violence and according to those regulations. This space, determined ("surrounded") by the state apparatus, imposes its form on the class conflicts. We shall call the form of conflict which has arisen in this way the *political form*.<sup>5</sup> Marx and Engels conceived politics in this sense as one of the major forms of ideology. They described the state as "the first ideological power over mankind", law as the second, etc. These forms, based on real institutions, determine the consciousness and behavior of the social individuals in the matters they regulate. They are the forms in which the basic social antagonisms at first become conscious and are fought out.

Ideology is then not primarily to be comprehended as a form of consciousness; at most it is a socially determined form of consciousness, and thus secondary. This is not in the sense that it immediately reflects social realities, but rather in the sense of its real mediation through the existence of a superstructure on the basis of social antagonisms. It reflects then the shaping of social conflicts by the superstructure. With the state it is especially clear that — and how — it defines a form in which conflicts are to be fought out and enforces this form in case of "excesses".

Nevertheless all ideology is determined by a common, "ideally" understandable basic structure: by the inversion of the basis-superstructure interrelationship. Consciousness, ideas, rules, etc. act in ideology as primaries

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. also "Zwei Kapitel über den ideologischen Klassenkampf", in: *Das Argument* 100, 1976, above all p. 930ff. In conjunction with the analysis of economic forms by Marx (cf. my *Vorlesungen zur Einführung ins "Kapital"*, Cologne, 1976, 8th to 12th lecture) and in continuation of the approach to determining ideological forms, above all by Engels, I conceive the "political sphere" (*das Politische*) as a particular, socially constituted, ideological praxis-form. As a rule, the form of the political sphere is presupposed as self-evident, as something that "is simply there".

not as secondaries, as axioms not as derivatives. Taken literally this is materially false. Nevertheless, to the extent that consciousness is ideological, it is not just false consciousness, for the ideological inversion is real, it is characteristic for the functioning of every superstructure which arises from society's class cleavage.<sup>6</sup> Though actually derivative, the superstructure acts as a superordinated "alienated" (and alienating) force. It appears as independent by nature, but not as something that has "established itself as [...] independent" (*verselbständigt*; cf. Marx *C I*, 201). This is one phenomenal form of its basic contradiction.

### III. The transitory necessity of the socialist state

Can there be a socialist, a revolutionary state? Socialism is the real action and movement of the masses.

To the extent that the state is determined by the "relegation" from society of activities directed towards the whole, the socialist state becomes a problem.

In the national and international class struggle, the movement destroys itself without centralization and discipline. It needs institutions. It needs the party and the state. The transition to socialism appears at first as the bourgeois overflowing of politics out of the narrow bourgeois channels. Politics takes charge of economics — which is just what it was separated from in bourgeois

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<sup>6</sup> To grasp "ideology" uncritically as a general-social "omnihistorically necessary" (Althusser) function, is to give away both a weapon with an orienting perspective and an alliance-conception. One of the dangerous consequences is the more or less clear equation of superstructure with ideology. This conception, which in my opinion is fateful for the socialist movement, is common to such otherwise opposed positions as that of Althusser and that of A. Bauer et. al. (*Basis and Überbau der Gesellschaft*, 1974), that is the position — dominant in GDR philosophy — which is otherwise so decisively opposed to and opposed by Althusser. The alternative between a merely "critical" and a general-sociological (omnihistorical) concept of ideology is one between frying pan and fire. One must connect the ideology-critical and the institution-analytical insights. Marx's "developing" method, which specifically joins together genetic and structure-analytical investigations, supercedes the opposition of the two positions, both of which don't know what to do with this method.

society. Almost everything that happens in society now appears political.

The process might be described inversely: this extension of political competence (Jurisdiction) over absolutely everything is based in reality on the new kind of competence of the social producers for production. In the revolutionary activity of the masses, the special form of politics superseded (*aufgehoben*), and what was institutionally relegated out of society is once again appropriated by the society of producers.

As revolutionary activities, above all of the workers and peasants, these activities have no specifically "political (as opposed to social) form. The political sphere is determined by the relegation out of society, by the opposition to the immediately social sphere.

The necessity of a socialist state is conditionally modified above all by the development of the industrial working class and its political" traditions and organization. The weaker and more amorphous the working class, the greater the weight of the political apparatus detached from it.<sup>7</sup>

The more intense the national and international cleavage, the more imperative the state's necessity. It is the core of the political system. How it works depends to a large extent on national particularities. For example, a nation whose past includes a broad resistance-movement against fascism will produce other forms than a nation whose past is stamped by a fascism not overcome from within but rather defeated from without by a foreign nation.

The contradiction of the bourgeois state is that it is class domination in the form of political integration.

The contradiction of the socialist state is that it is a workers' and peasants'

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<sup>7</sup> Gert Meyer("Industrialisierung, Arbeiterklasse and Stalin-Herrschaft in der UdSSR", in: *Das Argument* 106/1977, 107/1978 and 108/1978) shows with precise figures how under-developed the working class was at the time of the origin of "Stalinism" — partly decimated by the civil war, partly fresh from the country.

state in the form of an apparatus that has become autonomous over and against the workers and peasants.

Under capitalism the state becomes ever more important. It must increasingly intervene in the economic process.

In socialism the state becomes at first more important than ever before, its competence extends to everything. However firstly, the socialist state bases itself upon the working people, against whom it at the same time becomes autonomous — and this is its contradiction; and secondly, its necessity is transitory. The socialist state must be "done in by its own success", as Brecht says.

It would be worth investigating whether so-called "Stalinism" was not the unmastered form conflict for the basic contradiction of every socialist state. The "cult of personality" was in any case not the decisive problem. A "cult" may have been made around Lenin because, as #hardly ever in history, decisive events depended on him and his peculiar capabilities. Other revolutions have produced similarly important personalities. The particularity of Lenin, and that of other of socialism's founding personalities, consisted above all in the fact that he literally "convincingly" integrated the contradiction between the central, relatively independent power structure and its apparatus on the one hand, and its mass and class basis on the other. At his death it became clear that the "conviction" had not become institutionalized.

Perhaps "Stalinism" is best understood as the nationally specific "second genesis" of the "socialist state" (as bitter as it may be to employ this term here) determined by the historical conditions. It was the terroristic form of an unavoidable detachment and superordination of a state — unavoidable not in this form, though in its content — which turned the revolutionary workers's party into its apparatus, tore it away into its own separation from society, and



thus alienated it from its mass support. To this form of uncontrolled second genesis of the state, there corresponded a disastrous repression of the political sphere, whose relative independence, where it showed itself, was suppressed and criminalized by the state apparatus. It is clear, that even *after* such an uncontrolled genesis of the state, after the withering away of its terroristic form, the reductive stamping of the political sphere and the "nationalization" (*Verstaatlichung*) of the party, which were the consequences, do not simply wither away.

The critique of Stalinism can by no means ignore the necessity of the socialist state, otherwise it contributes to the uncontrolled forms of its implementation. *In order to become a power, over society, the state must set itself against society.* The genuine strength of the socialist state can also be its weakness: the pre-political, self-confident but uncoordinated action of the masses.

Nowhere is so much dialectics needed as in relation to the socialist state.

#### **IV. Political superstructure and development of the basis**

Socialist relations of production are not static. They claim to be the relations in which the revolutionary process approaches the goal of classless society. Thus "political systems" are always to be conceived as "subsystems" within this process. To say it paradoxically, one could speak of "transitorily dominant systems". For the state is at the same time super- and subordinated (though in different respects). "Socialism and political systems" — the topic can be handled in a Marxist manner only when both sides are handled in their dialectical relation. The relation is "asymmetrical": the state is superordinated above the society in certain respects, but in the end all of its possibilities for action remain subjected to the working of social laws.

Though the central question in the discussion about "socialist political

systems" is the *form* or *mode* of the socialization process, it must always be treated (if one does not want to become lost in illusions) as dependent on the socioeconomic *content* or *substance*.

Conversely, the achievement of certain socioeconomic goals is conditioned by their concrete political mode of realisation, the *How* of their pursuit.

Lenin saw the former clearly, when, after certain illusory attempts to pursue "socialist politics" directly, disregarding socioeconomic laws, he noted: the black market, which arose behind the backs of the "socialist politicians" as the answer to their measures, was the political economist from whom one had to learn. (Because of the predominance of triumphalist historiography, the uncommonly instructive history of the Soviet Union unfortunately remains to a great extent unevaluated.)

The developments in Chile have recently brought the latter strikingly into view — both concerning the great significance of the political and juridical forms and institutions and concerning the repressive state apparatus. Almost all elements of the political system and the state apparatus played their specific roles in the counterrevolution.

If the revolutionary process in socialism comes to a standstill, the unity of the opposed forms predominates: the interrelationship between the form of the state that determines the whole and the value forms that mediate the economic sphere. The state form of social action and the value forms have this in common: both rest on the "relegation" or "transposing" of social practice out of the realm of autonomous social action. To the extent that the mass movement in socialism comes to rest or distributes and exhausts itself in the form of politics defined by the state and the form of economics determined by the value form as well as in the private sphere, socialism regresses to bourgeois forms. In the bourgeois forms it remains inferior to

bourgeois society in a decisive respect: with regard to the "subjective factor", which bourgeois society mobilizes in the form of private egoism with the might of a force of nature.

Bourgeois society is "productive" — within the bounds of its basic contradiction and its unmastered fluctuation between the poles of boom and bust — because of the "second force of nature", economic pressure, and because of the passionate greed of private egoism. Capitalism's effectiveness is based therefore on relations and motive forces that socialism immediately eliminates. Capitalism is as strong as it is precisely because of its freedom from planning, community and solidarity. Thus, capitalism's apologists see its effectiveness endangered, when, for the sake of stabilization, it makes concessions to reformism. These concessions to social security for the individual are said to lead to a "welfare state mentality" and to weaken the "achievement principle". And they are not entirely wrong; weakening and stabilization go hand in hand to a certain extent here.

In the forms that are adequate to capitalism, socialism is inferior. This applies as well to the forms of the superstructure. Capitalist relations cast — in the vivid expression of Marx and Engels — their "beautified shadow" into the superstructure. There, life might appear as if it were immediately determined by freedom, equality, justice, and all—around harmoniously reconciled self—interest. But the relations — as Brecht's *Peachum* says — they aren't that way. It is a deceptive dream of certain "true socialists" that socialism can be established as existence in the form of such "beautiful shadows", as a realm of social justice on a capitalist foundation. It is understandable, though not excusable, when certain groups of ideologists cultivate the illusion of such "beautiful shadows".

It would be totally false however to conceive the "bourgeois rights" of the individual as mere "semblance". The same applies to other rights which

guarantee certain liberties against the intervention of the state apparatus, such as the freedom of science. In their further-developed socialist form, these guarantees serve, among other things, the important function of preventing "political" or "social" measures from infringing on the law-like tendencies of personality development, of the scientific process, etc. Here, there are many unsolved problems. In the phase of socialist statehood, it will have to be the "political system" that institutionalizes such guarantees. One great problem is how to avoid the merely verbal guarantee of socialist legality on the whole; an often even greater problem is how to maintain the internal legality of the party as an element that binds together the social and the political system.

The interrelationship between inner-party and general social legality has hardly been investigated. Moreover, Marxist theory has not yet been able to grasp the norms of such legality in a satisfying way. Recourse to the old ideology of the "inalienable eternal rights and ideals", which are imagined as somehow hovering over humankind, is however unacceptable. "Celestialised forms" of social relations,<sup>8</sup> Marx and Engels called them.

The ideological form of the norms of political systems cannot be eliminated theoretically. Though their supposed eternal validity is nothing but semblance, this semblance exists in the material form of a system of social domination. The central feature that determined the ideological character of the political norms is how they really arise, how they are decided upon, and how their observance is controlled. In its critique of bourgeois ideology, Marxist theory *explains* only ideology's hidden origin in the class structure; but theory destroys the semblance only theoretically, without being able to eliminate it in its social reality. Generally, in the discussion about socialist norms, mere *postulates* are advanced, and when they are disputed, postulate is set against postulate. In

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. W.F.Haug, "Outlines for a Theory of the Ideological", in: *Commodity Aesthetics, Ideology, and Culture*, New York: International General, 1987, ch. 4: "Law as the Second Ideological Power — Celestialization and Idealization", pp. 69f.

reality there can be only one thing that brings Marxist theory and socialist postulate together: no longer the merely interpretive derivation of norms out of the social basis ("in the last analysis"), but rather their real derivation from the socialist basis supplemented by the control of the "superstructure" by the "basis".

The whole of Marxist theory — as far as is supposed to be a theory of social action in socialism — becomes lop-sided to the extent this central feature — not only of the content but also *of the form* — of the "socialist superstructure's" class standpoint, i.e. of its establishment and control by the "socialist base", is hampered. On the other hand, it is true that certain state functions in socialism become more important than ever before. But should these functions endeavor to clear control by the basis out of the way as "resistance" or a "disturbance factor", they would at the same time undermine the effectiveness of their own leadership activity. It is not just the mere ideal of free discussion that is violated when the discussion processes are impeded, but above all the laws of the social learning process, and all the more, of the scientific process and of the working masses' conscious adoption of social goals. What is lacking today is a Gramsci of socialist society, who, without schematism, but also without surrendering his scientific Marxist standpoint, investigates the real interacting of instances within socialist societies, devoting special consideration to the transition phenomena "between" basis and superstructure, which mediate the real coherence.

## V. The dismantling of the state in communist perspective

In German there is a cynical saying: *Sei schlau, geh' zum Überbau!* ("Be clever! join the superstructure!").<sup>9</sup>

Marxists see the socialist superstructure with the eyes of the basis, i.e, from the standpoint of the working class. Even Marxists "in the superstructure" measure themselves with the yardstick of the basis; otherwise they become parasitical.

As far as the political superstructure is concerned, the statement of Marx and Engels still applies: "The workers cannot realize their personality without abolishing (*aufheben*) the state." Thus Marxists see the political superstructure in the perspective of the dismantling of the state. This statement of Marx and Engels becomes absolutely false if it is absolutized. For the state is needed to organize the development that can lead to the dismantling of the state (and to the full unfolding of the workers' personality).

Thus Marxists will not consider the dismantling of the state as their *goal*, rather they understand this dismantling as a *consequence* of their goal which is the construction of a classless society. Just as the state arose out of the cleavage within society, its necessity disappears with the removal of the cleavage. The functions of social life that have been removed from society, "relegated", and transposed into politics, law, religion, etc., in short, into ideology, will once again be appropriated by the self—determining society (associated without the interposition of classes and the private ownership of the means of production). The ideological forces will be eliminated or die out. To the extent that humankind, in the words of Engels, "no longer just thinks for itself, but also governs itself" (*nicht nur selbst denkt, sondern auch selbst lenkt*), as Engels put it, all the separate governing agencies outside of and above society disappear.

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<sup>9</sup> A "supplement" to an advertising slogan of the construction industry which has been debunked by mass unemployment: *Sei schlau, geh zum Bau!* ("Be smart, join the construction trade").

The self-determining society will create its own social agencies for such functions.

It is important, instructive, to perceive transitional phenomena more clearly. The false sharpness of the either-or cuts through the real lines of development. The existing socialist societies, or those on their way to socialism, reveal manifold phenomena of the transition to communism. On the other hand, the highly-developed capitalist societies reveal phenomena of the "transition" to socialism which often — like many socio-political institutions — have been intentionally created to take the wind out of the sails of the labor movement. The arming of entire factory crews in the industrial plants of the socialist countries is — in contrast to the existence of a separate state military apparatus — a directly social measure. Similarly, the establishment of "social courts", which return a part of the judicial competence to society.

The economic value forms, taken over from bourgeois society and placed in the service of the planned economy, should likewise not be considered formally. Lenin was completely right, when he observed that their value form character diminishes in the course of the development of the planned economy. The commodity character, as it were, loses force. Though in the transition from bourgeois to socialist society everything is at first potentially (and as a rule also in actuality) a commodity, i.e. purchasable, more and more spheres (the human body, its labor power, health, education, culture) are removed from the commodity form.

To emphasize the transitional phenomena does not at all mean to assume a calm evolutionary course for things. The process proceeds as contradictorily as it does differently from country to country.

In the Marxist camp (in Germany, above all by Wolfgang Harich<sup>10</sup>), the following question has been raised recently: In view of the increasing ecological Problems, the economic plundering of natural resources and of the human sphere of life as a whole, must one not banish the perspective of a communist society of overabundance into the realm of illusions? The dismantling of the state however depends on this perspective.

The question is quite serious. But is it correctly posed? If one assumes, with Harich, the continued existence of private interests and of struggles over distribution, then it appears just as necessary to eternalize an institutionalized repressive state apparatus above society. The decisive question is whether society itself will master the forms of its "material exchange with nature", together with its "social metabolism", instead of being mastered by it (Marx writes similarly at the end of the first charter of *Capital*).

Will society learn — i.e. develop the requisite material foundation and modes of behavior — to deal consciously and according to a plan with the necessities of production? If this question could be answered in the affirmative, the ground would be removed from Harich's prognosis. But the answer to such questions is not a matter for theory, but for the changing of the world.

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<sup>10</sup> W. Harich, *Kommunismus ohne Wachstum? Babeuf und der "Club of Rome"*, Reinbek, 1975; cf. the review in *Das Argument* 101/1977, p. 163f.