

PART IV

HISTORICAL
MATERIALISM
AS METHODOLOGICAL
POSTULATE

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The Theory of Reflection
and its Incompatibilities
as a Theory of Science

The theory of knowledge and of science prevalent among some Marxists and particularly those paying allegiance to the Soviet Union is the theory of reflection. While I fully recognise the political importance of this theory and its ideological purpose for use against idealism and positivism, I consider its theoretical value to be nil. In fact it has the damaging effect of mitigating against all serious historical-materialist investigation of the phenomena of cognition. The theory of reflection is not historical materialistic but is an offshoot of natural materialism.

These remarks will, of course, arouse violent contradiction among reflectionists, and pronounced boldly in this way they may appear incorrect. But are they really so? I would answer those who reject my statement that I am aware that the reflectionists embrace more into their epistemology of the sciences than mere external nature; they also take into account historical and social factors. Nevertheless, these additional factors are only arrayed to make the reflection of nature appear more plausible. Hence, what they serve to support is the assertion of a reflection of nature. Or, put another way: remove the reflection of nature from the whole complex argument, then all the subsidiary elements would lose their meaning. Even taking into account Todor Pawlow's seven hundred and fifty pages¹ presenting the theory of reflection there only remains the assertion that the formation, method and objectivity of science are explained by the scientific mind reflecting its object of

cognition as it exists in nature. This is natural materialism and no amount of elaboration can ever succeed in changing it into historical materialism.

Of course, there is nothing wrong in natural materialism so long as it is applied to phenomena of nature; but is consciousness one of these? The only sort of consciousness which forms under the direct impact of nature is the instinct of animals. Whether or not this could rightly be called consciousness is a matter for debate. Alexeyev Nikolayev Leontyev,² one of the stalwarts of the reflection theory, would probably raise no objection since he reduces the theory to the level of physiology, at least as a starting-point. However, I would regard this of very little value for the elucidation of the phenomena of consciousness with which our investigations in this book are concerned.

Cognitive faculties such as Greek philosophy, mathematics and the exact sciences are clearly human manifestations, as is the whole field of conceptual thought from which they arise. To understand the human world Marx created historical materialism. The vital point for him in this respect was the realisation that 'it is men's social being that determines their consciousness'—their *social being*, not nature, not *natural being*. When a theorist of reflection speaks of 'nature', 'external nature' or man's own 'internal nature' he is animated by ideas already determined by his social being. His whole thought about reflective consciousness is an ideology of a particular social class and historical epoch.

Moreover there is another major objection to the theory of reflection. I understand 'natural science' in the sense of the mathematical and experimental method emerging from the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. This is modern bourgeois science, inextricably linked with the capitalist mode of production. It presents a mathematically exact knowledge of nature from sources other than manual labour and other than experience gained from such work. Natural science in this sense is essentially founded upon methodological concepts of a non-empirical character, which make mathematics applicable to observable phenomena of nature, such as, for instance, Galileo's and Newton's concept of inertial motion. To try to explain the foundations of modern bourgeois science from a reflection of nature is incompatible with the non-empirical character of these

foundations. It implies a misreading of the methodological tenets of modern science. The theory of reflection may be fruitful when referring to empirical knowledge based on a unity of head and hand, as in the case of handicraftsmen, but modern science evolved when this kind of knowledge became ineffectual. The hallmark of mathematically based thinking that took the place of craftsmanship is its intellectual character radically divided from manual practice.

I regard my argument against the theory of reflection as applied to natural science of major political importance. From it must follow the conclusion that the enactment of science in unbroken continuation of its tradition as practised in the capitalist world is incompatible with socialism. It may well be that science and scientific technology have not yet reached a stage where a socialist transformation can emerge from the bourgeois tradition. But unless the development leading towards this stage is carried under the revolutionary impetus of the proletarian forces, as appears to be the case in China, then socialist transformation, when it becomes due or overdue, will require a proletarian revolution to overturn a hardened technocratic class-rule based on intellectual privilege.

The theory of reflection simulates the neutrality of science and technology towards social class, and assumes indifference to social order. By these characteristics it is marked as an ideology of technocracy, not of socialism. Its statements concerning the source of knowledge are assertions which by their very nature are unproven and unprovable. To support them and lend them a semblance of conviction the theory as a whole is fortified by certain generalised pronouncements supporting materialism. They run somewhat like this: materialism, as a rational standpoint, demands that the external material world exists independent of any consciousness; that, as a general truth, matter is prior to mind and being is prior to consciousness; so, clearly, consciousness reflects the external world, and it reflects being; hence, ideas and thoughts are not only alleged to derive from material reality but actually do so, and all that is required is the explanation of *how* this occurs. Thus when you ask a reflectionist how he knows that a specific idea is a reflection of being he answers by reiterating the same contention in the guise of a prime truth. I consider this a feat of dogmatic reasoning completely at

odds with Marxian thinking which is undogmatic and critical to the core.

In the *Philosophical Dictionary of the German Democratic Republic* (*Wörterbuch der Philosophie*)³ the case for the theory of reflection is argued in a way which amounts to burking the main question. The human person is presented as equipped with sense organs doing the service of impersonal measuring and registering instruments such as are indispensable for scientific experiments. Here, science, far from being explained, is introduced as a given state of affairs. The historical fact that people living in commodity-producing societies develop a social form of thinking in non-empirical abstracts constituting a pure intellect divided from their bodily activities — this fact is taken for granted and treated as though it were part of human nature. We would all agree that sensations perceived by persons through their individual sense organs are personally sensed, and differently so by different persons. But this truth does not seem to occur to the leading theorists of reflection in the German Democratic Republic. One has the impression that the difference between an individual and a robot is but one of degree. True, scientific man is an individual who, upon entering his laboratory, abdicates his subjectivity of a person and with it the entirety of his existential personal condition, but how does a living person change into this extraordinary status of scientific man? This, surely, is an important part of the question that a theory of science is called upon to answer. This criticism of reflectionism is cogently reasoned in an excellent study by Bodo von Greiff.⁴

But this is no wholesale condemnation of the theory of reflection as such. It only contests any claim for it as a critical theory of science. I consider it unfit to challenge philosophical epistemology and to perform the critical liquidation of the bourgeois fetishism of science and scientific technology, which is a prime necessity to achieve socialism as an outcome of a revolutionary liquidation of the bourgeois class-rule. Socialism demands the disappearance of the division between mental and manual labour and I reiterate that the reflection theory never probes into the socio-historical matrix of this division and completely disregards the social foundation of this formation of the intellect. A construction of true socialism in our western setting is, in my view, a near impossibility without a correct

historical-materialist understanding of science and of the relationship of mental and manual labour.

However, in many other fields except that of science the theory of reflection does invaluable service. For an understanding of the psychology of everyday life it is indispensable, as Georg Lukacs has shown. And it has at least relative merits in the theory of aesthetics. What useful role it can play for understanding the labour process of production and of its management has been demonstrated in the comprehensive study of Winfried Hacker on the *General Psychology of Labour and Engineering*.⁵

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Materialism versus Empiricism

One of the objections Marxists frequently encounter in academic circles is that the whole juxtaposition of 'social existence (or social being)' to 'consciousness' amounts to a naive ontologism. What do we know of social existence except through our own consciousness of it? And how is it possible to guard against the hypostatization of all manner of ideas, preconceptions and standards of value in our approach and our description of what we think is 'social existence'? Yet we claim to judge and criticise all ideas, including our own, in the light of their determination from 'outside' consciousness. Not a single step could we take in carrying out our proclaimed principle without having to beg it. Before starting on our task we need a critical sifting of our own assumptions, and this necessarily requires a *prima philosophia* which Aristotelians seek in ontology, Kantians in epistemology. Thus, before we can start to follow out the postulate of materialism we find ourselves landed in idealism.

This objection must be met; it is no futile argument. In actual fact it is a precise description of what happens to the non-materialist bourgeois historians and sociologists. And for us Marxists it is in the countering of this argument that we strike the dividing-line between us and empiricism.

The entire profession of academic philosophy swears by the axiom that 'no empirical fact can ever prevail against an argument of logic'. The world of these empirical facts does not yield the normative standards on which they could be judged. To decide upon these standards is the exclusive prerogative of the epistemologists. On this both the epistemologists and the empiricists are agreed. It is an error to present the philosophical idealists and the prophets of empiricism as opponents to each other. They both play the same game, although they have separate parts in it.

It is essential to realise that Marx does not recognise this disjunction between 'logic' and 'empirical fact'. In his method he cuts across the traditional antithesis, and the important point is that he does so on strictly critical standards of thinking.

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Marx's Own Object Lesson

Marx's *Capital* bears the sub-title *Critique of Political Economy*, the same as formed the main title of the earlier study. We have already quoted Marx in the meaning of the term 'political economy': 'Let me point out once for all that by classical political economy I mean all the economists who, since the time of William Peity, have investigated the real internal framework (Zusammenhang) of bourgeois relations of production. . . .'⁶ Thus methodologically the subject-matter of Marx's critique is

not the historical reality of this or that form of social existence but, in the first instance, a particular mode of consciousness – namely, that of political economy; it is thoughts, not things. It is the concepts of 'value', 'capital', 'profit', 'rent', etc., as he found them defined and discussed in the writings of the economists. He does not deal directly with realities, does not elaborate concepts of his own which, as 'correct' ones, he would oppose to the 'false' ones of the economists. His approach is characteristically different. It is an approach to reality, but by way of the 'critique' of the historically given consciousness.

Following the Smith – Ricardian concept of 'value' Marx defines as 'commodity' the reality to which it refers: it is as 'an immense collection of commodities' that capitalist society 'appears',⁷ appears that is, as seen through the spectacles of the established mode of thinking. Marx then analyses commodity (not value) insisting all the time on finding in it the correspondence to the concepts and distinctions of the economists, and what he finds is – the historical origin of the seemingly timeless concept of 'value'. It is on this purely critical line of procedure, on the standards of the very concepts he is out to criticise, that he establishes the determination of a given mode of consciousness by social existence, and thereby, as the intended result, succeeds in uncovering the true reality of that social existence.

Thus, far from hypostatizing any concepts and assumptions, Marx, on the contrary, starts out from suspecting everybody's ideas and notions, his own included. They are the notions and ideas which the world of ours imposes upon us. To the empiricist they are the prime material from which he coins the 'truth'. Marx looks upon them all as potentially false, as the deceit of our world just as likely as a glimpse of truth.

The truth about our world is concealed to everybody under the spell of his false consciousness. When our academic opponents ask what we know of that social existence which we oppose to consciousness our answer would be: we know of it as little as you do. But we know how to find out. The way to do so is to trace the genetical origin of any current ideas and concepts, on the very standards of them. Social existence is that which we shall find determines these ideas and concepts.

Read as a statement of an inherent truth Marx's sentence is

worth less than nothing. It is a link-up of two questions each begging the other. To know how to judge consciousness we are referred to social existence, but to know about social existence we are referred to consciousness. Understood, however, as a methodological postulate the sentence says everything. For this interacting reference is precisely the movement we have to carry out in our actual search. The Marxist method in *Capital* is the continuous reference of concept to reality, of reality to ideology. Reality is put on trial upon the summons of established theory, and, in the face of reality, theory stands convicted as necessary, and necessarily, false consciousness.

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Necessary False Consciousness

This term is an all-important one in historical materialism. The various notions and ideas men form in their historical world and surroundings are of very different weight and consistency. Some are formed in a slipshod manner, held one day and dropped or modified the next. Some are cranky and neurotic, peculiar to one individual or another. Some are freakish, based on muddled thinking. Very little of value to a materialist can, as a rule, be gained from tracing ideas of this kind to their genetical condition. If the ideas are accidental themselves, their genetical basis is accidental too. The same is true resulting from a personal bias for this or that political or social cause. They do not reflect any of the necessities and impersonal forces governing the historical course of our social world. In order to penetrate into the foundations of this world and to learn how it holds together and how it could be

changed effectively we must seize upon 'necessary false consciousness' as subject-matter for materialistic critique.

Before Marx started on the writing of *Capital* he spent fifteen years reading the whole of economic literature available in the British Museum. These studies were on the line of purely inherent criticism of the theories as they stood, and were aimed at sifting the logically sound, unimpeachable core of economic thinking from anything traceable to faulty argument. The faulty parts he discarded and only on the hard, systematically valid core of the science did he base his *Critique of Political Economy*. With these critical siftings Marx filled copious notebooks, an important selection of which was posthumously edited by Kautsky in three volumes as *Theorien über den Mehrwert (Theories of Surplus-Value)*.⁸ According to Marx's own original plans they were to form the fourth volume of *Capital*.

Necessary false consciousness, then, is not faulty consciousness. It is, on the contrary, logically correct, inherently incorrigible consciousness. It is called false, not against its own standards of truth, but as against social existence. Roughly, the Marxist approach to historical reality can be understood as answering the question: what must the existential reality of society be like to necessitate such and such a form of consciousness? Consciousness fit to serve as the theme of enquiry of this kind must be socially valid, free from accidental flaws and personal bias. Necessary false consciousness, then, is (1) necessary in the sense of faultless systematic stringency.

Necessary false consciousness is (2) necessarily determined genetically. It is necessary by historical causation. This is a truth of existence, not immanently inferable from the consciousness concerned. It is the truth specific of materialism.

Necessary false consciousness is (3) necessarily false consciousness determined genetically so as to be false by necessity. Its falseness cannot be straightened out by means of logic and by conceptual adjustments. Historical materialism rejects the Kantian idea of epistemology as ultimate *arbitr philosophiae*. Consciousness is not the function of a 'mind' capable of absolute self-criticism on lines of pure logic. Pure logic itself does not control, but is controlled by, its timeless idea of the truth; of this idea itself there is no immanent criticism or confirmation. Necessary false consciousness is false, not as a fault of consciousness, but by fault

of the historical order of social existence causing it to be false. The remedy is in a change of this order, a change which would remove powerful and deep-rooted characteristics upon which that causation can be proved to rest. Marx lays great stress upon the fact that his critical disclosure of the fetish character of the value concept by no means does away with the spell of this concept which commodity production must exercise as long as it is allowed to remain in being. Man, in the social sense, is not wrong; he is deceived. He is innocent of his necessary false consciousness, and no amount of cruelty and slaughter ensuing from it among men can impair the eligibility of mankind for fighting its way through to a classless society.

Lastly, necessary false consciousness is (4) necessary pragmatically. It is necessary for the perpetuation of the social order in which it holds sway over men's minds. Where this order is based on social class rule the necessary false consciousness is the consciousness needed by the ruling classes to maintain their rule. On the other hand the false consciousness of ruling class is necessary false consciousness only so long as their rule is itself historically necessary and continues to be irreplaceable for reasons of the given stage of development of the productive forces. Necessary false consciousness has its roots, not in the class struggle, but in those conditions of historical necessity out of which class antagonism itself results. This might give rise to distinguishing necessary false consciousness from ideology understood in a narrow sense as accessory to class struggle. Marx has proved the value concept, for instance, to be the fetish concept of the form of commodity, and commodity exchange to precede the rise of class society. So long as a certain system of social class rule is historically necessary and irreplaceable for the reasons given the false consciousness of the ruling classes is truly representative of the interests of mankind. Political economy lost its innocence and intellectual integrity only when, in 1830, the illusion broke and the class character of bourgeois society became patent even to the bourgeoisie itself. The events of that year 'sounded the death knell of scientific bourgeois economics'.⁹ The 'bourgeois vulgar economics' which followed was 'no longer of scientific, but only of historical interest'.¹⁰ Bourgeois class consciousness, in other fields just as much as in economics, came to mean, not false, but falsified consciousness. This kind of class consciousness (the

only one that vulgar Marxists seem able to grasp) is, to Marx, a subject not of critique but of contempt. Being no longer necessary false consciousness it is useless for his methodical purpose.

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The Philosophical Issue

The reality, then, to which Marx critically opposes the various forms of consciousness of men is the historical one of their own social existence. It is not 'matter' or the 'external material world independent of any consciousness'. Our notions of things and the concepts in which we undertake their systematisation are historical products themselves. So are science, mathematics, natural philosophy, etc. It is for the historical materialist to account for the rise as well as the objective validity of science in history, not for the logic of natural science as a logic reflected from nature to supply the principles of historical materialism.

To reason about the world's existence is not one of a historical materialist's commitments. If ever he finds himself involved in arguments of this nature, the line to take is the historical-materialist critique of the standards of thinking on which the world's existence ever came to be questioned. But for a materialist to embark on dogmatic speculation of this style himself to combat idealism is like throwing oneself in the fire in order to extinguish it. The contrast between Marxist materialism and idealism is much more fundamental than that. It is between the Marxian mode of thinking and the whole of dogmatic traditional thinking, idealistic and materialistic. In fact, the issue can be expressed by the contrast of two incompatible conceptions of the truth itself.

Dogmatic thinking, in all its variants, is pledged to the conception of the truth as timeless; Marxist materialism con-

ceives the truth as timebound. Now, under a timeless conception of the truth, idealism is the only consistent standpoint of thinking. If the truth is timeless the spatio-temporal world cannot be ultimately real and the standards of distinction of the true and untrue, i.e. the standards of logic, must be of a transcendental, extra-temporal order. Under the conception of the truth as timebound, *per contra*, materialism is the only consistent standpoint of thinking. And, conversely, materialism is consistent with itself in method and doctrine only as a quest for timebound truth. Such truth is dialectical as it changes in its attainment.

Timebound truth is an existential, not a cognitive, ideal (the term 'existential' understood on a social scale, not the individual one of so-called 'existentialism'). It is a truth of being, not of thinking. The predicates of 'false' or 'correct' are used by Marx, of consciousness in relation to the social reality of its class-holders, not to a concept in relation to an 'object of cognition'. The qualification of that existential reality as 'social' derives from the fact that no individual ever commands the conditions of his own existence.

Hitherto in history social existence has always been such as to necessitate false consciousness. Fulfilment of the ideal of timebound truth would be through the creation of a kind of social order allowing for correct consciousness. Such a social order could, by factual implication, only be a classless one. It would still imply continuous change and not, as by the inconsistency of Hegel's idealism, imply changelessness. The historical potentiality of such an order and the way of its political realisation are explored by accounting for the necessary false consciousness in present and past history. Historical, as distinct from immanent, critique of given forms of consciousness is, thus, the theoretical part of the practical quest for timebound truth; it implies the unity of theory and practice. In this quest the postulate of timebound truth, which is for social consciousness to be in keeping with social being, is the critical principle guiding the road towards social classlessness, the 'socialist road', as say the Chinese. This should make it abundantly clear that this postulate must never be presented in a dogmatic form as a hypostasis, lest the rational foundation be taken away from the materialist position.

Natural science, like mathematics, mathematical physics, etc.,

is a functional part of a particular form of the social life-process. Its logic is based on the abstraction from our own timebound existential condition, or, as we have said, on the abstraction of society from itself. It is from this abstraction, not from any absolute root and spontaneous 'intellectual' font, that the logic of science derives its character of timelessness. There is, in other words, a timebound cause for timeless logic. In this manner of thinking, it must be said, we understand dialectical materialism and historical materialism as synonymous terms. From the materialistic standpoint, human history is part of natural history and nature is a historical, evolutionary process. As Marx put it in the opening pages of *The German Ideology*: 'We know only of one single science, the science of history!'¹¹

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The Essentially Critical Power of Historical Materialism

Turning now to our own treatment of the intellectual formation of societies based on commodity production we can safely claim that our approach is historical materialistic. We do not merely assert that cognitive concepts are derivatives from material being, we actually derive them one by one from being, not the being of external nature and the material world, but from the *social being* of the historical epochs in which these concepts arise and play their part.

I maintain, moreover, that this derivation has its demonstrative strength in the fact that it satisfies historical materialism in its capacity of a methodological postulate. In the

entire tradition of theoretical philosophy grounded in these concepts themselves, from classical antiquity down to our own times, it is regarded as an absolute impossibility that these concepts could ever be derived from spatio-temporal reality. They are severed from such reality by an insuperable gap; taken in their own logical meaning they are universal and abstract, containing no vestige of the world of sense-perception. And yet they carry all the knowledge of the external world that bears conceptual certainty for us. To try to challenge the logically unshakable conviction of this philosophical reasoning by the materialistic contention that our ideas, including the non-empirical concepts of the pure intellect, are nevertheless derivable from the world in time and space, would not only be utterly lost on these philosophers but, in their eyes, amount to a self-avowal of philosophical ineptness. Any candidate advancing such a proposition in his philosophical examination would certainly fail, or be regarded as a psychiatric curiosity. If he quoted as his authority a person by the name of Marx, he might at best evoke the response: 'Well then, prove that it is as you say or else never repeat the like again!'

Hence, our most elementary convictions as Marxists and historical materialists count for nothing unless they can be proved to be true — true in a way to convince even one of those philosophical archetypes if, indeed, he could allow himself to be so open-minded. For historical materialism, then, to be the political weapon in the proletarian class-struggle which Marx intended it to be, we must think of it, not in terms of a doctrine or of a world-view (*Weltanschauung*) or any other dogmatic fixture, but purely as a methodological postulate.

In the preface to the first edition of *Capital* Marx speaks of 'My standpoint from which the development of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history',¹² and this is, indeed, the only standpoint fully consistent with a materialist conception of history. But he also explains that 'in the analysis of economic forms neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of assistance. The power of abstraction must replace both.'¹³ Although we move in the field of natural history we move in a part of it where only argument of reason can lead us to the truth of the facts. Among these facts we have chosen the conceptual mode of thought and its sequels as our subject of

investigation and we would claim that the Marxian standpoint applies as much to the intellectual formation of society as it does to the economic one. And, like Marx, we have to revert to our powers of abstraction to carry on the argument of reason required to arrive at the essence of our subject-matter. What power of conviction can we rely upon that our argument of reason may carry?

The conceptual mode of thought arose in history as the basis of intellectual labour inherently divided from manual labour. Intellectual labour of this kind has one common and all-pervading mark: the norm of timeless universal logic. This is a characteristic which makes it incompatible with history, social or natural. Timeless concepts are ahistorical in their meaning and present themselves as historical miracles like the 'Greek miracle' actually so-called for starting conceptual reasoning in Western history. Of course, this ahistorical mode of thinking is itself a historical phenomenon. And so long as its timeless and non-empirical concepts fail to be understood historically, history itself remains incomprehensible. Our analysis has shown, however, that the timelessness of the separate intellect is necessary false consciousness which conceals the historical origin of its constitutive concepts and, consequently, their historical limit. The features characteristic of 'pure reason', the *notus*, the *intellectus purus*, are objectively deceptive. The true nature of the abstract intellect is, from its appearance to itself, totally unrecognisable. Despite the impression to the contrary its abstractness is not grounded in an intellectual origin, nor is its universality, nor its logical virginity, nor its sublime integrity or even divinity. Belief in an unbridgeable gap severing the intellectual world from the world in time and space is erroneous, but is not caused by personal and subjective deception, but by an unavoidable illusion.

We have been able to disclose the origin of the pure intellectual concepts from the spatio-temporal reality of social being, their character as reflections of the abstraction enshrined in money, hence their nature as offshoots from the reification upon which hinges the cohesion of exchange society, their essential use as forms of socialised thinking, their antithetical relation to manual labour, their accessory link with the class division of society.

These insights into the true nature of the intellectual formation

of bourgeois society are accessible only to historical materialism owing to the critical character of its method. The truth revealed on the strength of this standpoint of thinking is not impartial, it is utterly revolutionary. It critically liquidates all the credence on which the ruling classes must rely for the maintenance of their rule. It is calculated to prove the potentiality of social classlessness. The convincing strength that our investigation may be able to claim does not rest exclusively with the logical and genetic derivation of the abstract intellect and its cognitive powers; it is also helped by the degree of comprehensibility that human history gains in the process. The certainty attaching to historical materialistic enquiry, in other words, attaches to the reciprocal reference of consciousness to social being and of social being to consciousness that we pointed out as the essence of Marx's basic methodological principles. Above all, it must be seen that it is not the recourse to the acclaimed neutrality of intellect and intellectual judgement but, on the contrary, the revolutionary commitment of our exposition that yields the truth.

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 30. Marx - Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1934) p. 246.
 31. Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 172-3.
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- 1974). I refer the reader to this outstanding study. See also M. J. E. Cooley, *Computer-Aided Design: Its Nature and Implications* (Richard: Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (Technical and Supervisory Section), 1972).
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