

From Marx to Aristotle, from Aristotle to Us

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The contradictions contained by the equivalent form require a more profound examination with respect to its particularities. . . .

The first particularity which strikes us when we reflect on the equivalent form is this, that use value becomes the form of appearance [*Erscheinungsform*] of its opposite, value. . . .

The equivalent form therefore possesses a second particularity: in it, concrete labor becomes the form of appearance of its opposite, abstract human labor. . . .

But because this concrete labor, tailoring, counts exclusively as the expression of undifferentiated human labor, it possesses the characteristic of being identical with other kinds of labor, such as the labor embodied in the linen. Consequently, although, like all other commodity-producing labor, it is the labor of private individuals, it is nevertheless labor in its directly social form. It is precisely for this reason that it presents itself to us in the shape of a product which is directly exchangeable with other commodities. Thus the equivalent form has a third particularity: private labor takes the form of its opposite, namely labor in its directly social form.

The two particularities of the equivalent form we have just developed will become still clearer if we go back to the great investigator who was the first to analyze the value form like so many other forms of thought, society and nature. I mean Aristotle.

In the first place, he states quite clearly that the money-form of the commodity is only a more developed aspect of the simple form of value, i.e. of the expression of the value of a commodity in some other commodity chosen at random, for he says:

5 beds = 1 house
 (*klinai pente anti oikias*)

is indistinguishable from

5 beds = a certain amount of money
 (*klinai pente anti . . . osou ai pente klinai*)

He further sees that the value-relation which provides the framework for this expression of value itself requires that the house should be qualitatively identified/equated [*qualitativ gleichgesetzt wird*] with the bed, and that these things being distinct to the senses [*diese sinnliche verschiedene Dinge*], could not be compared with each other as commensurable magnitudes if they lacked this essential equality/identity [*ohne solche Wesensgleichheit*]. "There can be no exchange," he says, "without equality, and no equality without commensurability" [*ou', isotés mé ousés summetrias*]. Here, however, he falters, and abandons the further analysis of the form of value. "It is however, in reality, impossible [*tê mén oum alétheia adunaton*] that such unlike things can be commensurable," i.e. qualitatively equal/identical. This form of equation [*Gleichsetzung*] can only be something foreign to the true nature of the things, it is therefore only "a makeshift for practical needs."

Aristotle therefore himself tells us what prevented any further analysis: the lack/defect/imperfection [*am Mangel*] in [his] concept of value. What is the equal/identical [*das Gleiche*], that is to say the common substance [*die gemeinschaftliche Substanz*], which the house represents from the point of view of the bed, in the value expression for the bed? Such a thing, in truth, cannot exist, says Aristotle. But why not? Toward the bed the house represents something equal/identical, insofar as it represents what is really equal/identical, both in the bed and the house. And that is human labor.

However, Aristotle himself was unable to extract this fact, that, in the form of commodity values, all labor is expressed as equal/identical human labor and therefore as equivalent [*als gleiche menschliche Arbeit und daher als gleich geltend*], by inspection from the form of value, because Greek society was founded upon the labor of slaves, hence had as its natural basis the inequality of men and of their labor-powers. The secret of the expression of value, namely the equality/identity and equivalence [*die gleichheit und gleiche Gültigkeit*] of all kinds of labor because and insofar as they are human labor in general [*menschliche Arbeit überhaupt*] could not be deciphered until the concept of human equality had already acquired the permanence of popular prejudice. This however becomes possible only

in a society where the commodity-form is the universal form of the product of labor, hence the dominant social relation is the relation between men as possessors of commodities. Aristotle's genius is displayed precisely by his discovery of a relation of equality/identity in the value relation of commodities. Only the historical limitation inherent in the society in which he lived prevented him from finding out what "in reality" this relation of equality/identity consisted of.¹

THE "secret" of the expression of value: Marx is certain, we know, of having deciphered its truth. He is certain of having found "that which is equal" at the bases of the quantitative proportions of the exchange of objects, and also of not having been restrained by the historical limitation of his society. The cited fragment is sufficient witness to the spirit of his solution and to the method followed, both strikingly present all through the first chapter of *Capital*. How could there be exchange of objects in determinate and stable proportions; how could one write $aX=bY$, if there was not between the two exchanged objects, X and Y, something *common* and if this thing had not been *present*, contained in the *same* quantum? This thing is a "common substance"; exchange as quantitatively determined exchange presupposes an "essential equality/identity" of the exchanged objects—an essential homogeneity. There must be one common Substance/Essence, the same here and there, and, of course, *essentially* quantifiable—so that one could exchange five beds for one house, so that the expression "X meters of linen = Y ounces of gold" makes sense. This Substance/Essence is, and cannot but be, the one thing alone which the exchanged objects possess in common when one abstracts from their sensible differences. What these objects possess in common outside of their utility or use value—everyone knows that in Marx the relations of

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, translated by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 147–152. The English translation is modified according to Castoriadis's own direct translation from the second German edition. All transliteration from the Greek is also his.—Tr.

exchange are based on quantitative determinations—is their existence as “the products of human labor.” It is therefore the labor they contain that is this common Substance/Essence; and it is a quantum of this “condensed,” “congealed” Substance/Essence in each object that determines the proportion of its exchange. But *which* labor and *which* quantum? In its actual reality as “concrete labor” (of the weaver, mason, etc.) labor is heterogeneous; and the quantum of labor “contained” in a meter of cloth produced by a machine is different from a quantum of labor “contained” in a meter of cloth woven on an old loom. It must therefore be a question of—it cannot but be a question of—another labor, one that, to tell the truth, no one has ever seen or done: simple, abstract, and socially necessary labor. “La substance de la valeur et la grandeur de la valeur sont maintenant déterminées. Reste à analyser la forme de la valeur,” added Marx to the French edition of *Capital*.

Marx: The Common Substance

The first chapter of *Capital* is metaphysics. The question posed by classical political economy, why are objects exchanged according to one proportion and not another, is reformulated by Marx in his own fashion, in a formulation that already contained or predetermined the response. “What is the equal/identical [*das Gleiche*], that is to say the common substance [*die gemeinschaftlichen Substanz*], that represents the house for the bed in the expression of the value of the bed?” The reformulation has its own unique characteristic; the labor-value of classical political economy, of Smith and Ricardo, does not invoke the category of substance, and if one finds the word there it will certainly be only an innocent usage. That commodities are exchanged in proportion to the labor cost of their production, that is what the classical economists want to say: if someone would propose to exchange a product that cost me ten hours of work against one of his products that would cost only nine, I would refuse

the proposition. And by means of competition the relationship of the respective temporal “means” of labor will regulate the relationship of exchanged quantities. Thus labor-value, before the immense (and insurmountable) complications that create the differences of individual labors, “capital,” “earth,” “time,” etc., is an affair of common sense and even a *simple* tautology: who would give ten to have nine?

Marx reformulates the question in his own fashion, which places it directly on the terrain of *metaphysical* tautology. That which one observes, the relationship of the exchanged quantities, “exchange value,” is only that which one observes: the quantitative expression of *something* itself nonobservable at the base of the observed appearance. The evident reasoning of the classical economists is superficial and secondary; it reproduces under a more elaborate form the common sense of the participants in the exchange (mediated by competition, etc.), which only takes up in the representation that which presents and represents (*darstellen* and *vorstellen*) the “something in common,” the common substance of the two commodity objects each of which already—as a useful object and a determined quantity—is form of appearance (*Erscheinungsform*) and presentation (*Darstellung*) of the substance of the other. That which is important in the first place is the knowledge of what the commodity *is*: now, the commodity not only *is* not exchange value but “in itself,” according to Marx, it *does not have* exchange value; exchange value is the *relationship* of two commodities (and ultimately of all commodities to the general equivalent, money). If this relation is all that it is, it cannot but be the effect of something immanent, inherent, characteristic of commodity A and of commodity B because of which the proportions of exchange are what they are.

The few economists like Bailey who have attempted to do an analysis of the form of value [*Wertform*] could not arrive at any result: first of all because they always confused the form of value with value; second, because, under the vulgar influence of

bourgeois practice they were preoccupied exclusively with quantitative determination.²

One cannot evidently speak of quantity without asking: quantity *of what*? There is quantity only of substance. And one ought not confuse the form of the value of commodities and the value of commodities. The form of the value of commodities is an “expression of value” (*Wertausdruck*) by means of which the value of commodities appears or manifests itself, not *in persona* (no metaphysical substance worthy of the name has ever done this or could have done this), but in and by means of a relation or relationship. This relationship, this form, is exchange value, which deploys itself logicohistorically as “simple or accidental form,” “total or developed form,” “general form,” and finally “money form.” All these forms are only manifestations, expressions, presentations, forms of appearance—but of what? All expression is the expression *of* something. Here: of Value. We begin, necessarily, with the phenomena, but we seek their essence. “In fact we started from exchange value, or the exchange relation of commodities, in order to track down the value that lay hidden within it. We must now return to this form of appearance [*Erscheinungsform*] of value.”³ What then is Value? It is a “common social substance”—simple labor, etc.—of which each particular product is a “crystal”: each product is value as far as it is crystallization, congelation, gelatin, deposit, etc. of a fragment or part of this substance. In order that the *alterity* of men and their labors be reduced to a simple (quantitative) difference there must be a homogeneous Substance/Essence. This essence in question, here and there, must be the same: Simple, Abstract, Socially Necessary Labor.

Substance and essence (*Substanz* and *Wesen*) are not innocent words, and above all not in the language of German post-Hegelianism. Marx was not furthermore an innocent author.

² *Ibid.*, p. 141, n. 17.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 139

And he did not utilize his terms innocently. He spoke, by the way, precisely at the beginning of *Capital*, of his “coquetry” with Hegel; it is rather this expression itself that is coquetry, for the first chapter of *Capital* is in all its parts Hegelian. It is furthermore *also* something else: it is *chemistry*. If there is “coquetry” in Marx it is with respect to the great chemists of the first half of the nineteenth century: the chemical “metaphors” that he utilizes all the time are far from being simple metaphors. The Substance Labor in this chapter—and in all of *Capital*—is crystallized in products; it is deposited or congealed in them; it exists as an amorphous gelatin, it is decanted from one product to another (for example, the wear and tear of the instruments of production passes their value into the product).⁴ Just as there is a dialectic of chemistry (exposed by Engels in *Anti-Dühring* with the approval of Marx) there is also a chemistry of the social dialectic.

This chemistry is evidently alchemy: an alchemy that will permit, as we will see, the transformation of the social-historical into physiology and vice versa.

What then is, “in truth,” Simple Labor, Abstract and Socially Necessary? What is the mode of being of this Substance/Essence, and how does one manage to isolate it in a pure state (chemically) or to determine it fully (philosophically)? That which is given in the vulgar world of appearances is not Labor but heterogeneous and incomparable labors, of

⁴ The problem of value is itself unfolded in terms of a series of “conservation laws,” at least initially. This conservation suffers a setback on a second level by the devaluation of capital as a result of technical changes that reduce the value of existing instruments of production. Marx insists on this a great deal, as we know in the *Grundrisse*, but much less in *Capital* (“volume 3”), and this is not at all accidental. To take devaluation fully into account—or, more generally, technological change—would actually render impossible a calculation of value in general, and in particular would blow into open the inconsistency of the reasoning leading to the pretended “fall in the rate of profit.” Cf. my texts “Sur la dynamique du capitalisme,” *Socialisme ou barbarie* 24 (August 1963): 4–5 and 25 (January 1954): 63–64. Also the “Introduction” to my *La société bureaucratique* (Paris: Union Général d'Éditions, 1973), pp. 26–27. I will come back in detail to this point, the ensemble of the theory of value in Marx and its being anchored in the Hegelian interpretation of the category of substance in my *La dynamique du capitalisme*, to be published in 1978.

different crafts, each exercised under different conditions here and there, by individuals different in force, capacity, diligence, etc. To pass from this phenomenal diversity to the unity of Labor Substance/Essence requires multiple operations of *reduction* (in all the senses of this term). We are going to see, shortly, that these operations are “in truth” impossible, that Value and its Substance (as well as the rest of its grandeur), far from being determined, are rather nebulous enigmas and that this situation is profoundly anchored in the antinomic character of the thought of Marx.

The reduction of effectively expended working time to “socially necessary” labor time would not be a problem worth lingering over if it were simply a question of affirming that it is not sufficient for a shoemaker to be more lazy or less skillful in order that the value of shoes he fabricates be raised. More exactly, the major problem would be the same but its discussion would not permit the unveiling of a series of insurmountable contradictions in Marx. To speak of socially necessary labor time implies that one knows what “socially necessary” signifies. However, of the many significations of this expression concerning capitalist society, none is tenable. Perhaps one might consider as “socially necessary” the time required by the labor carried out in the *most* efficacious enterprise; because it may be that the other enterprises are behind the progress of technology and economy and one might be able to say, absolutely speaking, that the labor time one finds there is wasted without necessity. Or perhaps one might consider the opposite view, that “socially necessary” is the time required by the enterprise *least* efficacious of all those which must still function to satisfy the “needs of society.” In effect these needs would no longer be satisfied *ceteris paribus* if this enterprise (the “marginal” enterprise) should disappear, and the economy would no longer have consecrated to the production of the product “socially necessary” labor time in the sense of “volume 3” of *Capital*. Finally, one might consider as “socially necessary” the average time dedicated to production, keeping an account of

all the enterprises of the branch in question.⁵ The first interpretation may be eliminated because it leads to unreal and incoherent results. If values were determined by production under optimal conditions, all suboptimal enterprises would be eliminated and the optimal enterprise would be in a situation of monopoly, in which case there would be no question of a “law of value.” Or, on the other hand, where the optimal enterprises would not be able to satisfy the “social need,” it would be demand that would determine at the same time the level of production and prices, thus permitting the existence of a range of enterprises of declining efficiency up to an enterprise (or class of enterprises) that would function without profit or with negligible profit. One is thus brought back to the second interpretation, which allows nothing to survive of the “law of value” and leads straight to the neoclassical conception of profit as a differential “quasi-rent.” (The “marginal” enterprise realizes zero or negligible profit, and the other one that represents the difference between their costs of production and the price determined by the costs of production of the “marginal” enterprise.) To have a “theory of labor-value,” therefore, only the third interpretation is left: “socially necessary” time is *average* time. But this “average” time is an empty abstraction, a simple result of a fictional arithmetic operation that has no effectivity and no efficacy in the real functioning of the economy: there is no real or logical reason why the value of a product should be determined by the result of a division that no one makes or can make. So that the phantom might acquire a bit of clarity, one must suppose that enterprises working in “average” conditions constitute the overwhelming majority of the branch in question. That is not and

⁵ It is this meaning that is at the center of Marx’s attention and is one that he most often formulates explicitly. But the first is not totally absent from his thought (cf. “volume 3,” where normal sometimes signifies optimal) and the second is present in the *Grundrisse* as well as other parts of “volume 3.” (I write “volume 3” in quotation marks because what we possess actually outside of volume 1 of *Capital* are arbitrary selections by different editors from among a mass of manuscript their author was never able to complete and publish.)

never has been the case in capitalist reality. But let us leave reality—which is without any importance, according to contemporary “Marxists.” It is the “model” that is intrinsically incoherent and even contradictory—as a model of a capitalist economy as well as that of an economy of “simple commodity production.”

In order that the “average” enterprises be typical and in the majority, it is necessary to suppose either that there is no change in technology or that (and Marx in effect explicitly postulates this in several places) “competition” constantly and *effectively* brings back effective times to the average time. The first hypothesis entails a theory of value that is relevant only for an economy *without* technical change, for a technologically static economy. But a technologically static capitalism is pure fiction and is not that which is exhibited in *Capital*, where the topic is the movement of capitalism ruled by the “law of value” and dominated by a perpetual upheaval of technology.⁶ One must therefore suppose (and include among the axioms of the theory) a form of competition sufficiently powerful so that whatever the leaps and bounds and the nature of technical change, the effective times (or productivities) will be successfully brought back in all periods, in all branches, in the great majority of cases, to the average time. That would mean that “competition,” far from pertaining to a “superficial phenomenon” of the economy, is an essential and even supreme mediation. But such power of “competition” is not conceivable except with a very extensive capitalist market and by means of the most delirious postulates of neoclassical economics: there must be a perfect and instantaneous mobility of capital sums and laborers; an absence of all blockages at the entrance of

⁶ Actually, a static technology is necessarily implied by the construction of the “law of value.” Without the hypothesis of such a technology, the instruments of production no longer have, in the general case, a definite value. One can leave to Althusser, Kidron, Mandel, Sweezy, et al. the cares of constructing a “model” of capitalism with static technology and of showing how the increase of the rate of exploitation, the growth of industrial reserve armies, or the decline of the profit rate are produced there.

branches of production; the existence in each branch of a host of enterprises, each one being negligible in relation to the total demand of the branch; the “transparence” of the market and the instantaneity and liberty of information, etc. In any case a capitalism both “developed” *and* “pure” is necessary, one that is established and functioning according to the model of “competition.” But if such a capitalism were established, “the law of value” could no longer be applied, and that according to Marx himself: commodities would no longer be exchanged according to the “labor time socially necessary” for their production—that is to say, according to their values—but according to their “price of production.” (This is the famous pseudoproblem of the pseudoequalization of the rate of profit, and that of the relation between volume 1 of *Capital* and “volume 3.”) For the law of value to apply, it is necessary that there not be capital, for the existence of capital entails (under the stated conditions) an equal rate of profit between branches, and therefore a divergence between “values” and “prices.”⁷ Is then the “law of value” valid where there is exchange but not yet capital—that is to say, under “simple commodity production”? But simple commodity production permits neither the determination, sociologically *and* economically, of “socially necessary labor time” for the production of a product—nor the claim that “exchange values” (the proportions according to which products are exchanged) are regulated by their time. There is not in the interior of each branch the degree of competition among producers who would effectively equalize the labor time required for each product, even less is there such competition *among* branches. In order that the law of labor value apply to an economy of simple commodity production (roughly an economy of artisan

⁷ It is of course a question of *capital* in Marx’s sense—not of the physical instruments of production. The equal rate of profit among branches is another unreal and unrealizable postulate of classical (and neoclassical) economics adopted by Marx, and for the same reasons as theirs: the necessity of a “rational” treatment of economic phenomena. I will come back to this in detail in *La dynamique du capitalisme*.

exchange), it would be necessary, for example, that the shoemakers of Saturday become tailors on Monday if they have ascertained on Sunday's market that the "rate of exchange" shoes/clothes is favorable for the tailors and unfavorable for them. In short: when *one part* of the conditions of validity of the "law of value" are given under the form of competition, etc., one is in the midst of developed capitalist production that implies *ipso facto* exchange not according to "values" but according to "production prices." And when exchange is not yet subsumed under the laws of capital and the equalization of the rate of profit—that is, under simple commodity production—it is not possible to define an *average* "socially necessary labor time," because the essential mediation for the effective domination of an average time, "competition" of the capitalist type, is not present. When, therefore, is the "law of labor value" valid? In a sense, never, under no set of social and historical conditions that either exist in fact or are constructable in a coherent manner. In another sense: always, in the past, present, and future. Because it is a consequence of the position of this Substance, Labor, that is there from the beginning to the end of human history and is crystallized in all its products—that may or may not be "exchangeable," and exchangeable according to this or that mode; these modes concern the form of value that one should not confound with *the* Value, any more than one should confound the substance H₂O with ice, water, or steam.

The situation is essentially the same concerning the notion of *Simple* Labor. In the world of phenomena almost all effective labors are complex or qualified. (The degree of this "qualification" or its extent are of little import; it suffices for there to be a serious problem here that *some* labor pertaining to the "base" of the economy be qualified.) Now, says Marx, complex (or qualified) labor "counts only as *intensified* [*potenziert*], or rather *multiplied* simple labour, so that a smaller quantity of complex labour is considered equal to a larger quantity of

simple labour.”⁸ How do we know? Through a postulate metaphysical and at the same time physiological. Because “the value of a commodity represents human labour pure and simple, the expenditure of human labour in general. . . . It is the expenditure of simple labour-power, i.e. of the labour-power possessed in his bodily organism by every ordinary man, on the average, without being developed in any special way.”⁹ If this were so, Simple Labor would evidently be the same in all societies and all historical epochs: with Australian aborigines, the Gauls, Russian serfs, and workers of Detroit. Marx, conscious of the difficulty, also adds: “*Simple average labour*, it is true, varies in character in different countries and at different cultural epochs, but in a particular society it is given.”¹⁰ What is a given society? Do Manchester in 1800 and Manchester in 1978 involve the same “given society”? It is *necessary* that they do so, otherwise the whole edifice of “economic laws” that is supposed to govern the evolution of capitalism (presupposing the *identity* of Simple Labor throughout this evolution, because presupposing an *invariant* measure of values) will go up in smoke. It is of little doubt, however, that if one admits that this “ordinary man” undeveloped “in any special way” differs from one society to another, that the difference implied by the comparison of the Manchester of 1978 with the Manchester of 1800 will be greater than that of the latter with the London of the fourteenth century. And what is this “character” of Simple Labor that changes according to countries and epochs? Marx had affirmed a few lines above that two crafts “although they are qualitatively different produce activities, are both a productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands, etc., and in this sense both human labour.”¹¹ But if it is by virtue of this

⁸ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 135.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

that different crafts are “human labor,” then the substance is the physiology of man; we can then reduce to the multiples of the same Simple Labor the labor of a driller at Renault and of a Polynesian fisherman, and even to mention different countries and epochs becomes redundant.

But let us remain in the interior of a “given society.” How can we operate the “reduction” of complex labor to Simple Labor? “Experience shows,” says Marx, “that this reduction is made constantly.” But that which occurs in experience is never more than a reduction in fact, and it cannot be taken, without a vicious circle, as expressing a substantial/essential commensurability in right, of diverse varieties of labor. The reduction that is made in experience is *not* the reduction of all labors to Simple Labor, it is the “reduction” of all labors to *money* (or to another “general equivalent” or to a legal tender socially instituted), which is absolutely not the same thing, but is something that we have already known without the “theory of value.” The “theory of value” was *supposed* to explain this fact, instead of using it to prop up its own existence as a theory. And how could the theory of value ever explain the “reduction” in question? Perhaps one day physiology or chemistry will be able to say how, to what degree, and in what sense the labor of the lace-maker—as the “expenditure of brain, muscle, and nerve”—is intrinsically the multiple or the submultiple of the labor of the miner or the secretary, how it represents a different quantum of the same Substance/Essence, and how the different labors are to furnish the corresponding coefficients of conversion. But Marx is not thinking of such a possibility: “The various proportions in which different kinds of labour are reduced to simple labour as their unit of measurement are established by a social process that goes on behind the backs of the producers; these proportions therefore appear to the producers to have been handed down by tradition.”¹² What is this “social process” and what can it be? The only such process that

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

one could conceive of (and to which, according to all evidence, Marx implicitly refers) should be that of the confrontation of the products of different labors on the market—therefore, one more time, “competition,” which would indirectly operate this reduction. (By referring back the products to the producers, the supply of a product becomes analyzable in terms of the supply of the types of labor its production requires.) But for this to be the case, it does not even suffice that competition should be sovereign on the market of products, it is necessary that it should be sovereign also on the market of labor. In other words, it is necessary that the “production” of diverse varieties of labor should be subsumed by the same (hypothetical) mechanisms that rule the production of any commodities whatsoever on a competitive market where homogeneous products are of a large scale and are limited only by consideration of profitability. Such cannot be the case in simple commodity production where labor power is not a commodity, nor is it produced like a commodity. Such also cannot be the case under capitalist production, where the “possessors of the commodity labor power,” workers expropriated of everything except their labor power, cannot conduct themselves in this regard, as the producers of any commodity whatsoever, and for example transform their simple labor power into qualified labor power because this would have a price superior to its “value.” Labor (simple or complex) is of course not “labor power,” but it is indissolubly linked to it, not only in general but specifically: there is no labor of a cutter without the labor power of a cutter. One cannot augment the quantity of labor of the cutter in the economy without augmenting the quantity of the labor power of the cutter. Now, contrary to the thesis that Marx considered the cornerstone of his theory—and which in effect is this cornerstone—labor power *is not* a commodity like the others, for multiple and fundamental reasons I have for a long time stressed,¹³ and also because its

¹³ Cf. the texts cited in note 4 and also “Le mouvement révolutionnaire sous le capitalisme moderne,” *Socialisme ou barbarie* 31 (December 1960): 70–81.

“production” cannot be accomplished under the same conditions as that of other commodities: it is not and cannot be regulated by its “possessor” any which way solely according to criteria of “profitability.” If for one reason or another the production of shoes leaves to the producers of this article a profit superior to the average, new capital will enter this branch, postulates (wrongly) Marx as well as the whole classical and neoclassical economics, up until the moment when the rate of profit of this branch will be “equalized” to the average rate of profit. But if the “price” of the labor power of airplane pilots were superior to the “value” of this labor power, it would be absurd to suppose (as in effect does political economy even today) that sufficient numbers will successfully undertake the relevant qualifying maneuvers to push the “price” down to the “value.” Evidently the question will not be resolved but *superseded* at the limit of development of capitalism such that Marx anticipates: If capitalism *effectively* transformed all labors in the heart of great industry into nonqualified labor, it would indeed have nothing more than Simple Labor (and simple labor power); the “reduction” would be *really* accomplished and the discussion of its possibility would become simply academic subtlety. Such is not the case. One has here again a theoretical-speculative thread leading the “necessities” of the postulates of the economic theory of Marx to the “necessities” of his orientation and to the “previsions” to which all this must lead to take on an appearance of coherence.

Finally the same thing goes for the reduction of effective concrete labor to Abstract Labor. We cannot go into this problem here. Let us only note that within the confines of two pages Abstract Labor is described in turn as “the productive expenditure of brain, of muscles . . . ,” “the expenditure *in the physiological* sense, of human force, and having *this status of equal human labour*, it constitutes the value of commodities,” and “a social unit . . . [that] cannot be *manifested* except in social transactions” (my emphases). This abstraction, is it then

“physiological” or “social,” or perhaps this distinction does not exist? Nerves and muscles, are they “forms of appearance” of the social? Or the social, is it “expression” and “presentation” of nerves and muscles?

Actually, that which underlies the thought of Marx is *not* simply the consideration of a particular social-historical institution, capitalism, resting on the effective mechanism that assures the domination of “socially necessary and average labor time” as the measure of the quantum of Value contained in the commodity, or on the “reduction” of all labor to Simple, Abstract Labor. This institution, whose “relative,” historically particular, and specific character Marx was the first to vigorously demonstrate against the still existing platitudes of bourgeois economics, was in fact for him—in another sense—*also* an absolute *significance*, to the extent that the essential determinations of social life and human history are *finally* manifested in it and by it. Just as “industry is the open book of human faculties” (therefore one knows next to nothing about these faculties so long as industry is not open, developed); just as labor, in a formula of the purest Aristotelian casting, materializes “the faculties that *originally lie sleeping* in productive man” (my emphases); and only the through and through transformation of man into “producer” completely awakens the dormant faculties, actualizes the *telos* of man; just as exchange value of the capitalist economy is the epiphany of Value, the presentation/manifestation/expression/figuration of that which was always there, since always and for always, but only in potentiality [*en puissance*], *dunamei*: Labor. “Le produit du travail acquiert la forme marchandise dès que sa Valeur acquiert la forme de la valeur d’échange, opposée à sa forme naturelle . . . ”¹⁴ Value, whatever else it may be, can only acquire [*acquérir*] such and such a form if it is *already there*. The

¹⁴ Karl Marx, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Pleiade, 1965), vol. 1, p. 593; emphases added. This is a sentence added by Marx to the French version of *Capital* by Roy. For Marx’s view of this version and of his own contribution to it, cf. his preface in *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 105.

paradox, the antinomy of the thought of Marx, is that Labor, which modifies everything and modifies its very self constantly, is at the same time thought under the category of Substance/Essence. It is something that unalterably subsists, that can “appear” under such and such form or take such and such an “expression” (concrete opposed to abstract labor, production of “use values” opposed to production of commodities), but in itself is not modified, not altered, and *subsists* as an immutable fundament of changing attributes and determinations. In this sense capitalism is historically and philosophically privileged. History, that is man—but man is essentially Labor, and this is manifested only when freed from all “useless lumber” and from all anterior “nonsense,” from all “accidental” factors. The identity of this Substance/Essence can finally prevail, triumphally affirming itself, in and by capitalist production. For this to take place, the Economy must become sovereign; the identity of the Substance Labor itself can be thought only by means of the “equalization” of products and labors that operates in great industry, in mass production, in the market, in competition. But Marx says explicitly that all that is essential *has been already there* as early as the first exchange, as early as the “simple form” of Value. Value was already there as early as “exchange” itself. But there is *always* exchange where there is society, including under “primitive communism”: the magician furnishes his incantations and receives a part of the game. It exists—if one would dare to say—even “before” society; in any case there is, according to Marx, Value for Robinson Crusoe, except that for him it is “transparent”: “like a good Englishman” (that is to say: as a rational *homo economicus*) he keeps a “detailed” “stockbook” that contains “the labour-time that specific quantities of [his] products have on average cost him. . . . those relations contain all the essential determinants of value.”¹⁵ And the same thing will be valid for the future communist society, this “association

¹⁵ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 170.

of free men, working with the means of production held in common . . . according to a common plan. All the characteristics of Robinson's labour are repeated here, but with the difference that they are *social* instead of individual."¹⁶

This Substance, the privilege of the economy, is in the end an instrument or vehicle of Reason. This is why from the start (though without being planned) the *critique of the economy*, of the economy *as such*, as a mode of the relationship of human beings to one another, rapidly becomes for Marx the critique of *political* (meaning bourgeois) economy, its refutation as the ideological and mystified representation of *economic reality*, finally becoming *economic theory*, "true" theory opposed to false theories. This is so because the Economy is (or seems to be) rationality-rationalization, that is to say ultimately the kernel of identity in a heterogeneous and multicolored social-historical world. It is the domain where the Different is nothing but a form of the identical, where the Other is reduced to the Same. It is here, to a large extent, that the form of equivalence rests and triumphs, that two things become essentially the same to the extent they have the "same value," where the heterogeneity of objects and of human beings is therefore reduced to purely quantitative differences. In and by the Economy, the abstraction of quantity, the pure repetition/cumulation of the absolutely homogeneous becomes effective, a reality more real than the real.

But which "economy"? Constantly, Marx oscillates between two positions: the capitalist economy and all economy, from the beginning to the end of history. From the beginning to the end of his *oeuvre* Marx says at the same time and successively:

- for the first time in history, the capitalist economy *effectively transforms* heterogeneous men and their heterogeneous work into the Same, homogeneous and measurable, and *creates*, for the first time, Abstract Simple Labor itself, that has no other pertinent determination than "time" (the clock);

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 171; translation modified according to the French of Roy.

- the capitalist economy *finally allows to appear* that which, since the beginning, has been the hidden equality/identity of men and their labors, until then marked by “fantastic” representations;

- the capitalist economy *gives the appearance of the Same* to that which is essentially heterogeneous: the individuals and their labors, by means of the production of commodities and the transformation of labor power itself into a commodity by means therefore of the reification (*Verdinglichung*) of labor power.¹⁷

Now, this oscillation is fatal. Marx knows very well, and he is the first to say, that the apparent homogenization of products and labors emerges only with capitalism. It is capitalism that *brings it into being*. But how, in *his* ontological framework, can Marx think that capitalism could bring something into being that has not been already there, at least as a potentiality? Capitalism can therefore only bring to the level of appearance, reveal humanity to itself, a humanity which up until then thought of itself in terms of magic, politics, law, theology, and philosophy, and which learns by means of capitalism its true reality, which is economic, learns that the reality of its life always has been *production*, which is crystallization in use values of the Substance/Essence Labor. But if one proceeded no further, the truth revealed by capitalism would become simply *truth*, which would imply politically the inanity of all revolution and *philosophically* a new and sinister “end of history,” already

¹⁷ One could furnish numerous citations by which each of these conceptions is supported. I will do this elsewhere. Rapidly: the first conception appears from the beginning to the end of the *Grundrisse*. It is the second that underlines the commentary on Aristotle reproduced above, and the third that is expounded in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*. It is evidently in the celebrated paragraph on “the fetish character of the commodity and its secret” that Marx confronts in the most audacious manner and with the greatest profundity the problems that this situation created for him: here the world of realities *is* the world of appearances and the world of appearances *is* the world of realities. But one should not be reading this text (as is always done) in order to conjure away the fact that this phantasmagoria of reality and reality of phantasmagoria is not valid in Marx’s conception *except for capitalism*: all the other “epochs” that he opposes to it, from Robinson to the future communism, are characterized by the transparency of economic relations (including the “dark European Middle Ages,” during which “the tithe furnished to the priest is clearer than the benediction of the priest”).

accomplished. Therefore this truth is and is not truth; capitalism *gives the appearance* of the Same to that which is not (reduction, fetishism)—and the superior stage of communism will finally be able to take into consideration the truth and the full truth of the incomparability and irreducible alterity of human individuals. But it will be able to take this into consideration only by also taking into account the economic “truth” that capitalism has *brought everything to the level of appearance* that *gives it the appearance* of being the whole truth (reification). At the foundation of the “realm of freedom” there will always be a “realm of necessity,” and in this

after the abolition of capitalist mode of production, but still retaining social production, the *determination of Value continues to prevail* in the sense that the regulation of labour time and the distribution of social labour among the various production groups, ultimately the book-keeping encompassing all this, become *more essential* than ever.¹⁸

How, therefore, could this “regulation” be made without a unit of measure, and what could this be if not, as Marx says, the “determination of value,” that is to say, Labor brought back in one manner or another to its purely quantitative determinations?

Completely homologous is the ambiguity of Marx’s critique of Aristotle, and the excuse found for the latter. Either Aristotle did not see the “identity/equality” of human labors because he was hindered by the prejudices of his epoch (or by the absence of the “popular prejudice” of equality); or he did not see what was already there but had not yet appeared; or he did not see because there *was nothing to see*, because the equality of human labors, as far as it “exists,” has been *created* under and by capitalism. The antinomy that is revealed here is one that perpetually divides the thought of Marx between the idea of a “historical production” of social categories (and those of thought) and the idea of an ultimate “rationality” of the histor-

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, edited by Frederick Engels (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p. 851; emphases by the author.

ical process (therefore of the *rational* “producibility” of his categories, deriving them from each other, hence their ultimate “atemporality”). If antiquity “had as its natural basis the inequality of men and their labour powers,” if therefore labor was not homogeneous, Aristotle had reason to say that which it *was* and to not say that which it *was not*, and he would have been *wrong* if by a miracle of historical divination he had said that labor was that which it was only going to become two thousand years later. What can be the meaning of the idea that Aristotle was limited by “the particular condition of the society where he lived” if not that *there was* something to see, and that Aristotle, this “giant of thought,” *could not* because of his “particular” social situation? But what was there to see, actually? *Nothing*. This real phantasmagoria, this historical *constructum* of an *effective* pseudohomogeneity of individuals and labors, is an institution and creation of capitalism, a “product” of capitalism by means of which capitalism produces itself, which Marx, restricted by the “particular condition” of the society in which he lived, transformed on one out of every two occasions into a universal, transhistorical determination, into the Substance Labor.

Aristotle: Equalizing the Nonequal

What does Aristotle actually say?

Aristotle does not say that the position of equality/identity (*Gleichsetzung*) of products—therefore of labor—is “an expedient for practical needs [*Notbehelf für das praktische Bedürfnis*].” He says that individuals (therefore also their labors and finally their products) are “completely other and nonequal” and that “they must be equalized” in order that there can be exchange in society. This equalization is the work of *nomos*, of the law, of the social-historical institution. Products, labors, individuals can never be rendered *truly* commensurable by the law, it cannot do this in the case of triangles, quantities of acid and weights, to utilize the analogies that appeared evident to Marx

in the first chapter of *Capital*. It can, however (and this is always done in one fashion or another), equalize them *pros tén chreian ikanôs*, “sufficiently with respect to need/utility.” In this “sufficiently with respect to need/utility” is found condensed all the philosophical *phronésis*, the Wisdom of Aristotle, the *phronésis* that will be absent in Hegel and his main heir. The great speculative thinker does not allow himself to be carried away, in this case least of all, by a speculative delirium; he knows that there are domains where rigor is the rule, and others where the demand of rigor is the certain mark of an uncultivated spirit. “It is obviously just as foolish to accept arguments of probability from a mathematician as to demand strict demonstration from an orator . . . because of the indeterminate, nondetermination is also the rule.”¹⁹ He knows that it is “the very matter of acting things”—human things—not to be completely accessible to universal determination, including measure. *Chreia*, need/utility, has nothing to do with an “expedient.” Aristotle is going to define it a few lines below as that “which holds everything [of the city] together”;²⁰ the equalization (of objects, of labors, of individuals) is each time operated as sufficient for the need/utility of society, in order that society be kept together. It can never become true mathematical equality and commensurability, and that is completely obvious.

Marx disputes—criticizes, explains, and excuses—Aristotle as if Aristotle had wanted to create a theory of the economy, and strangely enough even the *capitalist* economy. He sees Aristotle “hesitate.” Aristotle does not hesitate; he affirms as categorically as possible, completely coherently within the profound problematic that he is going to elaborate, and with the

¹⁹ Aristotle *Ethics* A, III, 4; p. 5. “Indeterminate” (*aoristos*) does not mean here that there is no rule, but that the latter must be each time adapted to the case without ceasing to be rule. The translations of Aristotle used are the following: *Nichomachean Ethics*, translated by M. Oswald (Indianapolis: The Liberal Arts Press, 1962) and *The Politics*, translated by T. A. Sinclair (London: Penguin Books, 1962). Whenever necessary, these are modified according to Castoriadis’s own French translations from the Greek. Citations will be both according to book, chapter, and paragraph, and English page number.—Tr.

²⁰ *Ethics* E, v, 11; p. 126.

most striking truth, that individuals, labors, and products are not actually commensurable, that social law alone “equalizes” that which is, in itself, “completely other and nonequal.” This is what Marx paraphrases ten years later, when writing the *Critique of the Gotha Program*. What Aristotle says in this respect does not have to be explained, and it is not a “historical limitation” that had prohibited him from seeing what was not there, what was never there and never will be there: a Labor Substance, on which one could base an “actual” commensurability of human labors. Such a commensurability, taken as “actually” and “objectively” existing, is validated as an operating imaginary signification only in and by capitalist society. This imaginary social signification, this figment more real than all “reality,” this effective fiction, and all the significations which it entails and excludes, constitute moreover the “historical limitation” that allows us to comprehend, to a certain extent, how Marx can understand Labor Substance at times as purely physiological-natural and at times as completely social, at times as transhistorical and at times as specifically located in the capitalist epoch, at times as manifestation of the reification of man under capitalist exploitation and at times as the foundation permitting a “rational calculus” in the society of the future. Finally, Aristotle does not need to be excused, because he is not creating a theory of the capitalist economy—in which this pure absurdity, the rigorous commensurability of human labors, becomes a fundamental social reality and thus can take on, in an imaginary fashion, the appearance of an objectively incontestable truth—and because he is not even creating a theory of the *economy*. He is doing something much more: he is undertaking *political* research, he is interrogating the foundations of the *polis* and of the *politeia*, of the instituted community and its constitution/institution in which alone an “economy” can appear and exist.

It is in effect impossible to understand the formulations of Aristotle on equality and commensurability and to assess all of their profundity and actuality if one does not see from what

source and by what means equality and commensurability arise as questions in his research.

Aristotle has, as it is said, “discovered” the economy; but the economy as such and for its own sake did not interest him. In the two major places where he speaks of it, the fifth book of the *Nichomachean Ethics* and the first book of the *Politics*, he considers it in the perspective of a “science or power” (*epistémé é dunamis*) that goes beyond it and dominates it from above, politics, that is “the most sovereign and most architectonic,” that aims at “the good and the supreme good,” this being the “end [*telos*] of action that we want for its own sake” and not as a means for another thing. It is to politics that the most precious powers like strategy, economics, rhetoric are subordinated; it is politics by means of the laws that establishes that which must be done and not done. Its end is therefore supposed to contain and to subordinate to itself all other ends, and is itself the “human good” (*tanthropinon agathon*). Whatever should be the difficulties that surround the question of knowing if and under what condition the good for the individual coincides with the good for the city, it permits no doubt for Aristotle that ethics—and infinitely more “economics”—is contained in politics and is a part of it. The *Nichomachean Ethics* affirms right from the beginning that the research that will be undertaken, in its aim and method, is “in a way politics” (*politiké tis*).²¹

The end that directs politics, the supreme human good, Aristotle determines forthwith as “that which is beautiful/good and just” (*ta kala kai ta dikaia*).²² But also the beautiful/good and just “present so much variety and error that it appears to exist only in/by/for/with respect to the law alone, and not in/by/for/with respect to nature.”²³ Aristotle takes up here

²¹ *Ethics* A, I–III; pp. 3–6.

²² *Ethics* A, III, 2; p. 5. *Kalos* means most often “beautiful” but frequently also “good.” It is clear that here it is not a question of esthetic beauty. The Latin translations render *kala* by *honestum*.

²³ *Ethics* A, III, 2; p. 4.

the opposition between *nomos*: law, convention, institution and *physis*: “nature,” an opposition that violently split Greek thought from its awakening, just as the oppositions which, without being identical, were profoundly related to it: between *doxa* (opinion/representation) and *alétheia* (“truth”), between *phainesthai* (to appear, to let itself be seen, to manifest itself) and *einai* (“to be truly”). These oppositions, which divided philosophers and philosophies from the beginning, were themselves also *political* oppositions: one might say the political conflict that tore open the *polis* in its ontological expression, or ontology itself as politically divisive. I obviously do not mean to say that the philosophers were the “spokesmen” or the “ideological representatives” of such and such a political movement, or that a certain philosophical position had been advanced in order to “justify” a certain political aim; but that it was the same movement that shakes at the same time, from the end of the seventh century, political and social institutions *and* the ideas and representations until then uncontested, and that this movement, in and by which democracy and philosophy were simultaneously born, was not simply a movement “of fact.” It was the constitution and the putting into question of the instituted social imaginary [*l’imaginaire social institué*], of the established institution (political, social, ideological) of the city and the imaginary social significations [*significations imaginaires sociales*] carried by it. It was furthermore not a simple contestation and putting in question of the given institution to which one preferred another, but of the *foundation* and the *raison d’être* of institution itself, of the possible justification of *nomos*, of the given *nomos* as well as *all* possible *nomos*. It was this contestation that was deployed as—or was paired with—the opposition between *nomos* and *physis*, and it was this that gave philosophical profundity to the oppositions (otherwise trivial and known everywhere and always) between opinion and truth, appearance and being. It was this scission that mattered, and not a term-by-term correspondence between philosophical “position” and political “tendencies,” which did not really exist

and could not exist, because of the turns and twists of discourse itself. The *demos* could advance against the *oligoi* the conventional and arbitrary character of instituted law, and invoke an equality “by nature” of free men; or precisely to base themselves on the nonexistence of any “natural” *nomos*, on the absence of all law given “by nature,” in order to impose its law, and its opinion, its *doxa*: *Edoxe tē boulē kai tō demō*, “it appeared, it seemed [good] to the *boulē* and to the people . . .” is the introductory clause to the laws of Athens. In all cases the artificiality, the nonnaturalness, of the *nomos* is at the same time a prerequisite of an explicit and clarified (“reasoned”) political struggle and is *entailed* by it. Now this artificiality was, for the Greeks, at the same time incontestable and enigmatic. The enigma of the *nomos* is not only or so much that it is arbitrary, *thesei*, as an individual gesture or action can be, but that it is universally arbitrary or *universality as arbitrary*, and yet this arbitrary universality is the foundation and the condition of existence of that which appears to them and is in effect the thing least arbitrary of all—the city, society.

No term-by-term correspondence between political struggle and philosophical conception, but one must underline that the most radically subversive attitudes in the domain of ideas were those of thinkers who put forth *nomos* against *physis*, who insisted on the “arbitrary,” “conventional,” instituted character not only of “political constitutions” but of the constitution/institution of the *world* itself. The central figure here was without doubt Democritus—with his “eleatic” antecedents (the conventionality of the habitual representation of things and of the world can be easily read between the lines of eleatic argumentation, negatively) and his continuation in the great Sophists. Subsequent tradition, the one still dominant in our day, always wanted to cover over this current, or to present it as triumphally liquidated by Plato and Aristotle. But this could be done only by mutilating the same authors they wished to save—a mutilation repeated most recently by Heidegger. Plato and Aristotle, precisely because they were

great, wished to surmount one-sidedness and took up again in thought the divided world in which they lived. The scission became an *internal* division of their thought. Certainly, they were the philosophers of the *alétheía*, of the *ontos on*, of *physis*, but they would not have been what they were if they had been *only* that, if this radical scission—without which obviously these terms themselves *no longer have meaning*—had not been constantly present for them.

For the same reasons unilaterally and ultimately false are all “interpretations” of Greek philosophy that trouble themselves only with a few Presocratic, Platonic, and Aristotelian texts and the etymologies of words, and ignore not only the “oppositional” philosophers but also the poets, the dramatists, Aristophanes and Thucydides, and political/social history *as philosophical sources*. Because the great Greek philosophical texts *are also political* texts. Is it only coquetry that Plato has Socrates say that what is important to him is not the rocks and the trees but men in the city? Is it because he does not know the rules of literary composition that Plato says what he has to say about truth, essence, and beyond essence in a book that he titled *Politeia—The Republic*—that has been justly subtitled: *peri dikaion—politikos*, “of justice—political dialogue”? It is *also* the question of *dikaiosuné*, of justice, of the just institution of the city, that leads Plato to ask himself concerning what really is.

No, and the *polis* was not simply peace, harmony, and tranquil discussion among citizens, but just as much *polemos*, war among men and cities, exile and massacre; nor was the man of Greece simply, as the nostalgic western pastorales would have it, naturally in measure and light, but he was rather irresistibly driven to unmeasure, *hubris*, and the blindness that it entails; not consubstantial with truth but capable of seeing it only by destroying his own eyes, after killing his father and sleeping with his mother. Nor did Greek thought grow in the meadow of being inundated by the light of *alétheía*. It was rather an interminable struggle with the insurmountable evidence of *doxa*, a hand-to-hand fight with the enigma of *phainesthai* (to

appear) that is not *einai* (to be truly) and that at the same time cannot be Nothing, and of *einai* that had to be all the same *phainesthai* and yet did not and could not appear as such, a struggle with the unskirtable question that gave rise to the recognition, since the first steps of this thought, that the principal human affairs—and to begin with the only element in which and by means of which it can exist as thought: language—are not ruled by “nature,” *physei*, but by law, convention, institution, *nomô*; and yet the positing of *nomos* itself leads back unavoidably to the positing of *physis*, to an indubitable fact of being a norming/normed *mode* of being, both in the domain of logic/ontology (for example, aporias of truth as simple convention) and in the domain of politics (where the legislative activity of the people or even the wiseman-legislator consists of the *preference* of such and such a *nomos* to such and such other and therefore invokes, explicitly or implicitly, something that cannot be simply *nomos*).

Aristotle, we know, thinks constantly in reference to *physis*, the opposition *physis-nomos* (as the homologous one *physis-technê*) is internal to his thought, the division is not “surmounted.” The question raised at the beginning of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, whether the supreme human good, the beautiful/good and just, is *nomô* or *physei*, is not given a genuine answer in either this book or the *Politics*. Rather than conducting a philological or archeological inquiry, I aim to elucidate the meaning of this situation. In a subterranean fashion, it is the same situation that governs the aporias and ambiguities of Marx already discussed: do the “equality” of human beings and the commensurability of their labors depend on the *physis* of man (“natural” or “social” *physis*?) or on *nomos*, the law, the social-historical institution of a particular society, capitalist society—in other words, is there a *physis* of history that requires that a particular *nomos* *must* be realized at a particular moment? The elucidation leads to the disengagement of the question from its purely theoretical context and toward its being posed as a properly *political* question.

The question of politics, for Aristotle, is at the same time a question bearing on the supreme human good—happiness in its Aristotelian sense, *eudaimonia*—and on the means that permit attaining it which depend essentially on the constitution/institution of the city (*politeia*). Now this question is for Aristotle identical to the question of justice to which the fifth book of the *Ethics* is consecrated: “Accordingly in one sense we call those things ‘just’ which create and preserve happiness for the instituted/constituted community [*politiké koinônia*].”²⁴ Therefore Aristotle can also call justice in the sense of the term that aims at the whole of society “complete” or “total” justice; it is not a part of virtue but “perfect” or “achieved” virtue and “total virtue”; it is virtue itself and differs from it only according to “essence”/definition (*to d’einai*): in the sense of the “effective exercise of virtue” with regard to others it is justice and in the sense of an “acquired disposition” (*hexis, habitus*) it is virtue “simply/absolutely” (*haplôs*).²⁵

Why “in one sense” only? Here again, as in the case of being and of the good, Aristotle begins by establishing what justice is commonly said to be, and here again the current senses and significations of the term furnish the starting point of research. It is a remarkable and fundamental thing that in this case the sense and signification so furnished will be elaborated, elucidated, and enriched but never rejected or corrected. *The just and justice are that which the language of the Greek people says to be just and justice*: someone is considered as unjust if he acts against the law, or if he wants to have more than his share (*pléonktés*) or if he is unfair (unequal; *isos*). The current popular signification of these terms—and the “solid, popular prejudice” that it includes and that Aristotle not only does not ignore but explicitly accepts—directly furnishes the content of the definition that will be maintained and validated throughout his research: just is the lawful and the equal/fair, unjust the unlawful and unequal/unfair.

²⁴ *Ethics* E, 1, 13; p. 113.

²⁵ *Ethics* E, 1, 15–20; pp. 114–115.

Certainly these terms immediately present considerable problems. The just is the legal, the *nomimon*—of *nomos*, law, convention, institution providing for *nemô*: distribution, allocation. *Nomos* is therefore also the law of attribution or allocation—and it is this sense that we will rediscover when examining “distributive justice.” But will everything that is legal, that the posited (*keimenos*, “positive”) law prescribes, be *ipso facto* just, *dikaion*? The “lawful,” Aristotle first answers, “is what the art of legislation has defined as such, and we call each particular enactment ‘just’ [or ‘right’: *dikaion*].”²⁶ But this first affirmation is directly limited or put in doubt by the sentence that follows: “The laws make pronouncements on every sphere of life, and their aim is to secure either the common good of all or of the best, or the good of those who dominate [*kyriois*] either because of their excellence or on some other basis of this sort.”²⁷ But laws that aim only at the interest of those who dominate—the particular interest of a tyrant, for example, an example that had nothing of the hypothetical about it, as Aristotle knew indeed well—without *any* relation to virtue or any other similar referent, will they also define, without any further proviso, the just and the right? These doubts can be immediately reinforced by the already cited sentence that follows: “Accordingly in one sense we call those things ‘just’ which create and preserve happiness for the instituted/constituted community.” Certainly, the political community is—as Aristotle makes more precise later on—the community of those who participate in power; it can just as well be the “community” of oligarchs or even of the tyrant as an individual. But it would be in that case more than difficult to speak of happiness, *eudaimonia*, that is inseparable for Aristotle from virtue, *arété*.²⁸ Further precision immediately follows: the law commands acts conforming to virtue and forbids

²⁶ *Ethics* E, 1, 12; p. 113.

²⁷ *Ethics* E, 1, 13; p. 113.

²⁸ *Ethics* A, v, 1 and 5–6; A, vii, 5 and 14; A, xiii, 1–2; pp. 5–29.

acts contrary to it “correctly when it is framed correctly [*orthôs*] and not so well [*cheiron*] if it was drawn up in any which way [*apeschediasmenos*].”²⁹ The conclusion is without ambiguity: justice, that is “total justice” defined in term of the law, is perfect/achieved virtue, “not a part of virtue but the whole of . . . virtue.”

There is therefore a complete justice, “the exercise of the whole of virtue in our relation with our fellow men,” that coincides “more or less” with lawfulness; “the law commands to live in conformity with every virtue and forbids to live in conformity with any wickedness.”³⁰ But—and this above all is important—the law does not content itself with commanding and interdicting; the law is “creator of total virtue” by means of “lawful measures which are enacted for education oriented toward the community [*peri paideian tén pros to koinon*].”³¹ Complete justice—and essentially law—is therefore infinitely more than injunction and interdiction; it is first and foremost “creator of total virtue” and this by means of *paideia*, education, preparation with common affairs in view, the process of giving birth to the citizen, the transformation of the little animal into a man in the city. Complete justice is the constitution/institution of the community, and according to the finality of this institution its most important part is that which concerns *paideia*, the formation of the individual with his life in the community in view, the socialization of the human being.

This total justice aiming at the totality of that which is important for the man of excellence, Aristotle does not propose to examine in the *Ethics*, no more than he wants to conclude an answer to the question whether it is the “same” to be a good man and a good citizen.³² The two questions will be objects of the *Politics*, where moreover they will not be “re-

²⁹ *Ethics* E, I, 13–14; p. 113.

³⁰ *Ethics* E, II, 10; pp. 116–117.

³¹ *Ethics* E, II, 11; p. 117.

³² *Ethics* E, II, 10–11; p. 117.

solved.” The questions overlap, and the difficulties are homologous. We have already evoked those concerning the affirmation that the legal is the just, the law is always and without any proviso the just.³³ In the same way, the law aims at the “creation of virtue” by means of *paideia pros to koinon*, education/preparation oriented toward the community; but is the virtue of the citizen virtue in the absolute sense? In other words, does the social institution of virtue completely exhaust virtue? In one sense, there is virtue only in and by the institution, to begin with because man cannot exist outside of the city, because virtue is created by education and this is based on the law, and finally because virtue is *hexis proairétiké*, a disposition acquired through deliberation, and this acquisition—not being able to do without *proairesis*, deliberation and free choice—is evidently an acquisition from and by means of all that is given to and imposed on the individual by the law of the city. But to say this without anything further is to come back to the view that virtue itself is only by convention, “relative,” the correlative of the law of the city, *nomos* as opposed to *physis*—conventional, instituted, “arbitrary,” variable. “Fire burns both here and in Persia whereas . . . notions of what is just change.”³⁴ Is there *one* city, *one* institution of society of which one can affirm that it is not simply another “convention” but that it is *absolutely* the best, that it is better *physei*, by nature? Aristotle seems at times to affirm this: “What is just not by nature but by human enactment is no more the same everywhere than constitutions are. Yet there is only one constitution that is by nature the best everywhere.”³⁵ But as opposed to all other forms of being determined by nature and by a thing’s own nature that realizes almost always (with the exception of monsters) the norm that *is* its being, *to ti ên einai*,

³³ This question is also voided in contemporary discussion of “the law” and “the symbolic”—within the framework of which it has become impossible to ask: Why and in what sense is the law of Auschwitz or Gulag not the Law?

³⁴ *Ethics* E, VII, 2; p. 131.

³⁵ *Ethics* E, VII, 5; p. 132.

that which it was to be, the city of the best *physei* is not to be found anywhere. All existing cities are defective, Aristotle affirms throughout. The identity of the law and justice, that of “communal” *paideia* and “private” *paideia*,³⁶ of the virtue of the citizen and that of the man, as well as the inclusion of the ethical in the political, would not be problems either if one could affirm that every city in fact is a city by right (all that is *nomô* is also *physei*)—something that Aristotle knows and pronounces not to be true—or if one could affirm that everything is always simply a question of fact, that there are no norms for the law—because in this case the question of law itself, of justice and of politics, will be bypassed. The problem subsists, in spite of its anticipated solution in the beginning of the *Ethics*, because, on the one hand, Aristotle affirms that there exists *one politeia* that is everywhere the best by nature (and as far as we are concerned we continue to pose the question of politics, to be able to discover what thing is *preferable* to that which exists) and because, on the other hand, he experiences (and we experience) the greatest difficulties in attempting to say what this *politeia* is or will be and because he would even say (and so would we) that it remains the case that the city best by nature is not realized, that we do not live in it, and that while waiting it is necessary to live and to act in one way or another without being able to avoid asking ourselves if we are doing what we ought—if what we are doing is just.

There is therefore the question of complete justice, because there is always the question of the right or correct law, of how to act and for what, the question of virtue and happiness, of the law as *poiétiké arétés* and *poiétiké eudaimonias*, creator of virtue and of happiness, of the institution of society. The question of complete justice is the question of politics, the question of the law in the most general sense. In this respect the question of justice is the question of lawfulness, and the idea of equality does not appear.

³⁶ *Ethics* E, II, 11; p. 117.

But there is also the question of equality. While the violation of the law does not necessarily produce inequality (the law requires also dispositions that do not have the trait of equal-unequal), inequality is always violation of the law.³⁷ Equality is “part” of justice; it is therefore a “synonym of and of the same genre” as justice; it is “partial justice,” part of justice and virtue or particular justice and virtue that has the trait of equality. And its opposite, partial injustice, concerns “the honor, material goods, the security or whatever single name we can find to express all these things collectively, and its motive is the pleasure that comes from gain.”³⁸ To be unjust in this sense is to want *more* than *one’s share*, to have more than one’s share. One’s share of what? Of honor, of money, of security and all the things of this order that we can designate by “a single name.” This single name Aristotle furnishes a few lines later, in an apparently tautological manner: “anything . . . that is divisible [*meriston*: partakeable] among those who participate [*koinônousi*] in the city.”³⁹

Partial justice has to do with the equal and is regulated by the equal. Aristotle distinguished, as is well known, two kinds: distributive justice and corrective justice. Distributive justice concerns *division*, the corrective voluntary *transactions* (*sunallagmata*)—contract in the proper sense—or involuntary ones (for one of the parties: offenses). Both are determined by the idea of the *equal*: in order that there be justice, all division, all distribution must be equal, in a sense that is yet to be defined, and all transaction must be ruled by equality, or be redressed, rectified, corrected so that equality is restored.

Distributive justice concerns division, and there is division only of something “that is divisible among those who participate in the city.” What is then divisible, and is it always the same everywhere? Aristotle discusses this not in the *Ethics*, but

³⁷ *Ethics* E, II, 2–5; pp. 115–116.

³⁸ *Ethics* E, II, 6; p. 116.

³⁹ *Ethics* E, II, 12; p. 117.

in detail in the *Politics*. It clearly seems to be the case that the frontier between divisible and nondivisible is not something given (except for trivialities), neither logically nor naturally, and this is precisely one of the questions that the *Politics* ought to resolve on its own account and on its own responsibility—without being able to have recourse to physics, logic, or metaphysics.

To what is the divisible opposed, or what is the nondivisible? Aristotle does not say, but it is evidently that which can be participated in (*participable*: “indivisible”). To divide is to give exclusively: division is privative/exclusive distribution/attribution. It pertains to that case when attribution to the one excludes (by the nature of things or by the law) attribution to the other. There exist perhaps things naturally “indivisible” and nondivisible: one would be tempted to say light and air, but it would be false (hovels and pollution today, prisons throughout the millennia). But there are certainly things social that exist insofar as they are “indivisible” and nondivisible: language, custom. The “appropriation” of language by an individual not only does not exclude but implies its appropriation by other individuals of an indefinite number. In the same way the “acquisition” of virtue by an individual renders its acquisition by others more easy rather than more difficult. That which is participated in cannot be divided. The divisible is that which can be divided and therefore poses the question of whether it *ought* to be. Thus for example the “earth” (and, more generally, the “means of production”) is physically divisible, but this does not imply that it necessarily ought to be shared out, divided: in examining *The Republic* or other “communist” propositions Aristotle discusses the question of whether or not the earth should be in common, or only its fruits, etc. He responds by taking into account facts and opportunities and does not proceed from the essence of things. In the same vein, in the case of individuals considered as sexual subjects, whom Plato would render, in a sense and under certain conditions, as *participable*, Aristotle thinks that it

is preferable to maintain them in a condition of reciprocal exclusive/private attribution.⁴⁰

Now total justice is precisely this: the creation of that which can be socially participated in, and of the conditions, ways, means, assuming each an access to this "indivisible." In other words, it is the separation of the "indivisible" and the divisible. It is in this sense that total justice is identical at the same time to the law and to "total virtue." It not only must define the "indivisible" and the divisible and separate them, but constitute them or institute them. Total justice is the first institution of society. That men born in the city participate in an apparently natural manner or spontaneously in language, for example, does not govern in any way at all the problem posed by "preparation/education oriented toward the community" which is supposed to "create total virtue." To socialize individuals is to make them participate in the nondivisible, in that which ought not be divided, privately, among the members of the community. Total justice pertains therefore to the totality of the order of the city, in its form and its content, and as such it *is* politics (and forms the object of the *Politics* as well as of the *Republic* and the *Laws*.) It is here that justification is to be found for the idea that politics is "the most architectonic."

Once the frontier between that which can be participated in and the divisible is traced, the divisible must be divided. There is therefore the first division, by nature or law, the attribution of which to someone excludes attribution to someone else. It is this idea that Marx will make explicit in the narrow sphere of production: "Any distribution whatever of the means of consumption is only a consequence of the distribution of the conditions of production themselves."⁴¹ This initial allocation

⁴⁰ The second book of the *Politics* is dedicated in large part to this question. It is remarkable that neither here nor anywhere in the *Ethics* is *power* mentioned among the divisible. Its division is evidently discussed in the *Politics*. One cannot insist too strongly that neither for Plato nor for Aristotle does the separation of divisible or partakeable have anything natural about it. For both of them it is based on the laws, the institution of the city.

⁴¹ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1972), p. 388.

(or sharing out) is the task and the work of distributive justice; in a minimal sense this always exists and will always exist. It is a law that must say whether or not each is to dispose over “his” body—a law and a disposition that are not automatic at all as is shown by the term *habeas corpus* itself, as well as by innumerable historical examples from slavery to Gulag and to the Chinese concentration camps (that also show, one more time in history, that even *habeas corpus* is not automatic).

The definition and separation of the “indivisible” and the divisible as well as that of the first division of the divisible are “in fact” arbitrary: they are, each time and for each city, that which they are. One can describe them, eventually explicate them (as Plato in *The Republic* and Aristotle in the *Politics*). But one can also discuss them, contest them, put them into question. And one cannot not discuss them once they have been contested; even those who would say and have said that the initial allocation can only be *de facto* would have to maintain a discourse without an end to *justify* this idea. To say that the question of initial allocation does not exist, or that one cannot discuss this question, this is to say that the question of society and of politics does not exist, that there is only a question of fact, fact of violence and violence of fact. But then there is nevertheless the fact of the question—because it is historical action itself that raises it, creating the contestation within the order of fact and the conflict within the city. And to say as does Marx, taking up the Saint-Simonian adage, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” is not to abolish the question of distributive justice, but to answer it, because this is an answer to the question: what to whom and according to what criteria?

But on the basis of what can one discuss this initial allocation? What does it say that such and such a division is *preferable* to such and such another—or what is more *just*, according to Aristotle’s and indeed everyone else’s terminology?⁴² To de-

⁴² Including the “Marxists” who denounce the term as mystification, petit bourgeois, ideological, etc. when they do theory—but who make abundant use of it and could not avoid making use of it when they address people.

bate this question, to hold a public discourse defensible *erga omnes* maintaining that such and such initial allocation is better or preferable, requires that one is able to reduce the question to “rational” terms—because it requires the admission of the comparability of individuals among whom one divides and of the things that are to be divided. It is necessary that there be “rationality” or *logos* with regard to the question. “This is why we do not permit the power of a man but the power of *logos*.”⁴³ Almost all of the senses of the word *logos* are recovered here. In order that there be discourse—*logos*—and arguments—*logo*: that defend it—there must be a definition—*logos*—of the question and of its terms, and a relation/proportion—*logos*—between these; it is also necessary that reflection—*logos*—preside over the solution. But to say *logos*, isn’t this already to say, in a certain fashion, “equality”? Heraclitus spoke of the *logos xunos*—a *logos* common, public, pertaining to all; and the *Meno* had shown that there is equal participation of all in *logos*, free men and slaves. Equality or equivalence, aren’t they always multifariously implied by all rationality—equality or equivalence of the partners in discussion, without which there is no *dialogos*; equality or equivalence of statements, without which there is no demonstrative chain; equality or equivalence of the referents of discourse, without which discourse could not even begin?

This function of *logos* will appear clearly in the solution *de principe* that Aristotle furnishes to the question of distributive justice.

The foundation and the criterion remain equality “if the unjust is unequal, the just must be equal; and that is, in fact, what everyone believes without argument.”⁴⁴ This belief Aristotle is going to render plausible at least if not actually establish, thus justifying the “solid popular prejudice”—by showing that the equality which is at stake here is not simply arithmetic equality but geometric proportionality.

⁴³ *Ethics* E, vi, 5; p. 130.

⁴⁴ *Ethics* E, iii, 2; p. 118.

If the unjust is the nonequal in a domain where there is more and less (assuming that one can speak in this domain of more and less), the just, as far as it is the equal, ought to be *between* the two, the more and the less, in the middle, as a “mean” (*meson*). Insofar as the “mean,” it ought to be the mean of something (of the more and the less); insofar as the equal, it ought to be so relatively to two objects; and insofar as the just, it ought to be so by relation to individuals. In order that a question of division be posed, a minimum of four terms is required: two individuals among whom one divides, and two objects (or parts of an object) that one divides. And the division is the instauration of two relationships: a relationship between the two individuals, and a relationship between the two objects, or a relationship between each individual and the object received by him through division. Now the *equality* of the two *relations* is evidently proportionality, “geometric equality,” *analogia*. There will be justice, therefore, if there is “the same equality between the persons and the shares: the ratio between the shares will be the same as that between the persons. If the persons are not equal, their [just] shares will not be equal, but this is the source of quarrels and recriminations, when equals have and are awarded unequal shares or unequals equal shares.”⁴⁵

In what sense is this solution “rational”? If the division is supposed to be equal, this equality cannot be arithmetic; it is not equal (nor just, nor sane) to give the same quantity of nourishment to a child and an adult, the same length of clothing to a giant and a dwarf. Arithmetic equality is inequality, as Marx will repeat twenty-two centuries later. Equality can only be equality of *proportion*: individual A is to individual B as object a is to object b; the just in distribution consists of “a certain proportionality,” “a certain,” *ti*, because one as yet knows nothing of the measure implied by this proportionality, and about the base of this measure. The proportion includes,

⁴⁵ *Ethics* E, III, 6; p. 118.

in one and the same equality, the four terms face to face, it is the only way to include “a minimum of four terms,” to equalize two *relationships*, to interrelate two *heterogeneous* diades (two individuals—two objects). One cannot think the “equality” of a man (or his labor time) and an object—but it seems that one could conceive of the equality of a *relationship* of two men and the *relationship* of two objects. And such a relation between two relationships has *always* been posed implicitly, ever since there has been distribution. Distributive justice is therefore relationship of relationships, proportionality.⁴⁶ If a and b are the objects attributed to individuals A and B respectively, there will be justice if one can say a is to b as (*outôs . . . ôs*) A is to B.⁴⁷ This “as,” apparently innocuous when taken in the sense of “by the same right,” “in the same manner,” becomes in reality “in equal ratio”—in its mathematical sense. It seems evident, in the trivial case, that one could “write” A is to B as a is to b, and this is equal and just—if A and B are men and a and b are clothes according to their respective sizes. Of this, one “writes” $A/B = a/b$, which “allows” one to “write” $A/a = B/b$, and “the combination of A and a and B and b in the distribution is just.”⁴⁸

But what gives us the right to “write” A/B and a/b ? There immediately arises the question of the *commensurability* of A and of B, as of a and b, of their measurability as such, of their reduction to “common units” (that would make each of the expressions A/B and a/b into pure numbers, and would thus render them comparable). If a and b are homogeneous objects and are “naturally” (physically) measurable—bushels of corn, meters of cloth, etc.— a/b has a meaning; but A/B has no meaning at all if a and b are heterogeneous. Even more, A/B (Socrates/Gorgias) has no meaning strictly speaking, unless one refers to the physical characteristics of the individual (weight, size) or one *reduces* them to these characteristics.

⁴⁶ *Ethics* E, III, 10; p. 119.

⁴⁷ *Ethics* E, III, 11; p. 119.

⁴⁸ *Ethics* E, III, 12; p. 119.

There is, therefore, the question of regarding the “foundation” of the “measure” of A and B and of a and b; and it is evidently this “foundation” both for A, B and a, b that will be for Marx “simple and socially necessary labor” as the “substance” of Value. But this “foundation,” even if we did accept it, would not serve us at all here where we are discussing the question of the initial allocation; it has meaning only *after* such a division is already accomplished, and accomplished in a determined manner, one that leads to the exchange of the products of independent labors. In this question, the “commensurability” of A and B (the individuals) holds complete sway over that of a and b (the objects); because even supposing that I have found a means to render a and b comparable, or more simply, supposing that a and b are homogeneous, therefore *ipso facto* comparable (as quantities of money, for example), I have still not advanced a single step because I cannot compare the men. It helps in no way to know that $a/b = 3/2$ if I cannot reduce the “relationship” of Socrates and Gorgias to a numerical relation, if I cannot find a “foundation” *according to* which Socrates and Gorgias become properly comparable and able to enter into the distributive proportion. To this question Aristotle furnishes a first response that immediately refers back to questions still more profound. Justice consisting of an equality of relationships (proportionality) is, he says,

manifested by the principle “to each according to his value” [*ek tou kat' axian*]. Everyone agrees that in distributions the just must be [established] according to a certain value [*axia*], though not everyone would admit this value to be the same: democrats say it is liberty, oligarchs that it is wealth or noble birth, and aristocrats that it is virtue.⁴⁹

I translate *axia* by value—and to distinguish it from the other I will designate it Proto-value, for reasons that will be immediately clear. *Axia* has also been translated as *dignitas* or

⁴⁹ *Ethics* E, III, 7; pp. 118–119.

merit. In its first sense *axios* is something that is a counterweight, that weighs as much as . . . , that equilibrates; the meaning of *axia* as value (worth) starting out from a physical equivalence, from equilibrium, is visibly rooted in concrete acts of exchange: *boos axios*, “worth an ox,” says Homer, the ox being for him precisely “the standard of value,” and the object that is “worth an ox” could make a counterweight to an ox on a metaphorical balance. *Axia* in the sense of the value, dignity, merit of a man, was constantly used since Herodotus. The *kat’ axian* of Aristotle could be translated in senses both primitive and modern: the coefficients of proper balance [*ponderation*] of different individuals according to which each has a *weight* for the community. But the question of the translation of *axia* by value (that may seem “modern”) or by dignity or merit (that may seem old fashioned or moralizing) is without importance, because whatever one does one is in the same circle: What is the value (merit, dignity) of such and such a value (merit, dignity), or, if one prefers, why is such and such a value a value? This circle is the circle of the Proto-value—the institution of a central imaginary signification for which one does not know how to provide a rational account. The democrats say that the *axia* of each is his liberty; they say this not only because liberty is a “value” but also because it is *worth* more than all other “values” that one could name. The same is true for the others, concerning the value of each. Each party is obliged to affirm that its “value” is worth being, that its merit merits to be the foundation of distribution, that its dignity is dignified to furnish the criterion of justice. Each is therefore obliged to pose value as *the* value, *an* attribute of men as the attribute that will define the “weight” of each individual in the division. The same way, each party affirms that just distribution is *relative to* what each individual is/has already *with respect to* a “value” that is not “relative” to anything at all, is not *with respect to* . . . , but is posed absolutely, as the *point d’origine* of justice, a base of reference that cannot be referred to anything else than itself, the “value” with respect to which and by means

of which individuals evaluate (or weigh) that which they evaluate, and which itself has absolute “worth,” which is to say that properly speaking it has no worth, or that it amounts to more than something having worth [*valoir*], that it does not have any possible counterweight. The worth of each is determined by his liberty, but nothing is worth liberty, say the democrats. This Proto-value, this axiomatically posed *axia*, must be an answer to the question of division according to a criterion once, but only once.

All division is debatable and all division actually does invoke in words, but in any case utilizes in fact, a criterion according to which it is done and which from this moment determines that which is just and unjust in the *interior* of the established *nomos* of the given institution of society. Thus the democrats say: all men are free, and insofar as free are worth as much as all other free men, weigh as much as they, and this ought to be the basis of division (that ought thus be egalitarian in the arithmetic sense). If A, B, C are free men, then $A=B=C$ and $A/B=B/C=. . . = 1$, always. The partisans of oligarchy say: each is worth according his wealth. $A/B = \text{wealth of A/wealth of B}$, supposedly wealth itself already being measurable (“by wealth we understand everything whose value is measured in money,” says Aristotle⁵⁰), or possibly each is worth according to his nobility, $A/B = \text{parts of nobility of A/parts of nobility of B}$. The partisans of aristocracy (of the power of the best) say: each is worth according to his virtue, $A/B = \text{virtue of A/virtue of B}$. (But how does one *measure* virtue?)

But who has said that men as such, or such and such men, are free? Who has already distributed “wealth” or “nobility” according to which division should be made? And since virtue is not possessed naturally, but is at the very least a coproduct of *paideia*, of the social preparation of individuals, who has rendered individuals virtuous or nonvirtuous, and such and such individuals more virtuous than others? All these criteria, these

⁵⁰ *Ethics* D, 1, 2; p. 83.

“foundation of the measure,” these Proto-values, appear only because they were already instituted, posed by the *nomos* and such and such *nomos* as Proto-values, *axia*. What Aristotle implies is that all societies (and in political conflict all parties) *always* pose in fact an *axia*, a Proto-value, and a proportionality based on this *axia*—that may or may not have involved the trouble of being explicated and “justified.” But what he raises here—as we will see explicitly—is the question: how can one *truly* justify this proportionality, always established *de facto* in one manner or another?⁵¹ This is a direct interrogation concerning the *axia* itself and its foundation. The *nomos* is in all cases already there; the initial allocation has in all cases already been accomplished starting out from a given Proto-value; but since it is not the same Proto-value, *axia*, that different cities establish as the foundation of their initial allocation, which Proto-value is valid? Every city establishes individuals by means of its initial allocation as being worth more or less or the same insofar as they are/have *this axia* to a greater, lesser, or same degree. But why *this* and not another thing? Who can ground or *justify*—render simply/absolutely just—the Proto-value, the *axia*, established each time by the *nomos*, the constitution/institution of the city, by means of which the individuals “are worth” for the city more or less, and in general “are worth” something?

To this question Aristotle produces two responses—but also, in a sense, says that there is no response. He will say, in the continuation of the fifth book of the *Ethics*, that this *axia*, the “foundation of the measure” and the measure itself, is *chreia*, the need/use/utility of individuals, the one for the others, and of all for the city. Each is “worth” according to what he provides for the common *chreia*. And he will also say, implicitly everywhere, and in particular in the *Politics*, that the *axia* ought to be virtue. But it is in the discussion of *chreia* that

⁵¹ For example, today: to each according to what they possess—to the capitalist according to his capital, to the worker according to his labor power.

appears the formulation criticized by Marx, and it is this discussion that permits us to measure the profundity of the thought of Aristotle concerning the problem of society. But before analyzing this, a detour is necessary to raise one fundamental point inherent in the formulations of Aristotle on “arithmetic” equality (or quantitative formal equality in the contemporary sense) as it appears in corrective justice, in transactions.⁵²

It might seem, if one read simply chapters 3 and 4 of the fifth (E) book of the *Ethics*, where the questions of distributive and corrective justice are formally treated, that “arithmetic” (or quantitative, formal) equality rules and ought to rule “transactions” and that transactions could only exist on the basis of the division of the divisible. One cannot obviously exchange except on the condition that there already had been initial allocation; one can only exchange what already was attributed. *Nemo plus juris transferre potest quam ipse habet*, say the Roman jurists in one of their inspired tautologies. The same for offenses: it is necessary that there be attribution of corporal integrity and liberty to each, for example, in order that the attack of one or the other should constitute an offense. Those transactions pose the question of arithmetic equality: one must know in the case of a voluntary transaction (contract) if that which has been “transferred” on both sides is “equal” (“equivalent exchange”), and in the case of an involuntary transaction (offense) if the “correction” or “rectification” has “equalized,” somehow or other, what the offense “rendered unequal.”

But what is then this “equality”? On the basis of what and by what means can exchanged objects said to be “equal” (to have

⁵² The French original of this article discusses the question of corrective justice in greater detail, comparing what Aristotle calls arithmetic equality and geometric equality and culminating in a discussion of the “equity” (a “justice” better than justice) inherent in judicial activity that “corrects” and “reverses” the inequality inherent in the application of formal laws, formal rules that necessarily disregard particular cases—that is, the inequality implied by “arithmetic equality” that was noticed, of course, by Plato, Aristotle, and Marx. The relevant Aristotle text is *Ethics* E, v.—Tr.

the same “exchange value,” the same “nonparticular use,” according to the expression of the first book of the *Politics*)? Ten measures of corn are equal to ten measures of corn of the same quality, but no one exchanges ten measures of corn for ten measures of corn any more than for nine measures of corn. One exchanges, for example, ten measures of corn for a certain number of pairs of shoes. It is here that the radical character of Aristotle’s reflection on the economy is manifested.⁵³ In effect the *sunallagmata*, “transactions” in the usual sense, the locus of equivalent exchange, are only particularizations, only modalities of *the* essential permanent transaction/transfer constitutive of society: the *allagé*, exchange in the primordial sense of the terms. “Just as there is no community without exchange, there is no exchange without equality and no equality without commensurability.”⁵⁴ It is necessary that there be commensurability to be able to have equality, equality to be able to have exchange, exchange to be able to have society. This is the nub of the whole problematic: society presupposes commensurability, but this commensurability is not or cannot be natural; it is not given *physei*. It cannot exist except by *nomos*, by convention/institution; it cannot exist except by *being established by society in order that* society may exist. In brief: society presupposes society—which is practically saying that society is its own creation, something that Aristotle *does not say*, and *cannot say* (any more than Marx).

But Aristotle does see and does say that the question of society and of its institution is expressed by the situation that society does not only in fact and by accident permit the difference or rather the alterity of individuals, but necessarily and essentially implies this alterity. “For a community is not formed by two physicians, but by a physician and a laborer who are absolutely different and unequal. But they must be

⁵³ Here in the fifth book of the *Ethics* much more than where one usually looks for it, in the first book of the *Politics*.

⁵⁴ *Ethics* E, v, 14; p. 127.

equalized”⁵⁵ The constitution of society, as the exchange between the “physician” and the “laborer,” requires the solution of this enigma: to equalize that which is absolutely other. Physician and laborer cannot exist except in common/communication (*koinônein*) and they cannot be in common/communication except in exchange; in order that they enter in exchange they must be—they themselves or their products, one by the other—equalized. Behind constituted exchange there is exchange that constitutes, the last requiring, implying, a commensurability or “equality.” One can understand habitual exchange, everyday “transactions,” as exchange of simple material “equivalents,” so much of money, so many beds. But the constitutive exchange of society is *not* of beds and money but the exchange of the work (*oeuvre, orgon*) of the physician and the work of the laborer—that is to say, the being-physician and the being-laborer insofar as these are actualized in the respective works. It is the physician and the laborer that society must equalize, it being understood *that they are*, says Aristotle (*that society makes them be*, I would say) “absolutely other and nonequal.” Here again in the text of Aristotle the antinomy of *physis–nomos* is working underground and determines that which appear as its limits. Because of course physician and laborer are not “given,” and when speaking of society one cannot treat them as given. Their alterity as physician and laborer (that has nothing to do with their incomparability as singular individuals) is instituted/created by society and manifests its nonnaturalness. In the same way, when Marx writes “the first division of labor is that between men and women in the sexual act,” one might remark that “this division of labor” already exists in the case of horses and is therefore not “division of labor,” that it indeed has a different meaning in the case of human beings because human/social sexuality is completely another thing than simple biological sexuality.

The question of exchange constitutive of society is pro-

⁵⁵ *Ethics* E, v, 9; p. 125.

foundly homologous to that of distributive justice. The two make it directly necessary to pose the fundamental problematic of this study: such and such a man/such and such another man = such and such an object/such and such another object. The two run up against the same unskirted difficulty: the objects are not “actually” commensurable; the men are “totally other and nonequal.” The “solution” proposed by Aristotle is a reiteration of the problem on a more profound level. He comes back to saying that actually there is a response to the question, but that this response is not really realizable, and moreover the foundation and the nature of the true response remain enigmatic. In order that there be exchange, “everything that enters into an exchange must somehow be comparable . . . all goods must be measured by some single unit . . . that unit is actually [*tô alétheia*] need/use/utility [*chreia*] which holds everything together.”⁵⁶ Without need and “similar” (*omoiôs*) needs “there would be no exchange or not the same kind of exchange.” *Chreia*, need/use/utility, “holds everything together as if it were one single unit.”⁵⁷ Need grounds the unity of society and, in one sense, is this unity itself, the *would be* measure rendering all comparable. But it is not this, because this unit has not the unity of a measure or a number: one cannot measure need or the intensity of a need. It is therefore “as a substitute [*hupallagma, vicarius*] of *chreia*, that money is advanced by general agreement [*kata sunthékén*]. That is why it has the name of money [*nomisma*] because it exists by convention/institution [*nomô*] and not by nature [*physei*] and it is our power to change it or render it useless.”⁵⁸ Thus the required measure/unit that renders all commensurable can exist only by convention/institution, by postulation. Money “equalizes” objects, but this equalization is not actual, it is sufficient according to use/need. And this function of equalization is already implied by the institution of exchange as such

⁵⁶ *Ethics* E, v, 10–11; pp. 125–126.

⁵⁷ *Ethics* E, v, 13; p. 127.

⁵⁸ *Ethics* E, v, 11; p. 126.

(that presupposes a “legal tender” [*numéraire*], however hypothetical), it does not rely essentially on the specific institution of money. “Clearly this is the way in which exchange took place before the existence of money, for it makes no difference whether five beds or the money value of five beds is the equivalent of a house.”⁵⁹ Money is only simplification/generalization of a convention/institution of measurability already inherent in exchange. The relation one home = five beds is quite as much conventional/instituted as no matter what relation expressed by money and contains what is essential in monetary relationships (as for Marx, “the mystery of all value form lies in this single form,” “X commodity A=Y commodity B”). And this convention/institution recalls another, more fundamental: that which “equalizes” individuals “totally other and nonequal.”

Chreia is/would be the true unit and unity but it cannot be and must be substituted for by the *nomos*, by *nomisma*, by money. But *chreia* itself, the need/use/utility that holds everything together—is it *physei* or *nomos*? Is it built on the nature of man or is it, insofar as it is and such as it is, each time, established/created in and by the institution of society, a unit made by society in order that society could unify itself and act as one?

Aristotle poses the question of justice: total justice, total institution of the city; partial justice, essentially distributive justice, the response to the question *what, to whom?* He starts out from the common idea of equality that he will not stop to dispute for a second. He establishes, rightly, that equality in the current sense, arithmetic equality, is not only conventional in social affairs but furnishes no means for responding to his questions. In exchange, which he posits as constitutive of society, he sees, behind the objects, men and their activities in relationship to which an arithmetic equality is without meaning. Exchange itself implies *another* equality, equality of pro-

⁵⁹ Ethics E, v, 16; p. 128.

portion, “geometric equality”: the exchanged objects are to each other as the men who have produced them are to each other. The same way distribution always establishes a proportionality, it is always ruled by an *according to*, and this “according to” is an *axia*, a Proto-value. Once this *axia* is posed, that distribution is just which is accomplished *according to* it.

But precisely, on the definition or positing of this *axia*, men, parties, and cities differ and oppose one another. In one sense all distribution accomplished in a city appears as *de facto* just, if one can dare to express oneself thus, because it necessarily corresponds to the *axia* posed/instituted by this city as criterion and Proto-value (and in a complementary fashion to the “commensurability” of individuals and objects in which and by which this position/institution instruments itself). In another sense, there will not be—could not be?—a distributive *justice* or a *just* distribution concerning which one will be able to—if one would be able to?—give a determinate response and ground—“justify”—the question: *what, to whom?* That would call for the solution of three problems: the problem of the *axia*, of the Proto-value *according to* which distribution ought to be made; the problem of the comparability of an individual with respect to this value; the problem of the commensurability of objects from the social point of view. These problems Aristotle does not resolve, neither in the *Nichomachean Ethics* nor in the *Politics*. It is clear regarding the first problem that in his eyes the only *axia* that would merit consideration is *virtue*; but at the same time his formulations on *chreia*, need/use/utility, make this appear as both the cement of society and the norm of proportionality. And supposing this problem were resolved, with virtue being posed as the *axia* according to which distribution is to be made, how does one *measure* the virtue of individuals? (The same problem exists in the case of *chreia*, and Aristotle affirms that all response can be only by convention.) It is only the third problem that he resolves, in dissolving it and in affirming *rightly* (correcting him, it is Marx who is *wrong*) that the commensurability of objects can never *in truth*

exist, but can be established only “sufficiently with respect to usage.” In other words, if we knew what a just society was and how to establish it, it would not be the question of the commensurability of objects that would subsist as an insuperable obstacle. Above all, what remains hanging over the whole complex is the enigma of the *physis/nomos* relationship.

The Idea of Equality

As almost always on the essential points, Aristotle’s text raises all the questions. The centuries of commentary and interpretation, driven by thirst for certitudes and need for authority, read only the answers.

When, twenty-two centuries later, Marx in turn has to accept and discuss the question, what is a just distribution, and attempts to answer it, he will do this within the horizon traced by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and by means of categories posed therein. In fact, essentially, his response in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* is only a paraphrase of certain passages in the fifth book.

According to Marx, communist society in its “first phase” will base distribution on arithmetic equality that is still unjust. In its “superior phase” it will be able to establish just distribution conforming to geometric proportionality, according to the principle: “from each *according to* his capacities, to each *according to* his needs.”

Arithmetic equality—which Marx calls simple equality—prevails in the first phase of communist society. According to this equality “the producer receives back from society—after the deductions have been made—exactly what he gives to it. . . . The same amount of labour which he has given to society in one form he receives back in another.”⁶⁰ The relation between individual producer and society—or the totality of other producers—is an “exchange of equivalents.” Here, arithmetic

⁶⁰ Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, p. 387.

equality rules both the relation between the constitution and the reward of the individual producers: the two are “the same amount of labour” under a different form, and the relation *among* producers: all are subsumed under the same quantitative or numerical rule. The two aspects are summed up in Marx’s phrase: “the equality consists in the fact that measurement is made with an *equal standard*, labour.”

This labor, which “has the function of common measure,” is the Substance of the Value of *Capital*. Distribution in this “first phase” is made in spite of all according to one Proto-value, *axia*, that is simply Labor-Value, because this appears still as the necessary “common measure,” foundation of the universal commensurability of productive contributions and of distributed objects.

It is this *axia*, Labor-Value as Proto-value, that Marx rejects as the foundation of distribution in the “superior phase” of communist society. This arithmetic equality is still inequality, and “right” to the extent equal (arithmetically) is unequal.

This *equal right . . . is, therefore, a right of inequality, in its content, like every right*. Right by its very nature can consist only in the application of an equal standard [Aristotle: “the law treats individuals as equal”]; but unequal individuals (and they would not be different individuals if they were not unequal [Aristotle: “completely other and nonequal”]) are measurable only by an equal standard in so far as they are brought under an equal point of view, are taken from one *definite* side only [Aristotle: “nevertheless they must be equalized . . . they must be measured by employing a certain unit”], for instance, in the present case, are regarded *only as workers* and nothing more is seen in them, everything else being ignored.⁶¹

Arithmetic inequality, says Marx, is inequality insofar as it is *abstract* (therefore also partial), insofar as individuals can be considered as equal only if one regards them from one, unique point of view (here labor, but it would be the same in the case of no matter what alternative). Therefore actually

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 387–388.

they are *no longer* being considered as *individuals*. In particular, to take only labor into account, to establish labor as *axia*, Value as Proto-value, to give a return to individuals *according to* their contribution to production (duration and intensity of their labor) is possible only if one neglects that the same quantity of labor does not mean the same thing for each individual (there is by nature an inequality in their productive capacities), and that the same quantity of received goods does not bring the same satisfaction (the needs of the individuals are different). And above all, to the extent that by means of their labor men are posited as “equal” to objects (products and goods received) they *are* still like objects in the “first phase” of communism.

Actually, what Aristotle had posed as the fundamental given of the exchange constitutive of society, that individuals are “completely other and nonequal,” Marx will never cease repeating, from the beginning to the end of his career, each time that he does not fall prisoner to his own fetishism of economics as “science.” In the *Manuscripts of 1844*, political economy is accused of dealing with only means and abstractions; the theme often returns in the *Grundrisse*, appearing even in parts of *Capital*; it will finally, in 1875 in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, furnish the basis of Marx’s response to the question of “equitable distribution,” to the question of Plato and Aristotle (and of all society where political conflict has become explicit) concerning justice. Concerning exchange or distributive justice Aristotle (and already Plato) posited as a noncontested and incontestable postulate that there must be equalization and that genuine equalization is not and cannot be arithmetic but geometrical—in other words, proportional. This postulate is just as much incontestable for Marx: individuals are “naturally unequal” and they must be equalized. To begin with, he believes, they can be equalized only by means of labor—this seems to him to be imposed by the stigmata of the ancient order in which communist society has been engendered. But this equality is still not satisfactory *because it is not yet enough equality*. Pure equality will be that

which, taking into account the natural inequality of individuals, will permit its overcoming in and by proportionality: “to each according to his needs.”⁶²

Where does this noncontested and incontestable idea of equality come from? Why does Aristotle accept without hesitation the (then current) idea that “the just is the equal” and why does Marx, after having criticized the expression “fair distribution,” propose all the same to resolve the problem of distribution in formulating a law of a *really equal*—that is to say, fair—distribution? Why, in the face of the natural and social fact of inequality, do they feel themselves possessed by the necessity to overcome it, the one posing equality as the end (*telos*) of justice, the other as the end of (pre-?) history?

Let us stay with Marx’s “solution.” In order that right cease being a right of inequality (abstract universal rule), it is necessary, says Marx—making as always a historical forecast out of his political project and posing his own requirement as the law of the “superior phase” of communist society—that the contribution and reward of each be proportional to that which he is, to that which he is concretely, as a singular individual, and not as an exemplification of the category of worker or consumer. Now the formula of Prosper Enfantin that Marx takes up here, “from each according to his capacities, to each according to his needs,” is in all evidence an attempt to respond to the problem posed by Aristotle: it realizes distributive justice as geometrical proportion. With regard to production: contribution of A/capacities of A = contribution of B/capacities of B; and with regard to distribution: consumption of A/needs of A = consumption of B/needs of B.

This seems to be the *privileged* solution to the problem. The question of “measure” (in reality insoluble, as Aristotle has seen) seems to be eliminated—each individual being posed, or better, *becoming its own “measure.”* And since this will be valid

⁶² It is thus that in responding to the question of “equitable distribution” Marx concretizes (for economic goods) the Aristotelian idea of *equity*, “justice and what is better than justice”—equality and better than equality.

for all, the rule or law is at the same time social and individual, universal and concrete; exactly in the sense of Aristotle, it is more and better than justice, it is the emblem of "equity." A and B (and all others) receive *with respect to themselves alone according to their needs*, and furnish *with respect to themselves alone according to their capacities*. Each and all establish their own "measure" and *are* this "measure." The rule is the same for all without resulting in a numerical pseudoequality. The individuals are equal in and by a contingent quantitative inequality of that which they are rewarded, because they are rewarded all of what satisfies their needs, and of the latter they are the best judge. In the same way they are the best judge of the labor they have to furnish, because "labour has become not only a means of life, but *life's first need*."⁶³

The solution seems privileged from the practical point of view: if each receives whatever to satisfy his needs (and can freely satisfy his "need" to work), "battles and contestations" would be over. No one would put division into question because each would be, structurally, "satisfied." It seems also privileged from the theoretical or logical point of view as the sole solution of the problem of distribution—of distributive justice—that reconciles the universality of the rule and takes concrete situations fully into account. Thus it seems to correspond to *logos*, and to *logos* alone, and to "resolve" the social problem by taking it back to its logical essence. Everything solved as it has been demanded: under conditions independent of *all* particular institution of society, and therefore of all particular *axia*, Proto-value, the fundamental problematic relation of exchange, implicitly formulated by Aristotle, being concretized in an incontestable manner, finally finds a response in contribution according to capacities and distribution according to needs.

Evidently this solution presupposes a determined response to the question of the division between the indivisible and

⁶³ Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, p. 388; my emphases. Translation altered according to the German original.

the divisible [*participable* and *partageable*] as well as to that of initial allocation: it is based on “a distribution of the material conditions of production” that makes them the “cooperative property of the workers themselves.”⁶⁴ Thus Marx responds to two underlying questions of Aristotle’s *Ethics*: the frontier between that which is to be participated in and the divisible (in the economic domain) is that between means of production and objects of personal consumption; and equality in allocation is a geometrical proportion, and the criterion, the *axia* at the basis of this allocation or division, is “need” (including labor that has become “first need”). The solution also evidently presupposes something else: a profound anthropological/sociological modification (disappearance of the subordination of the individual to the division of labor and of the opposition between mental and manual labor, labor having become the first need of life, with the universal blossoming [the all around development] of individuals) and in a concomitant manner, “abundance.” One can, however, ask if this solution of the problems does not amount to a suppression of the condition under which the problems themselves exist, if Marx’s response does not actually mean that the only way of resolving the question of justice (that is to say, *of politics*) is to create conditions under which this question is no longer posed. Is the *apparently* “unimpeachable” character of Marx’s response not based precisely on its mythological content? Is he intending to cross “the narrow horizon of bourgeois right . . . in its entirety,” or rather to escape the domain of right altogether—this is what he affirms *expressis verbis* in several places—to totally reabsorb law in the effective conduct of individuals, abolish all distance between private and public as well as between the instituting and the instituted society, to return to a (supernatural) naturality of man, who no longer being enslaved by abstractions would immediately become a concrete universal according to Marx’s own expression, “total

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 388–389.

man”? Here it is not possible to discuss this question in its own right.⁶⁵ But it is necessary to strongly underline that one should not confound the question of the possibility of a radical revolution and of an explicit self-institution of society with the question of the possibility of a society without explicit institutions.

One cardinal point only requires discussion here. Behind the “logical” and “ultimate” solution of Marx, there is yet a *particular* choice of an *axia* that in itself is neither justifiable nor theorizable, one that issues from a particular metaphysical thesis concerning man as “need,” including (in its *telos*) the “need to work.” Even if what Marx says in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* concerns only the contribution of labor and the distribution of the means of consumption in society (of which one would be wrong to make such a big deal), the *axia*, the Proto-value *according to* which this contribution and distribution ought to be made, is *need*. But whereas Aristotle posed need (*chreia*) as that which “keeps the whole society together,” for Marx it is a matter of the need of *each*: to *each* according to his needs. Each is the “measure” of his (“own”) needs—he is their good and just and only measure, the individual is their judge, the individual *is* the judge. But what is the origin, nature, and content of these needs? Can one thus refer to the needs of each, taking them as the foundation and criterion of his contribution and reward, without positing the “satisfaction” of the individual as the goal of society, without above all positing that man is defined and defines himself by “his” needs *and* that he can define them all alone, as an individual, in other words, without postulating a trans- or meta-historical, trans- or meta-social *physis* of man, that would not allow the survival of any doubt concerning the legitimacy of “his” needs? Are needs *physei* or *nomô*, natural or instituted? If they

⁶⁵ I have done this in “Marxisme et théorie révolutionnaire,” *Socialisme ou barbarie* 39 (March 1965): 35–40; now in Cornelius Castoriadis, *L'institution imaginaire de la société* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975), pp. 151–157.

are—as they are with the exception of trivialities—*nomô*, if all need is socially instituted, who would want to say, even concerning the “means of consumption,” to *each* according to his needs? The phrase would be without meaning. Similarly, there would be no meaning in the phrase from *each* according to his capacities, because these capacities are only capacities of social labor (and not, for example, brute muscular force determined genetically) as *created* by society by means of the *paideia* of individuals. Contemporary societies, the American, the French, the Russian, the Chinese, create in the children of the dominant classes “needs” for private airplanes, for villas in Saint-Tropez, for dachas, etc.: to each according to his needs? Similarly, they create in assembly-line workers the “capacity” to make the same gesture according to a single rhythm for eight or nine hours a day—and in the inhabitant of Gulag or the Chinese camps the “capacity” to work fourteen to sixteen hours a day under -20° centigrade while practically not eating at all: from each according to his capacities?

What are the needs and capacities that a society ought to create, toward which it ought to prepare/educate individuals, and on what basis and by what means are these needs and capacities to be created—this question cannot be eliminated. It occupies a central place with the philosophers of *eidōs* and *physis*, Plato and Aristotle: *The Republic*, *The Laws*, *The Politics* do not stop speaking of it. Paradoxically, the question grinds to a halt with the philosopher of history, Marx. The social creation of needs and capacities of individuals, considered from the point of view of justice, is *paideia*, “the preparation of individuals oriented toward the community” of which Aristotle speaks, and which he correctly identifies with the question of total justice—in other words, one more time, with the question of *politics* bearing on the institution of the ensemble of society. Certainly, if the needs and capacities of each are, first and foremost, that which society has created for each as needs and capacities, the aims of the individual are opposed to this social

imposition—more exactly, can be opposed to it from the moment and as a result of historical development, the individual being itself a social institution but an institution that is transformation of a singular and ultimately irreducible kernel: the *psyche*. If this opposition emerges—as it has emerged for a long time in the societies called “historical”—the reconciliation of these two terms can never be spontaneous or automatic; and it is also this that concretizes for us the question of total justice and of politics. We cannot find a response to the question of justice with individuals, who would be already fully determined before all socialization, because it is absurd to believe that they define “their” needs and “their” capacities; just as it is absurd to believe (in spite of the efforts of Stalin and Mao to the contrary) that the totalitarian state, disguised as the “people” or as “society,” can indefinitely and integrally define it for them. The question of the coexistence of the two terms ought to be confronted in its own right, it should not be allowed to dissolve in the myth of a society that would be the immediate reconciliation of all with each and of each with himself. There will always be the question of total justice, of the formation of individuals, of *paideia* in the most vast and profound sense of the term, of the socialization of the psyche, that will never be automatically and spontaneously resolved by any “universal blossoming” of individuals, because any “blossoming” whatever can exist only by means of the social fabrication of the individual. And whatever the state of “abundance” of society, the question of distributive justice, of the definition of the divisible and its division, will subsist, because there will always be the matter of the delimitation of the individual sphere, of right and of the rights of the individual correlative to his own life and to the means accorded to him in order to live, and of the position of rules relative to the attribution to each of his own body and an autonomous sphere of activity. The distance that separates the idea of a society where human beings do not kill one another for a few dollars and the idea of a society where the needs and desires of each and all are

spontaneously satisfied is immense, and this is the distance that separates a historical political project from an incoherent fiction.

On this occasion again one can observe the profound anti-nomy that divides the thought of Marx. It would be evidently more than false to say that Marx thinks of human needs as “natural”: he knows and affirms time and again their “historical” character. But *with this idea he can do nothing*. He cannot take it into account any time the category of need has to be utilized, not when it is a matter of analyzing the capitalist economy which is treated as if fixed and stable needs could be posed and, for example, a “level of life” of the working class could be defined once and for all (a definition without which the idea that labor power is a commodity would go up in smoke); not as we have seen when it is a matter of the “superior phase” of communist society where the needs of each become, without question, criteria of an equitable distribution; and not, finally, when it is a matter of history considered in its totality, where all seems to unfold as if human beings worked to satisfy better and better, more and more needs given once and for all—otherwise there would never be a question of “abundance.”

Marx comments on Aristotle as if the *Ethics* had proposed to resolve the quantitative question of “exchange value.” But the question posed by Aristotle is much more profound and goes much further—and it is a question that Marx at times believes he can eliminate by referring to “the laws history,” by which he evidently mystifies himself. The question of Aristotle is the *political* question, the enigma of the foundation of the political community, of society—*koinônia* or *polis*—as the creation of social individuals (*paideia*), as justice (*dikaiosuné*), as exchange (*allagé*), as the indissolubility of the three, a foundation where the question of fact and the question of right cannot be easily separated, neither at the origin nor at the end, where *physis* and *nomos*, nature/spontaneous finality/norm/life regulating themselves after their eternal destination on the one hand,

and mutable, contingent, arbitrary convention/institution on the other hand, can be neither simply identical nor absolutely separated and opposed to one another. It is the *physis* of man that requires that he establish the *nomoi*, it is in and by his *physis* that he is a political animal. But also, all *polis* imply a particular *nomos*; the *politeia*, the constitution/institution of *all* existing cities, including even the one Aristotle considered “the best by nature” and of which he affirmed that it is “everywhere the same” (except that it exists nowhere), contain and will always contain *nomina* that are purely by convention.⁶⁶ The same way, language is in and by the *physis* of men, while its elements are “ones that signify by convention.”⁶⁷ The same is true for *techné*. That man should have *techné* one could not doubt, man is naturally an artificer and artificial. But what is *techné*? “*Techné* either imitates nature or achieves that which by nature is impossible to accomplish.”⁶⁸ Would *techné* be repetition of nature, an instrument provided by nature for its own imitation (why?)—or does it exist in order to accomplish, by the intermediary of man, nature’s own proper ends that it cannot itself achieve? But that which man accomplishes by means of *techné* “serves” only man; does it “serve” him insofar as he is natural? When men perfect their weapons and the *techné* of war; when they outfit the city with futile defensive walls and naval shipyards as Plato says; when they transform necessary exchange into unnecessary *chremismatique*, an unlimited activity of acquisition ruled by a desire “without an end”⁶⁹—an art squarely against nature (and in vain,⁷⁰ while “nature does nothing in vain”); when they invent the instruments and the kinds of music that Aristotle, following Plato, severely criticizes and wants to exclude from the *paideia* of the young; when finally they commit the “important and perfect” acts that have the names of parricide, fratricide, infanticide,

⁶⁶ *Ethics* E, VII, 1–6.

⁶⁷ *On Interpretations* II, 1.

⁶⁸ *Physics* B, VIII, 199 a 15–17.

⁶⁹ *Politics* A, IX, 16; p. 44.

⁷⁰ *Ethics* A, II, 1.

incest, massacre of innocent prisoners, and when they fashion the tragic poetry that imitates this *techné*—are they “natural” beings?

Man is *physei* and he is naturally a political animal; and the city is *physei* and naturally precedes the individual man.⁷¹ One ought, therefore, to be able to define *the* city that is really “natural” or “best by nature” in its specific institution/constitution, in its *politeia* and *nomos*, but this is not really possible. Even more: this natural city, if it is by nature, ought *to be* effectively the real city in the great majority of cases, just as the “normal” man is the rule, the “pathological” the exception. Now the *Politics* knows and shows, one more time, that this is absolutely false. All the cities are far from “the best by nature,” the foundations of their constitutions/institutions, the *axia* that ground their justice, are very different from justice pure and simple or absolute;⁷² all are in accord concerning justice and proportional equality but never attaining it;⁷³ if all the constitutions comprise “something of justice, they are, absolutely, in error”⁷⁴ because while the *axia* that they posit always has partial validity, they transform it into *axia* plain and simple.

What would be then the *axia* which would have absolute (*haplôs*) validity? Without any doubt virtue itself, total virtue that coincides with total justice. But precisely in the case of virtue the two sides of *physis* are brutally separated: the norm/finality and the predominant norm/effectivity, *eidos* as *telos* and the *telos* as immanent and spontaneous tendency, power. Every being *is* in as much as a *being* it actualizes *what it was to be* (*to ti ên einai*), in as much as it accomplishes its destination. But with man the *ti ên einai* is broken. These two moments whose nondisassociation forms the kernel of the ontology of Aristotle, a nondisassociation according to which everything is a

⁷¹ *Politics* A, II, 9, 12, and 14.

⁷² *Politics* G, IX, 1 and XII, 19

⁷³ *Politics* E, 1, 2

⁷⁴ *Politics* E, 1, 5.

being only as far as it is what it is, which is to say "what it was to be," that the "to be" of a thing is its *eidos*, that is to say its *telos*, its goal, its eternal destination; these two moments are dissociated in the case of men. Virtue is the *telos* of man, his "natural end"; but it is not "natural" in the sense that men arrive there "more often than not" and spontaneously. Almost all horses, insofar as horses, accomplish the end of a horse; almost no man really accomplishes virtue, and strictly no city accomplishes its *telos*. And of course virtue has not this "power" to be accomplished in the case of man, because virtue ought to be created by *paideia*, that is to say, by the fundamental institutions of the city. Thus the *physis/telos* of man is conditioned by the *nomos* of the city. What is the virtue that ought to be thus created; what is the *telos* of man to which the *Ethics* and even more the *Politics* respond: "*logos* and *nous* are the end of nature for us other men." But *how* can the institution of the city accomplish this goal, on what bases and by what means, this question remains open till the end of the unfinished mazes of the *Politics* and without doubt would so remain in any case. Would this be so only for a reason already known to Plato: the creation of virtue by the institution of the city presupposes virtue itself, because it presupposes that virtue is already effectively created as the goal of total justice capable of realizing itself in the form of an instance that institutes—whether "the legislator" or the people.

This rupture of the ontological determination of man and of the city, this impossibility of saying either that all *nomos* is *physei* or that if there is not a *physis* of the *nomos* and of the city, traces the limit, the frontier of the thought of Aristotle, of Greek thought, and in essence the thought of the West.

Aristotle thinks starting out from the *physis*: in the bundle of the significations of the term what is important for us is the logical/ontological *organization* of being and of beings that it aims at and particularly and above all the relation that it poses between determination and indetermination (*peras-apeiron*) and the conception of this determination. What type of orga-

nization is this, and why can one say that in this respect the thought of the West—including Hegel and Marx—has never left the Aristotelian horizon? Nature is purpose [*fin*], repeats Aristotle constantly; nature does nothing “in vain.” Does nothing in vain: does nothing “without reason,” “without cause.” It is “final” cause he means—but at this level the distinction of the “final” and the “causal” has strictly no importance.⁷⁵ The final cause *determines* the organization of that which is and grounds its being; it is this that renders an account and a reason for how it is and why [*pourquoi*=*pour-quoi*, for what] it is such as it is; it makes that which is be what it is, what it was to be, and determines the necessary sequence of means and ends—which necessarily realizes itself in a sequence of causes and effects. This sequence is itself determined by the thrust, the tendency, of *physis* against the assimilation of the *nous*: *nous-theos*, God-thinking, thought thinking itself and as such absolutely separated, *ab-solu* of the world. God who does not act in the world and yet acts in one sense on the world, to the extent he loves it, or the world loves itself in relation to him. This love, the *eros* of nature for the *nous-theos*, is a tendency to assimilate itself as closely as possible to the *nous*, to resemble it as nearly as possible, to become like *nous* to the highest possible degree. This is also the goal proposed for human life, the supreme echelon of *physis*, because “our end is the *logos* and the *nous*,” because we ought to “make ourselves divine to the highest possible extent.”⁷⁶ This is the tendency that renders *physis* thinkable: *physis* is thinkable insofar as it is the *eros* of thought.

But *physis* is the *eros* of thought—not thought itself. Insofar as it is *eros*, it is determined—thinkable, intelligible for us. Also, insofar as it is *eros*, it is finality, *eidos*, determined destination, *ti ên einai*. But it would not be *physis* if it were *only* this. Now it is also, essentially, something else: matter, movement, alteration, the indefinite, the indetermined. All *physis* com-

⁷⁵ Cf. *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, chap. 4.

⁷⁶ *Ethics* I, vii, 8; p. 17.

prises matter, movement, “potentiality” [*puissance*], the power to be other—otherwise it would be God, thought thinking itself, pure act, immutability. By this move Aristotle, after Plato, in a manner profoundly different and profoundly analogous at the same time makes room both for an indetermination of that which is “physically”—of all that is outside the *nous*, *ab-solute*, separated—and for an ontological foundation of the limits of human knowledge and of the existence of error. In the measure that *physis* “never exists without matter,” it is “in itself” indetermination of that which is, and is “for us” error. But once this essential limitation is posed, it is no longer one of principle. Each time, one must and one can know the kind and degree of the “exactitude” that the thing considered and the correlative discourse involve. Of course this indetermination effects not only our knowledge but our activity: “the matter of acting things” contains an essential indetermination because it is at the same time “matter” and has to do with “things that can be other than they are.”⁷⁷ Inversely, in defining matter as indetermination Aristotle again profoundly makes room for a space for action, human doing as *praxis* and *poiésis*: the two in effect rest on the fact that everything is *not* determined in that which is, that there is indeterminacy and “objective” possibility. We can act because we are *in physis* as matter, because we are ourselves part of *physis*, we are *physis*.

But here Aristotle rediscovers another problem of principle, one much more serious. Human things are not simply indeterminate insofar as “physical” (affected by matter as all of nature). On one side they are the *contrary* of *physis*: they interminably and essentially involve *nomos*, just as they involve *techné*. They are, in a sense, *nomos* and *techné*. The city is *physei*—by nature; but the city and each city is *nomos* and a particular *nomos*. Even if the perfect city were achieved and accomplished, the city that alone would be uniquely “the best by nature” will be thus only in and by the *nomos*, it will be

⁷⁷ *Ethics* F, vi, 1; p. 154.

just—and the just is “the legal and the equal” and there is neither “natural” legality nor equality.

This ultimate division, *physis* and *nomos*, Aristotle does not conjure away; he confronts it but cannot “surmount” it. This is why he vacillates before it, as Marx vacillates in another manner but for deeply analogous reasons. Aristotle ought to separate *physis* and *techné*—and he ought not separate them absolutely, because then there would no longer be any ontological status or locus for *techné* and its products, *techné* would be nothing if it were not anchored in the “imitation” or the “surpassing” of *physis*. Insofar as *techné* essentially exceeds nature, it cannot be assimilated by the Aristotelian ontology (and by all traditional ontology). For a similar reason he ought to separate *physis* and *polis*—and he should not separate them absolutely. To the extent that the city is *never* effectively that which it ought to be *physei* as “the best,” and that, quite on the contrary, its constitution is always, absolutely speaking, in error, one does not see that it can exist at all. No more than one can see that the *nomos* can exist—from the moment when it is not simply, nor “most of the time,” a means for “our natural end, to us other men, the *logos* and the *nous*.” If the differences among *nomoi* were minor, accidental, exceptional, one could eventually disregard them, or assign them to some kind of matter of political being/existence. But they are not. It is in and by its particular *nomos* that each city is what it is. *Nomos* is not “matter” and it is even more not *eidos* or *physis*. What is it then? What is this indetermination of *nomos* in relation to the natural end of men—the *logos* and the *nous*—that is not simple “matter,” “movement,” the potentiality of human things, but is expressed by the *instituted alterity* of *nomoi*? There would have to be a nature of law or a natural law—and in spite of certain formulations which the centuries have understandably rushed upon, Aristotle cannot resolve himself to affirm, to completely, categorically affirm, without reserve or restriction, that *nomos* is *physei* or that there is a *physis* of *nomos*. For he knows

that there is a contradiction between the terms—there is, in any case, in the Greek language. For the being of *nomos* there is no ontological locus.

Thus one can understand the necessity of the aporias of the fifth book of the *Ethics* that continue into the *Politics*. There is a city everywhere best by nature and no real city is this city. There is an *axia according to* which initial allocation ought to be made: virtue—but this *axia* cannot actually ground the division, because it cannot be thought as *anterior* (logically and actually) to the *politeia*, to the constitution/institution of the city. This *axia*, virtue, can only exist by *paideia*, the preparation of individuals in view of common affairs, it itself is the kernel of the institution/constitution of society. It is therefore *nomos*, the institution of the city that ought to create virtue—virtue that is, however, the “natural end” of man. And in order that this *paideia* be true, veritable *paideia*, the appropriate institution of the city would have to be established—but by whom, starting from what, by what means, and from where would this “who” draw his own virtue? In order that just distribution might exist, there is the necessity of the comparability of individuals with respect to the *axia*, the Proto-value of society, but virtue is not measurable, nor, more generally, are individuals comparable except by convention. To fill up this lacuna and also for more profound reasons, there is the appeal to evident and enigmatic *chreia*; but *chreia* itself appears each time as something instituted and is in itself also not measurable. It too is supposed to be made up for by a conventional equalization, to be sure instituted, to be sure exceeding all *physis* of man and city. There is, finally and above all, the *explicit destruction* of all possibility of “rational” response, in a sentence in which all the aporias are found condensed, and which I will leave without a commentary: “Therefore, [in this case] there is no just and unjust in politics. For the politically just is according to the law and for those for whom there is law

by nature, for those, for whom there exists the requisite equality in ruling and being ruled.”⁷⁸

The greatness of Aristotle—and an aspect of his importance for us—is also the fact that he assumes the division and the contradiction that rent the Greek universe, that he accepts this hand-to-hand struggle with the ultimate questions which he not only does not leave dormant but pursues indefatigably into their interminable innermost recesses, which indeed exceed the means which his thought disposes over, which indeed in the end make his ontological framework explode.

We are in appearance very far from the first chapter of *Capital*, from Marx and the questions that are his—and ours. Are we really? Marx himself does not manage to decide if Labor-Value is a transhistorical Substance/Essence, a particular expression on the level of this Substance/Essence by capitalism, or an Appearance created by capitalism—to which its “reality” can be reduced. But what is behind this vacillation, if not vacillation concerning the *physis* of man, of society and history, the problem of knowing if there can be a question of *physis* in this domain? Does not Marx want to show that a certain *physis* of man and of history must lead them to their “goal,” to their predetermined *telos*, communism? Does he not try to find in the proletariat the legislator, which by its own proper *historical nature* as a universal class does not have particular interests and would therefore vindicate the human essence/nature of man, such as will be undoubtedly manifested when “labour will become the prime need of life”? Is he really in position to extricate himself from this oscillation between what he knows and even says, incidentally but clearly, of needs as defined socially and historically and the necessity (his) to postulate fixed, stable, determinate needs, to be able to speak on the same plane of capitalist economy and communist society? Can the “to each according to his need” have meaning

⁷⁸ *Ethics* E, vi, 9; p. 130.

any other way than by a reference to a nature (and a “good” nature) of the individual man, whose needs would be determined both without arbitrariness (individual or social) and as spontaneously compatible with his sociality? Does he not see technique totally ambiguously, as both historical creation and natural manifestation of man? Does he not maintain—and not only in his youthful writings—an enigmatic naturality of man, complementing the equally enigmatic humanity/rationality of nature? This profound thinker of society, the man who has most insisted on the irreducibility of the social and who has always denounced “*Robinsonades*,” does he not go so far as to write in his principal book: “. . . the social life process . . . will not strip off its mystical veil until it becomes a product of freely socialized [associated] men and is put under their conscious, planned control”?⁷⁹ In other words: to pose future society as product of the *free association* of men and the sociality anterior to this, visibly “not free,” as a sort of “mystical veil”?

One could continue. But it suffices to demonstrate what is at stake here. The real “historical limit” (what is not simply “historical” in the contingent sense of the term) of Aristotle as well as Marx is the question of the institution. It is the impossibility for inherited thought to take into account the social-historical as a mode of being not reducible to that which is “known” from elsewhere. The impossibility does not make an appearance with dull authors—who effectively “reduce” the social-historical to something else (to “nature,” to “structure,” to “desire,” etc.). It appears with the great—and precisely under the form of the antinomy, of the internal division of thought. Thus it traces the limit of great Greek thought, as that of Hegel and Marx, and the same way of inherited political thought conceived as theory.

The questions of the institution and of the social-historical

⁷⁹ “Produkt frei vergesellschafteter Menschen unter deren bewusster planmässigen Kontrolle” (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, 39 vols. [Berlin: Dietz, 1958–68], 23: 94).

become the limits of inherited thought, because and insofar as they are posed within a horizon “purely theoretical,” because and insofar as one wants to give an account and a reason for the institution as it is, and to ground in reason what the institution “ought” to be. But the question of the institution by far exceeds “theory”; to think the institution such as it is—as social-historical *creation*—requires the smashing of the framework of inherited logic-ontology. To propose another institution of society raises the issue of a political project and a goal, which can certainly be discussed and argued, but cannot be grounded in some kind of Nature or Reason (even if these were the nature or reason of history).

Surpassing the limit requires understanding a “banality”: value (even economic value), equality, justice are not concepts that one could ground, construct (or even destroy, as Marx wants to do in the case of justice) in and by theory. They are political ideas/significations concerning the institution of society as such that could not be and that we would not want to be an institution that is anchored in a natural, logical, or transcendent order. Men are born neither free nor unfree, neither equal nor unequal. We want them (and ourselves) to be free and equal in a just and autonomous society—knowing that the meaning of these terms will never be defined definitively, and that the support that theory could bring to this task is always radically limited and essentially negative.

Thus it is for “value” and “equality,” including the domain that seems to be the most “rationalizable” of all, the “economy.” Here there are no “concepts” whose definitions could be obtained by an autonomous society from its theorists (as the specification of the technical modalities of a factory could be obtained from its engineers). If for example I have maintained for twenty-five years that an autonomous society should immediately adopt, in the matter of rewards, an absolute equality of all salaries, revenues, etc., this was not on the basis of an idea of a natural or any other kind of “equality/identity” of all men, nor on the basis of theoretical reasoning.

What such reasonings sufficiently show is the incoherence, the fallacies, the mystifications contained in all pretended theoretical (economic or other) “justifications” of the inequality of salaries and revenues. But the demand of equality in this domain has an aim and a meaning that by far surpasses economic considerations. It is a question of the imaginary significations that hold society together, and of the *paideia* of individuals. *It is a question of the destruction of economic motivations*, by destroying the “socially objective” conditions of its possibility: the differentiation of revenues. It is a question of the destruction of economic “value” as the Proto-value according to which society is ruled. And still more: in this domain it is a question of the destruction of the central imaginary signification of all the societies said to be historical: that of a *hierarchy* among human beings whatever may be its basis and its mask. The same is true concerning “economic calculation” in an autonomous society. If I maintain that this calculation—whose results in any case ought to be subordinated to other, much more serious considerations—ought to be made on the basis of labor time, establishing the equivalent of all labors, this is not only because there are no other foundations for this approach which present themselves to us in an indisputable fashion, but rather because all the ones that have been proposed until now are fallacious and incoherent, and because it is a question of at the same time anchoring the destruction of hierarchy in the facts themselves and to render as clear and intelligible as possible for all the relation between their work and their consumption. “Equality” and “commensurability” of “economic” labors ought to be *instituted* by an autonomous society as instruments of its institution to dethrone economy and hierarchy, to render society’s own functioning more intelligible for all, to facilitate another *paideia* of individuals.

TRANSLATED BY ANDREW ARATO