CHAPTER 5

Archeology of Restricted Superstructure

Exactly because of the long history of bowdlerization and misrepresentation of what Marx and Engels actually said, a practice that began even before Marx died in 1883 . . . I make my case by extensive quotation of what they said rather than, as is so often done, relying on snippets and paraphrasing. For this reason and the fact that I draw on their published record in its entirety, not just the usually cited canonical “texts”—which make up at most about one-tenth of their total output — I beg the reader’s indulgence.

—August H. Nimtz, Jr., *Marx and Engels: Their contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough*. ¹

Of course, the context of Nimtz’s argument is evidently different—making a compelling case for the democratic credentials of Marx and Engels— but what is remarkable is the felt need to make an apology and an appeal for indulgence regarding the extensive citation from their writings. Perhaps any sustained engagement with the writings of Marx and Marxism may need a similar gesture and appeal for indulgence, more so in the present academic scenario where the obsolescence of Marxism is almost an article of faith. In the words of Terry Eagleton:

. . . it is not as though anyone actually disproved the doctrine. It is not as though they needed to. In the new ambience of political cynicism, cultural philistinism, and economic self-interest, Marxism was less and less even in question, as quaintly antiquarian a pursuit for some as Ptolemaic cosmology or the scholasticism of Duns Scotus. One no more needed to refute it than one would waste time in refuting a fakir or a flat-earther. ²

In such a bleak backdrop, I borrow Nimtz’s words to speak for me, because I am about to embark on a similar expedition.
Focussing on the pivotal statement of Marx in his 1859 preface, the previous chapter — so far as it is successful in hitting the nail on the head — made a case for a restricted version of the superstructure, in contrast to the widely believed panoptic version. In doing so, it ignored — albeit consciously — a comparative and historical study of the concept of superstructure as an integral part of Marx’s intellectual maturation. The present chapter attempts that study now by considering the whole corpus of Marx’s writings, of course, within the limits of their accessibility to me.

Astonishingly, the two book-length studies devoted to this topic: 1. *Marxism-Leninism on Basis and Superstructure* by D. I. Chesnokov and 2. *Ideology and Superstructure in Historical Materialism* by Franz Jakubowski, do not even attempt anything like this, thus making this enterprise absolutely imperative. But, let it be clear that, even if the studies had embarked upon such a task, they are not a substitute to our project since our study has the unique focus of unearthing Marx’s restricted superstructure. I envision this project as a conceptual excavation because this original restricted version is buried so deeply that nobody could even sense its existence even as one likely version of base and superstructure among the variety of the avatars that we have been encountering. Thus this chapter is titled only to suggest this excavatory visualization and not to suggest any Foucauldian associations.

Obviously, the fact that Marx rigorously maintained a restricted version of superstructure in the texts which he himself thought to be central to his stance, doesn’t imply in any way that he had done that from the beginning. Understandably, the most probable presumption is the converse one, considering the prolific and fertile theoretical career of Marx that spanned around half a century of tumultuous times. Consequently our task now is to put the results of our previous analysis in proper intellectual and historical setting and to see to what extent the restricted superstructure as formulated by Marx in his 1859 preface...
could retain its rigour and consistency, when analyzed against the various and varied statements gleaned from his huge oeuvre. This involves probing into the conceptual and chronological variations with a view to the ensuing confusions and clarifications.

To be precise, the previous analysis contained three interrelated aspects of conclusion.

1) Marx’s use of the category of superstructure is restricted to the political and legal spheres only. He uses the base and superstructure metaphor to conceptualize the intricate connection between the production relations and the politico-legal spheres.

2) Marx’s holistic view of society as an inherently articulated organism of different spheres of life is to be found in his theory of Mode of production and not in the base and superstructure metaphor.

3) Ideology and consciousness (philosophy, ethics, art, etc..,) which are by common consent believed to be the constituents of the superstructure—perhaps as the most important constituents at that—are excluded from the category of superstructure in Marx’s 1859 preface. On the contrary, they have a sort of ubiquitous status in Marx’s conceptual network.

These are not to be seen as mutually autonomous observations but as inextricably related aspects of the base and superstructure thesis: the first point dethrones the thesis from the status of an all-inclusive echelon; the second point enthrones the concept of Mode of production in a similar status; the third point deals with one of the most important items in Marx’s conceptual horizon whose status is greatly affected by these paradigmatic manoeuvres and attempts to restore it in its rightful place. Our study takes all these aspects into account. But, before attempting a historical study, a few remarks on different trends in this field of study may be interesting and illuminating and even be useful in avoiding some potential pitfalls.
Some observations on the historiography of Marx’s intellectual itinerary

The history of Marx’s intellectual itinerary is as controversial as Marxism itself. The publication of Marx’s early writings and the debate it provoked is too well known to be given a detailed treatment. Like all aspects of Marxism, its history is also a battleground imbued with implications that are not only theoretical but also political. Thus, for instance, T. I. Oizerman, a Russian Marxist, writes caustically that “when the clerical Marxologist Erich Thier solemnly exclaims: ‘the young Marx is a discovery of our day’, one may well ask what sort of discovery he has in mind. Is it the discovery of Marxism? But its founders published their principal works over a century ago. So this is an effort to discover in Marxism something that is alien to it.”

As usual, dispassionate research is a rarity and even extremely implausible ideas are in common currency. One such extreme stance manifests itself as an endeavour to trace the ideas of Marx at his intellectual maturity even in his very early writings. Marx’s German composition, entitled “Reflections of a Young Man on the Choice of Career”, which he wrote as a student, is a case in point. Here, writing about the best choice of career, Marx makes the observation that “…we cannot always attain the position to which we believe we are called; our social relations in society have to some extent already begun to be established before we are in a position to determine them.”

This otherwise remarkable observation sounds inflated when extolled as full-fledged historical materialism. “It is nothing less than historical materialism that wakes in that short sentence and opens its eyes for the first time. It is a light whose brightness grew from year to year until finally it shone with a blinding brightness,” writes Lewin-Dorsch.

One can appreciate the objection raised by David McLellan against Lewin-Dorsch: “. . . that human activity is continually limited by the prestructured environment is an idea at
least as old as the enlightenment and the encyclopedists.” But it is difficult to say categorically along with McLellan that “[i]t would indeed be surprising if even the germ of historical materialism had already been present in the mind of a seventeen-year-old schoolboy”.8

Evidently, it will be too much to find in these lines the germ of historical materialism as an intricately articulated theory, but, at the same time, it is not altogether preposterous to sense a tenuous affinity here with historical materialism as a theory that says, “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.”9 In spite of its seeming incontrovertibility McLellan’s argument is crudely based on the biological age of Marx, whereas a more careful reading of the lines evinces a precocious youth for Marx’s age. In fact McLellan himself speaks about the originality of this composition a few pages earlier.10

Althusser, with his notion of “epistemological break”, represents the opposite extreme. As Robert Paul Resch puts it

Althusser argues that between the 1844 Manuscripts and Capital there exists a radical break in Marx’s thought, a break announced in the ‘Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach’ (1845), which identifies human nature with the ensemble of social relations, thereby rejecting Feuerbach’s ahistorical, abstract, and passively contemplative concept of ‘species being.’11

No one can deny the manifest centrality of social relations in Marx’s conceptual network. But Althusser’s argument of radical rupture turns untenable when he goes to the extent of claiming that Marxism is “theoretical anti-humanism”.12 In the light of recent critical work13 however, nobody can maintain such an extreme position now, without reverting to the grotesquely antiquated ideas.
Understandably, Althusser’s concept — a concept that he avowedly barrowed from Gaston Bachelard — of the “epistemological break” between the young Marx and the mature Marx became popular, as it seemed to represent the legitimate endeavour to demarcate the intellectual pre-history of Marxism from Marxism proper. Strangely enough, the self same Althusser with all his commitment to locating the differentiating features of Marxism proper from its own formative phase and with all his resolute resistance to obviating this intellectual and chronological difference can still write about Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* that “. . . These are all, or nearly all, categories we shall meet again in *Capital*, and on this basis we might accept them as anticipations of *Capital*, or better, as a project for *Capital*, or even as *Capital* crayoned, already outlined, but only as a sketch, which, if it has the genius of the completed work, has not yet been filled in as it is in the latter.”

It is not difficult to see the absurdity of Althusser’s claim. In fact, the central concept of *Capital* — Surplus value — cannot be seen in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, either as a law or even as a category or at least as a word. The same is the case with the concept of “two-fold nature of labour” which has a great organizing function in the theoretical framework of *Capital*. But still Althusser, with his subtle strategy of “symptomatic reading” and the awareness of “epistemological break” cannot resist completely, the temptation of finding the chicken itself in the egg instead of a chick. This, of course, does not show any inherent discrepancy in Althusser’s methodology. In fact, one of the strengths of his methodology is the resistance it offers to such teleological reading about which Althusser himself ironically remarks: “It is as if Marx's necessity to *escape from his beginnings* . . .” On the other hand, it is an indisputable testimony to the afflicting influence of an interpretive tradition, and to the almost inescapable thrust exerted even on a
nonconformist like Althusser, by an established hermeneutic praxis that is endemic to the historiography of Marxism.

These sketchy observations inform us against some of the prevalent erroneous trends in the historiography of Marxist thought which tend to ignore the diachronic differences or to exaggerate them beyond reason. These extremes could be avoided by a rigorous adherence to the texts in question and by a relentless conscious effort to be free from such predisposed readings of the texts. An awareness of these trends can be illuminating, in a negative sense, throughout our study.

Also, our study would be more useful and more focused if we take up this study not as a formal chronological survey but as a time-specific conceptual analysis. The first passage I am going to analyze is a remarkable passage from Marx’s magnum opus, *Capital*, volume 1 published in 1867.

**The Concept of Superstructure in Marx’s *Capital***

In the previous chapter, incidentally, I mentioned how Marx endorsed his restricted version of superstructure in his *Capital*. This occurs in a footnote to the first volume of his *Capital*, where Marx answers the objections of a German paper.

I seize this opportunity of shortly answering an objection taken by a German paper in America, to my work, "Zur Kritik der Pol. Oekonomie, 1859." In the estimation of that paper, my view that each special mode of production and the social relations corresponding to it, in short, that the economic structure of society, is the real basis on which the juridical and political superstructure is raised and to which definite social forms of thought correspond; that the mode of production determines the character of the social, political, and intellectual
life generally, all this is very true for our own times, in which material interests preponderate, but not for the middle ages, in which Catholicism, nor for Athens and Rome, where politics, reigned supreme. 

This passage from the first volume of Capital, the only volume to be published in Marx’s lifetime, is unique in many ways. Firstly, it unequivocally endorses the restricted version of superstructure, by categorically mentioning it as “the juridical and political superstructure”, the same components mentioned in the 1859 preface. Secondly, it doesn’t do this by a word-to-word repetition, in the form of a quotation, but by giving the words in the reported speech, which allows some freedom of reformulation, and still, the restricted version of superstructure is rigorously maintained. Thirdly, “definite social forms of thought” are again said to “correspond” and are mentioned separately from the superstructure. Fourthly, the overall determining role is again given to the mode of production: “the mode of production determines the character of the social, political, and intellectual life generally”.

Last but not the least significant is the fact that this passage betrays some differences or deviations from the 1859 preface.

But this difference can be a source of clarification than of confusion. In fact, it overcomes a conceptual lacuna that is implicit in the 1859 preface. It can be seen in the relation (or the lack of relation) between the mode of production and the base i.e., the relations of production. In the 1859 preface, the base and superstructure paradigm doesn’t seem to have any explicit relation with the concept of mode of production. A look at the fragment concerned, from the 1859 preface will reveal this:

The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.
The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness\(^\text{17}\).

The concept of *mode of production* has no apparent relation with the base i.e., with the relations of production. The passage from *Capital* is strikingly different: “my view that each special mode of production and the social relations corresponding to it, in short, that the economic structure of society, is the real basis. . .". This suggests that the *mode of production* is more fundamental and foundational than the concept of base or the production relations and that the production relations, in fact, correspond to the *mode of production*. This reformulation in *Capital* effects two changes: 1) it formulates the relation between the *mode of production* and the *relations of production*; 2) in consonance with the idea of the overriding importance of the concept of *mode of production*, which is derived from the previous analysis of Marx’s preface, it establishes the primacy of the *mode of production* even in connection with the *relations of production*.

Besides this clarification, this passage from *Capital* can also pose a new question. In the preface of 1859, Marx says that the relations of production are “. . . appropriate to a given stage in the development of . . . material forces of production.” But in *Capital* Marx says that these relations correspond to the *mode of production*. How these two formulations are logically reconciled in Marx? Or is there a logical discrepancy here? The answer can be found in *Capital* itself; to the effect that *means of production* constitute the basis for the *mode of production* to which correspond the social *production relations* in turn. The following passage is especially revealing from *Capital*:

In the paper industry generally, we may advantageously study in detail not only the distinctions between modes of production based on different means of
production, but also the connexion of the social conditions of production with those modes: for the old German paper-making furnishes us with a sample of handicraft production; that of Holland in the 17th and of France in the 18th century with a sample of manufacturing in the strict sense; and that of modern England with a sample of automatic fabrication of this article. Besides these, there still exist, in India and China, two distinct antique Asiatic forms of the same industry.¹⁸

This passage clearly shows with interesting historical examples, that Marx regards the means of production as foundational or central to the concept of mode of production and that the social relations (conditions) correspond to the mode of production. But, can we take all these clarifications as the improvements on an earlier theory that Marx could carry out between 1859 and 1867? The answer, most probably is “no”, because the concept of mode of production can be found in the 1859 preface itself, as a concept of overriding importance. Moreover, Marx’s intention here is only to report his own formulation given in the 1859 preface, for the sake of some related argument, even though he seemed to have amended it further. So, the amendments we find in the passage from Capital should be taken as the original ideas in the 1859 preface itself but not expressed properly in it.

In conclusion, we can say that, in his Capital, Marx reiterates the restricted version of superstructure on the one hand, and reinforces the predominant role of the concept of mode of production on the other. This clearly shows that the idea of mode of production is not only an overriding concept, dynamically interlinked with all spheres of life-activity but also the source from which the Base and Superstructure paradigm emerges as an explanatory model for the politico-legal spheres of life. But even this reiteration of the restricted superstructure does not rule out the possibility of maintaining a different version of superstructure in the
earlier writings of Marx. To analyze this, we should go to the birthplace of the concepts of base and superstructure i.e., *The German Ideology.*

**Superstructure in *The German Ideology***

Co-authored by Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* is the first major work, which contains the concept of superstructure. The relevant passage reads as follows:

> The word “civil society” [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*] emerged in the eighteenth century, when property relationships had already extricated themselves from the ancient and medieval communal society. Civil society as such only develops with the bourgeoisie; the social organisation evolving directly out of production and commerce, which in all ages forms the basis of the *State and of the rest of the idealistic superstructure*, has, however, always been designated by the same name.\(^{19}\) (Emphasis Added.)

Here “superstructure” figures as an inclusive category comprising both the state and the idealistic aspects. This version of superstructure is evidently different from the version we have seen in the 1859 preface, where the forms of consciousness are clearly kept away from the superstructure. This directly brings us to the relation of ideology to the superstructure. The first question to be considered is what constitutes this idealistic sphere in this context? i.e., does it comprise of all mental activity, which seems to have a ubiquitous status in the 1859 preface? The second question is to determine how consistent Marx is in maintaining this idealistic sphere as a part of the superstructure.

**Superstructure and Consciousness**

I think the first question about the nature of consciousness as a part of superstructure can be better discussed with reference to the 1859 preface where Marx says about “the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond
definite forms of social consciousness” (Emphasis Added). Here Marx mentions consciousness in the same sentence along with the superstructure though separately from the superstructure. The most important word here that usually received the least attention from the commentators is the word “definite”, which should not be taken as a casual way of avoiding vague generalized meaning but as a word used to specify a definite kind of consciousness. This is not properly appreciated by most of the critics. Engels, for his part, observed the specifying role of the adjective “social” as we have seen in the previous chapter. But the word “definite” has been elusive enough to escape his explanatory consideration.

What are the definite forms of consciousness that Marx speaks about here? The answer, I suppose, lies at some other instance, which is as illuminating as it is confounding— in Marx’s historical work of 1852, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.

Superstructure in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte

This passage is also often observed by the critics, but not analysed properly with reference to Marx’s 1859 preface. Here, Marx discusses the formation of class ideologies:

Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought, and views of life. The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the corresponding social relations. The single individual, who derives them through tradition and upbringing, may imagine that they form the real motives and the starting point of his activity (Emphasis Added). 20

The comparisons and contrasts this passage presents in relation to the wording in the 1859 preface is a matter of great interest. The “distinct and peculiarly” formed ideological elements of life presumably explain what Marx mentioned as the “definite” forms of consciousness in the 1859 preface. They are the ideological creations of a class built upon the
basis of their material existence. So, the ideological elements that Marx refers to here are what we call as class-consciousness in common parlance. It is not extendable to all sorts of consciousness.

But the individual may not be aware of the class origin of his ideas, leave alone its specific material basis. This lack of awareness constitutes or results in the idealistic notions of people about their own existence. It should not be forgotten that even in The German Ideology Marx spoke about the “idealistic superstructure” and not about all forms of consciousness. The editors of the book, not content with this, explain in the footnote that “idealistic” means “ideal, ideological” which tends to extend the original idea, to make matters worse.

Thus, this passage is illuminating, about the kind of consciousness that Marx has in mind. But it is also confounding because, here Marx speaks of this consciousness as the superstructure itself whereas in the 1859 preface he clearly mentioned it separately from the superstructure and maintained the same in his Capital. How should this be understood? Obviously, what we have here is a change of mind that Marx has undergone by the time he wrote the 1859 preface, a change that he consistently maintained until his last published works. There is another work of importance written by Marx after his Capital i.e., from July 1870 to May 1871 and published in the same year. That is The Civil War in France, which presents a very interesting case because its present edition contains the two preparatory drafts that Marx had written before he wrote the final draft. That is perhaps the last major work to be published in Marx’s life time which makes use of the concept of superstructure prominently.

But before we grapple with that work, let’s take a look at a pamphlet written by Marx in 1869, titled The Right of Inheritance which forms part of the Report of the General
Council of the International Workingmen's Association. This pamphlet embodies some succinct remarks on legality — an element of Marx’s restricted superstructure:

Like all other civil legislation, the laws of inheritance are not the cause, but the effect, the juridical consequence of the existing economical organization of society, based upon private property in the means of production; that is to say, in land, raw material, machinery, etc. In the same way, the right of inheritance in the slave is not the cause of slavery, but on the contrary, slavery is the cause of inheritance in slaves.

What we have to grapple with is the cause and not the effect — the economical basis, not the juridical superstructure.22

The echoes of what Marx says about law in his 1859 preface are unmistakable. Also remarkable is the concise way in which Marx regards legality as superstructure based on the “economical organization of society”. Another noteworthy feature is the strong terms of determination (cause and effect relation) that Marx deploys to define the relation between the base and the legal superstructure. As all these observations unequivocally reinforce our conclusions derived in the previous chapter we can move on to the consideration of the next work that is already announced.

Superstructure in The Civil War in France

In the two drafts available for the text, one (the second draft) is compatible with the restricted version of the superstructure whereas the other (the first) draft tends to suggest an inclusive superstructure but in the final draft, only the restricted version is retained, in line
with the 1859 preface. The final text of *The Civil War in France* incorporates the concept of superstructure, restricted to the state:

The gigantic broom of the French Revolution of the 18th century swept away all these relics of bygone times, thus clearing simultaneously the social soil of its last hindrances to the superstructure of the modern state edifice raised under the First Empire, itself the offspring of the coalition wars of old semi-feudal Europe against modern France.  

The passage clearly speaks of the modern state as the superstructure. This is evidently compatible with the politico-legal superstructure found in the 1859 preface. We find a similar passage in the second draft of the book:

The first French Revolution with its task to give full scope to the free development of modern middle-class society had to sweep away all the local, territorial, townish and provincial strongholds of feudalism, prepared the social soil for the superstructure of a centralized State power, with omnipresent organs ramified after the plan of a systematic and hierarchic division of labour. 

This version is also compatible with the restricted version of superstructure and is strikingly similar to the final text. But there is another draft to the text i.e., the first draft, which seems to suggest an ideological superstructure:

What the proletariat has to do is to transform the present capitalist character of that organized labour and those centralized means of labour, to transform them from the means of class rule and class exploitation into forms of free associated labour and social means of production. On the other hand, the labour of the peasant is insulated and the means of production are parcelled, dispersed. On
these economical differences rests superconstructed* a whole world of different social and political views.\textsuperscript{25}

Of course this passage doesn’t have the word “superstructure” at all, but the word “superconstructed” is superscripted with an asterisk indicating a note. The footnote reads: “superconstructed: as superstructure”, suggesting perhaps that Marx thought of using the word superstructure here. In any case, a certain hesitation in using the word superstructure to signify “views” is evident here. But, eventually, this use of superstructure has not found its way in the final draft. In view of Marx’s consistent adherence to the restricted version of superstructure in the works published in his lifetime, after the 1859 preface, it is not difficult to understand the fact that this ideological version of superstructure could not find its way in the final draft, as well as the obvious hesitation in using the word superstructure.

But what is intriguing is the question why Marx resorts to the ideological superstructure again even in a draft or in the preparatory manuscript, even in a hesitant way. Before attempting any solution to the problem it is mandatory to be acquainted with the problem in its entirety and its multiplicity, because the problem posed by the concept of superstructure in the unpublished writings of Marx, has a much wider dimension than the ideological superstructure. So, I think, this problem could be genuinely encountered only in its entirety, when we consider the other variable accounts of superstructure given in Marx’s posthumously published writings. Indeed, Marx’s works, which are not published in his lifetime, present a striking contrast with those that are published in his lifetime especially after the 1859 preface.

The former are bafflingly mottled with motley versions of superstructure. Though these versions of superstructure are never in vogue in the Marxist tradition, an awareness of them is indispensable to analyze Marx’s typical use of superstructure. These variegated versions of superstructure signify a range of things from the specific economic categories to the broad idea of society itself.
Superstructure Signifying Economic Categories

Marx’s use of superstructure for denoting economic concepts in the works not published in his lifetime doesn’t seem to have followed any single signification strictly. Speaking about Ricardo’s theory of rent, for instance, in the *Theories of Surplus Value*, written between 1862 and 1863 and never published in his lifetime, Marx writes:

Modified in this way, the proposition is correct. It explains the *existence of rent*, whereas Ricardo only explains the *existence of differential rents* and actually does not credit the *ownership of land* with any *economic* effect. Furthermore, it does away with the superstructure, which with Ricardo himself was anyhow only arbitrary and not necessary for his presentation, namely, that the agricultural industry becomes gradually less productive.²⁶

Another instance of the use of superstructure in the economic sense occurs while discussing money, credit system etc. In a letter written to J B Schweizer on January 24, 1865, Marx writes:

My book *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Part I, Berlin, 1859* (pp. 59-64) contains the proof that the theoretical basis of his (i.e. Proudhon’s) idea arises from a misunderstanding of the basic elements of bourgeois "political economy", namely of the relation between *commodities* and *money*, while the practical superstructure was simply a reproduction of much older and far better developed schemes. That under certain economic and political conditions the credit system can be used to accelerate the emancipation of the working class . . . is quite unquestionable and self-evident.²⁷

The use of superstructure for denoting “credit” occurs, also in the third volume of *Capital*, that was written between 1863 and 1867 along with the second volume, but published in 1894, eleven years after Marx’s death, in Engel’s editing. This reads as follows:
credit offers to the individual capitalist; or to one who is regarded a capitalist, absolute control within certain limits over the capital and property of others, and thereby over the labour of others. The control over social capital, not the individual capital of his own, gives him control of social labour. The capital itself, which a man really owns or is supposed to own in the opinion of the public, becomes purely a basis for the superstructure of credit.  

A similar use of superstructure in the context of economic matters can be seen in a letter from Marx to Nikolai Danielson written as late as April 10, 1879. This comes after discussing the relation of railways with the joint stock companies and the banking companies:

On the other hand, the appearance of the railway system in the leading countries of capitalism allowed, and even forced, states where capitalism was confined to a few summits of society, to suddenly create and enlarge their capitalistic superstructure in dimensions altogether disproportionate to the bulk of the social body, carrying on the great work of production in the traditional modes.

Here capitalism itself is spoken of as a superstructure. Together, all these instances give a fair idea of the use of superstructure in the works that are not published in Marx’s lifetime. In fact, the difference regarding the use of superstructure between the writings published in Marx’s lifetime and the writings that are never published in his lifetime is not only a qualitative one but also quantitative. We have seen that *The German Ideology* is the first major work, which contains the concept of superstructure. But this is not published in Marx’s lifetime. And in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, about which Marx says in his 1859 preface: “The salient points of our conception were first outlined in an academic, although polemical, form in my *Misere de la philosophie*”; the very term “superstructure” is conspicuous by its absence whereas the concept of *Mode of production* figures prominently. The same is the case with *Manifesto of the Communist Party* and many other works of Marx, published in his lifetime.
The frequency and multi-referentiality of the concept of superstructure in the works of Marx not published in his lifetime, strangely contrasts with the infrequency and referential consistency of the concept of superstructure in the writings published during his life. This contrast is both perplexing and glaringly demands explanation. The most plausible explanation for this, in my view, is to understand superstructure as a handy metaphor for Marx, which he uses loosely and conveniently in the preparatory stage of his writings— the stage that demands conceptual fecundity rather than terminological fidelity— but justifiably sorts out and presumably narrows down the concept’s referential purview when a text reaches the publication stage. *The Civil War in France*, which we have seen already, supplies a living example of this. The two preparatory drafts of this text contain two different versions of superstructure but in the final draft only one version is retained: the version that agrees with the restricted version of superstructure.

It is also quite possible that Marx might have been influenced by contemporary economic writings, in his use of “superstructure” for economic categories. It is remarkable that we find such an instance quoted by Marx himself in the third volume of *Capital*:

W. Leatham (banker of Yorkshire) writes in his *Letters on the Currency*, 2nd ed., London, 1840: . . . ‘This enormous superstructure of bills of exchange rests (!) upon the base formed by the amount of bank-notes and gold, and when, by events, this base becomes too much narrowed, its solidity and very existence is endangered’. 30

Such significatory practice might have some bearing on Marx in the deployment of the concept of superstructure, at least so far as its use for economic categories are concerned. At another instance, writing about William Petty and his discovery of measurement of value of commodities by equal labour, Marx quotes William Petty: “‘This’ (estimation by equal labour) ‘I say, to be the foundation of equalizing and balancing of values; yet in the superstructures and
practices hereupon, I confess there is much variety, and intricacy.” 31 This passage occurs, as a matter of fact, in the tenth chapter of Anti-Dühring written by Engels. But, as Engels explains in the Preface to this book, this chapter is written by Marx as they “. . . had always been accustomed to help each other out in special subjects” 32. J. S. Mill, one of the economists studied by young Marx, also uses the metaphor, commenting on the philosophers of Bentham School: “there is little chance of making due amends in the superstructure of a theory for the want of sufficient breadth in its foundations”. 33 It is highly probable that this frequent use of concepts of base and superstructure by contemporary economists might have influenced Marx.

Besides the use of superstructure to denote specific economic categories, we also find it being used to broadly refer to the society itself; again in the work not published in his lifetime: in his Economic Manuscripts, written between 1861 and 1863. I would quote this at length, adding my own emphasis, because it exemplifies a crucial analytical practice observable in Marx that touches upon the purport of superstructure as a metaphor, i.e., as something based on some other crucial phenomenon:

Once there exists a society in which some people live without working (without participating directly in the production of use values), it is clear that the surplus labour of the workers is the condition of existence of the whole superstructure of the society. They [the non-workers] receive two things from this surplus labour. Firstly: the material conditions of life, because they share in, and subsist on and from, the product which the workers provide over and above the product required for the reproduction of their own labour capacity. Secondly: The free time they have at their disposal, whether for idleness or for the performance of activities which are not directly productive (as e.g., war, affairs of state) or for the development of human abilities and social potentialities (art, etc., science) which have no directly practical purpose, has as its prerequisite the surplus labour of the
mass of workers, i.e., the fact that they have to spend more time in material production than is required for the production of their own material life.\(^{34}\) (Emphasis added)

Evidently, superstructure has the widest scope of signification here, referring to the whole elitist society. But this facile use of superstructure is not to be found in the later works published in Marx’s life time. As we have observed in the case of the texts that were published even at a later period like *Capital* published in 1867, and *The Civil War in France* written between 1870 and 1871, Marx stuck to the restricted version of superstructure in print.

Interestingly, we find a similar use of superstructure in a celebrated book by Engels, published after the death of Marx. This is *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, first published in 1884: “simultaneous with this division of the citizens into classes according to wealth there was an enormous increase, particularly in Greece, in the number of slaves, whose forced labor was the foundation on which the superstructure of the entire society was reared.”\(^{35}\)

But such broad use of superstructure is not found in Marx’s works published after the 1859 preface, though we find in his posthumously published works, superstructure being used as a handy metaphor referring to different things in different contexts, including ideology sometimes. Thus we find in the *Theories of Surplus Value*: “. . . the contradictions in material production make necessary a superstructure of ideological strata, whose activity— whether good or bad—is good, because it is necessary\(^{36}\)

However, this referential multiplicity of superstructure is limited to the posthumously published writings of Marx, which present a contrast with the restricted version found in the works published during his life time. Oddly enough, this restricted version that Marx maintained in all the works published in his life time, after the 1859 preface, is never acknowledged or explored in its own right, in the annals of Marxism, as it is abysmally eclipsed by the eclectic
version. But Marx’s writings offer a living testimony for this restricted politico-legal superstructure. One cannot help wondering, in this context, why there has not been any editorial intervention bringing out and sorting out this discrepancy in the case of posthumously published works of Marx. One presumable source for this lacuna, I suppose, has to do with Engels, the literary executor of Marx after his death, who does not seem to have any inkling of Marx’s restricted version.

Furthermore, the close nexus between the politico-legal institutions and the production relations is a predominant motif in Marx, even when he does not invoke the base and superstructure metaphor. In one of his last works, The Ethnological Note Books of Karl Marx posthumously published, based on his manuscripts of the period 1880 to 1882, we find: “It is impossible to overestimate the influence of property in the civilization of mankind. It was the power that brought the Aryan and Semitic nations out of barbarism into civilization . . . . Governments and laws are instituted with primary reference to its creation, protection and enjoyment.”

This methodological principle disclosing the connection between the production relations, and political and legal relations is consistently observable in Marx; and his articles published in Neue Rheinische Zeitung, exemplify this principle in its application to the contemporary social conditions. Thus Marx analyses the contemporary German politics:

The Diet represented primarily big landed property. Big landed property was indeed the foundation of medieval, feudal society. Modern bourgeois society, our own society, on the other hand, is based on industry and commerce. Landed property itself has lost all its former conditions of existence, it has become dependent on commerce and industry. Agriculture, therefore, is carried on nowadays on industrial lines, and the old feudal lords have now sunk to the level of producers of cattle, wool, corn, beetroots, spirits etc., i.e., people who trade in
industrial products just as any other merchant: However much they may cling to their old prejudices, they are in fact being turned into bourgeois, who manufacture as much as possible and as cheaply as possible, who buy where they can get goods at the lowest price and sell where they can obtain the greatest price. The mode of living, production and income of these gentlemen therefore gives the lie to their traditional pompous notions. Landed property, as the predominant social factor, presupposes a mediaeval mode of production and commerce. The United Diet represents this mediaeval mode of production and commerce which had long since ceased to exist, and whose representatives, though they clung to the old privileges, likewise enjoyed and exploited the advantages of the new society. The new bourgeois society, grounded on an entirely different foundation, on a changed mode of production, was bound to seize also political power, which had to be wrenched from the hands of those who represented the interests of the declining society, a political power, whose whole structure has arisen out of entirely different material conditions of society. Hence the revolution.\textsuperscript{38}

Remarkably, the whole passage reads like an exemplification of the principles later formulated by Marx, in his 1859 Preface, where he envisions the social revolution in terms of the base and superstructure. After thus presenting the United Diet as the retrograde element of the society, Marx goes on to question, “how then was the idea conceived to allow the United Diet, the representative of the old society, to dictate laws to the new society which asserted its rights to the revolution?” Marx’s line of reasoning is interesting again:

Allegedly in order to maintain the legal basis. But, gentlemen, what do you understand by maintaining the legal basis? The maintenance of laws belonging to a bygone social era and framed by representatives of vanished or vanishing social interests, who consequently give the force of law only to those interests which run
counter to the public needs. But society is not founded upon the law; that is a legal fiction. On the contrary, the law must be founded upon the society, it must express the common interests and needs of society—as distinct from the caprice of the individuals—which arise from the material mode of production prevailing at the given time. This *Code Napoleon*, which I am holding in my hand, has not created modern bourgeois society. On the contrary, bourgeois society, which emerged in the eighteenth century and developed further in the nineteenth, merely finds its legal expression in this Code. As soon as it ceases to fit the social relations, it becomes simply a bundle of paper. You cannot make the old laws the foundation of the new social development, any more than these old laws created the old social conditions.\(^\text{39}\)

That precisely is the idea encapsulated by the expression “legal superstructure”. And a similar idea could be found embodied in the “political superstructure” also. Thus Marx writes in his manuscripts of the period 1857-61, generally known as the *Grundrisse*, “with the development of wealth—and hence also of new [productive] forces and expanded intercourse among individuals the economic conditions upon which the community was based were dissolved, as were the corresponding political relations between the various component parts of the community”.\(^\text{40}\)

Thus Marx’s politico-legal superstructure encapsulates an essential dimension of his thought, in its restricted form. But the case of Engels’ use of superstructure is different, as we have already glimpsed. This point actually needs further attention, for its role and responsibility in the development of the popular heterogeneous version of superstructure and so we shall take up this in the next chapter.
Notes


10 David McLellan 35.


14 Althusser 158.

15 Althusser 84.


20 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, in one volume (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977) 117. Among the modern writers, Karl Mannheim expresses a similar opinion, though in a rather critical style: “If one were to trace in detail, in each individual case, the origin and the radius of diffusion of a certain thought-model, one would discover the peculiar affinity it has to the social position of given groups and their manner of interpreting the world. By these groups we mean not merely classes, as a dogmatic type of Marxism would have it, but also generations, status groups, sects, occupational groups, schools, etc. Unless careful attention is paid to highly differentiated social groupings of this sort and to the corresponding differentiations in concepts, categories, and thought-models, i.e., unless the problem of the relation between super- and sub-structure is refined, it would be impossible to demonstrate that corresponding to the wealth of types of knowledge and perspectives which have appeared in the course of history there are similar differentiations in the substructure of society. Of course we do not intend to deny that of all the above-mentioned social groupings and units class stratification is the most significant, since in the final analysis all the other social groups arise from and are transformed as parts of the more basic conditions of production and domination. None the less the investigator who, in the face of the variety of types of thought, attempts to place them correctly can no longer be content with the
undifferentiated class concept, but must reckon with the existing social units and factors that condition social position, aside from those of class” [Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979) 247-8].

21 An imperfect appreciation of this fact will lead one to think in the lines of Derek Sayer: “Marx qualifies the ‘superstructure’ in the Preface as ‘legal and political’. He also refers, independently, to ‘definite forms of social consciousness’. He fails to make clear whether the latter are part of the superstructure, though his language in this instance suggests otherwise. This is what has led Cohen to argue they are not. Elsewhere, however, Marx—like Engels in the letters . . . frequently describes the entire superstructure as ‘ideal’ or ‘ideological’, and explicitly includes forms of consciousness within it” [Derek Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction: The Analytical Foundations of Historical Materialism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987) 16]. Except with regard to *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, the claim about Marx’s ‘frequent’ inclusion of ideas in the superstructure is a pure myth sustained in Marx studies due to an unchallenged academic inertia.


24 Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* 236.


27 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1982) 146-147.


