CHAPTER 4

What Marx Meant? Revisiting the 1859 Preface

Least of all must a philosophy be accepted as a philosophy by virtue of an authority or of good faith, be the authority even that of a people and the faith that of centuries.

—Marx, *Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy*.¹

Our initial exploration, in the form of a preliminary survey of contemporary academic articles that deploy the concepts of base and superstructure has taken us into several alien territories but eventually landed us with the conclusion that the concept of base and, more importantly, the concept of superstructure are used in an extremely elastic fashion in terms of what these concepts encompass and theorize thereby. From this impression of baffling collage we moved on to another survey of the time-honored tomes of reference in search of some certainty, but what we found instead of a stable anchorage is an endorsement of the panoptic version of superstructure which, in turn, is determined by the base, read economics.

We also noted, *inter alia*, a certain discomfiture — implicit or explicit — with the crude, wholesale determinism that these metaphors entail. Taking the cue from the recurring references to the 1859 preface of Marx to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, as the acknowledged authentic formulation of these concepts, we have decided to settle the accounts at the very source. So, here, we set out on a meticulous analysis of Marx’s statement in question, to arrive at a reasonably— at least in a relative sense — accurate view of what Marx originally meant by these well-worn concepts. But, let there be no misunderstanding that this is going to be an easy enterprise.
Any account of Marx’s ideas is bound to be controversial. His writings are surrounded by such a mass of conflicting interpretations that to explain what they say is to walk through a minefield. Moreover, Marx, being human, was sometimes ambiguous and inconsistent, and changed his mind on matters both large and small. In picking one’s way through these difficulties, one has to tread a narrow path. It is easy to slip from ‘What Marx really meant to say . . .’ to ‘What Marx should have said, but didn’t’ . . .

In his book on Marx’s thought, Alex Callinicos writes these words — a book which he doesn’t even intend to be a theoretical polemic but only as a popular introduction. It is not rare that one comes across analogous passages about the possible misunderstandings regarding Marxism in almost all writings on Marx or Marxism. And most of these writers succeed in figuring out or sometimes even rectifying this or that aspect of this misunderstanding.

But, in spite of the collective illuminations carried out by these corrective efforts, still there prevails a grave misunderstanding about some aspect(s) of Marx’s critical canon. And this is true not only in the case of any peripheral aspects of his thought but also about the concepts that are crucial to his worldview. The concepts of base and superstructure which are certainly among the central concepts are a case in point. The present chapter is an attempt at analyzing this theoretical lacuna by approaching Marx afresh, unalloyed by any tacit interpretive traditions, by rigorously confining our analytical purview to the statements of Marx and relentlessly ignoring everything else except for ancillary purposes such as citing as examples of popular opinion.

Raymond Williams, whose estimation of the base and superstructure paradigm couldn’t be characterized as a complimentary one, still writes, “Any modern approach to a Marxist theory
of culture must begin by considering the proposition of a determining base and a determined superstructure.”

If we bring together the statements of various writers about the importance of the base and superstructure paradigm they will themselves run into the length of a small book. Ironically, the rigour and profundity of the analysis that was applied to these concepts have been inversely proportional to the recognition of their importance. Hence an original analysis of the paradigm is mandatory for any genuine understanding of Marx.

Some Remarks about the Nature of Inquiry

It would be a mere reiteration of a stereotype to say that Marx’s sporadic statements about art or literature are scattered over his writings and consequently any comprehensive presentation of his theory of literature demands extensive reading and research. But the temptation to extend the same argument indiscriminately to all aspects of Marxism should be restrained. When Isaiah Berlin, for instance, says, “No formal exposition of Historical Materialism was ever published by Marx himself. It occurs in a fragmentary form in all his early work written during the years 1843-8, and is taken for granted in his later thought”, he succumbed to such a temptation. Of course it is true that even some of the central concepts in historical materialism are taken for granted and the present chapter itself aims at analyzing such a deep-rooted assumption. But the alleged lack of formal statement from Marx, only serves to justify these assumptions by making them seem inevitable in the absence of any authentic statement. In fact there is a strikingly obvious authentic statement given by Marx, and consistently endorsed by him later. That is the 1859 preface of Marx, the subject of our study here.
Hence, Leonard Jackson rightly says that, “The clearest and most convincing statement ever made about the materialist conception of history is that by Marx himself, in his preface of 1859 to *A contribution to the critique of political economy* . . . The preface therefore has the highest possible authority as a statement of Marx’s lifelong position.”

This testifies the fact that the authentic text for the analysis of Marx’s comprehensive theory of history, does not exist as scattered statements but as the statement given at one place, in a few lines. So, the mode of inquiry needed here is not extensive but intensive. We can really appreciate the degree of intensive treatment that Marx’s Preface demands, only when we consider the highly condensed nature of this statement.

Understandably, Jackson writes in this connection, “The preface is a masterpiece of clarity and intellectual power; but it is very concise. In this it resembles nothing so much as one of those computer applications, which is distributed on a single floppy disk, and expands on installation. One puts the disk in; file upon file springs into existence and installs itself on the hard disk of the machine, megabytes of data.”

**What is so Unique about this Statement?**

Before we take up the analysis of Marx’s 1859 statement, it would be appropriate to consider the reasons that account for its uniqueness:

1. Firstly, this is perhaps the only place Marx purports to give a general statement of his theory of history in a comprehensive way; in spite of his well-known distaste for general statements. Marx’s introductory sentence to this passage testifies this fact: “The general conclusion at which I arrived and which, once reached, became the guiding principle of my studies can be summarized as follows.”
2. Notwithstanding his propensity for revising and improving his writings, (enough to recall that Marx says, “That passage would, in many respects, be very differently worded today” about the second section of *The Communist Manifesto*; and “No one can feel the literary shortcomings in ‘Das Kapital’ more strongly than I myself” about his *Capital*; — both are his pivotal works. Moreover, rereading *Holy Family*, which he co-authored along with Engels, he says, “it is self evident that an author, if he pursues his research, cannot literally publish what he has written six months previously”) Marx simply referred to this statement, in the afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*, as the instance where he discussed his materialist theory of history and in another instance he reiterated the same statement in reported speech in a footnote to his *Capital*.

3. Unlike the scattered statements in Marx’s early writings, which were mostly unpublished in his lifetime, this statement occurs in his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* which is published during his lifetime in the period of his intellectual maturity and he consistently endorsed this statement by citing it intact in his later writings.

4. Lastly, the canonical status of this statement is so well recognized that, to my knowledge, there are at least half a dozen writers — Melvin Rader, Hans G. Ehrbar, Leonard Jackson, Raymond Williams, G. A. Cohen, and M. M. Bober— who attempted a very meticulous analysis of this statement. I believe these reasons are fairly adequate to conclude that any serious inquiry into Marx’s theory must be ready for a rigorous analysis of this statement. Obviously, to do this properly, there is no alternative except for a close reading of the statement in question. And in analyzing this well-recognized and often-investigated passage, our primary focus is to verify the
constitutional plurality and the resulting referential elasticity of the concept of base, and more importantly the concept of superstructure that has undergone a wholesale extension to accommodate almost all non-economic spheres of the society. The previous investigations neither problematized this plurality nor studied the resulting notional elasticity systematically.

Discussing the reasons and repercussions of this conceptual extension without analyzing the statement at issue would be premature and presumptuous. So, reserving the cognate issues for a later treatment we should proceed with the analysis of the statement, which is cited below. In citing the statement, I made the following changes in it to enhance clarity and convenience in reference and analysis:

1. Some words are underlined for emphasis. All underlinings are mine.

2. The whole statement is divided to facilitate a focused reading, without changing the order of the sentences. It should be noted that all these sentences belong to a single paragraph.

3. These isolated sentences are numbered for the ease of reference.

These changes are carried out keeping in view the extremely condensed nature of the passage, which, if cited without these changes, may either not receive the meticulous attention it deserves, or be susceptible to receive a cursory reading that results in a blurring of distinct aspects and relations that the passage presents in a highly dense language. I believe that these changes do not offend the norms of citation as they are clearly stated beforehand. Here is the passage:

1. The general conclusion at which I arrived and which, once reached, became the guiding principle of my studies can be summarized as follows.
2. In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production.

3. 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.

4. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life.

5. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.

6. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms— with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.

7. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.

8. In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic
or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.

9. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production.

10. No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society.¹¹

I am afraid I have cited a very long passage, but considering the importance of the passage and the volume of interpretive writings it has given rise to, it is a relatively simple passage; moreover, there is no alternative for a careful reading of this text, which could serve as a legitimate beginning for any analysis worth the name. Here follows a discussion of the text point-by-point, correspondingly numbered just as with the text.

1) The 1st sentence tells us that what Marx attempting to offer here is a summary of his general conclusions and these conclusions served him as his guiding principles. This sentence is an indisputable evidence of the fact that what Marx embarks on here is a well-considered, avowedly general statement of his guiding principles.

2) This sentence characterizes the relations of production as definite, inevitable and independent. Some translations have “necessary” in the place of “inevitable” and “determinate” instead of “definite”.¹² “Determinate”, I think, might be a better word because it carries the
connotation of being connected with something else and Marx suggests such a relation here with
the level of productive forces. And the inevitability and independence (from will) of these
relations are because these relations are formed in correspondence with the forces of production.
Also some translations have “corresponding” instead of “appropriate”. Here too,
“corresponding” might be a better word because these relations are not always “appropriate”
according to Marx as can be seen from the 7th sentence. The normative suggestion vaguely
carried by the word “appropriate” is another reason for this. We could conclude this discussion
of discrepancies in translation with the point made by Hans Ehrbar, Professor at the University of
Utah, whose alternative translations have already been discussed: “In the German, the three
attributes: (1) determinate, (2) necessary, (3) independent of their will are given in parallel. In
English, such a parallel construction cannot be given in front of ‘relations,’ but one would have
to say: relations which are determinate, necessary, and independent of their will. This sounds
awkward. The translation given above [this is about Ehrbar’s own translation] is a
compromise.”13

The central idea of the passage, which is about how people enter into certain relations of
production according to the available forces of production, will be clear enough if we consider
the mediating role of division of labour relations in the production relations. This idea clearly
occurs in Marx’s writings as early as in his Poverty of Philosophy, where we read that “Labor is
organized, is divided differently according to the instruments it disposes over. The hand-mill
presupposes a different division of labor from the steam-mill”14. And these different divisions of
labour are also the source for different relations of property, because, as Marx and Engels say in
The German Ideology: “Division of labour and private property are, after all, identical
expressions: in the one the same thing is affirmed with reference to activity as is affirmed in the
other with reference to the product of the activity”.15 William H. Shaw rightly divides the relations of production as “work” relations of production and “ownership” relations of production.16 As the above two quotations explicate, Marx maintains that the two types of relations are influenced by the forces of production. Thus this sentence defines the relation between production relations and forces of production.17

3) This is perhaps the most important and also— unfortunately for those who are not used to the terseness of Marx’s style— the most epigrammatic sentence in the passage. Important, because this is the only place where Marx defines what constitutes superstructure. Epigrammatic, because it comprises two other crucial concepts besides that of the superstructure — all in one sentence. I venture to restate this sentence in the following formulaic paraphrase:

A). the foundation = economic structure of society = the totality of production relations.

B). what arises on this foundation = A legal and political superstructure.

C). what corresponds to this foundation = Definite forms of social consciousness.

The first point defines the foundation; the second point is about its relation with the superstructure; and the third point is about another sort of relation, viz., the relation of “correspondence” with another entity i.e., “definite forms of social consciousness”. All the three aspects frequently suffered misreading and misinterpretation. So, we shall consider them one by one.

A). Marx precisely says here that the foundation (or the base) is the totality of production relations. This sentence doesn’t even allow any ambiguity. But misreading is so prevalent that G. A. Cohen, in his famous book Karl Marx’s Theory of History cites a whole list of eleven sources
that include productive forces in the base\(^{18}\). This testifies to the consummate misreading of this passage. Williams, for instance, writes among other explanations of the term “the base”; that it is “a mode of production”; an expression that Marx actually used in the next sentence without any apparent relation to the base. Also, Williams wrongly thinks that Marx’s emphasis is on productive activities in the base;\(^{19}\) whereas for Marx, the base (production relations) doesn’t even comprise this activity but it acts as the framework for this activity as can be seen from the 6\(^{th}\) sentence. We can share Williams’ objection to consider “the base” as an object. But I think that “the base” should be thought of as a structure instead; not only because of the conceptual affinity of the idea of “production relations” with a structure than with an object, but also because a few sentences before this passage, referring to the economy, Marx used the word “anatomy”—a word with obvious structural connotations. Williams’ observation about the translation of the word “the base”, that in French it is usually translated as “infrastructure” and as “struttura” in Italian is also conducive to interpret the base as a structure. Thus, I believe, the Althusserian expression “structural causality” can be safely used here, so far as it is restricted to the relation of the base with the superstructure (the superstructure itself being a sort of structure). But the analysis of superstructure, as we have already seen, is even more important than this.

B). The fragment of the sentence relating to the superstructure: “. . . the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure. . .” comes like a shock to anyone who gives it a careful reading, because, when people read this passage, they generally have the preconceived notion, that the superstructure is a category that embraces various social constituents like Art, Literature, Philosophy, Morality and what not (perhaps anything except economy); and this makes them already predisposed to read all these familiar figments into this particular fragment. If this shock leads to any genuine intellectual searching, the reader will scan
the whole passage, looking for the other missing motley items, generally lumped together under the concept of superstructure. But this only reinforces the shock, as the reader finds that Marx did not include any other items in the superstructure anywhere in the passage. Moreover, Marx obviously excludes “forms of social consciousness” from the superstructure by mentioning them separately as something that only “corresponds” to the base, unlike the superstructure.

In fact, even a cursory reading of the passage is enough to realize that the word superstructure occurs only two times in the whole passage and what constitutes the superstructure is mentioned only in the first instance, i.e., the present instance, the second mention of the word superstructure (in the 7th fragment) does not say anything about its contents, but uses the modifiers “whole, immense” to modify the noun, superstructure. These modifiers cannot have any special signification except to denote the magnitude of the superstructure. Also, these modifiers can be applied to any constituent items equally well, whether it is to the Marx’s version of “legal and political” superstructure or to the widely believed all-inclusive version. So, the second mention of superstructure in the passage, does not contribute to the understanding of what constitutes superstructure. Moreover, it would be only naïve to think that only “legal and political” aspects of society cannot be designated “immense”, unless one has a thoroughly simplistic and superficial idea of the state and the legal system.

Consequently, Marx’s first mention of the term superstructure is the only instance where he defines what constitutes it, viz., “legal and political” systems. Furthermore, it is not difficult to see why these two systems are mentioned together, as legality is not much more than the official manual of the political state. This makes it crystal clear that Marx used the metaphor of base and superstructure to elucidate the relation between economics and politics alone. Ironically, this restricted use of the base and superstructure metaphor in Marx is consistently
overlooked. For one thing, the whole passage is read with an idea of the all-inclusive superstructure lingering in one’s mind, and as a result whatever Marx says about any social aspect is simply taken to be the explanation of some aspect of the base and superstructure. This persistent misreading— that takes the whole passage as if it is talking about some or other aspect of the base and superstructure, whereas the metaphor itself is clearly presented as one of the aspects of the passage— ends up in a reinforced belief in the all-inclusive, panoptic base and superstructure. Thus the all-inclusive version gained axiomatic status. I refer to this widely believed version as the panoptic version hereafter. (Potpourri superstructure would perhaps be a better word, but I avoid this, as it does not suit the seriousness of the problem).

Now, it must be admitted that, when I cited the passage in a piece meal fashion with numbered sentences, it is also to discourage this wholesale misreading, besides facilitating reference.\(^{21}\) It should also be mentioned that Marx’s restricted use is sometimes recognized, which inevitably happens whenever the theorist in question shows at least a superficial fidelity to the text. Even then, the meaning of this restriction is never explored nor its implications ever analyzed. Williams, for instance, perceptively observes this restricted use in Marx and writes, “The first use of the term ‘superstructure’ is explicitly qualified as ‘legal and political’”\(^{22}\). He even writes against the popular mistranslation that originated from the belief in the panoptic version: “it should incidentally be noted that the English translation in most common use has a plural—‘legal and political superstructures’ for Marx’s singular ‘juristicher und politischer uberbau’”\(^{23}\). But he later confuses his valuable observations, while considering the second mention of the term superstructure, which we have already discussed above. How, different theorists (in spite of their analytical acumen and theoretical sophistication) missed this restricted use of Marx does not enter our purview now. But here we shall try to analyze what difference
could be made by the recognition of Marx’s restricted use and consider some repercussions of ignoring it.

Firstly, the panoptic version contains or suggests ways of thinking that are quite alien to Marx, sometimes those even opposed to him: Marx, for instance, writes in his *Poverty of Philosophy*:

In constructing the edifice of an ideological system by means of the categories of political economy, the limbs of the social system are dislocated. The different limbs of society are converted into so many separate societies, following one upon the other. How, indeed, could the single logical formula of movement, of sequence, of time, explain the structure of society, in which all relations coexist simultaneously and support one another?²⁴

It is not difficult to see that the panoptic version has such unilinear character that Marx criticizes here. Williams was quite right when he observes:

It is then ironic to remember that the force of Marx’s original criticism had been mainly directed against the separation of ‘areas’ of thought and activity [as in the separation of consciousness from material production] and against the related evacuation of specific content — real human activities — by the imposition of abstract categories. The common abstraction of ‘the base ’ and ‘the superstructure’ is thus a radical persistence of the modes of thought which he attacked.²⁵

Obviously, the source of the problem is not in Marx, but in taking the category of superstructure as if it includes the areas of thought and consciousness.
Rader also writes, “In recognizing that philosophy, science, morality, and art often transcend the relativities of class and economic period, Marx shows that he is not entrapped by the base – Superstructure model.” Paradoxically, this valuable observation only amounts to an unwitting suggestion of inconsistency between Marx’s general theory and his actual analytical practice; again because the panoptic version of base and superstructure is taken to be Marx’s version.

It is crudely misleading to visualize the total social complex as a simple base and superstructure metaphor, unless it is only for the elucidation of a particular facet of that complex. Marx’s version of base and superstructure is such a metaphor whose elucidatory purpose is restricted to the relation of the economic base with the political superstructure. When a metaphor that explains a single aspect of the whole theory is magnified to the proportion of a complete theory, the original theory itself becomes inescapably one-sided, and the elucidatory device becomes an imposter that parades like an all-encompassing theory. What originally is a partial metaphor has turned into a procrustean schema whereby the real analysis might be replaced by the excision of everything into these neatly trimmed compartments. We have a classic example of the deep-seated persistence of this compartmentalized thinking when Stalin was asked the following question: “Is it true that language is a superstructure on the base?” No wonder that Williams writes, “A persistent dissatisfaction, within Marxism, about the proposition of ‘base and superstructure’, has been most often expressed by an attempted refinement and revaluation of ‘the superstructure’.”
Some Theoretical Repercussions

Firstly, this misinterpretation resulted in the metamorphosis of an elucidatory metaphor into an analytical model. Williams shows an inkling of this fact when he writes “[M]ost of the difficulty still lies in the original extension of metaphorical terms for a relationship into abstract categories or concrete areas between which connections are looked for and complexities or relative autonomies emphasized.”\(^{29}\)

Secondly, as is well-known, all metaphors are partial. When this problem is aggravated by the wholesale extension of the metaphor, the whole theory itself is confused. Williams could not figure out this unwarranted extension as he thinks that Marx himself is inconsistent in the signification of the term superstructure.

Lastly, the base and superstructure metaphor itself bears the brunt of this grotesque extension when it is magnified to subsume all the heterogeneous non-economic elements of the society and becomes amorphous as any other misused device. But the idea of an amorphous metaphor offends human reason and consequently different theorists visualize this amorphous entity in different ways.

Some possible objections

It could be argued that Marx’s qualification of the superstructure as “legal and political” is only restrictive and not defining. Let us see this objection in detail: by “defining” qualification, I mean qualifying something by way of defining it. In this sense “legal and political superstructure” is equal to superstructure that consists of legal and political systems. I maintain that this is what Marx meant. By “restrictive” qualification, I mean mentioning only some
restricted aspects of a thing, though we know that there may be other aspects also. This is not the case with Marx’s statement here, for the following reasons:

1). Marx did not include any other item in the superstructure, throughout the passage. There is not even a slight suggestion in the passage of a wider variety of superstructure.

2). Ideology or forms of social consciousness, which are the most important ingredients commonly lumped together in the panoptic superstructure, are rigorously excluded by Marx from his version of superstructure and their relation with the base is defined by another term i.e., “Correspond”.

Still, when Williams observes, “The first use of the term ‘superstructure’ is explicitly qualified as ‘legal and political’” as we have already seen, it is clear that he has taken this qualification as a restrictive qualification. The most skeptical reasoning against our argument is possible through doubting the validity of Marx’s statement here, by suspecting it as a careless oversight or as some other form of fortuitous formulation. But even this argument is not admissible, because, as we have already seen, Marx referred to this passage in an afterword to his Capital as one where he discussed his materialist theory of history and also gave the same passage in reported speech in a foot note to the same book. In both the cases, he faithfully endorsed his 1859 statement. Also, a few lines before introducing this passage Marx writes in the same 1859 preface, “My inquiry led me to the conclusion that . . . legal relations [and] . . . political forms . . . originate in the material conditions of life”. The same elements: “legal . . . political”. No doubt, this is the most authentic statement from Marx when he says that the superstructure consists of legal and political systems. Enough with the superstructure, for now.
C). The fragment left over in the 3rd sentence is “... and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.” Here Marx says that these forms of consciousness only “correspond” to the base, unlike the superstructure, which “arises” from the base. Obviously, in this passage, Marx offers the analysis of a multi-dimensional reality, with its elements having different sorts of mutual relations. So, Marx’s passage is interspersed with various relational words that express different degrees and kinds of influence. I have underlined these relational words for emphasis, because, often these variegated connections expressed in nuanced relational words are not properly appreciated, and paradoxically it is Marx who is generally criticized for not clearly defining the relation between the base and the superstructure. The source of the mistake is the familiar one: reducing Marx’s multidimensional passage to one of its aspects, the base and superstructure. Typical of this is the view of Rader:

Marx’s theory is not free from ambiguities. The kinds of relations between the base and superstructure are not precisely defined. Marx uses such diverse terms as ‘determination,’ ‘correspondence,’ ‘reflection,’ ‘dependence,’ ‘condition,’ and ‘outgrowth,’ to indicate these relations, leaving the nature of the connections open to various interpretations.30

Another aspect usually overlooked is that Marx is not speaking about all forms of consciousness here. Firstly he qualifies them as “social”, thus leaving out the consciousness of nature. Engels rightly explains this when he writes that “... all branches of science which are not natural sciences are historical”.31 Secondly, Marx qualifies them as “definite” forms of social consciousness, which is to say that only certain forms of consciousness correspond to this base. So, what Marx says is how the production relations have certain corresponding forms of social consciousness. Not that all forms of consciousness correspond to these relations.
4). Another crucial sentence. One can see here that Marx offers a really all-inclusive analysis in this sentence: “The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life.” This is actually the place where he attempts a panoramic formulation. But the significance of this sentence is largely overshadowed by the panoptic understanding of the base and superstructure, as that kind of understanding predisposes the readers to read this sentence as an explanatory statement about base and superstructure. This confusion is a reason why a number of modern writers like Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton mistakenly identify “the base” with the mode of production, contrary to what Marx says.

But, it is not difficult to see that there is nothing that suggests any overt connection with the base and superstructure formulation. Moreover, the conceptual incongruity between them is self-evident. The base and superstructure metaphor, as we have seen, is a structural metaphor; whereas this statement views all the “social, political and intellectual” domains as “life-processes” . . . i.e., as activities. It states that all these activities are “conditioned” by “the mode of production of material life”, which itself is an activity. Perhaps, we can safely designate the mode of production thesis as a praxological paradigm, since the concept of praxis informs the thesis, in a crucial way. Nevertheless, we are not going to dwell on this thesis any further, in spite of its importance, as this demands much space and also because our main preoccupation here is with the base and superstructure.

5). This is the sentence where the strongest word “determines” occurs. Also, this is the sentence in which Marx speaks about consciousness without any qualifications, about consciousness in general. He says that this consciousness is “determined” by “social existence”. Though Marx used the strongest word of determinism here, there was not considerable
controversy about this determinism in the commentary literature because what determines consciousness here is the social existence — a phrase of very broad signification.

In this context, Rader’s comment is illuminating. “Social being is broad enough to cover family ties, political relations, and other social connections and activities”. Thus, contrary to the popular view of consciousness as a constituent of superstructure; Marx formulates its determination using the concept of widest coverage.

This is the last of the sentences that gives a general description of social mechanism. What follows is Marx’s theorization of the why and how of the social revolution.

6). This sentence is about the contradiction between the production relations and the productive forces. Besides, Marx explains that property relations are nothing but the production relations expressed in legal terms. Here again, we see Marx stating an inextricable relation between the legal system (which he designated as a part of the superstructure in the previous sentences) and the production relations, i.e., the base. He also expounds the origin of the contradiction between the production relations and the productive forces.

7). Marx clearly states that the changes in the economic foundation lead to the transformation of the superstructure, though the pace of the transformation may vary greatly. This sentence contains the second mention of the term “superstructure”. But, there is nothing that signifies what constitutes it. One should not be mislead by the phrase “immense superstructure”. That, superstructure with its legal and political systems— the two important aspects of the state — is already an immense structure is self-evident. When one mistakenly thinks that ideology is also a part of superstructure then — as it is clear that it is only through ideology that people become aware of the contradiction and fight it out — one inevitably is misled to think, like
Rader, that superstructure determines the base in a revolutionary period\textsuperscript{34}. No need to say that Marx says the exact opposite of that: “The changes in the economic foundation lead . . . to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.” (emphasis added)

8). This is not a complicated sentence in itself, but has produced considerable complications. We see the “religious, artistic or philosophic” ideological forms mentioned along with the legal and political forms — the constituents of the superstructure. This could be easily construed as a statement suggestive of the panoptic version. But, if one observes carefully, it will be puzzling to realize that when Marx has spoken about the legal and political aspects as superstructure he has not characterized them as forms of ideology.

This is not something accidental, because the legal and political aspects as ideology are different from the legal and political aspects as superstructure. In fact, the legal and political systems have a two-fold existence: 1) as ideologies 2) as huge powerful social institutions. The first aspect allows them to be mentioned along with other ideological forms. The second aspect differentiates them from other ideologies. In the first aspect they resist being labelled as structures or superstructure. In the second aspect it is not difficult to visualize them as structures or superstructure. Thus, Marx’s mention of the legal and political ideologies along with other ideologies should not be allowed to mislead us into ignoring the institutional aspect of the former, the aspect that prompted Marx to call them superstructure. G. A. Cohen has clearly noted this institutional nature of the superstructural elements when he writes, “The superstructure consists of legal, political, religious, and other non-economic institutions. It probably includes universities, but it does not include knowledge, for knowledge is not an institution.”\textsuperscript{35} Although, he still thinks about superstructure in the customary unrestricted terms of signification as consisting of “non-economic institutions”.
The significance of this sentence also consists in the multidimensional version of class struggle it presents when Marx mentions, “the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic — in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.” Ironically enough, an incisive theorist of Perry Anderson’s stature seems to imply that there is no room for class struggle, for subjective forces, in this passage of Marx’s. Anderson’s critical remark seems unreasonably unsympathetic when we consider the problems posed by the then Prussian censorship to the writers, as rightly pointed out by A. Prinz in his article “Background and ulterior motive of Marx's 'Preface' of 1859”.

9). This sentence reiterates the predominance of conditions or existence over consciousness just as in the 5th sentence. But this sentence is remarkable, as Marx seems to suggest here that consciousness transcends even the base, i.e., the production relations, because if consciousness is something that simply confines or corresponds to the production relations — whether these relations comply with the productive forces or not— how can people ever become conscious of the contradiction of what determines their consciousness (production relations) with reference to something else (production forces) and fight it out? Understandably, Marx says here that the (revolutionary) consciousness should be explained from this contradiction and this entails that consciousness is not something that springs from the production relations (the base) alone and that the purview of consciousness transcends production relations, at least to the extent of including production forces.

In fact, consciousness seems to have a ubiquitous status in Marx that pervades and mediates all the divisions of social reality. It is an inherent component even in the material production. Thus, he writes in Capital:
We pre-suppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality.  

Can we subsume complacently this productive imagination as a part of the superstructure? Now, one can imagine the weird distortion involved in relegating consciousness to one of the heterogeneous elements of the panoptic superstructure.

10). This concluding sentence concerns itself with the historical time before which any social revolution is not possible but it does not say anything about the maximum time limit beyond which that revolution could not be delayed, as it was misread sometimes. So, what is offered here is not a teleological formulation that predestines the trajectory of history in a mystical way, but a formulation of the material constraints that lie behind the subjective initiative.

Concluding remarks

In contrast to the pre-Marxist historical outlook which, at best, had seen the source of historical changes in the legal and political transformations, Marx searches for a deeper root. In view of his Hegelian intellectual background which idealized state as the hypostatization of Geist, and against which Marx formulates his new outlook, it is not difficult to appreciate the crucial importance given to the analysis of the state in Marx’s thought even in his formative period. In fact, Marx writes, a few lines before the passage we analyzed,
The first work which I undertook to dispel the doubts assailing me was a critical re-examination of the Hegelian philosophy of law. . . My inquiry led me to the conclusion that neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but that on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life. . . \(^{39}\) (emphasis added)

This new conclusion that Marx arrived at, is no less an intellectual revolution, and it radically changed the previous historical thinking. Marx formulated this radical conclusion with his base and superstructure metaphor. He finds the source for the existence of state in the class relations or the production relations. These relations are the base and the state arises on them. Both the words originate and arises signify a relation of genesis, where “the base” is the source for the very being of the superstructure. This is not difficult to understand when we remember that, for Marx the state even withers away along with the class differences. But such a genetic relation is unthinkable in the case of elements like art, philosophy, and other forms of consciousness, which are traditionally yoked together under the all-inclusive category of superstructure. In Marx the case of consciousness is quite a different case. In the general theorization of consciousness (in the 5th sentence) it is said to be determined by the social being and in the particular theorization (in the 3rd sentence) only definite forms of social consciousness are said to correspond to the production relations. Both the words “determined” and “correspond” do not suggest any nexus of genesis with the counterpart. They do not deny the separate existence of the counterpart, on the contrary, they presuppose that separate existence.

As we have seen, Marx’s passage presents a highly nuanced exposition of a complex organic system with its multidimensional relations defined by words of different degrees and
types of influence and determination. I underlined these words for emphasis. We can see that Marx himself is very particular about these differences when he writes arguing against the economists that “. . . every form of production creates its own legal relations, form of government, etc. In bringing things, which are organically related, into an accidental relation, into a merely reflective connection, they display their crudity and lack of conceptual understanding.”40 Again the same theme: legal and political systems and their organic relation with the form of production, and how this relation should be differentiated from other types of relations.

When all this complexity in Marx’s theorization is distortingly reduced to the patently simplistic base and superstructure metaphor, it has grotesque theoretical consequences — both for the theory and for the metaphor. The theory suffered the reduction into a unilinear metaphor and the metaphor suffered an indiscriminate heterogeneous expansion, which made it amorphous. Any genuine exposition of the Marxist theory should settle accounts with this inherited confusion.
Notes


6 Jackson 84.


Though this relation has a central significance for Marx’s theory of history, we are not going to be detained here by a detailed consideration of this aspect, as this task forms the overwhelming concern, both for Shaw, in his book cited above, and also for Cohen, in his book cited below. As both these works have received considerable critical attention and appreciation, I refrain from belabouring the issue again.


Marx incidentally offers an illuminating explication of the intricate connection between the law and the economic system, when he writes that “always it is in the interest of the ruling section of society to sanction the existing order as law and to legally establish its limits given through usage and tradition. Apart from all else, this, by the way, comes about of itself as soon as the constant reproduction of the basis of the existing order and its fundamental relations assumes a regulated and orderly form in course of time. And such regulation and order are themselves indispensable elements of any mode of production, if it is to assume social stability and independence from mere chance and arbitrariness. These are precisely the form of its social stability and therefore its relative freedom from mere arbitrariness and mere chance. Under backward conditions of the production process as well as the corresponding social relations, it achieves this form by mere repetition of their very reproduction. If this has continued on for
some time, it entrenches itself as custom and tradition and is finally sanctioned as an explicit law” [Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986) 793].

21 In his otherwise influential study of Marx’s alienation, carried away by his endeavour to emphasise the essentially correct observation about the fluidity of concepts in Marx, Bertell Ollman says: “But if Marx often uses the same expression to refer to different things, he is equally capable of using different expressions to refer to what appears to be the same thing. In the passage in his Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* where he speaks of the mode of production determining ‘the social, political, and intellectual life process in general’, the same role is attributed to ‘relations of production’, ‘forces of production’, ‘economic structure of society’, ‘social existence’, and the ‘economic foundation’” [Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx’s Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996) 6].

22 Williams 76.

23 Williams 76.


25 Williams 78.


28 Williams 81.

29 Williams 81.

30 Rader 14.

31 Williams 81.

32 Rader 16.
Bukharin, thus misled by the adjective indicating the enormousness of the superstructure, writes after quoting the 1859 preface, “The huge ‘superstructure’ that rises over the economic basis of society is of rather intricate internal ‘structure’. It includes material things (tools, instruments, etc.), the most various human organizations, furthermore, strictly coordinated systems of ideas and forms; furthermore, vague, non-coordinated thoughts and feelings; finally, an ideology "of the second degree", sciences of sciences, sciences of arts, etc”. But, a few lines before this passage, he writes that “the state, furthermore, is a huge organization embracing an entire nation and ruling many millions of men. This organization needs a whole army of employees, officials, soldiers, officers, legislators, jurists, ministers, judges, generals, etc., etc., and embraces great layers of human beings, one superimposed on the other” [Nikolai Bukharin, “The Equilibrium between the Elements of Society”, Historical Materialism— a System of Sociology, International Publishers, 1925, n. pag, Marxists’ Internet Archive, marxists.org, 2002, web, 3 Mar 2009]. This clearly indicates that the politico-legal superstructure alone could take the modifier of immenseness, and it does not necessarily indicate other constituent elements in superstructure, by this immenseness— a point not recognised by Bukharin himself.

Rader 38.

Cohen 45. Prior to Cohen, M. M. Bober has given some emphasis to the institutional aspect of superstructure, in his book Karl Marx's Interpretation of History, which was awarded the David A. Wells Prize for the year 1925—26. For instance, here he writes, “[T]he productive forces continue to grow and with them the mode of production and the institutional superstructure” [M. M. Bober, Karl Marx's Interpretation of History (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1950) 39]. But Bober is not consistent in maintaining the institutional nature of superstructure, because he also endorses the ideological superstructure.

Prinz also remarks here convincingly that “censorship had produced the art of reading between the lines and this induced authors to practice the art of writing between the lines” [A. Prinz, “Background and Ulterior Motive of Marx's 'Preface' of 1859”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 30.3 (1969): 439]. But the way Prinz interprets the importance of his factual observation in this article is not very convincing and seems to be far-fetched on the whole.

