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The fate of Marx's base-superstructure model: Trajectories since 2000

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Abstract

The base-superstructure model in its “vulgar” form, in which the economic base unilaterally determines the legal, political, and cultural superstructures, has such a bad reputation that even those on the Left would hardly defend it today. However, after the clangor of post-modernism died out, Marxism has garnered renewed interest and popularity in the 21st century. The thorny question of the determinacy of the base over the superstructures resurfaces, and many scholars have had to grapple with the long shadow it casts on the whole edifice of Marxist theory. In this article, we seek to map out some important trajectories of the interpretations of the metaphor since the 2000s. We find that, rather than abandoning it altogether like their post-modernist peers did, many Marxists are at pains to go through and work out the model, often with major revamps and reconstitutions. Arguably, the attempts to refine it, even on the brink of dismantling and reworking it from the ground up, yet all the while remaining, even with fidelity, within Marx's problematic, are the most interesting ones.

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Introduction

The base-superstructure model is justifiably regarded as a tenet of Marxism. Yet, it is often known, unfortunately, by its “vulgar” version, in which the economic base unilaterally determines the legal, political, and cultural superstructures. The version has a musty reputation – a relic from a damp, dark place of the past century that even those on the Left today would hardly defend. Ernesto Laclau (2005, p. 236) calls it, as well as even the

serious attempts to amend it in the 1960s, “naïve”. For Slavoj Žižek (2012, p. 260), it is “(in)famously stupid”. This is scarcely surprising, granted that it has been associated with Joseph Stalin, the Second International, and an extremely rigid and reductionist view of history, which subjects all societal transformations and human existence to a law of motion, set forth by productive forces (mostly interpreted as technological development) and relations of production (usually, property relations).

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The accusation against Marxism of technologism and economism is age-old and can be traced back to the days of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels themselves. They both regretted the simplification and the misconstrued fate of the metaphor. According to Engels, Marx, at one point, said he was not a Marxist, and emphatically so when Engels recalled this right after commenting how a certain Moritz Wirth “has not yet discovered” that “the ideological spheres” can also react upon “the material mode of existence” (Engels, 1890). Engels admitted that Marx and he himself were to blame for this common misunderstanding (Althusser, 1962). There is, unfortunately, a truth to Engels’s statement because in their early to mid-life works, namely, *The German Ideology* (1846), *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), and Marx’s Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), they are quite adamant about the determinacy of the base on the superstructure. For Hall (1977), this adamancy extends even the later Marx: in *Capital*, Marx (1867) doubles down on this premise when responding to a critic, even if with more sensitivity than before. While some claim that Marx did not confine himself to the model (see below), Engels, later in life, went further to propose a brief idea for reworking it. Since then, Marxists have wrestled against the reductionism of the base-superstructure metaphor and the stain it has left on the whole edifice of Marxism. And yet, even well into the 21st century, this near-permanent accusation has had to be battled over and again.

In this article, we seek to map out some important trajectories of the interpretations of the metaphor since the 2000s. Surprisingly, the jury is still out and the debate is alive and well. Chibber’s (2022) most recent book, *The Class Matrix*, being a symbolic case in point, can serve as a springboard for our discussion. From there, we can work our way back to survey some variations on the model in the first two decades of the millennium.

Identifying Trajectories: The Debate Since 2000

In *The Class Matrix*, Chibber acknowledges the importance of rethinking the role of culture in relation to understanding the dynamics of class structure and class formation. He finds, however, that the scholarship of the New Left—and later also the cultural turn—placed too much emphasis on culture as a causal factor. For New Left scholars, class structure did not

automatically lead to class formation due to cultural factors. While the class structure in the economy generated class interests, culture could affect or block the generation of a class consciousness. Hereby, they challenged the fundamental materialist underpinnings of Marxism. Instead, Chibber seeks to present a materialist class theory that does not presume a separation of economic and cultural domains. He refers to structures in which material and cultural factors act together and shape social practices. In his words: a materialist theory “goes through culture, not around it” (Chibber, 2022, p. 16).

Chibber’s argues that in capitalist society the class structure is the domain of both economic and cultural factors. In terms of economy, the nature of wage produces a material pressure or economic compulsion on the social actors. In terms of culture, social actors have to adapt an appropriate a set of cultural norms or codes in order to participate and survive in capitalist society. Therefore, economic activity is immersed in culture which adjusts to accommodate the economic. Material reproduction and meaning construction are two dimensions of the same activity. However, the relationship between these two dimensions is *asymmetrical* – the cultural dimension is subordinated to the economic dimension: “[...] even though the proximate cause for the structure’s activation is still culture, the structure itself ensures the appropriate codes will be available” (Chibber, 2022, p. 41). “Class structure works through culture but is not constrained by it” (Chibber, 2022, p. 41).

In this materialist reading, Chibber seeks to re-establish the independence of the class or economic structure as the main causal factor in relation to understanding the dynamics of class formation in capitalist society and the durability of capitalism. Here his argument is that workers do not participate in reproducing capitalist society due to ideology, “false consciousness”, “hegemony”, or other cultural factors. Rather, the durability of class structure and capitalism “stems fundamentally from the material pressures exerted on social actors by the class structure” (Chibber, 2022, p. 111). The workers are aware of their precarious position in the capitalist system but resign to it because it guarantees their well-being and they see no other viable option—“the dull compulsion of economic relations”. Therefore, the absence of class consciousness is not a derivation from the norm but rather the norm. In sum, “The real source of social order in capitalism—

of its stable reproduction over time—is not culture or ideology, it is the class structure itself” (Chibber, 2022, p. 155).

In general, Chibber avoids using the terms base and superstructure unless referring to the position of other scholars. Nonetheless, the base-superstructure metaphor lies in the background, as a negative image from which he tries to get away and, simultaneously, arrives at his own positive propositions. This is, in fact, the position taken by many scholars in their attempts to revamp the model, Chibber being the most recent one in the line.

In the following, amid a tapestry of critical perspectives, we identify five trajectories that are by no means exhaustive, but can serve as an analytical tool on the subject. In a broad stroke, there are two ends—one yes, one no—and everything in between. The “no” extreme is common among post-modernists and many “post-Marxists”. The “yes” pole is rare but existent. Below, we put them together, as often they are two sides of the same coin, in the section (1). Rejecting or Defending the Classic Model. The main focus of this article, however, are those somewhere in between: those attempting to refine the base-superstructure binary while remaining, even with fidelity, within Marx’s problematic. Even so, most of them are about how to modify it, and some—arguably the more interesting ones—are even on the brink of dismantling and reworking it from the ground up, reinterpreting the base, the superstructure, and the relationship between them, in radical ways. In a way, they echo and answer earlier calls by Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall who warned in the 1970s that the model has its merits but it is important not to apply it directly and without qualifications and amendments (Hall, 1977; Williams, 1973). These range from (2) Retaining the Levels of the Model but Redefining or Restricting it to Certain Phenomena to (5) Peripheralizing it to Other “More Important” Marxian Notions. Let us elucidate these one by one.

1. Rejecting or defending the classic model

In the present-day environment, defenders of the classic model, with little to no modification, are extremely rare but do exist in some covert forms. A more fashionable trend has been to reject it wholesale, especially in the post-modernist vein, even though, just like all fashions, post-modernism is also in its death throes. The rejection camp has its precursors: already in the 1970s,

Jürgen Habermas criticized the model for being too *technicist* and grounded the whole structure in a more socially cooperative *communicative action*. Even though he developed this from “the social organization of labor, the relations of production related to it”, he also contended that “we must separate the level of communicative action from the instrumental and strategic action combined in social cooperation” (Habermas, 1976, quoted in Thompson, 2014, p. 166). In other words, the communicative action is *external* to the base, even though it has grown out of it and still responds to it; but it is here, outside of its technical-instrumental dimension, that a rational, recognitive society, as well as the whole Habermasian theory of intersubjective relations, should be cultivated.

Within the Left, the rejection of the base-superstructure binary arguably reached an apogee in 1985 with the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In their theoretical re-construction, the superstructure penetrates the base, so much that it replaces the centrality of productive forces and relations of production. In their place, *discourse* – the authors’ chosen term instead of the earlier notion of *ideology* – becomes the bedrock of all social relations and subsumes even the realm of the economic and class antagonisms (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). At the heart of discursive and political identity constructions are the hegemonic struggles, the “competition between different political forces to get maximum support for, or identification with, their definition of ‘floating signifiers’, such as ‘freedom’ and ‘equality’ ” (Townshend, 2004, p. 271). With Laclau and Mouffe (1985), the political gains the upper hand, and the traditional class relations is reduced to one among many struggles for hegemony. This provided a theoretical underpinning for the Left, or at least some parts of it, to repent and expand itself to incorporate marginal voices and new social movements, previously regarded as peripheral to the traditional working class.

After the Pandora’s box of post-modernism was opened, anything went, everyone ran amok, and “flat ontology” reigned supreme. Rather than struggling to identify structural, vertical, and deeper causes, the “social flatteners” prefer a horizontal sensibility, a flux of assemblages that produce reality-effects, irreducible plurality, a fuzzy configuration of the social – often consciously anti-Marxist in their conceptualization, with the base/superstructure couplet being the most attacked straw man. One of the arch-flatteners, the late Bruno Latour, argues for “keeping the social flat”,

so that the intricate and heterogeneous interactions of the elements remain central, and not dwarfed or “drowned out” by macro-analysis of meta-theories and narratives (Murawski, 2018, p. 18).

In response to these, amid the renewed attention to Marxism since the 2000s, sometimes the base-superstructure metaphor is re-inserted and put back on the pedestal. Michael J. Thompson finds the recent development of Critical Theory wanting and the remedy is to ground it, once more, with the base-superstructure hypothesis. His main reason: “the trajectory of Critical Theory has moved away from its critique of capitalism and its pathological effects on modern subjectivity and toward a neo-Idealist paradigm that has essentially displaced the Marxian problematic” (Thompson, 2014, p. 163). The “neo-Idealist” paradigm is precisely the communicative action, intersubjectivity, ethical arguments and open discursive praxis, against which Thompson proposes that they cannot exist in the first place without understanding “the constitution of subjectivity” and how individuals’ value-orientations and mental states “are shaped by social-structural forces” (Thompson, 2014, p. 164). Conscious that this may return the theory to a deterministic, mechanistic, and probably anachronistic thinking, Thompson slightly modifies the determination to be circular and claims it to be “organic” and “non-unidirectional”: “The shaping of personalities that will accept the social order and the goals of that order as valid is one that is both produced by economic imperatives of the social system and which also come to secure the goals of those imperatives” (Thompson, 2014, p. 181). Yet, Thompson’s tone in general is that of the base being foundational in the causal connection with legal, political, and cultural institutions, which, in turn, shape personal values and mental states. The classic determinacy is therefore re-established with only small rearrangements.

2. Retaining the levels of the model but redefining or restricting it to certain phenomena

The British Marxist Terry Eagleton defended the model with vigor, even though well aware that he was among the “dwindling band” whose number might be fewer than “those who believe in the Virgin Birth or in the Loch Ness monster” (Eagleton, 2000, p. 237). He might have said it differently today with the revived popularity of Marxism; but, back then, at the high time of post-modernism, he was defiant. He responds to the criticism that the base-superstructure model is *hierarchical* by doubling down that there is nothing

wrong with it. Any doctrine, he insists, lays emphasis on some things over the others, and some are more determinant than the rest. This is echoed by Mike Wayne (2003) that Marxism can retain its distinctiveness only when it keeps pressing on the priority of the mode of production over culture and politics, and this should be worked out even amid the derision of it being “reductionist”. For Eagleton, the priority of the base does not mean that everything can be reduced or deduced to it. Comparing material reproduction with the Freudian primacy of sexual reproduction, Eagleton contends that these meta-narratives are foundational in the sense that, at any point in history, “it is what most men and women, most of the time, have had to concern themselves with” and that “without these particular narratives, we would not be here to tell any tale at all” (Eagleton, 2000, p. 238).

Yet, despite the weight put on material reproduction in analyses, Marxism for Eagleton is not about economic at all, at least *not yet*. It is, in the long run, all about culture. Indeed, “...the project of socialism is to try to lay down the kinds of material conditions in which, free of scarcity, toil, coercion, they will be able to live by culture a great deal more than they can do now” (Eagleton, 2000, p. 240). In order to get there, however, we cannot simply turn a blind eye on the base, like post-modernists do, and jump right into cultural analysis and blow it out of proportion. The post-modern emphasis on culture, Wayne notes, “collapses back into the very idealism which the base-superstructure metaphor was trying to escape from” (Wayne, 2003, p. 120). To get to that long run, Eagleton reminds us, we need to tackle the base head-on and transform society from the real foundation up.

But not without caveats and modifications to the metaphor: for Eagleton, the relationship the base has with the superstructures is not so simple as in the usual (mistaken) formulae that the former gives rise to the latter. Their relationship is not ontological, but more specific and historical. That is, the model is not about whether the economic is more *material* or *real* than the cultural or the political (“prisons and museums are quite as real as banks” (Eagleton, 2000, p. 237); rather, it is a claim about determinations. At the base, there are always fissures because it is not just brute matter; if one stays true to Marx, the base is always *social*, a relations of exploitation in the productive process. To smoothen these antagonisms in the base is the task of the superstructure, and, importantly, only when it acts so.

This means that determinations become quite loose when Eagleton, following Raymond Williams, qualifies the superstructure in the way that it breaks down into *moments*: “A practice or institution behaves superstructurally when, and only when, it acts in some way to support the dominant set of social relations” (Eagleton, 2000, p. 239). A wonderful example: one can treat a literary work as part of material production (to consider it infrastructurally) or read it for signs of ideological complicity with power (to regard it superstructurally) or one can count commas in it (which is to do neither). Another one to hit his point home: “Law courts act superstructurally when they protect private property, but not when they protect senior citizens” (Eagleton, 2000, p. 239).

Here, the binary levels are retained, but what is considered to be constitutive of each of the levels is much more diverse. A practice can be in one level or both or none at all, depending on *when*. This definitely entails more careful and complex—bewildering even—analyses. Even though the skeleton of the base-superstructure model is still left hanging, the flesh and blood of a materialist analysis becomes very different from the usual picture.

The question of what constitutes the “base”, and hence what is cast out of it and regarded as the “superstructure”, has spurred further elaborations and is far from conclusive. To the “base”, Eagleton assigns productive forces and relations of production *and* everything in material connection with them, including the productive side of art, literature, and culture in general. In contrast, for the theses inspired by Louis Althusser, whose proposal to re-interpret Marx was influential in the 1960s, like that of Mike Wayne, the base has become exclusively the “mode of production” (that, in Engelsian-Althusserian parlance, only determines in the last instance), while even the industries, the economy, and the market become part of the superstructure. Wayne’s study is concerned with the media, and his example of the superstructure encompasses the whole bit of the state, the industry (such as film, television, advertising), down to specific companies and media texts (Wayne, 2003).

In his attempt to tidy up what he views as a mess of (mis)interpretations, Dileep Edara (2016) advocates a restrictive usage of the base-superstructure metaphor. He employs very close reading of the well-known paragraphs, from which the metaphor is often gleaned, in Marx’s 1859 Preface to *Contribution*. Edara’s conclusion:

Marx only meant legal and political institutions as the superstructure and hardly anything else (except perhaps in some earlier texts). Ideology, art, literature, philosophy, consciousness is not part of the superstructure, and, even more than that, is completely outside the formulae altogether. Their relationship with productive forces must be considered elsewhere, not in the base-superstructure model. In such an interpretation, the superstructure can then “arise out of” (Marx’s words) the base because the state and laws are closely connected with relations of production and are there to ensure their smooth arrangements and operations. Consciousness, which is usually considered a reflection of social being (in connection with economic arrangements of the era), here only strictly *corresponds* to the relations of production (read: consciousness is outside of the considerations of the base-superstructure relations, and only a part of it is bent to correspond to it). How the rest of culture is related to the mode of production is a more complex issue that Marx himself only provided hints rather than full-fledged expositions—and, even in those hints, he openly acknowledged its multiplicities, unevenness, and autonomy.

In his case studies of art and art production in the United States, Jarek Paul Ervin follows Edara in the “restrictive conception” of the superstructure and only includes in it “a narrow group of institutions, including government divisions, churches, schools, NGOs” (Ervin, 2020, p. 370). As such, art is deemed not part of the superstructure but is heavily influenced by those superstructural institutions through such processes as, in Ervin’s rather obvious examples, endowments and acquisitions. Art is funded, bought, and enlisted by, for instance, the US Armed Forces that utilizes it in many situations, such as playing hard rock or hip hop music before combats. This may suggest crude functionalism of art, but Ervin also suggests that non-military divisions of many governments invest massively in cultural activities for different purposes. Ervin insists that this kind of determination is not total, i.e. art is not completely subsumed or held sway by those institutions. Still, in his overall assessment, “culture *is* often tethered by prevailing economic conditions” (Ervin, 2020, p. 371).

In “tidying up”, such reading by Edara and Ervin, in fact, adds to the still-growing list of diverging interpretations. While their understandings differ vastly on what constitutes the base and the superstructure, even how each of them *acts* in what circumstances, the thread that we see going through them – and that is

why we put them together in this group – is how these authors are resolute about retaining the twin levels, with the base being foundational and determining. They are also common in maintaining that this determination must be specific (rather than all-purpose and one-size-fits-all), historical (rather than axiomatic), and even must be employed very restrictively and minimalistically, or else the model risks losing its explanatory power. But that is the furthest they travel together.

3. *Leveling the base with the superstructure, side by side*

If (2) can be called a strong claim, (3) is a weaker one. In the latter, the relationship between the base and the superstructure is more leveled and balanced. The two-story architectural metaphor is now more like a one-story with a loft. The base and the superstructure are considered mutual, feeding into one another, with culture and politics having more role to play in the overall equation. Still, level one, or the base, is somewhat more determining. In Chibber's argument above, the relationship remains asymmetrical: while culture is often the activation of the class structure, the economic is the chiseling code behind it.

Chibber's *The Class Matrix* can be categorized here, and so is his earlier one. In the article "What is Living and What is Dead in the Marxist Theory of History" (2011), Chibber traces the uprising against the canonical base-superstructure theory back to the 1960s and finds that, in place of the technological-determinist primacy of the productive forces, the class-struggle was brought to the fore as the main drive of human history by the New Left. The transition from feudalism to capitalism, for instance, depended on "the contingent outcomes of the struggle between lord and peasant" (Chibber, 2011, p. 62), rather than simply the shift to machines in production. This does not mean that productive forces no longer have anything to say about the trajectory of history: in the less-deterministic version of the theory, the productive forces determine *not* what will follow a relations of production in a historical transition of societies *but* a range of possibilities while the determining factor will be the class-struggle that finds the best candidate, or at least the class that is perceived as the most suitable to do the job, for the new production-relations. In other words, the production-relations exerts constraints and limits but is not an overarching causal factor. While the article is for the most part an appraisal of an earlier debate, Chibber interjects in favor of the class-struggle thesis. While class and class-struggle can be seen as part of the "base",

his preferred version of historical materialism overall offers more space for politics in the trajectory of history.

In his application of Marxist theory to architectural and urban anthropology, Michał Murawski expounds the "base" as, simultaneously, more (literally) material *and* beyond material. It applies not only to production and productive forces but also to concrete things in everyday life, inscribing it in "stone, wood, glass, cement, and concrete" that is "filled with life" of inhabitants who live in and use the buildings and the cities. Yet, at the same time, against the above-mentioned "social flatteners" that tend to "reduce infrastructure to superstructure", a materialist must "look above, beyond, and beneath infrastructure's materiality", especially for the injustice and violence in property relations it incurs (Murawski, 2018, p. 30). A "base" is not either material or immaterial, tangible or intangible, which is beside the point. Here, the "base" has its own dynamics, almost its own politics and culture. As for the "superstructure", Murawski follows Maurice Godelier, a French Marxist anthropologist, in asserting that its elements, such as thought and language, may not only function as "society's ideological superstructure" but also as "components of the infrastructure, as part of a society's forces of production" (Godelier, 1978, quoted in Murawski, 2018, p. 30). In other words, the superstructure is redrawn into the level of the infrastructure and, rather than being passively determined, is concomitantly active, and, in so doing, the "base" is dilated and revitalized.

4. *Collapsing the base and the superstructure together*

We have seen that the base in (3) is enlarged conceptually, but it is still cut quite sharply from the superstructure. Here in (4), the superstructural attachment to the base is even more pronounced and sticky: they are often conjoined by a hyphen, such as "semio-economic production" (bringing semiosis, or the creation of meanings, to the fore with productive forces), suggesting their even more intertwined activity and activeness. For comparative purpose, note that all the proposals in the categories (1) to (5) in this article are far removed from the conventional conception of the "base" as brute matter, and they all include in it language, social relations, thoughts, etc., to different degrees. However, in (4), the "base" is morphing, inflating, and encroaching: rather than just the economic, it absorbs, say, language more forcefully and, importantly, exudes their combined force in the production of social conditions and relations.

We can further split this group into two sub-divisions: (4.1) a “conceptually-expanded” base and (4.2) a more aggressive “empirically-expanded” base. In the former, Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum (2018) offer a good example with regard to language in the Marxist constellation. They argue that Marx himself lamented the growing division between manual and mental (intellectual) labor: by implication, language should not be seen as separated from material life. No later than the text on Feuerbach, Marx began moving away from the mechanical conception of base-superstructure model. Political struggle, for Marx, is often the mediator and catalyst for social transformation, especially when there are economic crises, and by “the political” Jessop and Sum include discourses, ideas, representations. Further, “Marx and Engels insisted that sense- and meaning-making are not confined to the superstructure but are co-constitutive of all social practices and interaction” (Jessop & Sum, 2018, p. 333). This leads Jessop and Sum to a conclusion that much of Marx’s oeuvre is a critique of *semiotic economy*, and the real foundation of society and history is *semiotic-material relations* in different conjunctures (Jessop & Sum, 2018).

Antonio Gramsci’s concept of *historic bloc* and *hegemony* is often invoked for this interpretative variant. In his single-authored text, Jessop (2018, p. 33) contends that Gramsci “sought to transcend [the base-superstructure binary] by exploring the interpenetration and co-evolution of these allegedly separate social spheres” and that, for Gramsci, there is always the reciprocity between structure and superstructure. Meanwhile, hegemony, in which the dominant group maintains their supremacy through the consent of other groups that is transformed into common sense, always involves “the material as well as the discursive moment of social practice” (Jessop, 2018, p. 36). Overall, however, we think that Gramsci’s thinking belongs to (3) because, despite a more interwoven engagement between the two realms of structure and superstructure in his conceptualization, they are still spoken of as largely separate, and Jessop and Sum perform a conceptual jump to their *semiotic-material production* without a solid support from the Gramsci they enlist.

Attempts to overcome the binary of the base and the superstructure, such as those by Gramsci and György Lukács (especially his emphasis on “totality”), can spur similar endeavors that lead some to hold a “holistic” approach to Marx. For instance, Arran Gare (2021a, p. 45), in his advocacy of “eco-Marxism”, declares that

“For Marx, humans create themselves and their world through their productive activity as participants in nature, activity which is essentially socio-cultural. This productive activity involves all dimensions of society, including those designated the superstructure”. Similar to Jessop and Sum above, Gare views such a clear-cut separation as a result of the socio-economic development that Marx critiqued, not one that Marx employed in his methodology. Quoting Louis Dupré, “where [Marx] stresses social coherence, his followers defended causal determinism” (Gare, 2021a, p. 46). Gare seems to conflate the evil of “the fragmentation and alienation wrought by the capitalist socio-economic formation” (Gare, 2021a, p. 46) with the evil of the analytical distinction of the base and the superstructure. As such, it seems like this kind of interpretation confuses Marx’s revolutionary vision and value judgements with his analytical tools. A result of this overly “holistic” view is similar to that of Lukács’s concept of totality that Raymond Williams criticizes: all we have left are only interacting forces, rather than what is determining what (Hands, 2018). Again, without determinations, the theory risks losing a distinct Marxist edge.

A more aggressive base (4.2) is expanded on the empirical evidence of historically changing characteristics of capital as it advances into the late-20th and the 21st century. Here, what is conventionally a superstructure is now subsumed into the base. As the Italian Autonomist Marxists, who can be a representative of this group, witness the encroachment of capital onto new social spheres, such as knowledge, cognitive capacities, neurons, the brain, attention (in the case of digital life and social media), they look back to Marx and galvanize his notion of the “general intellect” from *Fragments on Machine* in the *Grundrisse* (1858). The general intellect refers to the “general social knowledge” utilized for building machines, such as, in Marx’s days, telegraphs, locomotives, and railways; and, as such, the knowledge “has become a direct force of production” (Marx, 1858, quoted in Hands, 2018). As if Marx had envisaged what would happen today, the human brain is directly drawn into the realm of the base.

It has to be noted that, for Marx as well as for the Autonomists, this is a cause for concern rather than for conceptual celebration: the general knowledge and the brain is increasingly “dragged” into its circuit, rather than being a voluntarist part of production; i.e., it is continually undergoing the process of subsumption by capital. What were formerly superstructural are increasingly devoured

by the base, until, if this tendency persists and we venture into the sci-fi-like future, there is no such a thing as superstructure left. Hence, the “aggressive” base, as we term this group.

5. Peripheralizing it to other “more important” Marxian notions

The “eco-Marxists” are a good example of this trajectory. Gare (2021b) largely suggests that the mature Marx dropped the model of social development in favor of naturalist language and concerns about nature, reflected in such a concept as metabolic rift, the dynamic and contradiction between natural and social metabolisms. For instance, Gare draws from *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875) to claim that nature was now Marx’s primary concern, with labor being only its subset: “Labor is not a source of all wealth; nature is just as much a source of use-values as labor, which is itself only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labor power” Marx (1875), quoted in (Gare, 2021b, p. 24). In *Capital* Vol. I, labor is a “Nature-imposed condition of human existence” and only so that it can be viewed as common to every historical phase (Marx 1867; Gare, 2021a, p. 51). This re-prioritization is also often read back into Marx’s earlier works, e.g., in the *Grundrisse*, Marx criticizes how, in the relation of wage labor and capital, nature is left out from the equation (Gare, 2021a).

In Gare’s hand—and also, as often suggested by Gare, in older Marx’s hand—the base-superstructure model is no longer tenable. Criticizing orthodox Marxism of technologism, Gare raises the example of Ancient Rome where technologies were developed but, far from changing the society, they were suppressed. This and other examples in Britain and Russia lead Gare to announce that “throughout history, new modes of production have not been determined by technology but by the superstructure” (Gare, 2020b, p. 27). While his criticism of technology-directed history of orthodox Marxism is in line with the general trajectories since 2000 outlined in this article, the determinacy “by the superstructure” is less so. While many acknowledge political struggle, ideology, and language as important in Marx’s view of social transformations, especially in light of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, other commentators, such as in group (2), remain unwavering about a stronger determinacy coming from the base, however it is interpreted and modified.

Another comparison can be useful for our purpose here. In many places in Marx’s vast texts, from

A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy to Capital, Marx warns against applying and projecting present categories (of labor-capital relations, for instance) onto the past societies, where politics and religion were more dominant than the economic. While this led earlier Marxist thinkers, e.g., Althusser and Hall, to retain the determinacy by a mode of production at the same time as attempting to flex the superstructure and make room for its “uneven development” and “relative autonomy” (Hall, 1977, p. 71), it emboldens Gare to declare that “Marx rejects this model entirely as too simplistic” (Gare, 2020b, p. 25). For Gare, the forces of production as an independent variable and the driving force of history is fallacious and only elevated as such by later Marxists. The base-superstructure model should be abandoned; energy should be converged on other more important concepts in Marx’s complex works; and it is urgent to maneuver and mobilize them in the face of ecological crises and the age of Anthropocene. And those concepts for eco-Marxists like Gare and Hornborg (2019) are the ones that put nature on a par with, if not prior to, economic concerns in Marx.

Conclusion

Had Marx finished the third volume of *Capital*, as well as another volume on the State, we would not have this muddle of the base-superstructure metaphor. This rhetorical “as-if” scenario Stuart Hall wondered in 1977 still haunts us in the new millennium. For Hall, it is not a question whether the base determines the superstructures or not, but rather *how* this determinacy by a mode of production became more complex, less reductionist, and more open for “relative autonomy” of the superstructure, in Marx’s thinking over time (Hall, 1977, p. 56). As we can see, this Althusser-inspired position still has reverberations today, with the trajectory (2) that proposes to retain the levels of the model but refine or restrict it to certain phenomena being its next of kin.

Nonetheless, it is only one in a matrix of colliding interpretations. The model has the status of a zombie, not completely dead as often thought to be but not quite alive either. And yet, it can be argued that precisely because of this limbo status, it has evolved and produced an unignorable numbers of variation on the theme. The pure rejection or affirmation of the model (as in group (1)) has become a minority. Group (5) (Peripheralizing it to Other “More Important” Marxian Notions) is close to the

rejection camp of group (1), but, in contrast to the post-modernists, those in (5) have no qualms in openly identifying themselves as Marxists. Still, (5), too, is a minority in today's landscape of Marxisms. What has burgeoned and come to occupy the focal point is (2), (3) (Leveling the Base with the Superstructure, Side by Side), and (4) (Collapsing the Base and the Superstructure Together) positions.

What (2) to (3) trajectories have in common is their safekeeping of Marx's legacy on the primacy of productive forces, as well as their upgrading of the base-superstructure model and enlivening it into many reincarnations. Their main difference can be that of a gradation of how much the determinacy of the base is affixed onto the superstructure, with (2) retaining the strongest determinacy, (3) the weaker one, and (4) having parts of the superstructure *in* the base, actively co-producing social relations. Their participants range from the members of or those inspired by the old New Left, the humanist Marxists, the neo-Marxists who criticize and depart from the New Left, to the Italian Autonomists. The list is not exhaustive, and this review article can only offer a glimpse of some crucial movements in the 21st century. Their differences remain vast, their assessments and denigrations of each other often harsh, but, in our eyes, they constitute the "hegemonic" ground of the Left at present.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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