

**Contradiction and Overdetermination:**

**The Discussion of Their Diversity of Thought and Importance in the 20th Century**

## **Abstract**

This paper deals with the terminologies of overdetermination and contradiction in Marxist theory. These are terms that come up in many of the practical and theoretical applications of Marxism and dialectical materialism, and that makes them integral to completely understanding some of the main frameworks of Marxism like Karl Marx's *Capital*. So, this paper will attempt to provide a clear understanding and general overview of the relationship between overdetermination and contradiction. It will include the major theorists in this field, comparing Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. This work's relevance is not only in the specifics of Marxist theory, but also includes an overarching application of causality and the philosophy of history and events. The ultimate tension throughout the paper will evaluate the reality of philosophical theory to the practical world and application into political movement, but also evaluate the translation of the Hegelian dialectic into Marx's work as well as Althusser.

## Introduction

Within the Marx tradition, the discussion and debate about the clarification and placement of contradiction has continuously been at the forefront of the conversation. This paper will go into the specific explanation of contradiction and its purpose for revolution in Marxism as discussed by Louis Althusser. Firstly, contradiction will be referring to an idea introduced by Karl Marx that Althusser refers to as the general contradiction. He specifically defines it as the “contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production, essentially embodied in the contradiction between two antagonistic classes.”<sup>1</sup> The importance of contradiction as a motivation and force that directs society to needing change, or in this specific case revolution and how that change is specific to Marxism as a movement forward into communism as opposed to going backwards in time will also be discussed. Then the paper will move into an understanding of overdetermination to Althusser as the more authentic description of how contradiction would truly work in Marxism to forge the apparent revolution as the idea that there is unity from the different contradictions, including the general one, to create the right atmosphere for revolution. Overdetermination also serves as filler for lack of better words as Althusser believes it to assume more than he wants, and overdetermination as important to Marxism as it rightfully departs from Hegelian contradiction<sup>2</sup>. The part of this paper dedicated to overdetermination will also provide the departure from Marx on contradiction and how it leads to revolution. The end of the paper will complete the discussion of overdetermination and contradiction as an integral part of Marxism as pertaining to the question of revolution and what it would take to achieve it, as well as bringing forward criticisms of Althusser’s departure from

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Althusser, For Marx, p. 99

<sup>2</sup> Louis Althusser, For Marx, p. 101

Marx and what problems come from it. Therefore, this paper will pertain to the discussion of the concepts of contradiction and overdetermination in the Marx tradition and their relationships to praxis.

### **Contradiction by Hegel and Where Marx Departs**

Firstly, it is important to understand the basic foundation of contradiction in Marx as well as Hegel. The distinction between the two being Hegel's dialectical materialism and Marx's historical materialism. Althusser in *For Marx* jumps deep into the discussion of Hegelian dialectic and contradiction as Marx saw it. The beginning of Althusser's chapter on contradiction starts with a quote from Marx saying "With (Hegel) it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell."<sup>3</sup> This quote seems to be a central point and introduction to Marx in his distinction from the Hegelian dialectic as an "inversion" and demystification. In Althusser's eyes, as the paper will discuss in the overdetermination section, this inversion is important in that he will attempt to reject it and provide a new pathway for Marxist thinking going forward. An important thing to note when also introducing contradiction from Marx and Hegel, all of what Althusser, Marx, and Hegel are writing about is causality and the purpose of this was best described by Alex Callinicos: "Althusser is trying to hammer home... the shift from treating a cause as a thing, a substance, a distinct, separately identifiable entity to treating it as a relation, from something that can be immediately or ultimately pointed to, grasped hold of, to treating it as the displacements affected by the structure of a whole upon its elements."<sup>4</sup> However, to return to Marx and Hegel, Marx's

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital, Critique of Capitalism* p. 302

<sup>4</sup> Alex Callinicos, *Althusser's Marxism* p. 52

dialectics separate from Hegel in that they are removed from the ‘mystical’ world and put into the real one, or one that focuses on the historical processes of the dialectic rather than too much focus on the philosophical. The importance of this as well comes through in how Althusser describes Marx’s general contradiction. As mentioned before, the general contradiction is Althusser’s understanding of the “contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production, essentially embodied in the contradiction between two antagonistic classes.”<sup>5</sup> The importance to Althusser of this clarification of Marx’s concept of contradiction is that if one separates Marx from Hegel, it is necessary that the essence of the characteristic determination and structures of that process are different as well. Marx’s conception of the dialectic in comparison to Hegel’s is introduced with the separation of Hegel’s dialectic through the *rational kernel within the mystical shell*.<sup>6</sup> The ‘rational kernel’ being the dialectic and the ‘mystical shell’ being the philosophical speculation. This was, for Marx, an importance of not only departing from Hegel but also being able to apply his interpretation of dialectic within Hegel’s ‘mystical shell’. Marx continues in *Capital* to oppose the mystical form of the Hegelian dialectic for his ‘rational figure’.<sup>7</sup> The discussion of Hegelian dialectic and the specificity of Marxist rejection of it is central to where Althusser begins to question if Marx fully discovered the whole of his ‘rational’ or opposite version of the dialectic. Now discussing specifically how Marx rejected the Hegelian dialectic, we will enter Althusser’s interpretation and expansion of Marx’s historical materialism.

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<sup>5</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 99

<sup>6</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 90

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, *The Critique of Capitalism* p. 302

## **Contradiction by Althusser:**

Althusser understands that the 'task' of revolution is a very important part for the practical use of Marxism. As understood by the distinction of Marx's dialectic as a completely different structural system from Hegel, the picture of Althusser setting up his theory on revolution begins to be painted. Taking into account the general contradiction, the main departure that Althusser takes is the dissipating importance of the general contradiction as a motivation for revolution. Althusser, however, does come to commonality with Marx on the acceptance of the general contradiction as what presents what Althusser calls 'the task of the day'. In other words, the general contradiction, or the internal contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production introduced by Marx, make the necessity of revolution identifiable and noticeable. He specifically states that it "defines the situation" when it is the 'task of the day'.<sup>8</sup> However, this contradiction, contrary to what was assumed by Marx, cannot alone create the necessary atmosphere for revolution. This is where he introduces the idea of 'ruptural unity' as the important distinction and unity of many different contradictions that transform in their essence and are then separable from the 'little' contradictions, even the general one. Though, to truly understand where these ideas stem from for Althusser is apparent in his discussion of the successful Russian revolution and unsuccessful German one in the mid 19th century. The question that stemmed Althusser's research into questioning Marx's contradiction was: why was the Russian revolution successful? He begins by introducing Vladimir Lenin's "weakest link" theory. The principle that Lenin used was the metaphor that if one wants to control a situation, you would need to find the weakest link as it could threaten the stability of the whole system. In this case, the system would be the imperialist states of mainly Europe, and

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<sup>8</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 99

the weakest link being Russia. He calls Russia the “most backward” in the sense that it was far behind the rest of the system when it came to securing imperialist goals like colonies or foreign markets, but even though the connection of the system is imperialist states, there are many factors in Russia that complicate that. For example, Althusser connects the idea of rapid industrialization as the fuel of imperialism, and draws a ‘gigantic’ contradiction between the urban and industrial cities of Russia as some of the most forward in Europe and the almost complete opposite in the countryside where feudalism continues to leak from the past century. This seems to highlight not only the contrast between the urban and countryside, but also leads us to the two separate contradictions between the peasants and lords and workers and capitalists. He also notes a very important contradiction within the ruling and powerful class of Russia. Like mentioned, in the cities there is a largely growing powerful bourgeois class that would like to see the Tsardom gone. Vice-versa, the royalty can see their autocratic power diminishing due to the growing industrial capitalists. The last contradiction Althusser points out is that of the petty bourgeois and their battle between conformism and anarchist-leftism. The metaphor that Althusser leaves that then will lead into his concept of overdetermination is that Russia was pregnant with two revolutions, the bourgeois against the Tsar and the proletariat against the bourgeois. The importance is the grouping together of the issues of the proletariat, the peasants, and the petty bourgeois under a single movement. This understanding of the contradictions in Russia is applied and integral to how Althusser categorizes the need for revolution as overdetermination.

## Overdetermination

Following the deep discussion of why the Russian revolution was successful, Althusser concludes that through his understanding of those contradictions, it was only successful by overdetermination. Overdetermination, though like mentioned before is not a completely self-explanatory term due to the lack of a better one, is the acceptance of a consequence having multiple causes, with the understanding that not all of them were, or weren't, sufficient to cause the effect. This is where prior definitions in other fields make this term, and Althusser's interpretation, a little bit harder to pin down. This is also why the discussion of the Russian revolution is integral to understanding what he meant by this because it is common to assume that by overdetermination Althusser means that the possibility of each cause would be sufficient to create the effect. This is not the case, as Althusser specifically introduces the discussion of Germany in the 19th century. Germany at the time was considered to be the most powerful example in the imperialist system when it came to capitalism and industrial production. That being said, Marxists firmly believed that this would by implication mean that German society had the largest contradiction, meaning the general contradiction, between the capitalists and the workers. That is why these Marxists were also very confident in the revolution in 1848 in Germany, however, it was still unsuccessful. This is an example, to Althusser, of a larger problem that overdetermination points out in Marxist thinking that still hangs on to the Hegelian dialectic. The *simple* determination and circle of Hegelian dialectic is obvious to Althusser when looking at the failed German revolution in 1849. Through overdetermination, Althusser believes he is truly expanding and specifically defining what Marx's dialectic would look like. Though Marx only really emphasized the importance of the general contradiction, again using



Althusser's words, if Marx was true in his attempt to invert the Hegelian dialectic it would be a rejection of this abstract and simple schematic. This point is important to Althusser because it brings to light the question of if overdetermination is the specificity of true Marxist contradiction, then what is the 'necessary link' that unites "characteristic structure of contradiction for Marx to his conception of society and history?"<sup>9</sup> In other words, how does this change or apply to the question of structural causality or the relationship between base and superstructure? The question raised is central to his earlier claim and rejection of "inversion" of Hegel by Marx as it doesn't completely take into account the complete change in the structures or even worlds that Marx uses compared to Hegel. Those being the Idea for Hegel and the real world for Marx. To attempt to clarify and conclude the point of overdetermination as a necessary part of Marxist social formation, it is important to note that the social formations themselves, as overdetermined structures inside of historical situations, are determined by the economic relations and structures of the society as interpreted and presented by Marx in Capital.<sup>10</sup> This is present in his understanding of 'ruptural unity' and the fusion of the general contradiction among others into a singular movement, but also the importance that the essence of the general contradiction is alive in all of the contradictions and even the fusion.<sup>11</sup> Althusser emphasizes that this unity is a reconstitution, and that the reflection of the 'conditions of existence' of the internal contradiction and the reflection of the hierarchical structure of the unity of contradictions is the "most profound characteristic of the Marxist dialectic."<sup>12</sup> This is what Althusser wanted to centralize with his concept of overdetermination. An interesting connection brought forward between some of the central points of overdetermination and other aspects of Marxism are the

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<sup>9</sup> Louis Althusser, For Marx, p. 107

<sup>10</sup> Michael Emerson, Overdetermination and Structural Causation, p. 214

<sup>11</sup> Louis Althusser, For Marx, p. 100

<sup>12</sup> Louis Althusser, Reading Capital, p. 206

unknown aspects of social relations once there was a successful, global revolution. The unity of the contradictions working together towards revolution as well as the climax of success. These both seem to elicit the profound aspect of the Marxist dialectic referred to above as these processes, like the 'conditions of existence', all project a transformation in theory and structure into something completely separate. This also connects Althusser's critique of economic reductionism, though supported in the letter by Engels (and Marx), of economic determinism in the new society after the revolution, and saying that relationships economically are social, and that social relations are determinate.<sup>13</sup>

## **Criticisms**

With all of the discussion of contradiction and overdetermination had, this section will attempt to place the conversation in a historical, ironically, understanding of Marxist theory while also providing some criticism. To revisit, the historical significance of this seemingly theoretical discussion of contradiction is that it completely centralizes the motivational force for revolution in Marxism. The importance of overdetermination, Althusser's attempt to keep Marx's dialectic alive, being a way to understand what it takes to create the revolutionary situation with that 'ruptural unity'. Many Marxist thinkers after Marx focused on the idea and reality of revolution, especially as time went on after the Russian revolution. Leon Trotsky on the permanent revolution. Rosa Luxemburg on the importance of a global revolution. Vladimir Lenin on the ability of a controlled revolution. The question of social democracy in the ability to truly provide a communist revolution. These are all questions that stem from the necessity to answer the question of revolution. A problem that does arise in overdetermination and

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<sup>13</sup> Marx-Engels, Selected Works, Vol. II, p. 490

Althusser's discussion of the base-superstructure understanding is the complication of rejecting simple determinism. This, though he did address, is a large problem as seen in Marxism in multiple ways. The rejection of the 'mystical' aspect of Hegel and taking cover in rationale as being inefficient at inspiring the revolution among people. The importance of Althusser's work on causality and Marxism is undoubtedly profound, though popularity of his work among common understanding of Marx is low. This profoundness is specifically in the rejection of simple determinism, specifically economic, which like mentioned ironically has some side-effects, with the discussion of if Catholicism was specifically an effect of feudalistic economic relationships, yet the presence of feudalistic economic relationships were prevalent in places like Japan, where Catholicism was not.<sup>14</sup> Though, maybe there was some *raison d'être* for the existence of the simple determinism or even just the emphasis or importance of the general contradiction. In some fairness, even in Althusser's discussion of the general contradiction regarding the 'ruptural unity' it doesn't completely exist as just one of the many contradictions, but in some ways it can be diminishing to the historical materialism of Marx to not have the base have a complete contradiction. Another problem arises with the implication that, if Althusser's overdetermination is correct, could state that there is no longer room for human commonality. Steven B. Smith calls it an 'oversocialized' view of the self and makes it meaningless and impossible to have any core that defines our common humanity.<sup>15</sup> The rejection of humanism for Althusser is important historically for Marxist thinking due to the large movement of 20th and 21st century reading of Marx usually preferring 'Young Marx' and Marxist humanism. This distinction is also something that Althusser pointed out in his previous chapter "On the Young Marx" and being widely accredited, along with Feuerbach on the distinction between the

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<sup>14</sup> Steven B. Smith, *Althusser and the Overdetermined Self*, p. 522

<sup>15</sup> Steven B. Smith, *Althusser and the Overdetermined Self*, p. 518

‘epistemological break’ between ‘Young’ and ‘Mature’ Marx.<sup>16</sup> Due to a large Marxist intellectual movement and preference of Marxist humanism, Althusser’s rejection of humanism also seems to threaten the communal aspect of revolution. Like Althusser would like to point out, Marx’s later work and departure from philosophy towards science seems in large part to be a desire from both Marx and Althusser more than an actualization of it. The irony found in most of Althusser’s work is that it almost completely deals with philosophy and the discussion of the dialectic, and its most practical conversation is historical materialism with Marx. Ultimately, the irony of Althusser, and in some aspects Marx, wanting their work to be more practical and useful versus philosophical seems to also push it away from gaining enough motivation by the workers that also want to be united by their human commonality.<sup>17</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the importance and discussion of contradiction as an integral part of the very serious question of revolution is undebatable. Marx’s introduction of the base-superstructure had large consequences on the extent and influence of the contradiction between the relations of production and the forces of production. This iconic clashing of classes has been at the forefront of much political and social understanding of a globalized and capitalistic world, and Althusser believed in attempting to make sure that Marx’s dialectic wasn’t left behind or misunderstood as a simple economic determinism. The relevance and use of the general contradiction was, however, used by both, as well as the aspect of transformation and uncertainty of social formations beyond revolution. These similarities still beg detrimental questions as to even if this

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<sup>16</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx, On the Young Marx*, p. 51

<sup>17</sup> Raya Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution*, p. 153

aspect of uncertainty is necessary in the assumption of all of our understanding being based on those socioeconomic relations, is it not meretricious? The complete picture of Althusser's work is still not completely finished, but his perspective of Marx has also prevented the over-distinguished line between the reality and method that Marx provides in Capital. This bridge and gap in Marx of social formations as overdetermined-structured wholes provides a necessary understanding to the Marxist tradition. The importance of overdetermination for the future of Marxism and the need for a successful revolution is apparent.

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