

Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism

Conjuncture, politico-historical

A: waḍ‘ siyasi-tāriḥī. – G: Konjunktur, politisch-historische. – F: conjoncture historico-politique. – R: istoriko-političeskaja konjunktura. – S: coyuntura. – C: qingkuang (zhengzhi-lishi de) 情况(政治-历史的).

For Ben Brewster and Louis Althusser, the concept of ‘conjuncture’ is nothing less than ‘the central concept of the Marxist science of politics’ (Glossary of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, 1969 and 1970). It indicates ‘the exact balance of forces, [the] state of overdetermination of the contradictions at any given moment to which political tactics must be applied’. Unlike conjuncture in the sense of fluctuation, eminently compatible with various teleological philosophies of history, the concept of conjuncture in its developed form is decisively anti-teleological, as well as firmly opposed to economic or class-reductionism. Social changes, also of a structural type, take place in and through conjunctures with many determinations. As an analytical tool, the concept of conjuncture can expand the capacity to act politically by helping to examine the conditions of a political intervention in their complexity, that is, to trace the displacements and condensations of different sorts of contradictions, and thus open up possibilities for action.

1. The Latin *coniungere* – to bind, to join – continues to mark the modern meaning of conjuncture as a ‘combination of many circumstances or causes’ (Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755). In Diderot’s and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopædia* (1751–65), *conjuncture* is defined as ‘the ‘coexistence in time of many related facts, which

change the one to the other [...]: the *conjunctures* would be, if it were permitted to say so, the circumstances of the times, and the circumstances would be the *conjunctures* of the thing’. – In German, the word *Konjunktur* has most of all a strong association with economic conjuncture, in the sense of economic fluctuation. This is often transposed to the cultural realm in the sense that something is in fashion.

The beginning of the theoretical elaboration of the concept of conjuncture can be located in astrology/astronomy, a product of ‘natural curiosity’, a ‘daughter of ignorance’ and a ‘mother of knowledge’, which ‘is born when wonder arouses the human mind’ (Vico 1744/1999, Book II, Section I, §377). According to this doctrine, decisive historical crises, such as the demise of states, changes in their leadership or changes of cultural or religious self-understanding, were ordered by the movements of the heavenly bodies. Theoretical interest in the ‘great conjunctions’ was reinforced not least by the practical interests of kings and other rulers in gaining the foreknowledge that would allow them to secure their power. Thus the opposition to ‘*divinatores horoscopios*’ and the ‘*coniunctionistas*’ that is common in Ibn Khaldun, Nicholas Oresme and Henry of Langenstein (Garin 1983, 1–28) encouraged a critique of domination. This secularisation foregrounded the anti-idealistic perspective of Machiavelli, ‘the first theorist of the conjuncture’ (Althusser 1999, 18), for whom *fortuna*, despite ‘the great changes that have taken place and are still to be seen even now, which could hardly have been predicted’, was only ‘arbiter of half of our actions’. Even when *fortuna* acts like an ‘enraged’ river, ‘this does not mean that, when the river is not in flood, men are unable to take

precautions, by means of dykes and dams' (*The Prince*, Chapter XXV).

2. The young Marx in 1842 mocked the representatives of the nobility who saw freedom 'as the supernatural gift of an especially favourable constellation of the stars, because they regard freedom as merely an *individual property* of certain persons and social estates'. However, 'in order to save the special freedoms of privilege, they proscribe' – as an ideological anti-matter – 'the universal [*allgemeine*] freedom of human nature' (*MECW* 1, 151–2). As Marx and Engels think complex and historically transforming social relations in the perspective of a *revolutionary* praxis, they consistently aim to produce a concrete, non-reductionist analysis of specific conjunctures and constellations [*Konstellationen*] and their structural conditions. They sarcastically cite and criticise Karl Grün: 'Of course, there is no need for a true socialist, absorbed in his intimacy with "human essence", to know anything about what "may arise from the economic position and the political constellation" of a country' (*MECW* 5, 490). Max Stirner does not fare any better: 'Instead of making a real analysis of the conjuncture of conditions, which with the rule of the bourgeoisie became a totally different conjuncture of totally different conditions, Saint Sancho leaves it in the form of the general category "conjuncture, etc.", and bestows on it the still more indefinite name of "fortuitousness of circumstances", as though the "commands and arbitrariness of individuals" are not themselves a "conjuncture of conditions". Having thus done away with the real basis of communism, i.e., the definite conjuncture of conditions under the bourgeois regime, he can now also transform this airy communism into his holy communism' (*MECW* 5, 222–3). – Marx does indeed speak of the 'conjuncture of circumstances' or also of 'unfavourable conjunctures' (*MECW* 37, 511; translation modified), but he usually employs instead 'relations', 'articulation [*Gliederung*]', 'situation [*Lage*]; sometimes he also uses *Situation*].

3. Lenin wrote in 1917 that 'there are no miracles in nature or history'; 'every abrupt turn in

history, and this applies to every revolution, presents such a wealth of content, unfolds such unexpected and specific combinations of forms of struggle and alignment of forces of the contestants, that to small-minded types there is much that must appear miraculous' (*LCW* 23, 297; translation modified). – The outbreak of the First World-War, its causes and the possibilities of opposing it in a situation of increasing militarisation were a challenge for radical political thinking, giving new impetus for assessing different converging or opposing tendencies and weighing their relative importance. According to Rosa Luxemburg, the 'incident in Sarajevo' only provided the pretext for war; everything in the *Konstellation* that led to it had been ready for a long time (1916, 106).

Like Luxemburg, Lenin also tries to develop a political intervention capable of ending the War and shifting the political power-relations: 'the idea that the Russian proletariat is the chosen revolutionary proletariat among the workers of the world is absolutely alien to us. We know perfectly well that the proletariat of Russia is less organised, less prepared and less class-conscious than the proletariat of other countries. It is not its special qualities, but rather the special conjuncture of historical circumstances that *for a certain, perhaps very short, time* has made the proletariat of Russia the vanguard of the revolutionary proletariat of the whole world' (*LCW* 23, 371). Only 'as a result of an extremely unique historical situation, *absolutely dissimilar currents, absolutely heterogeneous class interests, absolutely contrary* political and social strivings have merged' in the revolution that brought down Nicholas II (*LCW* 23, 302). Thus, in early 1917 'a very exceptional conjuncture of circumstances' made possible a '*transition* from the first to the second stage of the revolution, from revolt against Tsarism to revolt against the bourgeoisie, against the imperialist war' (*LCW* 23, 355 et sqq.).

For Trotsky and for the evolving international communist movement, a central lesson of the Paris Commune and of the recent Russian revolutions was that the 'centralized party, internally welded by an iron discipline, linked intimately with the movement of the masses' can not conquer power 'save on the

condition of a powerful revolutionary pressure of the toiling masses. But in this act the element of preparation is entirely inevitable. The better the party will understand the conjuncture and the moment, the better the bases of resistance will be prepared, the better the force and the roles will be distributed, the surer will be the success and the less victims will it cost. The correlation of a carefully prepared action and a mass movement is the politico-strategical task of the taking of power' (Trotsky 1935, 45).

Following Lenin, Brecht understood dialectics as the 'practical teaching of unions and the dissolution of unions, the utilisation of transformations and the interconnection of transformations, of the organisation [*Bewerkstellung*] of transformation and the transformation of the organiser [*Bewerksteller*]' (GW 12, 475). He included in the 'art of manoeuvring' (464) the insight that there are 'many conditions for the revolution [*Umsturz*]'. Lenin 'didn't recognise any time when it wasn't the time to work towards it' (476). It was always a case of taking up 'the best' out of the 'existing state of affairs', and assuming the 'best position', for if 'one doesn't pursue pleasure, [...] how else should one struggle?' (576).

4.1. Gramsci notes that *congiuntura* in Italian is understood as 'economic fluctuation', 'bound up with very rapidly changing postwar phenomena', in such a way that the 'meaning of favourable or unfavourable [economic] *occasione*' remains associated with the word 'conjuncture'. The word thus signifies 'the complex of immediate and transitory characteristics of the economic situation'. 'Study of the conjuncture is thus more closely linked to immediate politics, to "tactics" [and agitation], while the "situation" relates to "strategy" and propaganda' (Q 6, §130). In a later note, he wrote: 'A conjuncture may be defined as the set of circumstances which determine the market in a given phase if these circumstances, however, are conceived of as in movement, in other words as an ensemble that gives rise to a process of ever new combinations, i.e., the process of the economic cycle. The conjuncture is studied to predict and thus also, within

certain limits, to determine the economic cycle in such a way as to favour business. On that account, the conjuncture has also been defined as the oscillation of the economic situation, or as the set of oscillations' (Q 15, §16). If such fluctuations then transform 'also the [relatively] constant elements', then it is no longer a case of mere 'conjunctural crises', but of an 'organic crisis' (Q 8, §216), or rather, the crisis is 'structural' and not conjunctural' (Q 14, §57).

When he rewrites his notes, Gramsci makes not only stylistic corrections: while Gramsci had earlier distinguished between what is 'permanent' and what is 'occasional [*occasionale*]' (Q 4, §38), a later version argues that 'it is necessary to distinguish organic movements (relatively permanent) from movements which may be termed "conjunctural" (and which appear as occasional, immediate, almost accidental)'. Following the argumentation of the earlier version, however, Gramsci writes that these 'conjunctural phenomena too depend on organic movements [...], but they do not have any very far-reaching historical significance; they give rise to political criticism of a minor, day-to-day character, which has as its subject top political leaders and personalities with direct governmental responsibilities. Organic phenomena on the other hand give rise to socio-historical criticism, whose subject is wider social groupings beyond the public figures and beyond the top leaders' (Q 13, §17).

4.2. The text immediately continues in a way that represents a break with the previous argumentation, and which opens up the possibility of a strategically more important understanding of conjuncture. Here emerges Gramsci's central problematic of the theory of hegemony – historical blocks, power-relations in civil society, passive revolutions, various transformisms, and so forth – and his understanding of the molecular process involved in these phenomena. Inspired by Marx's 1859 'Introduction', Gramsci writes that it is 'on the terrain of the *occasionale*' that the 'antagonistic forces organise' and struggle over a 'new reality'. It is a struggle that 'in the immediate [instance] is developed in a series of ideological, religious, philosophical, political, and juridical polemics,

whose concreteness can be estimated by the extent to which they are convincing, and shift the previously existing disposition of social forces' (Q 13, §17). In this context there is also the question of 'whether the fundamental historical crises are directly determined by economic crises', which Gramsci answers negatively: 'they can simply create a terrain more favourable to the dissemination of certain modes of thought, and certain ways of posing and resolving questions involving the entire subsequent development of the life of the state' (ibid.). It seems that Gramsci's dual warning against 'ideologism', in which there is 'an exaggeration of the voluntarist and individual element', and against 'economism', contributed to this insight: 'A common error in historico-political analysis consists in [...] presenting causes as immediately operative which in fact only operate indirectly, or to asserting that the immediate causes are the only effective ones' (ibid.).

The distinction between 'organic' and "conjunctural" or occasional movements and facts must, according to Gramsci, be applied to 'all types of situations', though 'the dialectical nexus between the two categories of movement, and therefore of research, is hard to establish precisely' (ibid.). Gramsci comprehends the question of the relations of force as an 'aspect of the same problem'. 'Abstractly, this formulation explains nothing, or almost nothing, since it merely repeats twice over the fact which needs to be explained, once as a fact and once as an abstract law and an explanation. The theoretical error consists therefore in making what is a principle of research and interpretation into an "historical cause"' (ibid.). In order to avoid this theoretical error, Gramsci emphasises the differentiation of 'moments' or 'levels'. *First*, there are the structural conditions, which are 'objective, independent of human will', and which, he argues, echoing Marx's 1859 'Preface', 'can be measured with the systems of the exact or physical sciences', thus allowing the determination of 'whether in a particular society there exist the necessary and sufficient conditions for its transformation' (Q 13, §17). *Second*, it is necessary to evaluate 'the degree of homoge-

neity, self-awareness, and organisation attained by the various social classes'. Gramsci then distinguishes between further 'moments', which combine and diverge in various ways: The 'solidarity of interests among all the members of a social class – but still in the purely economic field', and the transcending of this corporatism, in order to establish the 'hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups'. Here, 'international relations intertwine with these internal relations of nation-states, creating new, unique and historically concrete combinations' (ibid.). The life of the state thus appears as 'a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria' (ibid.); 'the written constitution' is adapted to 'the varying of the political conjunctures' (Q 14, §11). The *third* moment is the 'relation of military forces, which from time to time is directly decisive'. Gramsci distinguishes between the 'technical' and the 'politico-military' levels (Q 13, §17), and refers to the concept of military science of the 'strategic conjuncture'; or, 'more precisely, the degree of strategic preparation of the theatre of struggle' (Q 9, §40).

These 'methodological criteria' demonstrate themselves to be useful when applied to the examination of concrete historical facts, such as the transformation, in increasingly long waves, in France from 1789 to 1870. For Gramsci, 'it is precisely the study of these "waves" of varying frequency which enables one to reconstruct the relations on the one hand between structure and superstructure, and on the other between the development of organic movement and conjunctural movement in the structure' (Q 13, §17). If Gramsci appears here to return to a narrower meaning of conjuncture, the same note also contains an anti-reductionist understanding of it: he translates the 'question of the relations of force on their different levels' into the question of the 'conjunctural fluctuations of the totality of social relations of force, on whose terrain the passage takes place from the latter to political relations of force, and finally to the military relation, which is decisive' (ibid.). Herein lies Gramsci's most important contribution to the deployment of the concept of conjuncture.

5. Conjunction is one the core-concepts with which **Althusser** tries, starting from **Marx's** *Capital* and **Lenin's** political writings, to reconstruct a Marxist theory of history that could provide a theoretical basis for analysing the conditions of political practice. In his 'self-critique' (from 1966 onwards) he articulated philosophical practice more closely with the conjunctures of class-struggle. In his late writings on 'aleatory materialism', conjunction is the key concept linked to politics through his reading of **Machiavelli**, which he had already begun in the early 1960s.

5.1. According to **Althusser**, **Lenin's** interest in history was not like that of a historian, directed to a 'fait accompli', but was primarily that of a 'revolutionary leader' who 'reflects on the present in the present, on the necessity to be achieved' (1969, 179). These strategic analyses of the possibilities opened up for revolutionary action by 'the current situation' (178) or the 'current conjunction' with its complex determinations were for **Althusser**, after his own Hegelian phase (cf. **Althusser** 1997), a materialist alternative to the Hegelian conception of history as a teleological process with a character of an expressive totality (1976, 181–2; **Althusser and Balibar** 1970, 17 and 94–7). Conjunction is thus not just a 'foam' produced by history or its fluctuation around a teleological process inherent to it, but a characteristic feature of history (1969, 178–9).

The possibilities of revolutionary politics were based on the fact that the capitalist mode of production and its 'general' or 'fundamental contradiction' exist only as parts of a conjunction and its other contradictions: 'Of course, the basic contradiction dominating the period... is active in all these "contradictions" and even in their "fusion". But, strictly speaking, it cannot be claimed that these contradictions and their fusion are merely the *pure phenomena* of the general contradiction. The "circumstances" and "currents" which achieve it are more than its phenomena pure and simple. They derive from the relations of production, which are, of course, one of the *terms* of the contradiction, but at the same time its *conditions of existence*; from the superstructures, instances which derive from it, but

have their own consistency and effectivity' (1969, 100).

The 'general contradiction' did not alone determine the development of the social formation, but this development was overdetermined by different contradictions and other factors (1969, 99–101 and 200–2). **Marx** saw, due to the idea of a 'complex structured whole' (193–200), that the development of the contradictions of capitalism was 'inégal' and was realised only 'in the structure of the real historical present: the present of the *conjunction*' (**Althusser and Balibar** 1970, 106). Because history does not have any given telos, it can 'really [be] the object of a *practice*' (1969, 204). If history is understood as an expressive totality, as 'simply the development of one *single* essence or original and simple substance' (202), then there cannot be a contradiction that is dominant in any determinate conjunction, into which politics could intervene. Thus there can be no 'Hegelian politics' (204). **Althusser** does not claim that anything is possible in a given conjunction; the different determinations of a conjunction have unequal effects. A conjunction always has a 'structure in dominance' and conjunction and structure are not mutually exclusive opposites. The 'general contradiction' for **Althusser** was, along with other contradictions, determinant in structuring conjunctions, present only through these conjunctions with their specific condensations and displacements (99; 178–9; 205–6).

5.2. Soon after *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*, **Althusser** presented a new definition of philosophy: 'philosophy is, in the last instance, class struggle in the field of theory' (1976, 58; cf. 1967/2003, 217). This new definition highlighted the articulation of historical-political and theoretical conjunctions. From the manuscripts published posthumously in the 1990s, it is clear that **Machiavelli** was the theoretician that had a crucial rôle for **Althusser** while developing his thinking about conjunctions. **Machiavelli** was 'the first thinker consciously, if not to think the concept of conjunction, if not to make it the object of an abstract and systematic reflection, then at least consistently – in an insistent, extremely profound way – to think *in* the conjunction: that is to

say, in its concept of an aleatory, singular case' (1999, 18). *The Prince* was, beside Lenin's political writings, a model for analysing a specific conjuncture and its features; Machiavelli's interest was not to produce a general or universal theory of conjuncture, but rather, the question 'comment faire?' (1982, 544). He does not think 'on' the conjuncture, but rather, 'in' the conjuncture: 'it is the conjuncture itself that negatively, yet objectively, poses the problem of Italian national unity' (1999, 18), the problem of the 'duration' of the state (40). His book was itself an intervention into this conjuncture.

In his reworking of this manuscript in the 1980s, Althusser increasingly uses the new vocabulary of his 'aleatory materialism' (while concepts like 'dialectical materialism' and 'dialectics' are not used anymore; cf. Morfino 2006, 15–17). This attempt to analyse history conjuncturally and connect 'history' and 'politics' reformulates Althusser's old problematic in a new vocabulary. In his fragmentary manuscript *Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre* (1982) it is not Machiavelli or Lenin who are under scrutiny, though the goal is similar to that of 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' (1962) or 'On the Materialist Dialectic' (1963): to understand history conjuncturally, to analyse the conjunctural conditions for political action, and to ask how a conjuncture is constituted, that is, how it 'takes hold' and takes on a 'form' (2006, 191). For Althusser, the 'elements' or 'atoms' (Epicurus) do not give expression to a structure, but the structure itself is constituted by an aleatory conjunction of its elements (192). Althusser understood his notes on the tradition of aleatory materialism as a 'prelude' (188) to reading Marx's *Capital*. He insisted that, from the perspective of aleatory materialism, the capitalist mode of production was not a telos that is inscribed in the elements of this mode of production, predetermining their development. Only after the capitalist mode of production has been produced through the combination of elements that are not reducible to each other – 'the "encounter" between "the owners of money" and the proletarian stripped of everything but his labour-power' –

is it possible to speak of the 'stable relationships and a necessity' or 'tendential laws' characteristic to this mode of production (197).

5.3. Though Althusser's self-criticism increasingly emphasised the importance of the *interaction* between theory and practice, he never put forward any concrete conjunctural analyses concerning the relations between intellectuals and the masses or the *organizational-political* connections between Marxist science and philosophy in relation to the prevailing ideologies or *senso comune*. Thus, the effects of the possible changes in these relationships on philosophical-scientific institutions and practices themselves remained outside the focus of Althusser's observations – despite critical remarks on the 'petit-bourgeois' position of teachers of philosophy or other intellectuals (cf. 1971). Althusser's analyses of the political-historical positionings of theoretical practices in the conjunctures of social reality are indeed clearly more abstract – 'more theoreticist' – than the sensitive analyses in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. When Althusser, for instance, writes about 'the class-struggle in theory' he does not reflect extensively on the kind of effects this could have on the material practices and institutions of philosophy or the sciences in a given conjuncture. In Althusser's analyses, Marxist intellectuals seem to remain philosophers or theoreticians who 'spontaneously' reproduce the division between intellectual and material work typical of the capitalist class society' (Lahtinen 2009, xvii).

6. Nicos Poulantzas continued to develop the concept of conjuncture from the perspective of political intervention. Lenin is also important for him because when he 'saw the Russian conjuncture as the weakest link in the chain of imperialism, he was seeing the effects of the unity of an ensemble of structures on the class struggle [...] Without this conception, Lenin would have remained at the Second International's economist interpretation of Marx, which is ultimately an economist theory of the strongest link' (1973, 97). Thus he 'returned to the authentic thought of Marx in producing the concept of *conjuncture*, equivalent to that of the "present moment" which is

the specific *object* of political practice' (93). It is 'the *nodal point* where the contradictions of the various levels of a formation are condensed in the complex relations governed by overdetermination and by their dislocation and uneven development' (41). It represents 'the ever-singular historical individuality of a formation' as well as 'the concrete situation of the *political class struggle*': 'the articulation and the index of dominance which characterize the *structure* of a social formation are reflected as a conjuncture at the level of political class struggle' (94).

For Poulantzas, the 'specific *objective*' of political practice is 'the state, i.e., institutionalised political power, which is the cohesive factor in a determinate social formation and the nodal point of its transformations' (93). According to him, a 'conjuncture appears in the form of the effects of the structures on the field of the practices concentrated, in their unity, at the level of the *political class struggle*. These limits regulate, as such, a play of possible variations of social forces, in short, the intervention of political practice, which is here the concentrated intervention of the field of practices on the structures. The effectiveness of the structure on the field of practices is thus itself limited by the intervention of political practice on the structure' (95).

After Poulantzas provided a concrete analysis of the 'conjuncture of the class struggle leading to fascism' (1974, 57) and the accompanying crises of hegemony, dominant ideology and party-representation, he studied in his last book the conjuncture of 'authoritarian statism', formed by 'intensified state control over every sphere of socio-economic life combined with radical decline of the institutions of political democracy and with draconian and multiform curtailment of so-called "formal" liberties, whose reality is being discovered now that they are going overboard' (1978, 203–4).

7. The specificity of every conjuncture and the criticism of the abstract schemas of historical development are important also for Georges Labica. Against the 'ideological montages' of 'diverse "Marxisms"', he posited the thesis that 'the science founded by Marx has

no other object than historically specific objects' (1974, 61). 'Historical conjunctures are all and always specific, and that specificity is the case globally as well as on different levels of a structure' (1974, 75).

In his interpretation of the Althusserian concept of conjuncture, Étienne Balibar states that 'conception of an overdetermined and underdetermined causality immediately removes the traditional opposition of "structure" and "conjuncture" [...] because the reality of the structure is nothing but the unpredictable succession of conjunctures' (1996a, 115). In a later text, Balibar introduces the concept of *événement*, though not consistently, since he also still uses *conjuncture*: 'the idea of overdetermination has to be applied to the intelligibility of the *événement*', that is, 'to that which [...] Althusser calls the "conjuncture", the "present moment" of Lenin' (1996b, ix; cf. iv, xiv). If we try to conduct 'a practice that does not dissociate analysis of the statements produced and refined by philosophers from the analysis of the conjuncture in which they are destined to signify and to act' (Lecourt 2001, ix), it might be useful to ask if the *événement* (understood as an 'Ereignis') clarifies the conjunctural understanding of history and politics, or if we might instead lose something with this change of concepts. Does an emphasis upon *événement* give more weight to spontaneous happening, thus reducing our focus upon analysis?

Justin Rosenberg tries to develop a precise vocabulary: *historical conjuncture* is 'a space of time within which a particular combination (or conjunction) of causes exercises a predominant (causal or imaginative) influence over the course of events and production of ideas'; *conjunctural phenomena* 'are those arising specifically from that dominant combination'; *conjunctural change* 'refers to developments, shifts, alterations, and reconfigurations which, however dramatic or extensive they may be, nonetheless remain changes within the existing historical form of society'; and finally, *conjunctural analysis* 'is a form of historical explanation which seeks both to explain particular events and ideas, and to map the movement of a period as a whole, by relating them to the working out of a dominant combination

of causes'. He points out that there is nothing distinctively Marxist about the idea of conjunctural analyses. 'What makes it Marxist' for him 'is the central explanatory role accorded to the organic tendencies of capitalist development'. On the other hand 'what makes it *conjunctural* is that these organic tendencies are twice historicized: first by identifying their concrete character at a given stage of their historical development; and second, by locating their operation in the historically given circumstances of the time' (2005, 29–30). However, this idea of mere 'locating' might run the danger of underplaying the analytical potentials of Marxist concepts for *analysing* 'the historically given circumstances'. – Alex Callinicos criticises Rosenberg for failing 'to distinguish between two kinds of intermediary analysis' that 'operate at different levels, respectively, that of a specific phase of capitalist development and that of a determinate historical moment – in other words, of epoch and conjuncture' (2005, 355). By understanding conjuncture as a mere temporal moment, however, Callinicos ends up excluding the possibility that the 'epoch' itself has been formed 'conjuncturally'.

An opposition between conjuncture and structure can be found also in Wally Secombe. In his comments on the Brenner debate concerning the rise of capitalism in different regions of Europe, he maintains that 'while different outcomes of class struggle *may* generate enduring divergences in regional social structures and economic development they *will not necessarily* do so. Opposite results in conjunctural struggles are rarely sufficient to account for persistent socioeconomic differences between regions in the long run'. Yet, he concedes that 'it is precisely because conjunctural differences in struggle outcomes do not normally eventuate in profound and enduring divergences between regions [...] that the instances when this does occur are historic' (1992, 250).

8. What Stuart Hall calls his 'own kind of conjunctural thinking' (2004, 205) – inspired by Gramsci – means facing the things as they exist, 'not as you'd like them to be, not as you

think they were ten years ago, not as they're written about in the sacred texts, but as they really are: the contradictory, stony ground of the present conjuncture' (1989, 151). He is most of all interested in 'what [...] the circumstances [are] in which we now find ourselves, how did they arise, what forces are sustaining them and what forces are available to us to change them?' (2007, 278 et sq.).

8.1. Hall's attempt to study the complex political, cultural and economic determinations of current conjunctures of social struggles as well as his aim of producing politically relevant analyses differentiates him from economicist understandings of Marxism that can not grasp the 'condensation' of the contradictions that are 'moving according to very different tempos' in the 'particular historical moment' that 'defines a conjuncture' (1979, 14). Like Gramsci, Hall focuses on 'the forces which form the basis of a "conjunctural" terrain of struggle' (1980, 165) where 'it is critical to get the relationship between the "organic" and the "conjunctural" features right'. To avoid 'presenting [structural, organic] causes as immediately operative' or 'asserting that the immediate causes are the only effective ones' (166), conjunctural analysis must focus on the conditions of strategic political action. According to Hall, 'what is "scientific" about the Marxist theory of politics is that it seeks to understand the limits to political action given by the terrain on which it operates. This terrain is defined, not by forces we can predict with the certainty of natural science, but by the existing balance of social forces, the specific nature of the concrete conjuncture. It is "scientific" because it understands itself as determinate; and because it seeks to develop a practice which is theoretically informed. But it is *not* "scientific" in the sense that political outcomes and the consequences of the conduct of political struggles are foreordained in the economic stars' (1983, 83–4).

8.2. Hall's conjunctural analyses focused on Thatcherism and its continuation in new forms in Blairism. His notion of 'authoritarian populism' emerged in 1978 after reading Poulantzas's last book, trying to comprehend what is 'particular and specific to *this* historical

conjuncture' (1979, 14), which led him to predict the triumph of Thatcherism. According to Poulantzas, 'authoritarian statism exists in the form of regimes that vary according to the conjuncture of the country concerned' (1978, 204). With 'authoritarian populism', Hall tried 'to encapsulate the contradictory features of the emerging conjuncture: a movement towards a dominative and "authoritarian" form of democratic class politics – paradoxically, apparently rooted in the "transformism" (Gramsci's term) of populist discontents' (1988, 153). For Hall, 'authoritarian populism' is 'an attempt to characterize certain strategic shifts in the political/ideological conjuncture. Essentially, it refers to changes in the "balance of forces"' (1988, 154). In this sense, the 'Blair project, in its overall analysis and key assumptions, is still essentially framed by and moving on a terrain defined by Thatcherism' (1998, 14).

8.3. Hall's methodological understanding of conjuncture is marked by his reading – inspired by Althusser – of Marx's foreword to the *Grundrisse*: 'In the Althusserian sense, production not only "determines" in the last instance, but determines the form of the combination of forces and relations which make a mode of production a complex structure. Formally, production specifies the system of similarities and differences, the points of conjuncture, between all the instances of the mode, including which level is, at any moment of a conjuncture, "in dominance"' (1974/2003, 128). When analysing the 'present conjuncture', according to a later interview from 2007, one has to 'break into it' with 'concepts, ideas and thoughts' and then 'come back to the surface of a situation or conjuncture one is trying to explain' (277). Thus 'you need to return to the problem you really wanted to solve, but now understanding that it is the product of "many determinations", not of one: not of a singular logic unfolding through history' (278). When working on analysis of materials, 'thinking conjuncturally involves "clustering" or assembling elements into a formation. However, there is no simple unity, no single "movement" here, evolving teleologically' (2006, 3). This does not mean 'that conjunctures are all that we can study'; yet his own theoretical

work 'is always connected to the specifics of a concrete moment' and 'cultural studies [...] can only really work by moving from historical conjuncture to historical conjuncture' (cited in Grossberg 2006, 5 et sq.). 'I am a radical conjuncturalist in this sense that I think [that], when the conjuncture shifts, everything shifts. Politics doesn't disappear. Culture doesn't disappear. But the way in which culture is articulated with the economic, and the way in which that is expressed in the political – all of that changes' (cited in MacCabe 2008, 42).

Francis Mulhern (2000, 128) objects that 'in Hall's usage, the conjunctural achieves clear, constant priority over the organic', and that he even 'assimilates the concrete to the conjunctural, in opposition to the organic'. Thus 'he effectively suspends the operation of the "relatively permanent" aspects of historical situations' and supports a 'voluntarist appreciation of historical processes'. Against this, Mulhern himself conceives of conjuncture as 'a moment in the longer organic life of a social formation, which is no less concrete for being more extensive in time' (2000, 128). Mulhern's critique does not recognise, however, that 'radical conjuncturalism' also aims above all to explain the existing state of affairs, instead of presupposing it. As Lawrence Grossberg explains, it is a case of 'a description of a social formation as fractured and conflictual, along multiple axes, planes and scales, constantly in search of temporary balances or structural stabilities' (2007, 107). It is precisely such a 'conjunctural mode of knowledge' that 'can be most usefully and concretely articulated to political struggles' (2006, 5).

9. In summary, an analytical distinction between three main uses of conjuncture in various Marxist theories can be made. In the first usage, the 'structure' is an essence and the conjuncture is only a phenomenon of the surface. In the second usage, conjuncture is interpreted as a punctual moment of historical development. Here, the problem is the narrow, common-sense conception of the conjuncture, borrowed from economic discourse. In these uses of conjuncture, it functions more-or-less as a descriptive concept that designates a

certain historical moment and the relations of force prevailing in it, without, however, thematising the historical formation and structuration of these relations on various levels. Indeed, as we can see in the examples above, when conjuncture is conceived solely as an opposite to the structure, as its surface or punctual state, the formation and changing of the structure itself either falls easily out of analytical focus, or its formation is not problematised as an historical conjuncture of different structural elements irreducible to each other. In this kind of dichotomy between conjuncture and structure, the conjuncture remains descriptive and the latter spontaneously evolves into a fetish. This tends to leave open a backdoor, through which different spontaneous deterministic philosophies of history creep into Marxism, transforming it into evolutionism. This is avoided in the third conception with its 'conjunctural' understanding of structure and its changes, allowing us to talk about 'structural conjuncture'. The focus here is not on the dichotomy of the 'surface' versus 'essence'; rather, conjuncture refers to the complex formation of an historical moment. In developing intervening [*eingreifend*] Marxist analyses, however, conjuncture cannot function as a new 'conceptual dictator', but only as one among the many Marxist concepts that can help to analyse the many determinations of concrete reality, and thus open up new possibilities for political interventions. If this living connection to other conceptual tools is lost, one ends up with a 'conjuncturalism' that dissolves everything into a conjuncture.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: L. ALTHUSSER 2003 [1967], 'The Historical Task of Marxist Philosophy', in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings* (1966–7), London/New York; L. ALTHUSSER 1969, *For Marx*, London; L. ALTHUSSER 1971, 'Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, New York/London; L. ALTHUSSER 1976, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, London; L. ALTHUSSER 1982, 'Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre', in *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, ed. by F. Matheron, Vol. 1, Paris; L. ALTHUSSER 1994, *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, ed. by

F. Matheron, Vol. 1, Paris; L. ALTHUSSER 1997, *Early Writings*, London; L. ALTHUSSER 1999, *Machiavelli and Us*, London; L. ALTHUSSER 2006, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings 1978–1987*, London; L. ALTHUSSER and E. BALIBAR 1970, *Reading Capital*, London; E. BALIBAR 1996a, 'Structural Causality, Overdetermination, and Antagonism', in A. Callari and D.F. Ruccio (eds.), *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory: Essays in the Althusserian Tradition*, Hanover/London; E. BALIBAR 1996b, 'Avant-propos pour la réédition de 1996', in L. Althusser, *Pour Marx*, Paris 1996, i–xiv; B. BRECHT 1977, *Gesammelte Werke (GW)*, 20 Vols., Frankfurt/M 1977; A. CALLINICOS 2005, 'Epoch and Conjuncture in Marxist Political Economy', in *International Politics* 42 (3), 353–63; E. GARIN 1983, *Astrology in the Renaissance*, London; A. GRAMSCI 1975, *Quaderni del carcere*, Turin; L. GROSSBERG 2006, 'Does Cultural Studies Have Futures? Should it? (Or What's the Matter with New York?)', in *Cultural Studies* 20 (1), 1–32; L. GROSSBERG 2007, 'Stuart Hall on Race and Racism: Cultural Studies and the Practice of Contextualism', in B. Meeks (ed.), *Culture and Politics, Race and Diaspora: The Thought of Stuart Hall*, Kingston/London; S. HALL 2003 [1974], 'Marx's Notes on Method: A "Reading" of the "1857 Introduction"', in *Cultural Studies* 17 (2), 113–49; S. HALL et al. 1978, *Policing the Crisis*, London 1978; S. HALL 1979, 'The Great Moving Right Show', in *Marxism Today*, 1979, No. 1, 14–20; S. HALL 1980, 'Popular-Democratic vs. Authoritarian Populism: Two Ways of "Taking Democracy Seriously"', in A. Hunt (ed.), *Marxism and Democracy*, London; S. HALL 1983, 'The Problem of Ideology – Marxism without Guarantees', in *Marx: A Hundred Years On*, London; S. HALL 1988, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, London; S. HALL et al. 1989, 'Then and Now: A Re-evaluation of the New Left', in R. Archer et al. (eds.), *Out of Apathy: Voices of the New Left Thirty Years On*, London; S. HALL 1998, 'The Great Moving Nowhere Show', *Marxism Today*, November/December 1998, 9–14; S. HALL 2004, 'In Conversation with Stuart Hall', in H. Davis, *Understanding Stuart Hall*, London; S. HALL 2006, 'Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three

“Moments” in Post-war History’, in *History Workshop Journal* 61, 1–24; S. HALL 2007, ‘Epilogue: Through the Prism of an Intellectual Life’, in B. Meeks (ed.), *Culture, Race, Politics and Diaspora: The Thought of Stuart Hall*, Kingston/London; G. LABICA 1974, ‘Marxisme et spécificité. Sur quelques rappels théoriques à propos de la transition’, in *La Pensée* 177, 59–76; M. LAHTINEN 2009, *Politics and Philosophy: Niccolo Machiavelli and Louis Althusser’s Aleatory Materialism*, Amsterdam; D. LECOURT 2001, *The Mediocracy: French Philosophy Since the Mid-1970s*, London/New York; V.I. LENIN 1964, *Collected Works (LCW)*, Moscow; R. LUXEMBURG 1916, *Die Krise der Sozialdemokratie*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 4, Berlin/GDR; C. MACCABE 2008, ‘An Interview with Stuart Hall, December 2007’, in *Critical Quarterly* 50 (1–2), 12–42; N. MACHIAVELLI 1988, *The Prince*, ed. by Q. Skinner and R. Price, Cambridge; K. MARX and F. ENGELS 1975–2005, *Marx Engels Collected Works (MECW)*, London; V. MORFINO 2006, ‘Il primato dell’incontro sulla forma’, in A. Boito and M. Turchetto (eds.), *Giornate di studio sul pensiero di Louis Althusser*, Milan; F. MULHERN 2000, *Culture/Metaculture*, London; N. POULANTZAS 1973 [1968], *Political Power and Social Classes*, London; N. POULANTZAS 1974 [1970], *Fascism and Dictatorship*, London; N. POULANTZAS 1978, *State, Power, Socialism*, London; J. ROSENBERG 2005, ‘Globalization Theory: A Post Mortem’, in *International Politics* 42 (1), 2–74; W. SECOMBE 1992, *A Millennium of Family Change: Feudalism to Capitalism in Northwestern Europe*,

London; L. TROTSKY 1935 [1921], ‘Lessons of the Paris Commune’, in *New Internationalist*, March 1935, 2 (2), 43–7; G.B. VICO 1999, *New Science*, trans. by D. Marsh, Harmondsworth.

Juha Koivisto and Mikko Lahtinen

Translated by Peter Thomas

Abstract/concrete, accident, Althusserianism, appearance/form of appearance, articulation/*Gliederung*, base, capacity to act, contingency, culturalism, derivation, determination, determinism, development, dialectics, discourse-analysis, economism, element, elementary form, ensemble of social relations, essence/appearance, evolutionism, expression, fatalism, individuality, intervening thought, long waves, overdetermination, particular, simple/complex, relations of force, strategy/tactics, structure, surface, unity, universal.

Ableitung, abstrakt/konkret, Allgemeines, Althusser-Schule, Artikulation/*Gliederung*, Ausdruck, Basis, Besonderes, Bestimmung, Determination, Determinismus, Dialektik, Diskursanalyse, einfach/komplex, eingreifendes Denken, Einheit, Einzelnes, Element, Elementarform, Ensemble der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse, Entwicklung, Erscheinung/*Erscheinungsform*, Evolutionismus, Fatalismus, Handlungsfähigkeit, Kontingenz, Kräfteverhältnis, Kulturalismus, lange Wellen, Oberfläche, Ökonomismus, Strategie/Taktik, Struktur, Überdetermination, Wesen/ Erscheinung, Zufall.