

# Materialism, Social Formation and Socio-Spatial Relations : an Essay in Marxist Geography

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Article abstract

Marxist geography is a part of marxist science and as such it has the relative autonomy of the instances of the societal whole studied. These instances or the relations between instances which are the object of marxist geography are first the dialectical relation between social formations and the natural world and second the spatial dialectic between components of a social formation embedded into space or between social formations in different regions. Hence the need to refer to the concepts of mode of production and of social formation and to define and illustrate the concept of spatial dialectic and the development of contradictions in space.

## MATERIALISM, SOCIAL FORMATION, AND SOCIO-SPATIAL RELATIONS: AN ESSAY IN MARXIST GEOGRAPHY

by

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### RÉSUMÉ

**Matérialisme, formation sociale et relations socio-spatiales: un essai de géographie marxiste.**

La géographie marxiste fait partie de la science marxiste et à ce titre elle a l'autonomie relative des instances qui composent le tout social étudié. Ces instances, ou les relations qui s'établissent entre elles et qui sont l'objet de la géographie marxiste, sont en premier lieu la relation dialectique entre formations sociales et environnement naturel et en second lieu la dialectique spatiale entre les composantes d'une formation sociale enracinée dans l'espace ou entre des formations sociales dans différentes régions. D'où la nécessité de renvoyer aux concepts de mode de production et de formation sociale, de définir et d'illustrer le concept de dialectique spatiale et le développement des contradictions dans l'espace.

**MOTS-CLÉS: Géographie marxiste, mode de production, formation sociale, dialectique spatiale, développement des contradictions.**

### ABSTRACT

Marxist geography is a part of marxist science and as such it has the relative autonomy of the instances of the societal whole studied. These instances or the relations between instances which are the object of marxist geography are first the dialectical relation between social formations and the natural world and second the spatial dialectic between components of a social formation embedded into space or between social formations in different regions. Hence the need to refer to the concepts of mode of production and of social formation and to define and illustrate the concept of spatial dialectic and the development of contradictions in space.

**KEY WORDS: Marxist geography, mode of production, social formation, spatial dialectic, development of contradictions.**

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First, let us decide whether there can be a «marxist geography». The concept «marxist geography» has utility on two grounds, one pragmatic, the other theoretical. In terms of practice, most marxist geographers work in the academic discipline of geography, which already exists, has a number of functional relationships with capitalism, and is therefore a source of livelihood for its practitioners. These practitioners may include some who call themselves marxists for the following reasons. Capitalism is a system propelled through time by the development of its internal contradictions. These contradictions erupt into continual crises, for which the system needs «solutions». The universities have, as one of their functions, the provision of «solutions». Because the crises of capitalism are ever-changing, the universities must remain somewhat flexible and free. This necessary modicum of freedom can be extended to marxism by careful, diligent work on the part of the marxists. We must be geographers in order to survive at one of the centers of power, and we are enabled to be marxist geographers by taking advantage of capitalism's need for «free» thinking<sup>1</sup>.

But the concept «marxist geography» also has a certain philosophical validity. The structure of marxist science replicates the structure of its object — human society. Just as the social formation is a totality of dialectically interrelated instances, so Marxism is a holistic science of dialectically interrelated parts. This is, the parts of marxist science study the various instances, or the relations between instances, of the societal whole. As each instance has a relative autonomy from the whole, so each part of science has a certain autonomy, while remaining within (and only making sense in) a whole science. Hence, marxist science may include within itself specializations on the various instances and relations of the social formation.

Marxist geography specializes on two of the relations which affect, and are affected by, the whole social formation, which affect and are affected by all the instances of the formation: the dialectical relation between social formations and the natural world; and the spatial dialectic between components of a formation embedded into space, or between social formations in different regions. Together, these two sets of relations may be called the environmental relations of the social formations which make up world society. As a study of one aspect (environmental relations) of the relations of the social whole, and the interrelations of its instances, marxist geography is necessarily intricately integrated both into the whole marxist science and with each of its specializing parts. Relations do not make sense without the things being related. Things do not make sense except in their total web of relations. There can be, and is, such a thing as marxist geography.

### *The Materialist Basis of Marxist Geography*

Marx begins with the premise of the existence of human individuals who must be in a position to live in order to be able to «make history». The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy needs for food, drink, housing, clothing, etc. — the production of material life itself. This «mode of production» should not be considered merely as the reproduction of physical existence, but rather as a «definite *mode of life*» (Marx and Engels, 1976, 31). Individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into definite social and political relations with one another; and during their productive activity, humans also produce conceptions, ideas, etc.. «Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious being, and the being of men is their actual life process... It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness» (Marx and Engels, 1976, 36-37). Consciousness develops with productivity, the increase of needs, and of the numbers of people. It develops especially with the division of labor particularly the division between material and mental labor — from this point, consciousness may proceed to the formation of «pure» theory, theology, philosophy, morality, etc.. Hence, the key to the understanding of the structure

of social life and consciousness is the mode of production of the material basis of that life and consciousness.

This structure of understanding, which appears in a full coherent form for the first time in Marx's *The German Ideology* (written between 1845 and 1847) was developed during the 1850s and appears in a mature form in Marx's Introduction to his *Critique of Political Economy* written in 1859. I shall quote extensively from this Introduction, for it forms the basis of much of my subsequent discussion:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or — this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms — with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.... In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designed as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society. The bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production — antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals' social conditions of existence — but the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism. The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation». (Marx, 1970, 20-22).

This passage interrelates mode of production (the «economic structure of society») with social formation («structure» and «superstructure») and presents a general theory of the change from one mode of production to the next, and from one social formation to the next. I shall analyze these essential components of the marxian theory of the structure of society in some detail.

### *Mode of Production*

The mode of production is composed of two interrelated parts: the social relations of production and the forces of production. Relations of production are the forms of cooperation and mutual exchange of activities necessary for production to take place: of particular importance is ownership of the means of production and thereby distribution of the social product (i.e. property relations). Forces of production refers to the technical way in which man labors to transform nature into objects which have use value: they include the work of humans and the means of production — the raw materials, and the tools, machinery and infrastructure.

For production to occur, labor must be combined with means of production in a specific way: under the capitalist mode of production, labor is separated from its independent means of production (during «primitive accumulation») and forced to work with means owned by the capitalist. Two consequences follow from this: «First the labourer works under the control of the capitalist to whom his labour belongs.... Secondly, the product is the property of the capitalist and not that of the labourer, its immediate producer» (Marx, 1967, Vol. 1, 184-185; see also Balibar, 1970, 209-216). This product is pregnant with surplus value, which is realized when the product is sold, and flows back to the capitalist where it forms the source of his property. Thus, on the one side are the workers who must sell their labor power in order to exist; on the other side are capitalists who purchase labor power only to draw surplus value from it. «The existence of antagonistic classes is thus inscribed in production itself, *in the heart of production itself*: in the relations of production» (Althusser, 1978, 18). These antagonistic relations of

production pervade the productive forces, since labor power forms part of the productive forces, and since the process of capitalist production always tends towards the maximum exploitation of labor power. Hence, the technical mechanisms of production are subordinated to the class mechanisms of capitalist exploitation. Or, to put the same thing more generally, in the mode of production there is a unity between the productive forces and the relations of production *under the domination* of the relations of production.

### *Social Formation*

The concept of social formation designates a social whole composed of distinct but interrelated instances. Social formations are made up of levels of these instances: those of the economic structure — forces and relations of production — and those of the superstructure — politico-legal (law and the State) and cultural-ideological (religion, ethics, politics, etc.). The relations between these levels has often been over-simplified into a fixed, deterministic hierarchy (e.g. Bukharin, 1925, Ch. 6); yet as the discussion centered around Althusser (1969; 1970; 1971) has shown, this relation is actually highly complex.

In order to connect the «two ends of the chain», on the one end determination in the last instance by the mode of production, on the other the relative autonomy of the superstructural instances, Althusser (1969, 202) conceives the social formation as a structure articulated in dominance. In this structure the contradiction within the economic level, between the forces and relations of production (revealed in class antagonism), determines the character of the social totality because it determines which of the other instances is dominant (Althusser calls this «over-determination»). When the mass of producers had their own independent means of production, surplus had to be extracted from them via the state or via ideology (e.g. religion), making either the political or the ideological instance of the formation dominant. Under capitalism, the producers (workers) have been divorced from ownership of their own means of production, surplus may be drained directly, and the economic instance of the formation is both determinant and dominant. As Marx (1967, Vol. 3, p. 791) puts it «It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers... which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure» (see also Cutler, Hindess, Hirst and Hussain, 1977, 177). In the Althusserian conception, each instance of the social formation moves through time with its own rhythm, unevenly developing relative to the other instances, with which it nevertheless is interrelated into an organic whole.

Such a complex theory of structural causality is necessary because the essential causes of things must be fetishized in the capitalist mode of production. Fetishism is the mode of existence of capitalist production, the very form which the system takes, and reality is not something underlying the appearances, but is the structured relations of these appearances (Callincos, 1976, 39-52). Althusser's interest is to explicate this structured relation. Whether he has entirely succeeded in doing so may be questioned (see e.g. Hindess and Hirst, 1977) but what we can learn from him is the need to understand the relations between the structure and superstructure in terms of *dialectical* determination and the *relative autonomy* of the superstructure rather than mechanical impress.

The same applies to the dynamics of social formations, the process by which contradiction builds into revolution. If the contradiction in the mode of production, between the forces and relations of production, is to become the source of «revolutionary rupture» in the social formation, there must be an accumulation of «circumstances» and «currents», an accumulation of contradictions, a fusion of contradictions from different origins. The general contradiction in the mode of production is present in all these circumstances, and even in their fusion, but

we can no longer talk of its sole, unique power. A revolution in the economic structure thus does not, *ipso facto*, modify the superstructural instances (and especially the ideological instance) for these have enough independence to survive a change in their immediate contexts, and even to recreate-substitute conditions of existence. And the new society produced by revolution may itself ensure the survival of older elements through the forms of its new superstructure and specific (national and international) circumstances (Althusser, 1969, 98-106). Again, revolutionary change from one social formation to another has to be understood as a *dialectical* process.

What is the significance of this concept of social formation to geography? It enables the environmental relations to be included in a sophisticated theory of the social totality. For, different social formations have distinct relations with their natural environments: the nature of these relations emerges from the character of the formation, especially from the social relations of the mode of production. And spatial relations are actually relations between components of the social formation embedded into geographical localities, or relations between whole social formations. How can spatial relations be understood without first constructing a general theory of the social formation? In short, environmental relations (natural and spatial) are structured by the social formation, while in turn the nature of environmental relations affects the development of the social formation. As a first approximation, Marxist geography may be defined as the study of the dialectic between environmental relations and the social formations.

### *Spatial Relations*

In this paper, I shall discuss only the spatial relational aspects of this dialectic<sup>2</sup>.

The materialist approach to space treats it as an integral part of a general social theory: «men... enter into particular social relations, which give to space... a form, a function, a social signification» (Castells, 1977, 115). At the immediate level of understanding, space may be analyzed as an «expression» of the social structure: this amounts to «studying its shaping by elements of the economic system, the political system and the ideological system, and by their combinations and the social practices that derive from them» (Castells, 1977, 126). Thus for Castells the economic structure is expressed spatially in the locations of production, consumption (reproduction of labor power) and exchange; the politico-legal instance is expressed, through its functions of domination-regulation and integration-repression, in the political segmentation of space and its actions on the economic organization of space; and the ideological instance is expressed in cultural forms and symbolic meaning in landscapes. The social organization of space is determined by each of the elements of the three instances (and by combinations of the elements of any one instance), by combinations of the three instances, by the persistence of spatial forms created by earlier social structures articulated with the new forms, and by the particular actions of individuals and social groups on new environments. However, in the Althusserian conception of social formation, the economic level is both determinant and dominant under the capitalist mode of production. Hence for Castells (1977, 130), writing under Althusser's influence, under capitalism «the production element is the basis of the organization of space».

The relations between diachronic social process and synchronic space are the subject of an on-going controversy in marxist geography. This controversy concerns the degree of autonomy which space possesses, that is, to what degree is space a «seperate structure» with its own laws of inner transformation? (Harvey, 1973, 302-314). The idea of an autonomous space, associated with the work of Lefebvre (1972), has been attacked (within the Marxian left) as «spatial fetishism»,

a diversion from the more fundamental issue of the social relations of production. However recently a milder version — the socio-spatial dialectic — has been advanced by Soja. Soja's view is essentially that «the basic structures and contradictions in the capitalist (and any other) mode of production are expressed simultaneously and dialectically in *both* social and spatial relations... not only does the organization of space express social relations but... social relations (and hence class structure) are themselves, to an important degree, expressions of the spatial relations of production». In this statement, space has a *relative* autonomy, like the instances of the social formation discussed previously. Hence, although considerable debate will still undoubtedly follow, Soja's position is in the end more nearly compatible with the existing, accepted categories of marxist geography<sup>3</sup>.

But let us push the theory of the socio-spatial dialectic one step further. A social formation moving through time is both a process as a whole and a linked system of many specific social processes. This system of processes interacts with differentiated environments to produce geographical specificities, localized versions of a given social formation. These specificities are the product of, and context for, particular social processes. Yet they are ordered in space by the relations of the whole formation. And they have certain basic similarities, produced by the fundamental nature of capitalism. In particular, just as the essential character of capitalist social relations is the transfer of value from the direct producers (workers) to the owners of the means, and controllers of the conditions, of production, so the outstanding characteristic of capitalist socio-spatial relations is the transfer of value over space. This transfer produces a certain geographical shape which characterizes the capitalist landscape — center, where surplus is accumulated, and periphery, from which surplus is drained (see e.g. Harvey, 1975). At the world scale, Amin (1974, Vol. 1, 22) divides the capitalist system into central formations and peripheral formations between which «are relations of domination, unequal relations expressed in a transfer of value from the periphery to the center»<sup>4</sup>. But at the regional and local scales the same process produces the same shapes. As Frank (1971, 34) puts it a «contradictory metropolitan centre — peripheral satellite relationship... runs through the entire world capitalist system in chain-like fashion from its uppermost metropolitan world centre, through each of the various national, regional, local, and enterprise centres».

Social formations move through time under the impetus of the development of their internal contradictions. The tempo of this development, especially the transformation from quantitative to qualitative change, is «expressed» in the qualities of the socio-spatial relations of the formation — which may transmit quantitative or qualitative change (figure 1). However, the word «expressed» hardly suffices to express what actually occurs. The geography of capitalism is composed of unevenly and differentially developed specificities of the whole. In each specific version of the whole, therefore, the build up and intermeshing of contradictions proceeds in a somewhat different way, with the threat of transformation into qualitative change occurring at different times, and in different ways, in each specificity. As contradictions build up in one place, as crises begin to interrupt the orderly reproduction of capitalism, the nature of that place's socio-spatial relations changes, effects are transmitted elsewhere or antidotal «solutions» imported. A number of consequences follow. At the center of contradiction, the process of the build up of crises is temporarily slowed down, or diverted. But elsewhere, qualitatively new elements are added to particular geographical specificities where they interact with the local process of the development of contradiction, producing new hybrid versions and re-transmitting effects which may even heighten the development of contradiction in the original source. This complex interplay across space between specific versions of a whole formation, or between formations, may be called the «spatial dialectic». In this conception, at a more specific level than the previous definition, marxist geography becomes the study

of the uneven development of contradictions in space and the relations across space between unevenly developing contradictions. Let me give an example which should make the discussion more concrete.

The previous discussion on spatial relations divided what Wallerstein (1974) has shown to be a single world capitalist system into two main geographically specific versions — a world central social formation, towards which surplus value flows (the First World), and a series of peripheral formations, from which surplus value is drained (the Third World). Surplus value (capital) accumulated in the center (from various sources — including local sources) is used to support economic production in the next round of «development». As the owners of capital produced by others, the business and banking institutions of the center allocate and re-allocate forms and amounts of production to different regions of the world capitalist system by withdrawing capital from the regions where it has historically been produced by the local working class, and investing it elsewhere to breed more surplus value. Regional «development» at one place is thus linked through a system of socio-spatial relations to regional underdevelopment elsewhere.

The particular form of exploitation of the Third World by the First changes over time. One way to classify these changes is in terms of the forms of capital flows between the two sets of social formations. Thus Palloix (1977) has divided the capital (and thereby social) relations between the First and Third Worlds into stages: the «internationalization» of commodity-capital, then money-capital, and now productive capital. The last of these stages essentially corresponds to the international production of multinational corporations. Thus, for example, by the early 1970s international production by U.S. controlled firms was worth \$172 billion, which was four times greater than the value of U.S. exports at the time (Palloix, 1977, 8). Obviously there is a tremendous flow of capital out of the center to begin manufacturing, and other forms of production, in the cheap-labor regions of the Third World (especially in «free trade zones») as the prelude to even greater return flows of surplus value. What are these flows of the center a response to?

Capitalism is a system propelled through time through the development and interaction of its inherent contradictions. The longer it exists in any region the more intense and interlocked these contradictions tend to become, and the more drastic their social and environmental consequences. In the old centers of capitalist production two types of highly developed contradiction are most evident. First, contradiction between the forces and the social relations of production, revealed in class struggle largely of an economic type, yielding higher wages for the organized working class, the diversion of some surplus value away from the capitalist class, and lower rates of profit. This contradiction is also reflected in social problems of various kinds which have to be contained and controlled by a state supported by high taxes, which constitute a further drain on surplus value and profit. Second, contradiction in the environmental relations of capitalist production, revealed in shortages and high prices for raw materials, high direct and indirect costs from pollution and other damages to the natural world, hence lower rates of profit (Peet, 1979). One of capital's response to its development of these contradictions is to abandon the old industrial regions of the center (Northern England, New England, etc.) in search of virgin environments (to dispoil), ideologically and politically virgin labor forces (to exploit), and higher profits. Hence, for example, the rapid growth of free trade zones in areas of cheap labor and rigid social control in Southeast Asia (Takeo, 1978). The internationalization of production is the spatial response to the intense development of contradiction at the center.





Let us examine some of the possible consequences of this development for the geography of contradiction. At the center, the old form of the build-up of contradiction is altered, becomes less intense, but new problems emerge from the




Figure 1

## DIALECTIQUE SPATIALE

La géographie du capitalisme s'adresse à des ensembles composés d'éléments spécifiques (A.B.C.) différemment et inégalement développés. En conséquence, dans chaque ensemble, la croissance et l'interaction des contradictions se déroule d'une façon spécifique: ainsi la menace d'un passage vers le changement qualitatif se présente à des moments différents, de façons différentes, selon les spécificités. A, B, C évoluent dans le  $\longrightarrow$  temps sous la pression du développement de leurs propres contradictions internes.

Le rythme de ce développement, plus particulièrement la transformation du changement quantitatif (  ) en changement qualitatif (  ), se traduit par la qualité des relations socio-spatiales de la formation — qui peuvent transmettre le changement soit quantitatif (  ), soit qualitatif (  ).





Avec le développement des contradictions dans un lieu donné (  ), avec l'interruption, due aux crises, de la reproduction ordonnée du capital, la nature des relations socio-spatiales concernant ce lieu change et, soit les effets sont évacués ailleurs, soit des "solutions" antidotes importées. Des conséquences s'en suivent. Au centre de la contradiction, l'"accumulation" des crises est temporairement ralentie ou déviée. Mais ailleurs, des éléments qualitativement neufs s'ajoutent à certaines spécificités géographiques où, en se combinant avec les processus locaux du développement des contradictions, ils produisent de nouvelles versions hybrides. Ainsi sont retransmis des effets qui peuvent même accroître le développement de la contradiction au centre originel.


Cette interaction complexe à travers l'espace entre des éléments spécifiques d'une formation complète, ou entre plusieurs formations, peut être qualifiée de "dialectique spatiale".

## SPATIAL DIALECTIC

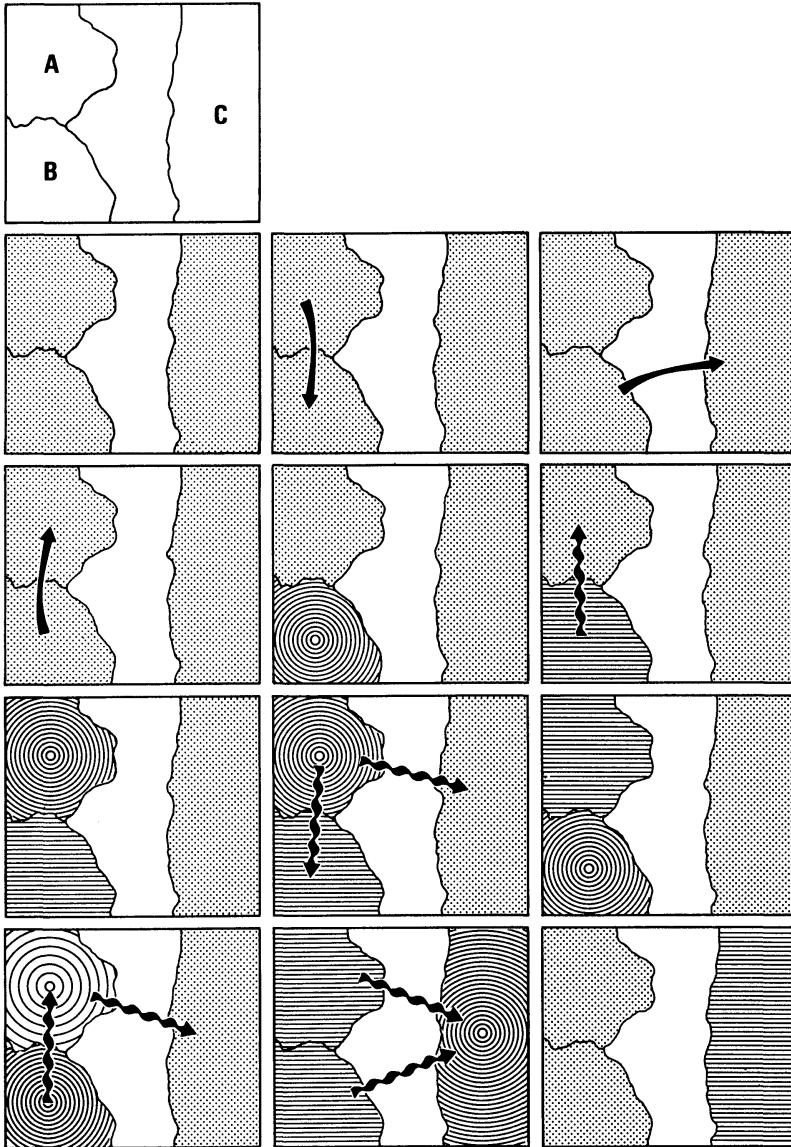
The geography of capitalism is composed of unevenly and differentially developed specificities (A.B.C.) of the whole. In each specific version of the whole, therefore, the build up and intermeshing of contradictions proceeds in a somewhat different way, with the threat of transformation into qualitative change occurring at different times, and in different ways, in each specificity.

A, B, C move through  $\longrightarrow$  time under the impetus of the development of their internal contradictions.

The tempo of this development, especially the transformation from quantitative change (  ) to qualitative change (  ), is expressed in the qualities of the socio-spatial relations of the formation — which may transmit quantitative change (  ) or qualitative change (  ).

As contradictions build up in one place (  ), as crises begin to interrupt the orderly reproduction of capitalism, the nature of that place's socio-spatial relations changes, effects are transmitted elsewhere or antidotal "solutions" imported. A number of consequences follow. At the center of contradiction, the process of the build up of crisis is temporarily slowed down, or diverted. But elsewhere, qualitatively new elements are added to particular geographical specificities where they interact with the local process of the development of contradiction, producing new hybrid versions and re-transmitting effects which may even heighten the development of contradiction in the original source.

This complex interplay across space between specific versions of a whole formation, or between formations, may be called the "spatial dialectic".



intensification of regional or urban-ghetto alienation in areas abandoned by Capital. At the periphery, the old form of contradiction between local urban center and rural periphery may be altered, and new forms of urban contradictions (those of rapid industrialization) emerge. This new build-up is counteracted by the imposition of commodity fetishisms into the minds of the masses in the Third World via radio, television and all the instruments of the «consciousness industry» (Enzensberger, 1974). In terms of the world capitalist system (center and periphery), the level of industrial production and consumption rises and the contradictions with the natural environment are both internationalized and intensified. In late capitalism the contradiction with earth becomes fundamental, structuring the other contradictions. And the effects of this structure of contradictions on the revolutionary consciousness of the world's population are counteracted by the most sophisticated manipulation of the mind and emotions ever known in human history. This struggle between the contradiction with earth and the ideological manipulation of man will dominate our lives in the waning years of the twentieth century. It should be the focus of an emerging marxist geography.

## NOTES

1 On the development of radical geography in the United States see Peet, 1977.

2 On the Marxist theory of natural environmental relations see Schmidt, 1971; Leiss, 1975; Parsons, 1977; and Burgess, 1978.

3 In the meantime, however, the whole conception of the social formation as a totality generated by an organizing principle, with determination by the economy in the last instance, has been critiqued by Hindness and Hirst (1977), followed by the geographer Gregory (1978, 115-122).

4 On the mechanisms by which value is transferred, see Emmanuel (1972) and Szentes (1971).

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