

Making Sense of Overdetermination: Elaborations on the Ideas of Althusser, Resnick and Wolff

OZAN ISLER
GRADUATE STUDENT at
THE DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS,
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, RIVERSIDE

ABSTRACT

Theoretical abstraction from the fundamental complexity of reality is necessary. Forgetting the nature of our simplifications, however, may become problematic. French philosopher Louis Althusser uses the concept of *overdetermination* to create a theoretical space for thinking about various key aspects of the social reality that we tend to abstract from; for example, how “causes and effects” or “theory and material reality” mutually constitute one another. In this essay I emphasize some of the implications of these two aspects of overdetermination on various ontological and epistemological considerations. The essay is thus made up of two main components. In the first part, I consider how overdetermination blurs the distinction between “causes and effects” in ones ontology, and compare a deterministic system to an overdetermined *social formation* in order to see how an overdetermined ontology might look like. Consequently I provide a starting point for an overdetermined alternative to the deterministic conception of “mode of production.” In the second part of the essay, I show how overdetermination of “theory and material reality” replaces classical epistemology, and use the concept of social practices to think of an initial approach to an epistemology of overdetermination apropos Althusser’s distinction between *theoretical* vs. *technical practice*.

OUTLINE

Introduction	3
A. An “Onto-Logical” Evaluation of the Elements of a Social Totality	5
1. System as a theoretical abstraction	10
(i) Towards a <i>definition</i> of a system	10
(ii) System as the <i>set</i> of all of its elements	13
2. Conditions of existence of a deterministic system	14
(i) Universal vs. particular elements	14
(ii) Necessary vs. sufficient elements	16
3. Conditions of existence of an overdetermined social formation	18
B. Overdetermination, Epistemology and Theory	26
Bibliography	39
Appendix I: Necessary vs. Sufficient Elements	41
Appendix II: Processes vs. Practices	52

Making Sense of Overdetermination: Elaborations on the ideas of Althusser, Resnick and Wolff

Introduction

How to think in abstract terms about the ubiquitous complexity of social formations such as "capitalism" without reducing it to a set of unidirectional causal relations?

When we ask this question either to Louis Althusser or to Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff their advice is to use the concept of *overdetermination*.¹ They provide us with the concept of overdetermination as an alternative way of thinking about the conditions of existence of fundamentally complex social formations such as capitalism. In practice we see that overdetermination is a concept generally used to problematize the essentialist Marx-inspired characterizations of the ‘changes in’ or ‘history of’ a “capitalist society” as determined by its relations and forces of production (i.e., its mode of production). In this deterministic version, the essential causes of change in all levels of the society originate from the changes in the mode of production. In an overdetermined framework, on the other hand, such one-way causal structures give way to the complex and mutual constitution of all effective elements of the social formation, thereby problematizing the distinction between “causes” and “effects”—as reality in this framework is analogous to an infinite number of “feedback effects” that are constantly changing in their properties. In this sense, the concept of overdetermination is rather demanding as its critique of unidirectional causal mechanisms is—at least at first—rather counterintuitive. However, one should note that overdetermination is not simply claiming

¹ Louis Althusser, “On the Materialist Dialectic” in *For Marx*, Verso: London, 2004. Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff, *Knowledge and Class*, University of Chicago: Chicago, 1987.

an impenetrably chaotic world. In searching for knowledge or trying to make sense of reality we, of course, find “order” in this reality; however, we neither simply impose this order on the world nor simply recognize it passively. According to overdetermination, these two are mutually constituted; in other words, the existence of “theory and material reality” arises out of the complex interaction between the two. In this sense, even if overdetermination is a concept generally used to rethink Marx it is by no means limited to it. The general motivation of this essay is to make (my own) sense of overdetermination, and more specifically the first part of the essay is about the overdetermination of “causes and effects” within the context of ontology and the second part about the overdetermination of “theory and material reality” within the context of epistemology.

The essay is thus made up of two main parts: ontological and epistemological. In the first, I try to think in abstract terms about how the ontology of an overdetermined theory would look like if its basic premise of complex mutual constitution were true. I do so by creating various categories out of what I assume to be the existing elements of a social formation;² here, a social formation is defined to be an overdetermined theoretical space about certain aspects of the social reality where the assumed conditions of existence of this social formation are simply referred to as elements. More specifically, we will be abstracting here from the assumed complexity of social formations by reducing their conditions of existence to elements, sets of elements and logical relations between them.³ Then we consider the implications of overdetermination on these

² Some of these categories that I use in here are “universal vs. particular” and “necessary vs. sufficient” elements, but also the deterministic “mode of production” vs. the overdetermined “social formation.”

³ Overdetermination contradicts *methodological individualism*, and mainly for three reasons: (1) The primitive element of an overdetermined ontology is not necessarily the individual, (2) these elements are

relations between elements so as to see the effects of such complexity on our ontology. Throughout this first part—although rather abstractly—the notion of the *constitutive subset* is used as a nondeterministic and not necessarily economic replacement for “the mode of production.”⁴

Then in the second part of the essay we consider an elementary but insightful approach to an epistemology of overdetermination apropos the distinction between *theoretical* vs. *technical practice* and emphasize the existence of the problematic that is the dialectics of theory and reality.

A. An “Onto-Logical” Evaluation of the Elements of a Social Totality

According to Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, who are the proponents of a particular conception of overdetermination that I criticize in this essay, overdetermination is the fundamentally complex constitution of social reality in the absolute absence of *causal essence* (i.e., a reality devoid of cause independent of effects);

“This rejection of independence among social and natural processes means that it is not possible to rank determinations in regard to their qualitative or quantitative importance. Put simply, one cannot affirm a notion of overdetermination and simultaneously hold onto some kind of last-instance economic or noneconomic determinism. *Logically, these are inconsistent positions. The ordering of influences—some ranked as more or less important than others—depends on an a priori assumption: the independence of entities to be ordered.*”⁵

Overdetermination of causes and effects implies that their “objective categorization” is impossible in the sense that there is no a priori universally true categorization for such a

never independent of the social reality they are a part of, and (3) overdetermination of a social formation as well as its elements denies a one-way causation between the two. For similar reasons overdetermination contradicts *methodological holism* as well; we just expand the first reason as “overdetermination rejects both ontological individualism and ontological holism.

⁴ For further consideration, I provide in an appendix Althusser’s definition of the elements of a social formation as (social) practices and compare it to Resnick and Wolff’s notion of processes as elements; see “Appendix II: Processes vs. Practices.”

distinction. Categorization of causes and effects as distinct and independent is meaningful only within a particular theoretical context. But if this category of causes and effects as well as their assumed mutual independence is problematic, what insights are we losing due to this otherwise useful abstraction? I do not intend here to demonstrate the mutual constitution of causes and effects. Rather I take this mutual constitution as given and ask; if overdetermination is correct in this respect then how could we think about these things that mutually constitute one another, and what are some of the following plausible implications? In this first part of the essay I propose one insightful way by logically categorizing a social formation's elements according to various properties other than causal ones. What is proposed here are some plausible qualitative metrics in the categorization of the elements that are not necessarily about causation but about logical implications, yet which make it possible to think of an alternative to deterministic accounts of social reality.

For the purposes of this first part of the essay the concept of overdetermination is used to characterize the general *ontology* of such social formations.⁶ I do *not* attempt to categorize (e.g., objectify, qualify, measure or relativize) the elements of the overdetermined totality or social formation into relations of causes and effects, because by our assumption of the overdetermination of causes and effect such a categorization is contradictory. Moreover, unlike the emphasis given by Althusser, Resnick and Wolff to

⁵ Resnick and Wolff, "Rethinking Complexity in Economic Theory: The Challenge of Overdetermination," unpublished, p.3, emphasis mine.

⁶ Overdetermination can be used both as an ontological description of social formations (i.e., accepting that the constitution of any element is fundamentally complex such that its causal factors are in turn dependent on its effects) and/or as an epistemological perspective in producing knowledges of this complex reality. "Theorists of overdetermination" study both sides of this distinction albeit by no means evenly or in a clear-cut way. I accept that overdetermination is fundamental to both ontology and epistemology of social formations in its implications. I deal with the former in this part of the essay and then in the second part

the problematization of causation,⁷ I do not even discuss causation in depth, again, mainly because overdetermination severely blurs the distinction between “causes” and “effects” that we usually take for granted; in other words, because it conceives a problem that I want to avoid for now. But we also do so in order to make it possible to avoid the one-way causal relations inherent in the deterministic accounts of social formations. In this sense this approach is not in direct opposition to Resnick, Wolff or Althusser. Rather, I use the words “constitutive” and “effectivity” to denote the existence of complex constitutive influences between and internal to elements without necessarily referring to a source from which the “effectivity” originates and without a clearly identifiable destination. In effect, I see the categorization of elements into causes and effects as one among many such possible criteria and propose some alternatives in this regard. Specifically, I strive for an initial but general categorization of the conditions of existence of a social formation in terms of non-causal logical relationships; this is because in an overdetermined ontological framework one cannot make unidirectional causal propositions, such as A causes B, because B itself has some effectivity on A, by definition. Implicitly, our assumption of the overdetermination of “causes and effects” problematizes classical syllogistic logic only within a framework of causal relations. Of course, overdetermination may also be used to criticize the more general analytical functions of classical logic that we use here and not only the causal relations that we avoid. Ignoring this possibility, however, allows us to think of an initial overdetermined

when I distinguish between theoretical and technical practice I expand on the implications of overdetermination with regard to epistemology.

⁷ Overdetermination has a rather different take on causation due to its rejection of the mutual independence of causes and effects. A comprehensive and concise review of various important theories of social totality with regard to causal relations between the “parts” and the “whole” can be found in Stephen E. Cullenberg, “Althusser and the Decentering of the Marxist Totality,” in *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory*, ed. Antonio Callari and David F. Ruccio, Wesleyan: Hanover, 1996.

alternative to the deterministic structures of “the mode of production.” It is also helpful that one can use logical propositions without making causal inferences; for example, “all NBA players are above 5 feet.” Here, all individuals are categorized according to two qualities of being an NBA player and being taller than 5 feet; because the former is a subset of the latter we say the former implies the latter. Likewise in this essay, I take propositions such as “A implies B” to denote its most general meaning; namely, that the existence of A implies the existence of B in the social formation at hand.

Existence here has a particular meaning. First, it is a practically useful distinction to make that an “object” in reality qualifies as existing either as part of the material reality or as mental representation; in this initial conception, thinking (or knowledge or theory), for example, mainly has “non-material” existence as part of a “symbolic” reality which is distinct from things that exist as part of the material reality. Likewise, our overdetermined ontology here exists primarily as part of this “symbolic” reality. Therefore when I talk about the overdetermined ontology of social formations, I emphasize it to be a “mental representation” of various aspects of the social reality. Without denying the existence of material reality or theory’s mutually constitutive relationships with it, it is in fact my implicit argument that one can never simply provide an “ontology of social reality” as such; ontology always exist as a form of discourse in terms of linguistic or mental representations. It is, therefore, important to keep in mind throughout the essay that I am not proposing “the ontology of social reality” as such, but rather suggesting a preliminary, abstract and general ontology for theories of overdetermined social formations. Overdetermination here implies the mutual constitution of theory and material reality—an important argument that I consider in the

second part of the essay within the context of epistemology. This tension is already present in the paper, however, so that I provide here a preliminary example.

When we refer to the existence of an element in our overdetermined ontology we are neither simply talking about the existence of a symbolic representation nor of this element's "pure" existence in material reality but rather about a complex interaction between these two sides; in other words, the existence of a representation or abstraction corresponds in fundamentally complex—or overdetermined—ways to the existence of various things in material reality, where both sides play a constitutive role in each other's existence. One might think of a graduate course in which various formal economic theories or models are presented and discussed—suppose, for example, the general equilibrium framework of Arrow-Debreu; here, we when we talk about a given preference ordering as characterizing the individual economic agent and her "rationality," we also, sooner or later, imagine this conception as "somehow" corresponding to real human beings in the context of market transactions. Or take another example: Suppose we discuss "the existence of capitalism" in a graduate course on Marx; such a discussion would have complex implications regarding both the social reality (e.g., the actual division of labor, technological change, etc.) as well as the ontological and representational framework for its analysis (e.g., concepts of surplus, abstract labor, etc.). This "correspondence" cannot simply be explained by the model or theory itself, and in this sense overdetermination problematizes the assumption of independence between "theory" and "social reality." I talk more about this complex interaction in the second part of the essay.⁸

⁸ This implies that a "correspondence" between material reality and a certain representation of it exists only from the perspective of a given human subject or its inter-subjective state: namely, discourse. As I will

1. System as a theoretical abstraction

A system is a theoretical space for thinking about the dynamics of any formation regarding “the whole and its parts.” As it is used here in this essay, social formations fall under a particular category of systems; namely, theoretical abstractions on *social* reality understood to be *overdetermined*. We will initially be considering the more general concept of a system—which is not necessarily overdetermined—to see the different implications of overdetermination afterwards.

I propose that we begin an ontology of a system with two components: (1) a preliminary *definition* of the system in terms of its fundamental properties, and (2) an initial conceptualization of the system as a whole in terms of a *set* of irreducible elements assumed to be the conditions of existence of the system.⁹

(i) Towards a *definition* of a system

Definition of a system provides a list of properties to be used as the criteria for recognition of a given system through change, for its distinction from other systems and

explain later on in the essay, “confirmation” of this “correspondence” between the definition of a concept and the existence of a material reality requires a *belief* in the nonexistence of an “epistemic gap” which I call the *fundamental leap of faith*. The nature (or ontology) of material reality is such that it does not preclude the possibility that a mode of thinking (or a form of “subjectivity”) partially constitutes the existence of the material reality (e.g., any commodity at least some of whose material body is produced by labor, which is tied to the human subject, via some kind of a physical, chemical or biological transformation). Neither is it necessary for a material “thing” to be an object (i.e., to be thought of as distinct) in order for it to be an existing thing (e.g., prior existence of a planet just discovered) nor is it required for all “objects” to be existing things (e.g., the *signifier* itself as an immaterial object or as belonging to immaterial reality). Yet, things need to be thought of first in order to be qualified in a theory as either existing or not. This implies that in a theory those things that are not thought of but have material reality or effectivity are in effect *assumed to be nonexistent*, whereas in reality they are in existence. It is equally important to note that those “things” that neither have material reality nor are objects of a theory (i.e., “those” that are excluded from its ontology) but are constitutive (i.e., have effectivity) in material reality are *assumed to be non-constitutive*, even though they are effective in material reality (e.g., the role of “theoretical knowledge” and its discourse). Theorization of a system requires both of these problematic assumptions in some way, and it is important to keep these assumptions in mind.

⁹ Irreducible: I use this qualifier for the cases when no section of an element’s conceptualized domain (in terms of its potential and actual effectivities or other qualitative and quantitative properties) is excludable from the theorization of a given social formation. However, irreducibility of an element is not a

from possible alternative definitions. In effect, as we move towards a definition—or more specifically, towards a theory of the system—we need various categories to outline the “fundamentals” of the observed phenomena. For example, *one* definition—specifically a Marxian definition—of capitalism as a social formation may perhaps condition our ontology according to the three properties of (1) *commodity production*,¹⁰ (2) *surplus “value” creation*,¹¹ and (3) *appropriation and distribution of surplus* among the participants of the production/consumption cycle other than by direct producers and against their will (i.e., the existence of classes). If we accept the definition that implies these categories then this would mean that our appropriate ontology should be compatible with these categorizations.

The depth of detail in the cataloging of properties implied by a definition is at least partially arbitrary in the sense that it could be condensed into “more fundamental properties” (e.g., capitalism as commodity production only) or expanded to include “less fundamental details” (e.g., capitalism as also including particular power and property

“necessity”; rather, it is the recognition of the choice of a particular conceivable element as the building block of the system.

¹⁰ One should include here the “special” commodity of wage-labour. Also, commodity production implies the existence of various sites of social use-value production as well as the existence of markets as sites of exchange of value

¹¹ This implies a distinction between labour power (capacity for useful labor) and labour (realization of useful labor). As an aside one could think about what overdetermination implies for the creation of value: One should look at the traces of use-value creation in order to gather evidence for surplus creation. First, let us conceal half of the picture; this hidden part cannot be “seen” from the perspective of the “labor theory of value.” What this theory sees is the transformation of a set of use-values into another set in the form of the particular commodity produced. A necessary condition of surplus creation is the transformation of hired labor-power into labor, which creates value, part of which is set by wages as the value of the commodity of labor-power while surplus is divided into “subsumed class payments,” “profits”, etc. The point I want to emphasize is that according to my understanding of the labor theory of value, existence of a process of “value creation” always implies the creation of some use-value, “somewhere.” However, *even if* it is possible to see from this perspective the creation of new *social* use-values not only through commodity production but also through the transformation of subjectivities (e.g., advertisement), not contradicting labor theory of value still implies that commodity production is a necessary condition of value creation. The rest of the picture, which is still largely hidden from the view of deterministic versions of Marxian economics, involves a study of the constitution of *decentered* (i.e., not necessarily having commodity production in its

relations). Even in this initial ontological conception of a system, however, we are not simply dealing with “reality” as such; the properties implied by the definition as well as their “recognition” is not directly and simply about the “reality” out there but also about the theory’s own objects or elements which are categorized according to particular qualities selected to serve the analysis.¹² Therefore, it is possible to conceptualize overdetermined as well as deterministic ontologies or elements with which to theorize the same social reality. These choices could be academic convention necessitated by a particular intellectual history or discourse; it could be strategic or political choice, etc. Definition is, of course, also partly constituted by the history of social reality itself. Yet, the converse is also true: an overdetermined ontology is also a historical one because human agency—to the extent that it is based on an ontology—has constitutive role on the way history plays itself out. In this sense, (“agreement” on) the definition itself partly constitutes the “important” elements one uses; in other words, it partly creates our “objects of analysis.” In the specificity of what I am proposing here, it constrains our ontology in complex ways. What is crucial is that this quasi-arbitrary choice of definition restricts the domain of further theoretical analysis by defining possible conditions of existence of the social formation. The question we face now is: How to think about these conditions of existence or elements of a social formation that are constrained and partially constituted by its definition?

center) social use-values so as to question other possible sources of value; but this I will have to set aside for now.

¹² Empirical observation is a crucial methodological question that I leave hanging for now. In theorizing social reality this “observation” may simply be recognition of various types of *continuity* asserting the existence of this list of properties. I will talk about the problematic nature of empiricism in the second part of this essay. It is sufficient to note here that the particular “overdetermined” ontology I propose here

(ii) System as the *set* of all of its elements

Any system can also be viewed as a conceptualization of a set of elements as a whole. In other words, *elements* of this set are objects of analysis categorized as subcomponents all of which are theorized to comprise the system. Any theory of a system is about the relationships of any element of this set to itself, to each other element and to the set as a whole. This set of all elements conceived to “somehow” constitute the whole I will call the *total set* (totality). In this preliminary stage we stick to the most general definition of *elements* of a system as the *conditions of existence* of that system. The concept of the conditions of existence is an ontological category we impose on our ontology; for example, when we say “capitalism exists” do we also not imply that its negation is at least a theoretical possibility, and therefore as an actuality capitalism bears its conditions for its existence. The primary concern of the first part of this essay is to see how we can evaluate these conditions of existence or elements within an overdetermined ontology; namely, with the assumption that one cannot categorize elements into “causes” or “effects.”

Within this analogy to sets and their elements, it is obvious that if we take an element out of any given set then that set would no longer be exactly the same. Therefore, before we begin our evaluation, we assume here the conditions of existence of a system to be *all* the elements of its total set. One should, however, note that the changed system, which—let us suppose—is this new set, could still be satisfying the properties given by the definition, which would bring a continuity to the existence of the particular system through change (e.g., through time and history). The properties provided by the definition

corresponds to a particular epistemology where knowledge is the outcome of a production process; likewise, “observation” or “recognition” is “produced” as a well.

of the social formation, in effect, allows us to conceptualize the various possible relations—such as effects, change, history, etc.—within and between the objects of our ontology. We consider here two plausible sub-categorizations of elements. The goal of this preliminary attempt would be to think about a common ontological framework for future theories of overdetermined social formations, such as capitalism.

2. Conditions of existence of a deterministic system

Again, by definition, *all* elements of any given system are also that system's conditions of existence. Or, any conceivable element that has no constitutive relation either to any of the other elements in the total set or to the set itself as a whole is not a condition of existence of that system, and therefore, is not part of that system. And this is why and how I use the concept of *elements* to denote conditions of existence of a system. In order to distinguish between a deterministic system and an overdetermined social formation we can, as a first approximation, analyze their elements on two independent dimensions: (i) Universal vs. particular elements, and (ii) necessary vs. sufficient elements.

(i) Universal vs. particular elements

In order to point out to one of the fundamental differences between a non-overdetermined system and an overdetermined social formation, I classify their conditions of existence into *universal* or *particular* elements. *Universal* conditions of existence are elements defined to exhibit regular properties across time and space and independent of the effects and existence of all other elements. Due to the inherent limitations of the human mind and existence we can perhaps never be sure of the existence, constitution or effects on things of universal elements. However, we may

“assume” their universality—an assumption that generally involves a belief in constant or predictable effectivity of universal elements.¹³ Among the concepts of natural relationships,¹⁴ time and space are some plausible examples of actual universal conditions of existence. Some other conditions, which we know are not universal (since we infer their beginning and predict their end, such as the existence of earth, its gravitational force, etc.) but which can be safely assumed to be so for all practical purposes, are called here *practical universal* conditions. In the way we use the concept here, a non-overdetermined system is constituted merely by practical universal conditions of existence. However, these qualifications are not simply “academic”; in our daily social practices we assume universality for many sources of effectivity. Even if theoretically “incorrect,” such assumptions are necessary components of all kinds of daily practices, some of which are constantly “proven” their practicality over and over again. For example, we know that the biology of a human being is only a particular instance in the grand scheme of evolution (an instance, for example, that requires continual supply of oxygen gas for survival), yet we can safely assume (for all practical purposes) our anatomy to be a practical universal. This “assumption,” for example, is constitutive of the study of medicine. Apropos the constrained epistemology of human existence, these

¹³ Some universal conditions may also be necessary for the existence of an overdetermined social formation. This we cannot know because universal conditions, by definition, always exist. Something akin to a “natural experiment” is impossible. Moreover, even thought-experiments questioning the necessity of universal conditions are deeply problematic as (at least some of) these universal elements are fundamentally constitutive of existence in general and of the human mind in particular, such that it seems impossible and borders on the absurd to imagine their total effectivity on social formations (e.g. what would capitalism look like without the dimensions of time or space?!). The problem seems to be that even if universal conditions are “suspect” of being necessary for overdetermined social formations and of possibly having widespread but perhaps non-uniform effects on the elements it mutually constitutes, social theory as well as daily practice by and large has to either ignore their constitutive omnipotence through assumptions or to reduce them to a series of practically simplified effects (e.g., linear time or Newtonian mechanical physics).

¹⁴ Namely, material reality that could exist independent the human mind, yet which partly constitutes social and historical formations.

universal conditions and assumptions about them render all human knowledge essentially conjectural; but so do particular elements.

Particular (or non-universal) conditions of existence are those elements whose existential constitutions as well as properties depend on other elements, which have beginnings and ends, and moreover, whose structures and effectivities are in constant change. Complexity is thus a defining property of particular elements, and when they belong to social formations then they render them overdetermined. Within a non-overdetermined system, on the other hand, these particular elements are generally categorized as practical universal elements. In so doing, however, one conceals sources of effectivity and difference important in understanding the existence of the system which has direct consequences on how we act upon this practical knowledge. Therefore, assumptions or beliefs in the practical universality of particular elements are another reason for the conjectural nature of our knowledge. On the one hand, this is what abstraction generally tends to do. Overdetermination in this regard seems to be an unavoidable problematic, but is also potentially helpful for further thinking.

(ii) Necessary vs. sufficient elements

Any element of a system (or a *set* of elements) can also be classified as necessary but not sufficient, sufficient but not necessary, neither sufficient nor necessary, or necessary and sufficient conditions of existence of the system.¹⁵ This categorization is not so controversial for the ontology of deterministic “mode of production,” where ontological categories are also causal categories. Logically speaking a deterministic “mode of production” corresponds to a well-defined and constant group of necessary and sufficient elements that is a subset of the total set. In the context of an idealized version

of an essentialist Marx-inspired framework, for example, the superstructure (i.e., law, politics, religion, arts, culture, philosophy, etc.) would be outside this subset of necessary and sufficient elements. Here, the existence of this unique subset of necessary and sufficient elements implies the existence of the system; In Marxian terms, the specific configuration of forces and relations of production unique to a moment would determine the changes in the whole capitalist system, including its superstructure.¹⁶ Conversely, existence of the system implies the existence of this unique subset of elements as part of the system. This parallels the idea that the existence of capitalism implies the existence of a particular mode of production; namely, a capitalistic mode of production specific to a particular moment in its history.¹⁷ Together with practical universal elements such as forces and relations of production, the one-way causality originating from the necessary and sufficient conditions of the mode of production gives us an idea about what a deterministic (or non-overdetermined) system may mean.

As opposed to such a deterministic conception, an overdetermined social formation is not simply constituted by the subset of necessary and sufficient elements. In order to see this distinction, however, we continue to assume and impose this category for the overdetermined social formation as well. Even if it may be problematic to talk about the necessary and sufficient conditions of an overdetermined system, we do so here to see how the set of necessary and sufficient conditions—what is called here the constitutive subset—would look like under overdetermination; this will then give us a contradiction in

¹⁵ See “Appendix I: Necessary vs. Sufficient Elements” for a brief and rather simplified review.

¹⁶ We are using here a idealized or “caricaturized” conception of the deterministic “mode of production” in which we abstract from the historicity of the social formation as well as our interrelated “intellectual histories.” Althusser, Resnick and Wolff incorporate the historicity of the social formation into its study by conceptualizing their “element” as being historical and overdetermined; see Appendix II: Processes vs. Practices for a discussion.

¹⁷

the definition of the constitutive subset as the unique subset of necessary and sufficient elements. In other words, we will problematize later on this reciprocal if and only if statement and argue that an overdetermined social formation logically implies many such subsets, not just one.

3. Conditions of existence of an overdetermined social formation

Now we revise the conditions of existence of a non-overdetermined system outlined above so that we can use them as conditions of existence of social formations, which are by definition overdetermined.

As opposed to a deterministic system, every overdetermined social formation, which is also a theoretical abstraction on reality, is an *incomplete totality*. As is the case with deterministic systems, an overdetermined social formation is total because *all* elements (that mutually constitute each other in fundamentally and irreducibly complex ways) that are theorized to relate to the whole are included in the system. It is, however, incomplete (or never complete) because the system itself and its elements are continuously changing even while satisfying its conditions of existence. “No listing of processes can ever be complete. Indeed, the very conceptual process of specifying them will beget still others in a ceaseless attempt to explain concretely the existence of any one...”¹⁸

I have so far characterized the deterministic mode of production as a subset of necessary and sufficient conditions made up of practical universal elements. Within the context of overdetermined social formations we can no longer use this mode of production as an explanation of the constitution of the system. However, rejection of this deterministic mode of production does not mean that one cannot make any

categorizations of elements. On the contrary, I will argue that within the context of an overdetermined social formation (i.e., including particular elements) one can try to imagine how the set of necessary and sufficient conditions would look like. From now on I will call this subset of necessary and sufficient conditions of an overdetermined social formation the *constitutive subset*, while still recognizing that elements that are neither necessary nor sufficient have their own effectivities both on this constitutive subset as well as on the system as a whole.¹⁹ In a parallel manner, one could also conceptualize the constitutive subset of a social formation as an incomplete sub-totality due to its fundamental complexity and flux. Here, the constitutive subset would be total because it would theoretically include all the necessary and sufficient elements conceivable, but it would be incomplete as the elements of this set are always changing,²⁰ while still implying the existence of the system.

Particular elements in the total set of an overdetermined social formation can be categorized as belonging either to the constitutive subset of the “necessary and sufficient” or not. If not then, by the definition of the constitutive subset, these particular elements are by themselves neither necessary nor sufficient for the existence of the social formation. As such, they can be temporarily ignored apropos to the question of the existence of a system.²¹ However, if a subset of particular elements is also a subset of the constitutive subset then the existence of the system becomes fundamentally complex. In

¹⁸ Resnick and Wolff, *Knowledge and Class*, p.23.

¹⁹ Again, this is an “onto-logical” exposition not an epistemological resolution; I leave aside for now the vital question of how to know the necessary and sufficient conditions from the neither necessary nor sufficient ones.

²⁰ Especially the elements of sufficiency, which are potentially “exchangeable,” as we will see.

²¹ One can certainly talk about the constitutive subset of any given element of the total set, which may practically be constrained to a much smaller ontological space than the total set; however, here we are talking about the existence of the social formation that defines the total set as a whole (e.g., on the level of “society” or as constrained by the definition).

such circumstances fundamental complexity becomes a property of the subset of necessary and sufficient conditions and, therefore, of the ontology of the system itself. Such systems we call here overdetermined social formations.²² Complexity of a social formation follows from the complexity of its set of necessary and sufficient elements, whereas complexity of any given *particular* element is due to its overdetermined constitution and embodied contradictions. The constitutive subset is complex because at least some of its elements are complex. Such particular elements are complex because (1) as an effect the form of a particular element's constitution is in a constant state of flux; (2) as a cause the effectivity of each such complex element on other is relative, contradictory and changing; and as such (3) an element is internally contradictory due to the irreducible contradictions embodied in it.²³

Social formations are such fundamentally complex and therefore overdetermined systems. Thus social theory, which includes a study of social formations, involves a study of at least some particular elements that are irreducibly complex or in constant flux. An initial implication of this complexity is that the elements that comprises the constitutive subset may be continuously changing as well. This means that at different instances or moments in its history the "same" social formation may have different necessary and sufficient elements, which makes the study of these transformations, continuities and

²² Resnick and Wolff have corresponding concerns: "The concepts of overdetermination and contradiction are deployed in Marxian theory to define its particular concept of change. All entities in society change as the direct consequence of the complex contradictions that constitute their existence" (Resnick and Wolff, 1987, p.7).

²³ Fundamental complexity is in some sense "irreducible," which is a crucial point to bear in mind when conceptualizing the possible constitutive elements of a system; namely, one should expect and allow this conceptualization of the element to be contradictory and irreducible. However, practical requirements on further theoretical elaborations of this irreducible complexity necessitate abstraction from this complexity. What we have, therefore, is a double abstraction; abstraction from the irreducible complexity of the constitutive subset, which makes it possibly reducible to an "explanation," follows the initial conceptual abstraction (i.e., social formation) from the fundamental complexity of "reality."

breaks—namely, the historical study of such formations—essential. From this follows the interesting observation that the existence of a social formation over time, which is “observed” for a duration (i.e., over a series of moments) even as it continually changes, implies not one constitutive subset but all *possible* subsets, some of which are realized throughout its history. In other words, for example, the existence of capitalism—as defined in one possible way—may take many different forms through history or as experienced by its subjects because its continual existence as a historical process implies an excess of different constitutive subsets.²⁴

A more important implication of overdetermination is that even for a given moment in its history there may be plural constitutive subsets because some of the elements (or certain subsets) of the constitutive subset that guarantee the social formation’s existence may be exchangeable or substitutable with other elements of sufficiency. This would happen when an element of the constitutive subset itself is actually a smaller set of possible elements where at least one of these elements’ existences is necessary. This makes it impossible to equate the relationship between the existence of a system as a whole and the existence of its *constitutive subset* in terms of a simple reciprocal *if and only if* statement, as was the case with the concept of the deterministic “mode of production.”

By definition, there may not be two actual mutually exclusive constitutive subsets because that would imply a contradiction in these subsets as being necessary; however, we may reconceptualize overdetermination as the presence of multiple constitutive

²⁴ Corresponding to the above discussion, Stephen Cullenberg talks about the various alternative forms a social formation may take. For example, he discusses how different forms of ownership of the means of production may lead the form of the totality to vary from “hideous communism” to “benevolent

subsets with the necessary elements common to all such subsets. It is thus vital to note that in an overdetermined system some of the conditions of existence that render a constitutive subset sufficient may be exchangeable or substitutable with other elements of sufficiency. Possibility of finding multiple constitutive subsets implies a particular level of overdetermination; specifically, an *excess* of elements of sufficiency that results in a literal meaning of the word “over-determined.” As such, disappearance of a constitutive subset does not necessarily imply an end to the social formation.²⁵ As a result the constitutive subset is fundamentally different than deterministic mode of production because the latter defies the category of “the set of necessary and sufficient conditions.”

With the distinction of the overdetermined *constitutive subset* from the deterministic “mode of production” I intend to oppose one of Resnick and Wolff’s fundamental arguments arising from their framework of overdetermination; namely, the idea that “since all determination is mutual among all social processes, no one determination can be ‘more or less’ important.”²⁶ The concept of the constitutive subset, therefore, not only builds on Resnick and Wolff’s framework and extends it, but also it intends to bring a further critique to Resnick and Wolff’s framework of overdetermination and specifically to their idea that “an antiessentialist or nonreductionist theory refuses to look for the essential cause of any event because it does not presume

capitalism.” See, his “The Burden of Socialism: Towards a Thin Definition of Socialism,” *Rethinking Marxism*, 5:2 (Summer 1992): 64-83.

²⁵ In his “Althusser and the Decentering of the Marxist Totality,” Stephen Cullenberg calls such an overdetermined system a “decentered totality” in order emphasize the lack of a “center” or “essence” that would otherwise *determine* the cause/effect relationships existent in the system in particular ways—as for example the Cartesian or Hegelian totalities do. My discussion above gives further weight to the validity of his conception of the totality without a singular determining center.

²⁶ “The conditions of existence of the economy’s effectivity are precisely the effects of the noneconomic levels upon it. The relative autonomy of the economy only exists by virtue of the effectivities of all the other entities upon it. Its qualitative and quantitative determination in the society is thus (over)determined by all others. This determination therefore cannot be identified independent of the determinations of all

that it exists.”²⁷ The problem here is not that Resnick and Wolff do not presume the existence of essential causes of an outcome, but rather something else; they seem to presume that such a *question* regarding the existence of essential causes does not exist;

“The formulation of Marxian theory at work in this book *displaces the question* underlying the traditional debates over economic determinism. Beyond rejecting economic determinism, it *rejects the question* of which social aspects are more or less socially influential than others. That question presumes the possibility of an answer; it supposes that some social processes have greater effects than others.”²⁸

I find this rejection problematic because it allows Resnick and Wolff to abandon any relativization between the elements of the total set other than through the idea of the “entry point”;

“There can be no question of reducing this notion of causality—this play of differential relations—to any common standard or measure. Among the different relations between any one entity and all those others that overdetermine it, none can be ranked as ‘more important’ or ‘more determinant’ than another. To prose such a ranking is to reduce those differences to a quantitative measure of something presumed common to them all.”²⁹

Even if it may not be possible outside an entry point to impose a metric on the elements, the question of its possibility is still vital for the practical applications of an antiessentialist “Marxian” framework. In other words, the question cannot simply be avoided. To do so would be to abandon the field to “empiricists and rationalists”—to those who can provide “answers” because they can ask *the question*. It is in this context that the constitutive subset allows for advancement: by allowing the possibility of a further antiessentialist categorization of the elements of a totality; by emphasizing the

other entities. *Since all determination is mutual among all social processes, no one determination can be ‘more or less’ important*” (Resnick and Wolff, 1987, p.51, emphasis mine).

²⁷ Resnick and Wolff, *Knowledge and Class*, p.3.

²⁸ Ibid, p.51.

²⁹ Ibid, p.4.

importance of “the question” of how to know what is more or less constitutive; and by providing a starting point for further theoretical development.

To summarize: An overdetermined social formation is always fundamentally complex and is in continuous flux; the conceptualization of its constitutive subset within the total set is constrained and shaped by the definition of the system; in turn, this subset logically implies the existence of the system; moreover, the complexity of the constitutive subset is the reason for the complexity of the existence of a social formation. The extent, depth and coverage of this initial definition are at some level bound to be arbitrary, yet it is also historically determined. It follows that the objects of study (what I call the element) are also partially arbitrary and partially historical. It is also the case for an overdetermined social formation that any element that is outside the constitutive subset in a given moment could become its member in another moment, or vice versa, and some elements could jointly form a necessary condition where at least one such element’s existence is required. Therefore, the constitutive subset is “doubly arbitrary” both because of the determination of the domain of its possible elements by the quasi-arbitrary definition and due to its “literally overdetermined” nature that results from an excess of sufficient elements.

There are many reasons for the continuing antiessentialism of this revised framework of overdetermination. First of all, the existence of a system (i.e., the coexistence of its definitional properties) implies “many” possible constitutive subsets (one or perhaps some of which exists in actuality). This property of a social formation is perhaps the defining property of its overdetermination—that is to say, either having multiple constitutive subsets within a given moment or across history. Therefore, any

given constitutive subset is not *the* necessary and sufficient subset for an implication of the social formation's existence. Furthermore, a constitutive subset is not entirely independent of the other elements of the social formation; one should not forget that it is partly constituted by them. Yet, the constitutive subset is also (partly) independent of these elements outside itself with regard to the question of the existence of the social formation. Most importantly, the constitutive subset is *not determinant* of the “neither necessary nor sufficient” elements in the total set; it only takes part in their constitution. In classical Marxian terms, the constitutive subset is *not* the base determining the superstructure.³⁰ Another implication we gather from this comparison is that because we cannot separate the elements in our ontology into causes and effects due to our assumption of their overdetermination, we need to characterize the elements as inherently overdetermined; in other words, as having an “excess” of substitutable constitutive processes establishing an element (such that lack of “some” of these processes would have no effect on our “recognition” of the element).

³⁰ These properties of the constitutive subset are enough to satisfy Resnick and Wolff's criteria for antiessentialism: “This [essentialist] approach assumes that the different levels or instances are independent of each other so that it can identify the influence of the economy as the most determinant in society” (Resnick and Wolff, 1987, p.51, remark added). “By *essentialism* we mean a specific presumption that characterizes many theories both within and outside the Marxian tradition. This presumption holds that any apparent complexity—a person, a relationship, a historical occurrence, and so forth—can be analyzed to reveal a simplicity lying at its core. In relation to conceptualizing causality, essentialism is the presumption that among the influences apparently producing any outcome, some can be shown to be inessential to its occurrence while others will be shown to be essential causes. Amid the multifaceted complexity of influences apparently surrounding, say, some historical event of interest to an essentialist, one or a subset of these influences is presumed to be the essential cause of the event. The goal of analysis for such an essentialist theory is then to find and express this essential cause and its mechanism of producing what is theorized as its effect” (Resnick and Wolff, 1987, pp.2-3). “The Marxian conception of society as a totality of overdetermined processes implies a distinctly antiessentialist view of causality in society. No process in society can be understood as the effect of merely one or a subset of other social processes. No one process in society, nor any subset, can be understood as *the* cause of one or more other social processes. In other words, no process can be the essence of another; no subset of social processes can determine another subset” (Resnick and Wolff, 1987, p.25).

B) Overdetermination, Epistemology and Subjectivity

After the preliminary ontological description of social formations outlined above where constitution of any element is fundamentally complex or overdetermined, we are better prepared in this second part of the essay to examine various epistemological issues surrounding the—ultimately “subjective” and overdetermined—practice of knowledge production and its dialectical relationship with this complex reality.

First, we criticize epistemologies with essentialist ontologies. For heuristic purposes we consider only two such epistemologies (i.e., empiricism and rationalism) and only in their idealized or “pure” form.³¹ Resnick and Wolff argue that empiricism and rationalism are characterized by essentialist ontologies rather than, say, an overdetermined one. They point to the source of their essentialism as buried in the notion of “the truth” as arising from a singular reality, and instead propose the possible coexistence of many valid knowledges of a social phenomenon. In effect, theirs is a (perhaps implicit) call for pluralism in the discourse of economics. And in this sense, their contribution is substantial.

For the remainder of the essay, we consider the implications of overdetermination with regard to the epistemology of the individual and her mental realm of theoretical representations or abstraction—what is simply referred to here as “theory” or “epistemic subject”; it is here that as we situate our ontological considerations from the first part of the essay into a discussion of “symbolic representation” that they completely dissolve into the realm of epistemology. We will be talking here, mainly with the help of

³¹ I leave aside here—mainly for purposes of simplicity of exposition—the turn to “scientific language” in the 20th century exemplified by logical positivism, where truth value corresponds to the internal consistency of logical propositions evaluated within a certain system of rules that govern statements; but I also do so

Althusser, about the overdetermination of the duality between “theory” and “material reality” that is present in the subjective nature of both the theorist as well as the theorized. Before doing so, however, one should note that an ontological duality here denotes categorization of reality (i.e. the set of all things that exist in ones ontology) in two “mutually exclusive” sides in terms of a general existential quality. By the definition of this quality, existence of one side of the duality is incommensurable with the existence of the other; one can therefore characterize this situation as “mutual exclusion.”

However, “mutual exclusion” based on a particular quality does not imply that the existence of one is independent of the existence of the other. Rather, independence would seem to require “mutual exclusion” with regard to all possible qualities of comparison. In the framework proposed in this essay—as outlined in the first part—something exists either as part of the “material reality” or as a mental representation in “theory.”

Therefore, this duality between “theory” and “material reality” is a “mutually exclusive” ontological division based on a particular definition that covers the whole space of the totality; however, it is also the case in our overdetermined framework that there are no independently existing entities. The question posed here is How to resolve this apparent dilemma?

First, following Resnick and Wolff, we conceive a critical and overdetermined stand point to the “pure” and “essentialist” versions of empiricism and rationalism. In empiricism symbolic representation of material reality (e.g., its objectification, measurement, etc.) is the essential practice, which is thought to have objective and independent existence within theory. Epistemology of empiricism assumes observation to

because I believe that logical positivism is a particular form of rationalism—even if ideally initial statements are to be grounded in facts such that empiricism is not outside its method.

be a “neutral experience” to be used as the “objective” foundation of knowledge. However, as I have argued in the first part of the essay, in a framework of overdetermined ontology categorization of objects and their observation are mutually constituted. In a decentered ontology no social practice or element has independent existence, as—among other things—the definition of the social formation and the characterization of meaningful categories—including elements—in our ontology not only constrain but also create the objects we recognize. Furthermore, all ontological categorizations always belong to the realm of the ontology of theory and never simply to the ontology of “reality” as such. In effect, “observation is not theory-neutral.”³² For rationalism, the essential practice—which is essential because of its assumed independent existence—is reason or theorization that has the power to “somehow” discover reality as the singular truth. To be able to consistently apply such an epistemology, rationalism assumes an ontology where reality is rational (or at least rationalizable), and in turn what is rationalized represents its truth. Empiricism, on the other hand, tries to reach knowledge of reality by “letting the truth to emerge” from the observation of reality. In this way the two epistemologies are partly defined by these two opposite essentialist practices; yet, they also share a more fundamental belief in the independent existence of a universal truth to be extracted from reality.

It is within this problematic that our ontological distinctions eventually transform into epistemological ones. We saw that rationalism and empiricism have similar “axiomatic” structures; both hold that the truth is to be appropriated from reality while assuming the independent existence of their essential practices from truth and reality. Stephen E. Cullenberg rephrases these properties as the assumption of an “ontological

³² Resnick and Wolff, *Knowledge and Class*, p.9.

gap” between material reality and theory.³³ Prior assumption of the “ontological gap” then motivates the search for knowledge in a particular way where closure of this gap becomes a necessary goal; and this closure is brought by a further belief in the correspondence between truth—as the essence of reality—and its theoretical representation. This is specifically when the use of these dualities becomes problematic; namely, when empiricism and rationalism assume their ontological dualities to include a “correspondence” between truth (i.e., “the essence” of reality) and theory. As such, epistemologies based on this distinction frame the knowledge problem in terms of an act of *appropriation* of the essence of material reality that corresponds to a representation of truth in “theory.” It is in fact a certain structure of a “correspondence” that both empiricism and rationalism aim at by giving some methodological priority on either “material reality” via induction or “theory” via deduction; yet, they both aim to close their assumed ontological gap by providing evidence for the bridges they build between theory and reality.

Overdetermination, on the other hand, denies the existence of this “ontological gap.” Instead of a “correspondence” between the realm of theory and material reality, an overdetermined ontology implies the mutual and complex constitution of the two sides of the duality. Theory, in overdetermination, is no longer a tool in the appropriation and representation of the truth of material reality or a reflection of its inner essence; it is rather the creation of “objects” and production of knowledges of their relations within the wider context of the social reality. In other words, knowledge is *produced* rather than appropriated as a result of the complex and mutual constitution of both sides of the “material reality vs. epistemic subject” duality. In overdetermination the “ontological

³³ See Cullenberg, “Althusser and the Decentering of the Marxist Totality,” pp.145-147.

gap” disappears because truth does not exist prior to theory; rather, knowledge can be evaluated both according to particular internal value systems of a theoretical framework but also in view of its wider (social) usefulness. Knowledge production is a social practice that is overdetermined by the modes of thinking of the theorist, constraints of material reality, goals of society, as well as the history of its conceptualized theoretical framework and objects, etc. As a result, in an overdetermined framework the “ontological gap” between the two sides of this duality completely dissolves into epistemological considerations; in effect, there is no gap other than from a point of view, specifically from the perspective of a human “mind,” or in other words, an “epistemic subject.”

In overdetermination there is no *a priori* structure assumed about reality; therefore, the “ontological gap” becomes a misnomer. Such distinctions, as long as they are useful, only exist as theoretical constructions of one's objects of analysis in terms of particular and constructed qualities or definitions. Therefore, an overdeterminist epistemology supports pluralism of discourses in economics; at least, this is a logical implication that follows the rejection of a singular reality that might otherwise be represented by a universally true theory. However, there still exists an “epistemic gap” in overdetermination—as it does for *all* epistemologies—even as the ontological one dissolves: this is because all such ontological categorizations, including the category of “elements,” exist only from the point of view of the subject or the theorist. There exists, in a sense, an “epistemic gap” since theory always exists as meaningful in the form of mental representations of the “epistemic subject”; as such, the distinction between material reality and theory exists only from the perspective of the human subject. In this way our thinking is trapped, by definition, to the side of the “epistemic subject” and

“theory.” Therefore, it is the conditions of existence of human consciousness (e.g., our linguistic abilities) that implies the possibility of theoretical constructs, an example of which is the “ontological gap.” This fundamental condition of existence for knowledge, meaning or truth is formulated within the concept of the “epistemic gap.”

Rather simply put, the theoretical construct of the “epistemic gap,” implies from the perspective of any given human subject a *belief* in the existence of a material reality exterior to human subjectivity.³⁴ Any specific instance of the use of this belief can intuitively be called a *fundamental leap of faith*. This is mainly a pragmatic, practical or—in the way I use the word in this essay—a *technical* belief. Such a leap of faith is not *a priori* in the sense of being prior to observation or its examination, however, it is still a fundamental one that is a necessary condition of “being” in the world or living as a part of the material reality.³⁵ This belief is *a posteriori* because as we somehow come to

³⁴The “form” of the human subject or inter-subjectivity can of course vary drastically; it is in this context and as a side curious to note the striking “malleability” or “adaptability” of the human being who experiences its own subjectivity, for example, as ranging from “emancipation” to “enslavement” with regard to its “potential” or “capabilities.” I argue above that regardless of this form and strictly from her perspective, the subject (i.e., whatever is implied by “Me” apart from my material body) exists merely as mental representation and so does material reality. Of course as a thought experiment, one might imagine a particular form of subjectivity that may seem to pose no “epistemic gap” in its being such as perhaps a god-like subjectivity that *a priori* knows all, causes all and *is* all. Yet, if we restrict the domain of the subject in general to the *human subject* and assume the wide-ranging “alienation” of this subject as a necessary condition of its existence we would logically be implying an “epistemic gap.” Even when we imagine the possibility of human subjectivities “somehow” becoming one, this “transcendental subject” would not be sufficient to avoid the “gap” both because its effectivity would be necessarily partial in material reality as non-subjective material reality is also constitutive and because non-subjective materiality would in turn partially constitute this hypothetical universal subject. Keeping this example in mind, I am arguing that any human subject whose practices have the property of being (perhaps partially) “theoretical” would necessarily be in the close proximity of the “epistemic gap.” This “gap,” therefore, can be seen mainly from the perspective of the “theoretical practice” even if it exists for *any* practice, as I will explain. This is tied to the self-reflexive character of the subject; because the “gap” is the property of the subject (i.e., nature has no theoretical practice) it is only through a theoretical reflection or study of the self that the problem becomes apparent.

³⁵ Taking note of this epistemic gap, a crucial question arises: What are the particular sets of “leaps of faith” corresponding to particular epistemologies, including the various epistemologies of everyday practice? Marxian theories of epistemology has major contributions to this search for a “closure” of the “gap,” most important of which is the project of dialectical materialism. So much so that the ever present “alienation” of the human subject from the rest of the nature (i.e., partly from other subjects and mainly

believe in it or learn how to “use” this belief to our advantage, the belief itself becomes at least partly based on observation and experience.³⁶ A crucial implication of this foundational belief is that all possible human knowledge (i.e., the product of practice viewed as “theoretical”), however “objective” or “scientific,” always involves a belief in the epistemology practiced to close this “gap.” Creation of knowledge, therefore, needs to deal with this fracture either implicitly or explicitly. For empiricism and rationalism, a belief in the independent existence of material reality together with the belief in the “correspondence” between theory and “essence” of this reality brings a “temporary”—and as I argue, false—closure to their “ontological gap.” On the contrary, within the framework of overdetermination, where the “ontological gap” dissolves into the “epistemic gap,” the problem of closure is that of a different kind.

It is here with what Althusser calls the Marxian dialectic (or dialectical materialism) that we get some hints towards a “temporary closure” to the “epistemic gap,” which—as argued above—exists for all epistemologies. Althusser’s most thought-provoking discussion of practices with regard to the dialectic between “theory” and “material reality” comes in his distinction between *theoretical practice* and *technical practice* in his article “On the Materialistic Dialectic.”

Before looking at this distinction we need a short discussion of what a practice is.³⁷ In the way Althusser defines practices, they correspond to a particular

from all material objects or non-human subjects but also from its own constituent elements) and its potential “emancipation” are major concern for Marxian ethics.

³⁶ Borrowing some Zizekian language, we know that it is otherwise (i.e., we acknowledge of the “epistemic gap” from the perspective of theory or subject), yet we act as if we don’t know (i.e., we “somehow” deal with the gap in practice either explicitly or implicitly so that we may go on “functioning” in the world), and in effect we “believe” (i.e., we exercise a fundamental leap of faith).

³⁷ For an extended discussion of why Althusser’s concept of practices as elements of a social formation is preferable to Resnick and Wolff’s alternative elements of processes, please see “Appendix II: Practices vs. Processes.”

conceptualization of what has been referred so far in this essay as elements or conditions of existence of social formations. It follows that any implications about (particular) elements developed in the first part of the essay follow on as properties of any practice. As we have seen, overdetermination implies an “excess” of sufficient practices such that lack of “some” of these practices does not necessarily has an effect on the existence of the social formation; at the same time, the overdetermined nature of the elements make it possible for the social formation to take multiplicity of forms. Therefore, any given practice is overdetermined by all the practices that are elements of the total set. Likewise, all practices exist in particular social, historical and material contexts (e.g., they are embedded in various total sets). A practice involves contradictory processes (or incompatible categorizations of effectivities); it is thus complex and in continuous change. Specifically, practice is the event of *transformation* by human labour—but together with the effectivities of natural processes—of a set of raw “materials³⁸” into a not necessarily “intended” set of products using some given means (various natural, technological, practical, technical, theoretical, political, subjective, ideological, etc., processes). It is important to note here that this transformation or “production” is not necessarily material; forms of consumption and exchange of use-values as well as subject formation and inter-subjective interactions, for example, are other possible but not necessarily material transformations. I am, therefore, following closely Althusser’s definition of practice in “On the Materialist Dialectic.”³⁹

³⁸ Material here may include any “object” that has some use-value with regard to the production process. Conceptual “objects” do not have material reality but nonetheless may have use-value as “inputs.”

³⁹ “By *practice* in general I shall mean any process of *transformation* of determinate given raw material into a determinate *product*, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means (of ‘production’). In any practice thus conceived, the *determinant* moment (or element) is neither the raw material nor the product, but the practice in the narrow sense: the moment of the *labour of transformation* itself, which sets to work, in a specific structure, men, means and a technical method of

Althusser, mainly for heuristic purposes, distinguishes among many types of practices. In thinking the overdetermination of “theory” and “material reality” we focus here on the comparison between “technical” and “theoretical” practice. This distinction provides a conceptual space to think about this dialectic in which some particular forms of overdetermination occur in the interaction between the “theory” and “material reality” separated—from the perspective of the theorist—by the “epistemic gap.” Surprisingly, his perhaps most clear exposition of the issue comes in a footnote to his article;

“Theoretical practice produces knowledges which can then figure as *means* that will serve the ends of a technical practice. Any technical practice is defined by its ends: such and such effects to be produced in such and such an object in such and such a situation. The means depend on the ends. Any theoretical practice uses among other means knowledges which intervene as procedures: either knowledges borrowed from outside, from existing sciences, or ‘knowledges’ produced by the technical practice itself in pursuance of its ends.”⁴⁰

The notion of theoretical practice situates theory in its larger societal and historical context by emphasizing how theory is one of many practices that acquire their meaning in this larger context. As such, theory is a social practice where creation of knowledge is seen as a form of production (as opposed to “appropriation”), which is then used as means for the accomplishment of goals that have extra-theoretical origins. Usage as well as production of new knowledges, which also includes the production of the objects in one’s ontology, is strongly influenced by these ends exogenous to theory. Therefore, the ontological space of theoretical practice lies somewhere between its limit to its independent existence that is the practical necessity for knowledge in its socio-

utilizing the means... Thus, ‘social practice’, the complex unity of the practices existing in a determinate society, contains a large number of distinct practices. This complex unity of ‘social practice’ is structured, we shall soon see how, in such a way that in the last resort the determinant practice in it is the practice of transformation of a given nature (raw material) into useful *products* by the activity of living men working

historical context and its liberation from such concerns through abstraction. Technical practice, on the other hand, is defined by a direct transformation (or forced continuation) of material reality or social relations as a result of the subject's intervention in the world. Technical practice uses the products of theoretical practice (i.e., theoretical knowledges) as means for the achievement of its goals. Therefore, technical practice includes in its space the role of material necessities, societal rules, regulations, ideologies, discourses, and different modes of thinking and inter-subjective processes in guiding the products of theoretical practice as means for the achievement of its own practical goals. These goals always involve a will to transform the material reality and social relations in some way, and in this sense technical practice is also a form of production. It is also the case, however, that technical practice does not theorize its goals independent of its means, social and material context or other goals but rather tries to "control" the theorizations to be used as means. There is, therefore, a dialectical relationship between the technical practice of transformation of the material reality or social relations and the theoretical practice of knowledge production or more generally the transformation of the theorist's mentality that we refer here as the "epistemic subject."

Here, rather than approaching the "epistemic gap" in terms of categorizing each practice as either theoretical or technical as Althusser does,⁴¹ I propose that *any* social practice that is in the proximity of this "gap" could and should be analyzed from the perspectives of both technical and theoretical properties of this practice. In effect, what we have in this case is a slight revision to Althusser's distinction between theoretical and

through the *methodically organized* employment of determinate *means of production* within the framework of determinate relations of production." (Althusser, pp.166-167).

⁴⁰ Althusser, p.171.

technical practice; for any given practice it is this *form* of interaction or—as I explain in the first part of the essay—overdetermination of these two “qualities” of any practice that determines its epistemological status. Seeing these two concepts as two distinct but related properties of any given practice provides us with clues into the forms of overdetermination of specific practices. My revision to Althusser also provides the reason why our distinction is not merely between theory and practice but between theoretical practice and technical practice. It seems at first that “pure” theoretical practice may perhaps be called theory; however, given the range of forms of the “epistemic subject,” which invariably involves some level of practical and extra-theoretical considerations together with the overdetermination or dialectics between theory and practice, such a pure state is improbable. The same logic applies to a pure state of technical practice, and thus we would rather expect any social practice to have—in varying degrees—both of these qualities. This distinction corresponds rather well to how positive analysis (e.g., positive economics) cannot be separated from normative analysis; positive economics may perhaps avoid normative statements in itself; however, as a social practice it must (either anterior or posterior to it or perhaps evasively and implicitly within such a positive theorization) assume some normative positions or become dominated by some technical practice. In other words, economics is a technical practice to the extent that it is influenced, for example, by daily, local or general social, political, strategic or methodological considerations. Therefore it seems more appropriate to use the words theoretical and technical as two fundamental dimensions of any given social practice.

⁴¹ Althusser mentions various types of practices; productive, ideological, political, etc., as well as theoretical and technical.

It follows that one can view all practices of knowledge production both as a technical practice as well as a theoretical one; from the perspective of ends we have the former and from the perspective of means we have the latter. Therefore, any given technical practice has a theoretical component even if in a “practical state” or used as means to the ends of a technical practice. Likewise, any theoretical practice is partly constituted by various forms of technical practice which provides ends for the “embedded” theoretical practice—having systems of value external to the theory itself on the level of daily practical concerns, rhetoric, discourse, language, politics, etc. But how does this dialectic brings a (temporary) closure to the “epistemic gap” of an overdetermined epistemology? Althusser answers this question in a particular way that seems in some ways outdated but in others still insightful;

“In every case, the relation between technique and knowledge is an *external*, unreflected relation, radically different from the internal, reflected relation between a science and its knowledges...Left to itself, a spontaneous (technical) practice produces only the ‘theory’ it needs as a means to produce the ends assigned to it: this ‘theory’ is never more than the reflection of this end, uncriticized, unknown, in its means of realization, that is, it is a *by-product* of the reflection of the technical practice’s end on its means. A ‘theory’ which does not question the end whose *by-product* it is remains a prisoner of this end and of the ‘realities’ which have imposed it as an end. Examples of this are many of the branches of psychology and sociology, and of Economics, of Politics, of Art, etc...This point is crucial if we are to identify the most dangerous ideological menace: the creation and success of so-called theories which have nothing to do with real theory but are mere *by-products* of technical activity. A belief in the ‘spontaneous’ theoretical virtue of technique lies at the root of this ideology, the ideology constituting the essence of Technocratic Thought.”⁴²

Althusser labels any theoretical practice that does not concern itself with its dialectical relationship with technical practice as ideological. In his account, concern with the dialectic between theory and reality is only possible within the Marxian dialectical

⁴² Ibid, p.171.

materialism, and lack of such “consciousness” demarcates “the true science of Marx” from bourgeois ideologies. The concept of ideology is fundamentally important in thinking about the possible alternative courses of action that the “epistemic subject” is able to consider. However, it is also deeply problematic in demarcating science from non-science. Even though I am critical of Althusser’s conclusions in this regard, I believe the problematic he conceives is both insightful and unavoidable. In this preliminary account of an overdetermined epistemology we simply take note of this dialectic between theory and social or material reality without resolving it.

What seems crucial is to note that theory is not independent of the epistemic subject’s other interventions in the world; rather, they are all complexly related. As such, theory can be seen both as a technical as well as a theoretical practice. Therefore, we should strategically and pragmatically consider the wider social and historical context in which our theoretical practice is embedded and how it interacts with the material reality of social relations.

Appendix I: Necessary vs. Sufficient Elements

Any element of a system (or a *subset* of elements) can *logically* be classified as (a) necessary but not sufficient, (b) sufficient but not necessary, (c) neither sufficient nor necessary, or (d) necessary and sufficient conditions of existence of the system.

(a) Necessary elements of a system are those that are always in the system regardless of the different forms that particular system can take. The existence, as defined above, of a system, therefore, implies the existence of its necessary elements (or a necessary subset of them). It is important to note that the reverse is not true; coexistence of necessary elements is in general not sufficient to guarantee the existence of the system.

(b) Existence of the sufficient elements of a system (i.e., a subset of sufficiency), on the other hand, implies the existence of the system. It is, for example, by definition true that the set of *all* elements of a system guarantees the existence of the system. However, this particular case of sufficiency amounts to a tautology because if this set were not sufficient it would not have been conceptualized as the total set to begin with; some elements would be “missing” from the system.⁴³ Also, this subset of sufficiency may include unnecessary elements in the sense that if these were excluded then the subset would still be sufficient to imply the existence of the system.⁴⁴

⁴³ The logical nature of the total set as a tautology is important to note in order to locate various problems with Resnick and Wolff’s version of overdetermination.

⁴⁴ In an overdetermined total set it is harder to take into account the total effectivity of disappearance of an element as this element would be constitutive of and constituted by all other elements—but, of course, to varying degrees. I abstract from this complexity for now.

- (c) These elements that could be omitted from the subset of sufficiency, while the latter still implies the existence of a system, are elements that are by themselves neither necessary nor sufficient. Even in systems of overdetermination where all elements take “some” part in constituting any element of the total set there may be elements that are neither necessary nor sufficient for the existence of the system.⁴⁵
- (d) Most important is the group of elements that constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions of existence of the system. Here, existence of this particular subset of elements *logically* implies the existence of the system. Conversely, existence of the system *logically* implies the existence of this subset of elements as part of the system.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ At any given moment, however, such elements change within a domain restricted by its *current* position in the total set (i.e., its relations within the “network” of all conditions of existence). These currently possible effectivities (some of which are actual) that any “neither necessary nor sufficient” condition has at any given moment are not “enough” to induce a substantial change in the *form* of the particular system such that we believe we are looking at a different system. This is specifically why they may be categorized as neither necessary nor sufficient. One should, however, also note here that the domain of effectivity of an element is in constant change, which implies that any “neither necessary nor sufficient” element of a given moment may become a “necessary and sufficient” condition in another moment, and vice versa (a movement which in general is not random). The first theoretical impulse to this possibility is perhaps to think about this distinction as a criterion for the “historical periodization” of a group of moments distributed across linear time, where each moment is a particular current situation of actual and potential overdetermined domains of effectivities. Even though a theorization of historical time as a transformation on linear, mathematical or “objective” time is important, it would in this particular case be problematic; one cannot assume any given moment as *the only* material to be studied even if one is accounting for potential effectivities that are not actual, simply because between any two proximate moments, however measured, defined or distinguished, there will be many (perhaps infinite) such transformations in the qualitative status of elements as conditions of existence. Therefore, any periodization based merely on this particular qualitative distinction (of being necessary and sufficient or not) among elements will either be deterministic or *ad hoc*. Any appropriate theoretical response should, as an initial step, acknowledge the necessary choice of particular metrics for historical categorizations among other possibilities, but more importantly should consider the different forms of interactions among and internal to moments made possible by *subjectivity* as distinct from the dynamics of natural historical processes that are “objective.”

Appendix II: Practices vs. Processes

Within the progression of this appendix, I will adjust Resnick and Wolff's ideas to an Althusserian framework where the concept of *practice* rather than *process* is used as the basic analytical unit in the ontological descriptions of social formations, show how a set of practices constitutes the conditions of existence of this complex social formation, and in this sense try to argue that the concept of practice is preferable to process.

For Resnick and Wolff, *process* is the fundamental element of social formations, where "theory" is one among many processes;

"To say that theory [or any other process or element] is an overdetermined process in society is to say that its existence, including all its properties or qualities, is determined by *each and every other* process constituting that society. Theory is the complex effect produced by the interaction of *all those other* processes...In this sense *these other* processes are all the conditions of existence of the process of theory."⁴⁷

"...each [process] is therefore the unique effect of the totality of all processes *other than itself*."⁴⁸

In order to theorize overdetermination Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff categorize the elements of a totality in terms of processes. Processes are continual and changing activity of social practice in particular sites of social space, defined and distinguished from each other by their contradictions.⁴⁹ In an overdetermined totality existence of contradictions,

⁴⁶ I problematize this reciprocal if and only if statement and argue that an overdetermined system logically implies many such subsets, not just one.

⁴⁷ Resnick and Wolff, *Knowledge and Class*, p.2, emphases and remark added

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.24, emphasis and remark added

⁴⁹ "Reality for Marxian theory is a totality comprising contradictions in theory interacting with contradictions within all the other processes that constitute that totality. Marxian theory specifies that interaction as overdetermination...The concepts of overdetermination and contradiction are deployed in Marxian theory to define its particular concept of change. All entities in society change as the direct consequence of the complex contradictions that constitute their existence. To exist at all, for Marxian theory, is to be overdetermined, contradictory, changing, and hence in a state of process. Entities, for Marxian theory, become processes." (Resnick and Wolff, 1987, p.7)

which are defining “qualities” of processes, implies continual change.⁵⁰ Contradictions cannot necessarily be reduced to opposing forces with common denominators of a single value metric (e.g., as in a vector space) that may balance each other and result in an equilibrium. In a framework of overdetermination such a scenario would be an exception rather than the “norm,” and the stability of such an equilibrium would be “rare.”⁵¹

An Initial Ontology of the Element: Process, Practice, Site and “Form”

(i) Process

What should be the basic element of analysis in studying overdetermined social formations? Resnick and Wolff accept that society is a collection of *practices* (synonymous with relationships or activities).⁵² Yet, they focus extensively on the concept of *process* as the building-block while leaving undeveloped the relationship between processes and practices. Thus unlike Althusser, Resnick and Wolff’s basic unit of analysis—what I have so far called *element* in this essay—is conceptualized as processes;

“Marxian theory, as we understand it, conceptualizes society as a complex totality of relationships. We will use relationship as roughly synonymous

⁵⁰ “The generalized concept of overdetermination is accompanied by the parallel generalization of the concepts of contradiction and change discussed earlier. Thus, each social process, understood as overdetermined, is conceived as contradictory. It is the site of influences from all other social processes that push and pull it in all sorts of ways. Its overdetermination constitutes the process’s existence and its internal tensions. These produce its movement, its change. Such movement or change in any one process within a society means a change in the influences it exerts upon all other social processes. The latter change and their changes react back upon the first process to change it further. This is true for each and every overdetermined process in the society: hence the notion of ceaseless, complex changes which characterizes the Marxian theory of society.” (Resnick and Wolff, 1987, p.24) “By contradictions we mean the tensions and conflicts produced by these different directions that inevitably characterize any overdetermined process, that is, any process understood as the site of the interaction of all other social processes. For Marxian theory, overdetermination implies contradiction in this sense, and vice versa.” (Resnick and Wolff, 1987, p.5)

⁵¹ Stephen Cullenberg observes in his “Althusser and the Decentering of the Marxist Totality” how Althusser conceives of his own concept of overdetermination as implying an uneven development of the totality as a result of its complex and contradictory nature (see especially page 137). My corresponding arguments above are in line with the idea of uneven development as a much more likely path of change than not.

⁵² Practice is a concept used extensively by Althusser, which is basically his answer to this question.

with the terms practice and activity. We understand these terms to refer to multifaceted interactions among and between people and nature. *However, such relationships are not the basic analytical unit with which Marxian theory approaches the conceptualization of society as a totality... The basic unit of analysis in Marxian theory is 'process'.* Every relationship in society is composed of its distinguishing set of processes. The qualities or aspects of any relationship in society are nothing other than its set of component processes. For simplicity of exposition, we shall group all the possible processes comprising any social relationship into four categories: natural, economic, political, and cultural. Various combined sets of these processes comprise the relationships whose aggregate is society.”⁵³

Thus, for Resnick and Wolff the basic unit of analysis (i.e., the element of the total set) is process even though society “is a complex totality of practices,” which implies that in their formulation one can treat all practices as sets of processes. In other words, any practice is an aggregation of some processes and, therefore, “society is the totality of all designatable processes...”⁵⁴ This is because processes are “qualities and aspects” of practices *and* because “every relationship [practice] in society is composed of its distinguishing set of processes.” It seems to follow from their logic that society is equivalently an aggregation of qualities and aspects of practices or an aggregation of practices. This equivalence implies that a practice is nothing more or less than an aggregation of these “qualities and aspects;” or in other words “variously combined sets of these processes comprise the relationships whose aggregate is society.”

This result is problematic enough to abandon the concept of process as *the only* element. Before taking this step, however, one should acknowledge that it seems conceivable that particular processes define any given practice’s “effective core.” By this I mean that processes are appropriate conceptualizations of properties, contradictions and various other categories of effectivities causing or resulting from the interaction between

⁵³ Resnick and Wolff, *Knowledge and Class*, p.19, emphasis mine

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p.5.

human beings or between humans and nature, etc. Yet, Resnick and Wolff seem to imply that practices are *merely* made up of sets of processes;

“The qualities or aspects of any relationship in society are *nothing other than* its set of component processes.”⁵⁵

A process, therefore, summarizes a particular category (property, quality or aspect) of effectivity, contradiction and change present in any given practice. As the basic unit of analysis, the element of process fits in the overdetermined framework of totality accordingly.⁵⁶

However, the idea that the process is the basic unit of analysis is problematic simply because a practice is *not* made up *only* of processes. Yes, a practice can be categorized into its contradictory and changing processes according to its properties. Yet, such an abstraction would leave out vital “substance” in any given practice that is constitutive of social formations. In the remainder of this appendix, I will rather start with *practice* as the basic element and try to make an initial analysis of some of this “substance” in terms of *processes, sites and forms of overdetermination*. A process in this revised framework is a particular set of categorizations of effectivity within a practice as well as throughout or between groups of them; in other words, processes are properties, “qualities and aspects” of practices. This turn to practice away from mere processes parallels a turn to Althusser away from Resnick and Wolff.

⁵⁵ Resnick and Wolff, p.19, emphasis mine. Or: “These processes, for Marxian, theory, never occur in society alone; they *appear rather in sets as the distinctive and constitutive aspects of relationships* [or practices]... [Practice] comprises a set of processes that are its distinguishing qualities...” (Resnick and Wolff, 1987, p.20, emphases and remarks are mine).

⁵⁶ “As such an effect, the process of theory embodies the different influences of its many determinants. In other words, the process of theory exists as the site of a particular interaction of all the influences stemming from all the other processes comprising any society. In this sense these other processes are all the conditions of existence of the process of theory” (Resnick and Wolff, 1987, p.2).

(ii) Practice

Practice is the concept I will adopt as the basic element of analysis in the framework of overdetermination in studying social formations. It follows that any implications about elements developed so far in the essay follow on as properties of any practice. Therefore, any given practice is overdetermined by all the practices that are elements of the total set. Likewise, all practices exist in particular social, historical and material contexts (e.g., they are embedded in various total sets). A practice involves contradictory processes (e.g., as incompatible categorizations of effectivities); it is thus complex and in continuous change. Moreover, at least one constitutive subset exists and is made up of a set of practices that are necessary and sufficient with regard to the existence of a social formation.

A (human) *social practice* is an ongoing event of various processes of human subjectivity, inter-subjectivity and actions that transforms reality together with natural (or “non-human”) processes concentrated around particular sites, and is distinguished from other practices according to many properties of its processes, material and historical context as well as according to its various *forms of overdetermination*. Specifically, practice is the event of *transformation* by human labour—but together with the effectivities of natural processes—of a set of raw “materials⁵⁷” into a not necessarily “intended” set of products using some given means (various natural, technological, practical, technical, theoretical, political, subjective, ideological, etc., processes). It is important to note here that this transformation or “production” is not necessarily material; forms of consumption and exchange of use-values as well as subject formation and inter-

⁵⁷ Material here may include any “object” that has some use-value with regard to the production process. Conceptual “objects” do not have material reality but nonetheless may have use-value as “inputs.”

subjective interactions, for example, are other possible but not necessarily material transformations. I am, therefore, following closely Althusser's definition of practice in

“On the Materialist Dialectic”:

“By *practice* in general I shall mean any process of *transformation* of determinate given raw material into a determinate *product*, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means (of ‘production’). In any practice thus conceived, the *determinant* moment (or element) is neither the raw material nor the product, but the practice in the narrow sense: the moment of the *labour of transformation* itself, which sets to work, in a specific structure, men, means and a technical method of utilizing the means... Thus, ‘social practice’, the complex unity of the practices existing in a determinate society, contains a large number of distinct practices. This complex unity of ‘social practice’ is structured, we shall soon see how, in such a way that in the last resort the determinant practice in it is the practice of transformation of a given nature (raw material) into useful *products* by the activity of living men working through the *methodically organized* employment of determinate *means of production* within the framework of determinate relations of production.”⁵⁸

(iii) Site

In its defining moment practice is a “localized” transformation rather than a total one, even though the repercussions of such an event are eventually total in its constitution or effectivity. In its conception practice is “local” because it is bound, in each definite moment, to a specific material space and to specific positions in various economic, cultural and historical contexts. This is why practice is a particular form of event—occupying various relative positions as a node in a given network of relations that are bounded by its material, cultural and historical space; constrained by its current potential effectivity, which in turn is overdetermined by *all* practices of the total set; and where the human subject plays a major role (“choice,” agency, behavior, beliefs, memory, identity, preferences, etc.). If a given practice is always “local” in the first instance it is because of its ties to a specific location in the total set (i.e., the site). Therefore, a necessary

⁵⁸ Althusser, pp.166-167.

condition for the existence of any practice is a *site*. However, this specific space of a site is not merely a “container.” Yet, this is the way Resnick and Wolff characterize this concept;

“That is, because each distinct social process is the site constituted by the interaction of all the other social processes, each contains ‘within itself’ the very different and conflicting qualities, influences, moments, and directions of all those other social processes that constitute it.”⁵⁹

Rather, a site is always part of the social reality that further constrains and constitutes the practice⁶⁰. This is one of the main reasons why no set of processes can aggregate to a specific practice by itself. Processes always “need” sites to exist in because they always realize their effectivities within them. More importantly, site of a practice is that practice’s location in the larger social formation as a particular node in the historical, cultural and economic networks. Such qualities of a site, however, are not necessarily material; they are also partly embodied in individual subjectivity (as memory, desire, identity, etc.) and inter-subjectivity (as ideology, institutions, social value, etc.). It follows that the sites of a social practice are both the material location and the subjective disposition and perspective of the “practicing” individuals. Therefore, sites are necessary (but not sufficient) components of practices. However, in *Knowledge and Class* the concept of the site does not occupy an ontologically distinct space in a social formation’s totality; rather, Resnick and Wolff use the word site as a synonym for a group of processes; “Each process in society is understood as overdetermined by all the others, as

⁵⁹ Resnick and Wolff, p.?

⁶⁰ This seems both more obvious and complex in a *social* practice where (part of) the material site of a practice is also a site of human subjectivity. One might think of, for example, the material (e.g., anatomical, biological, chemical, etc.) conditions and limits of the human body as a site of the human subject that partly constitutes the “mind” of a distinct individual subject that in turn partly constitutes practices.

the site constituted by their interaction.”⁶¹ As Resnick and Wolff do, a site could perhaps be logically decomposed into groups of past and current processes; for example, material sites could partly be decomposed into natural processes, etc. As such there would be no need for the concept of a site. However, history of past overdeterminations and moments that situate a current practice to its position in the total set are categorized to comprise the site of practice as ontologically distinct simply due to its “pre-given” quality relative to the current determinations of processes that are effective in the current practice.

Therefore, distinction between the site of a practice and its processes is not clear-cut; rather, it is mainly a practical necessity.

The relative constitutive importance of any given practice is partly due to its particular location in various “networks” of practices and their sites. A site is where the “relative” effectivities of all other practices interact with the effectivities of the “special” processes of transformation specific to that practice and its site. Practice, therefore, has the property of being doubly situated in reality; the specific material context of the local space itself is situated in a wider social, historical and natural context. In this way the site of a practice has two dimensions: its constrained material reality and its relative position in the totality. Some general categorizations of sites may include the market, the family, the corporation, the body, but also “the mind,” etc.⁶²

⁶¹ Resnick and Wolff, *Knowledge and Class*, p.5.

⁶² These categorizations are by no means trivial. Conceptualization of particular sites in a theory are certainly constitutive of that theory and its practices, yet this involves a further level of categorization that I will not attempt in this article. Further development of the tentative framework presented in this paper, however, would require such categorizations. Categorization in general (i.e., categorizations of processes, sites, practices and forms of overdetermination) is vital to bear in mind for many reasons, but it can be approached positively from two rather distinct perspectives: (1) how, as a theorist with given certain histories and goals, should one “best” categorize the possible elements of social formations, or (2) how, as a self-reflexive subject, theory may question its own formation of concepts, etc., as objects of study and scrutiny.

Likewise, the material reality of the site of a social practice can be distinguished into two “concentric” regions; namely, of the epistemic sites (i.e., material conditions and particularity of each individual subject and sites of inter-subjectivity involved in the practice) as always existing within the local material site of transformation (i.e., all local material conditions of the practice of transformation). In such a formulation all social practices include in their “objective” material sites, the material conditions of the sites of “subjectivity.” The most easily distinguishable and perhaps the most important of these material sites of the subject are the bodies of human beings involved in the practice but also the material conditions required for necessary inter-subjectivity (e.g., sites of communication, discourse, rhetoric, or “ideology”). Situating the human subject within an overdetermined ontology also has implications about possible epistemologies of overdetermination. But what is the nature of this “epistemic subject” with regard to practice, or how to initially approach its conceptualization? And more generally, is any given practice constituted merely by various processes and its sites, or after we take these into account are we left with some unidentified “substance” that “somehow” brings out the particular moment of the practice of transformation as a constitutive element of a totality?

(iv) Forms of overdetermination

The “last” conceptual component of any social practice in particular or of any social formation in general is intended to create a theoretical space in the general ontology of the totality in order to account for various possible categorizations of the different ways overdetermination can take place.⁶³ This fundamental problem arises out

⁶³ Althusser talks about *the* social practice as “the complex unity of the practices existing in a determinate society.” Is it possible to talk about the social practice as in, for example, the social practice of society? It

of the suspicion that the form (or “nature”) of overdetermination—namely, how various objects and effectivities interact, mutually constitute each other and culminate in contradictions, processes, practices, etc.—across different social practices or processes for any given total set does not necessarily need to be universal whether in terms of a constant form or in terms of a fundamentally chaotic or “random” nature. Rather, it seems more reasonable and, I believe, vital to think of the specificity of various forms of overdetermination that are active in the given social formation at hand.

At the level of a given practice specificity of overdetermination can be categorized in terms of *local forms* of overdetermination active around the sites of the practice, whereas with regard to the mutual constitution of objects involving numerous social practices (e.g., division of labor) one can perhaps talk about *general forms*. One possible categorization of general forms of overdetermination is perhaps the concept of the “decentered totality”; Stephen Cullenberg uses this phrase to qualify the lack of an independent causal essence or “center” of an overdetermined social formation. A decentered totality, therefore, lacks a determining causal “principle.” Another possible general form of overdetermination may perhaps be a state of “equilibrium” where various effectivities between practices “somehow” balance out; yet, an overdetermined ontology

seems problematic for many reasons. Most importantly, a singular practice implies that one total social practice constitutes the total set (or at least the constitutive subset); however, the overdetermined totality is not a singular totality. Following Stephen Cullenberg, it is a “decentered totality,” with no unifying essence. The category of “the social practice” seem to be a prelogical abstraction, in effect naming by assumption, all practices that are “out there.” Yet, if we can talk about, for example, the daily practices of “ants” as their social practice perhaps we can talk about our economic interdependencies as constituting the subject of economics? Even though Althusser talks about “a determinate society,” a “determined means of production” and a “determinate relations of production,” he also categorizes the social practice into political, ideological, theoretical, technical practices together with the practice of production of commodities. It seems we can talk about the social practice in this manner, and, it is perhaps more reasonable to expect the constitutive subset to contain only some (perhaps most) of the various distinctive and contradictory practices. In such a conception, determination by the practice of commodity production “at the last instance” would only be one possible form of overdetermination.

with fundamental constitutive complexity and continual flux would imply such a state of equilibrium to be neither stable nor unique.

Local forms of overdetermination, on the other hand, are about categories at various levels within a practice. Specifically, a local form of overdetermination is a theoretical explanation of the particular form of interaction of effectivities of a practice's processes around a site that culminates in the local effect of the *transformation* that defines the practice at hand. For example, one dominant way of abstracting from this complexity in economics at the "local" level is the notion of rationality that organizes the individual behavior given the particular sites of exogenous "preference relations" together with various material constraints. As I explain in the second part of the essay, it is specifically within this duality of "theory vs. material reality" where ontological questions become epistemological ones.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Louis Althusser, "On the Materialist Dialectic" in *For Marx*, Verso: London, 2004.

Stephen E. Cullenberg, "Althusser and the Decentering of the Marxist Totality," in *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory*, ed. Antonio Callari and David F. Ruccio, Wesleyan: Hanover, 1996.

Stephen E. Cullenberg, "The Burden of Socialism: Towards a Thin Definition of Socialism," *Rethinking Marxism*, 5:2 (Summer 1992): 64-83.

Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff, *Knowledge and Class*, University of Chicago: Chicago, 1987.

Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff, "Rethinking Complexity in Economic Theory: The Challenge of Overdetermination," unpublished.