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Society and Social Class (2)

- Archives - Archives Générales 2006 - 2022 - 2008 - N°14 Juillet/July/Juli/ julio 2008 - Theory / Théorie - What is « Society »? -

Date de mise en ligne : Sunday 13 July 2008

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The idea of “society” emerged as a central conception in the modern worldview as part of the great convulsions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During the bourgeois revolutions in England and France, it was necessary for opponents of the feudal system to offer a vision of the totality of the existing complex of political and social relationships characteristic of the population, a vision denying the legitimacy of the feudal-aristocratic mode of social domination. In these contexts of social struggle and political-ideological debate, the idea of the “people” or “nation” was used to mobilize the population against traditional conceptions of social order or authority. In the 1820s, Auguste Comte objectified the scientific study of society in language, when he coined the word “sociology”.

Living during the immediate aftermath of these bourgeois revolutions and their consolidation, and during the beginnings of industrialization, Karl Marx enjoyed an exceptional vantage point from which he was able to penetrate the ideological mystifications accompanying the great transformations. It was in formulating his critique of capitalist political economy that he developed the idea of social class conflict (or struggle) as the determining factor in the evolution of political institutions and modes of material production. The special force of Karl Marx's idea of society is its capacity to dispel the philosophically idealist mystifications of State and Nation.

Marx's great contribution was the idea that the populations of the industrialized or industrializing national entities of Western Europe were integrated by the centralizing tendencies of capitalist production. The political implications of this idea were readily apparent. If the idea of the “people” or “nation” was subversive wherever feudal social relations continued to exist, it immediately became reactionary whenever anti-feudal, bourgeois revolutions were accomplished. The notion of a population united against aristocratic elites was a powerful force for social change. But, after the revolution, this same notion became an essential defense of bourgeois property relationships. It was, in fact, from this time that the idea of “society” became the focal point for ideological debate. What (or who) was the “people”? How can (or should) the divisions within it be described? What are the mechanisms, which explain how these divisions, are maintained or transformed?

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If the ideological implications of these questions are clear, their scientific thrust is no less important. Marx was not simply engaged in political or ideological debate, because the idea of “society” had not yet emerged upon any solid empirical or philosophical foundation. Marx's objective was, therefore, to document and explain how populations came to be constituted in different ways according to historical and socio-political circumstances. His task was to explain the emergence of modern class-stratified society in terms of secular processes, as the result of a logical transformation of social relationships, economic organization and technical innovation. The novelty of this approach was that there was simply no general theory of society founded upon historical study at that time, in spite of many existing observations and conclusions about the advent of bourgeois polities and capitalist economies.

Part of the problem was the “sacralization” of the bourgeois revolutions. The “nation” had become an idealized entity transcending social description itself.

This was especially true in France where the debate concerning social relationships was brutally terminated by terror and dictatorship (from 1793 to 1815). In England, the strategy of newly established powers was to deny that any change in social authority had taken place. There, it was insisted by ideologists, the aristocracy continued to exist, but was relatively restrained by a system of constitutional political representation. In Marx's Germany, these arguments and ideological tendencies existed as part of a movement towards national unification, and were expressed most forcefully through the medium of an idealist philosophical tradition imbued with Christian spiritualism. (Hegel produced the most effective intellectual synthesis of these trends.)

Marx was therefore confronted with the prospect of a German bourgeois revolution combining the worst elements of the English and French experiences. Not only was the notion of the “nation” and “people” used to legitimize the ascendance to power of the bourgeoisie and the creation of a capitalist State, many sincere “democrats” believed

that such ideas were progressive forces for change. The only way to counter such ultimately reactionary ideas was to demonstrate how the social relations required by capitalist production were inherently undemocratic. The formulation of an alternative conception of “society” was, thusly, Marx's most essential objective. His conclusion was that populations organized by capitalist production were simultaneously united and split apart by the functioning of economic processes.

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In Marx's conception, it was the organization and regimentation (or disciplining) of work and labor in the most cost-efficient manner (in terms of profit) that characterized capitalist production. Any alternative type of social or economic organization was subject to elimination through the mechanism of the market place, or by use of pressure from the State (which tended to facilitate and protect capitalist investment and practice). With respect to the mass of individual people who composed it, society was therefore an increasingly congruent entity integrated by the development of capitalist production.

Central in this regard, the notion of proletarianization is a description of how work and labor are progressively homogenized through the absorption of greater and greater proportions of the population into an increasingly dependent mass of employed or unemployed wageworkers. (Marx would have rejected the recent notion of “exclusion” in description of unemployed workers. In fact, all workers, and especially those unable to find employment, are integrated into the ever-increasing pool of labor made available to capitalist investors – the “reserve army of labor”.) The process of proletarianization is the greatest force for unity in modern society. Thanks to capitalism, national populations were therefore integrated in a new way, and in more powerful manner than ever before.

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But populations integrated by the organization of capitalist production were also divided in new and fundamental ways. As control of capital became the most important source of social authority and political power, and control of the labor supply was the primordial source of capital, the population was stratified accordingly. Those who controlled capital were the capitalist class. Those whose livelihoods depended upon the investment of capital over which they had no control were either part of the wage-earning proletariat, or vestiges of pre-industrial professions or social formations increasingly marginalized by the development of industrial capitalism. A fundamental characteristic of capitalist society is, therefore, the existence of social divisions that cannot be permanently overcome. The capitalist class must control and discipline the great mass of wage earners in order to maximize profits and maintain their control over investment. Those in subordinate positions seek to increase their share of economic largesse and gain more control over decision-making processes.

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Given the structuring of social-group relations by capital, the principle of civic equality is essential to the ideological support of capitalist political institutions. The deliberations and negotiations between political “parties,” generally represent the interests of different social groups and factions. It is because of this interplay of interests and representations that the political lives of capitalist societies appear full of complexities. Only when the capitalist system(s) are jeopardized from within or without is the principle of democratic representation discarded for some more directly authoritarian or dictatorial form of political and social control.

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These are the most important elements of Marx's conception of society. It is a conception which places emphasis on the collectivity considered as a set of group relationships structured by the functional requirements of productive organization. In the historical context of mid-nineteenth century Europe, Marx's formulation of society was innovative in that it insisted upon calling this complex of relationships a “society” (in opposition to the idealistic notions of

“nation” or “people”) while allowing empirical investigation of its component parts (social groups and classes) and historical evolution.

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