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# Society, Community, and the Capitalist State (3)

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Marx benefited from a long intellectual interrogation beginning in the seventeenth century, but his concept of society nevertheless immediately provoked keen opposition. Most disturbing was the idea that society — this integrating entity — was only relatively cohesive. Because capitalist society is a complex of antagonistic interests, it is inherently unstable. The centralizing and integrating dynamic of capitalist production rapidly brings the varied interests of different social and professional groups into conflict. Tensions develop which require the arbitration and negotiation between “parties” within the framework of constituted political institutions. Proletarianization, urbanization, radically increased demographic density and formal democratic representation call an increasingly intricate state administration into existence. In effect, both capitalist production and social relationships become more and more complicated to manage. The costs of this management are increased as well as the size of the bureaucratic-administrative apparatus.

At the origins of the latent instability of capitalist society is what Marx perceived as the “anarchy” of capitalist production. A tendency for the rate of profit to decline in relation to the total amount of investment means that any and all means to increase profits will be tried. Consequently, social misery tends to be overlooked or ignored as short-term financial gain is sought and as political crises occur, produced by social movements and inherent in capitalist politics. A second factor producing instability in capitalist societies is the necessity for a certain amount of “social mobility”. The cooptation of ambitious or talented members of the subordinate social classes into the ranks of capitalist operatives, managers or functionaries is combined with the contrary possibility that some members of the privileged classes will lose status and financial resources. The system is competitive in both theory and reality and, although the preservation and continuity of elites is one of its main features, the overall atmosphere created is nevertheless one of insecurity, impermanence and existential anxiety.

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It is clear that Marx's concept of society is in the nominalist philosophical tradition (as opposed to the idealist school of philosophical realism). It is not a sociological notion to be studied in isolation from historical development and current political affairs. In effect, Marx's definition of society is designed to demystify society in the act of definition itself. It is intended to de-sacralize a philosophically idealistic notion of the People or of the Nation. In this way Marx accomplished an act of social praxis that at once advanced social theory in a scientific direction and countered a major element of capitalist propaganda.

The importance of Marx's definition of society is apparent when we consider its antecedents and those who reacted against it.

It would be exaggerated to say that all social conceptualization since Marx has been in reaction to the idea of society that he developed. Marx himself built upon the contributions of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Smith and others, and his work is inconceivable in isolation from them. It can be said, however, that Marx's explanation of society as a self-destructing entity composed of irreconcilably antagonistic social formations is a social concept which poses an inescapable political question: can industrial-capitalist society achieve real integration and internal stability?

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Honest observers of industrializing countries in the nineteenth century could not ignore the process of social disintegration accompanying capitalist development. Certain features of this process were readily apparent; most prominent were urbanization and ruptured social bonds, the growth of spontaneous and organized protest against capitalist practices, the rise of anti-social theories and doctrines (of which Marx's work was a part). The examination and criticism of all the vicissitudes of capitalist practice and of bourgeois existence was not dissociable from the new social science. When Auguste Comte created the new word “sociology”, the study of *society* in the 1820s he saw the new science as an element in the evolution of social relations towards greater harmony and away from the disruption caused by rapid evolution.

It was Ferdinand Tönnies, in his *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887) who established the most influential framework for understanding how modern society was essentially destructive of human relationships. Seeing his work as continuing the conceptualization established by Marx, Tönnies focused upon what he considered the characteristics of the new type of social collectivity created by capitalist production. Human contact was dramatically different in the environment created by what he called *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* because money relations condition all aspects of life and mentality. The disintegrating effects of capitalism meant that the very idea of *Gesellschaft* presented a paradox in that a cohesive social entity had become impossible. *Gesellschaft* was thus only an idea of association; it was a speculative fiction. But, at the same time, the collectivity existed. There was an association of individuals in which each performed some task demanded by the capitalist system of production, but this very system subverted social cohesion.

That Marx's idea of society was subversive is seen in the way Ferdinand Tönnies and, later, Georg Simmel and Max Weber elaborated in different ways how capitalist society developed by destroying the organic bonds characteristic of *Gemeinschaft*. These three thinkers all maintained that extensive state bureaucracies and police forces were created in order to impose order upon the disturbed, disorganized populations exhibiting obsessive tendencies (the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, for example), emotional instability and other forms of irrational behavior in the new social environment. In the work of these major thinkers, society was synonymous with cultural disruption, nervous disorders and political violence.

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It was in reaction to this perception of society that Emile Durkheim reversed the paradigm established by Tönnies and provided contemporary sociology with a conceptual system that has been used consistently to discredit Marx's idea of an essentially unstable society in which different forms of alienation predominate.

For Durkheim, society was becoming more cohesive, not less. The increasingly complex division of labor and greater population density created relations of greater mutual dependence and, in addition, a common culture that he called the *conscience collective*. What was often understood to be evidence of social disintegration — socialist ideas, working-class organization and strikes, anarchist terror, etc. — were only temporary symptoms of the transition to a more cohesive social organism. Durkheim's work was an attempt to create a new idea of society, one in which industrial-capitalism provided an integrative dynamic that showed Marx's ideas to be false. Much, if not most, sociological thought and practice in the twentieth century is based upon Durkheim's idea.

répression capitaliste