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Marx's Idea of Capitalist Society and Opposition to It (4)

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Although many sociologists believe it is possible to synthesize the opposed premises of Marx and Durkheim, it nevertheless seems correct to say that two ideas of society — that based upon Marx's work and that drawing its inspiration from Durkheim — have dominated social thought for the past century. The recurrence of social conflicts within a context of almost constant tension in industrial-capitalist countries tends to validate Marx's idea of society regardless of its denigration in the communications media and in the universities. It is perhaps for this reason that the durkheimian sociologist Alain Touraine, a leading specialist on the subject of "social movements," has asserted that the idea of society is not conducive to informed opinion and understanding about the nature of social phenomena. Like many others who are opposed to the Marxian vision of capitalist society, Touraine advocates a sharper focus upon the individual, social "actor".

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One could conclude that Touraine's rejection of the idea of society seems to be an admission that Durkheim's attempt to substitute the notion that contemporary societies are becoming more and more harmonious has been a failure. The problem is that words like "society," "capitalism," "imperialism" or "third world" evoke a complex set of images of social division, exploitation and domination that are simultaneously the result of and the inspiration for empirical research. To discard such words would represent an abdication of the analytical imagination. (And it is difficult to imagine capitalist thinkers advising the rejection of other words such as, for example, "democracy," "liberalism," or "terrorism" which are so central to capitalist ideology.)

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That the idea of society should become contested in the late twentieth century would certainly not have surprised Marx. As he explained in *The German Ideology* (1854) and elsewhere, the interests of social groups and, especially, the ruling or capitalist class are expressed in terms of a worldview which is congruent with their interests. Such a worldview is not (necessarily) chosen cynically in order to dominate or exploit others, it is genuinely believed to be the most accurate explanation of reality. In this way, Durkheim's idea — that society is essentially an integrating or consensual collectivity in which social bonds are strengthening — is readily accepted by those people wishing to be integrated into capitalist society (or who simply wish to profit in some way from capitalist processes). Given the pervasiveness of capitalist propaganda, especially during periods of relative prosperity, it is not surprising that people from all social categories including the proletariat adhere to this worldview. Called "false consciousness" by Marx, Karl Mannheim discussed this phenomenon more completely in his *Ideology and Utopia* (1936).

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In more recent times, when Marxism and anti-capitalist ideas in general have been relatively discredited by the degeneration and dissolution of "socialist" regimes, new forms of ideological debate have been accompanied by the idea that existing capitalist society represents the only viable form of social organization. In this new context, Alain Touraine's assertion that the very idea of society is counterproductive has been elaborated by the current of "postmodernism," which denies any possibility of unifying knowledge as a means of concerted action. Philosophical systems which link clear epistemological premises to explanations of social and historical process are said to be "meta-narratives" necessarily deforming or eliminating parts of reality and, therefore, necessarily false. A corollary idea characteristic of "postmodernism" is that juxtaposing two ideas of society seen as two sides of an ideological struggle is a "binary" conception and, therefore, another artificial reduction of complex reality to a preconceived formula.

The force of the postmodernist rejection of unifying concepts is, however, weakened by phenomenological considerations well considered by generations of philosophers. At the time of Hegel and Marx it was understood that an object of study has to be named before its complexities can be explored to any meaningful extent. Society was not to be understood as a static entity, but rather as part of a process involving contradictory forces and tendencies. The ideas of a "unity of opposites," "the negation of the negation," "internal contradictions" and "dialectical change" in the hegelian and marxian philosophical traditions are attempts to evoke the complexity of a process which tends to

escape the explanatory capacity of linear, one-dimensional western rationalism.

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Marx gave special attention to the question of conceptualization in relation to scientific method in his introduction to the *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie (Rohentwurf)* in 1857 (itself the preliminary drafts of his ideas which eventually became the first volume of *Das Kapital*). The scientific method as explained by Francis Bacon in the early seventeenth century was to go from the particular to the general. The political economists critiqued by Marx, on the contrary, habitually went from the abstract (general) to the concrete (particular), and then they stopped. In contrast to both Francis Bacon (who believed that it was possible to proceed directly to the concrete) and the political economists (who simply project their conclusions about capitalist economic relations from their abstract idea of capitalist society) Marx explained that it was indeed necessary to begin with an initial idea of the totality, proceed to concrete relations, and then return to the larger abstraction which was, in fact, the real subject of research and analysis. "[T]he method of rising from the abstract to the concrete," he said, "is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind." The concrete cannot, however, be the subject of investigation because it is only part of a whole:

"The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation [*Anschauung*] and conception."

The idea of society is at the beginning of this process, and is its ultimate objective; it is the "real subject".

The following passage clearly shows how the idea of (capitalist) society was the central conception in Marx's work. He explains that "The totality as it appears in the head, as a totality of thoughts, is a product of a thinking head, which appropriates the world in the only way it can, a way different from the artistic, religious, practical and mental appropriation of this world. The real subject retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before; namely as long as the head's conduct is merely speculative, merely theoretical. Hence, in the theoretical method, too, the subject, society, must always be kept in mind as the presupposition." (This citation and above from Karl Marx, "Introduction," *Grundrisse*, Penguin Books, 1973, p. 101-102)

All the categories of economic thought and investigation — rent, labor, exchange, price, property, etc. — are only elements in the attempt to understand something of which they are part of and which transcends them: bourgeois (capitalist) society.

As Marx explained: "In the succession of the economic categories, as in any other historical, social science, it must not be forgotten that their subject — here, modern bourgeois society — is always what is given, in the head as well as in reality, and that these categories therefore express the forms of being, the characteristics of existence, and often only individual sides of this specific society, this subject, and that therefore this society by no means begins only at the point where one can speak of it as such; this holds *for science as well*." (*Ibid.*, p. 106)

Because it is the beginning point, the subject, and the ultimate consideration of Marx's analytical work, the idea of society can perhaps be considered its key element. The marxian idea of society is therefore a dynamic conception of the social relations of production in which all of past development, present tensions and future possibilities can be seen. The history and present situation of the proletariat, for example, is the history of a new type of social relationship remaining characteristic of capitalist society even though the composition and mentality of this social class are constantly being transformed by the evolution of capitalist production.

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It is this dynamic element in the marxian conception of society that is subversive of ruling ideologies. The idea of

capitalist society has a critical content designed to deconstruct the capitalist worldview and the propaganda sustaining it. Postmodernism, on the contrary, denies the capacity of any idea system to contribute to "enlightenment"; and it is for this reason that this postmodernist current of thought must be seen as a recent development of capitalist ideology. Ultimately it is an *antiphilosophy* that rejects the very possibility of social science in that it holds out no real promise of greater understanding of life or nature (themselves ideas which can be constructed

or deconstructed). Postmodernism must join similar attempts (such as pragmatism, logical positivism and the dogmatic reductionism that passes for value-neutral social science that C. Wright Mills called "abstract empiricism" and that V.I. Lenin called "empirio-criticism") to eliminate dynamic social thought of which the idea of society is a part.

The continual reemergence of such intellectual trends reveals the fundamental importance of the idea of society and, more particularly, the importance of the marxian idea of society. The idea of society, whether as a particular "structure," as a set of social "relationships" or as an "intellectual construction", inevitably encounters opposition because it is founded upon social perceptions, epistemological orientations and political aspirations. The idea of society is an element of ontology, and necessarily political in its implications. But even without the opposition provoked by particular notions of society, it is clear that research in the contemporary academic disciplines of sociology and anthropology would be virtually impossible without them. The conception of human collectivity as "society" is essential for all social understanding. Marx can be considered as having contributed the definition of it that has had, and continues to have, the greatest influence over serious social and political thought.

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