

Material Dialectics and Socialist Politics ¹

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A prime source of discomfort among some marxist intellectuals is that the theory they work with is too far removed from day to day politics. This discomfort is not without justification, for marxism makes the claim of being an essential component of any attempt at overcoming capitalism, and marxist intellectuals are usually concerned that their theory be relevant to the pressing questions of actual political struggles. In particular, there is an implicit understanding that marxist theory has to be useful in formulating political strategy, especially with Leninists (including Trotskyists) and Euro-communists. The way in which this understanding is usually expressed is in the call to make 'concrete analysis' and to avoid 'abstractness'. Indeed, with some marxist writers one finds a distinctly apologetic tone when they have to use conceptual terminology. In the following, I intend to probe a little more deeply behind these conceptions of 'abstractness' and 'concreteness' in order to show that they are expressions of a false response to the undeniable separation of marxist theoretical work and practical, actual struggles and that, rather, the terms 'abstract' and 'concrete' have a general, meta-theoretical meaning *within* theory which describe one of the aspects of dialectical thinking. Through this discussion, the question of what characterises marxist theoretical work will also be raised and the attempt will be made to demonstrate that the conception of marxist theory and its political application is sullied by the vernacular use of the terms 'abstract' and 'concrete'. I have some reluctance in publishing these reflections, because the discussion necessarily involves touching on work which is at present unpublished, leaving me open to the accusation that I anticipate results which aren't argued for and which will be disputed. Nevertheless, I have decided on publication on two grounds. Firstly, that which is referred to in the following has arisen out of a research program carried on over the last years in Konstanz and Sydney and will presently be published, and secondly, this general paper may provoke interest in and point out the political relevance of such a research program.

First, I will seek to show that there is already something paradoxical in the notions of 'abstractness' and 'concreteness'

as commonly used by marxists. To be abstract generally means that the actual circumstances which exist or existed in a particular capitalist society are not being spoken of, but rather the terms are so general as to include a vast variety of phenomena without singling out a particular instance. Thus, for example, to talk of 'commodities' is to be 'abstract' because the particular commodities produced today are not distinguished from the sorts of commodities produced in the nineteenth century - which can give occasion to the accusation of being 'ahistorical'-, nor are the commodities divided into the innumerable types such as agricultural products, motor cars, textiles etc. etc. To talk abstractly, then, is to talk in such a way that many different particular phenomenal contents are captured in one breath. If in talking abstractly, we are able to encompass many particular circumstances and phenomena, then there would, at first glance, appear to be no reason to complain about 'abstractness'. For the particular phenomena could just be filled in under the heading of the abstract categories, and there we would have a 'concrete analysis'. But for most situations in conjunctural politics what is needed are the empirical details of a particular situation. To undertake a concrete analysis seems to require very little use of 'abstract' categories. The latter may provide a general framework, but the details of the abstract analysis have apparently very restricted application to solutions of empirical questions. The 'concrete' has so many peculiarities that the relevance of abstract categories is questionable and each particular conjuncture in capitalist society has to be approached anew with a fresh assessment of the facts.

Here, however, the paradox of the notions of concreteness and abstractness appears. Concrete analysis appear to be closer to reality because they grapple with circumstances which can be read about in newspapers or historical documents. But this very immersion in reality prevents such an analysis from saying anything which could reveal the nature of our form of society, ie. it is unable to lay bare any inner connection of capitalist society because it grapples only with a particular, restricted constellation of empirical data. In this sense the concrete is abstract and fragmentary. Abstract, general theory, on the other hand, is in a position to provide knowledge of capitalist society because its categories are general ones, which are not tied to particular, accidental instances of phenomena. Its generality allows it to make conceptual connections between phenomena which thinking that is tied to particularities is unable to make. Abstract categories by no means have an ideal existence separated from the given reality, but treat via concepts various general features of that reality in order to gain an understanding of it. The use of concepts by general theory does not mean that it is in

any way 'further' from reality than concrete analyses, but simply that it is using the form of thinking which is appropriate to it, ie. conceptual thinking. Concrete analysis is just as much thinking activity, but it has not taken the trouble to ask itself how it should order its thoughts. Rather, it follows the ordering of common sense. Abstract, general thinking is, in one important sense, much more concrete than all concrete analyses, because it allows the object, capitalist society itself, to become known. Concrete analysis is content to collect the immediate facts and give them an order, but this is not sufficient to capture the contradictions of our historically determinate kind of society. Such studies thus tend to remain on the level of *description* of particular phenomena.

Many marxist intellectuals make the claim that this gulf between abstract categories and the 'concrete' empirical can be overcome and needs to be transcended if political struggles are to be properly informed by marxist theory. Fine and Harris, for example, in their book Rereading CAPITAL (London 1979); put forward a view of marxist theory according to which a movement can be made from the analysis of the capitalist mode of production, as contained in Capital (with the necessary corrections of Marx's presentation), to 'concrete social formulations': '...the most abstract concept of the capitalist mode of production abstracts from the existence of nations and national states, but to produce on the basis of it the concept of the nation and national state still leaves us with a relatively abstract concept of the social whole; it remains a concept of the mode of production (!) and is only one small(!) step further toward the concept of the concrete social formation (Britain in the 1970s for examples).' (p15). Thus, although Fine and Harris admit that the progression of concepts to the concept of state still remains at a general (what they call 'abstract') level, they are of the opinion that 'the concept of concrete social formations is to be produced by proceeding from the most highly abstract to a *succession* of less abstract concepts until (!) the concept of concrete social formations is produced.' (p. 14f emphasis original) In their schema, the analysis starts and remains on a very 'abstract' level, even in coming to the concept of state. Only when a further progression is made to a concrete social formation, 'Britain in the 1970s for example', can we say, according to them, that we have finally reached the 'concrete'. But here come the confusions in the use of the terms 'abstract' and 'concrete'. For Fine and Harris, the concept of state, as a concept which should be developed on the basis of the capital-analysis (this, however, is yet to be successfully performed by marxism, in my opinion) is not concrete enough for them, even though they agree that such a concept of state would be 'less abstract'. On the other hand, only a particular, historically existing society is concrete enough for

them, presumably because it is real, palpable and immediately open to experience without the mediation of concepts (one can read about Britain in the newspapers). What, however, does this meaning of concrete have to do with Marx's meaning of the concrete as a 'concentration of many determinations'?(2). Nothing, I would suggest. The concreteness of the immediately experienced everyday of capitalism is in fact a chaos of particularity, which, as a chaos, is not accessible to dialectical thinking. Rather, what Marx's capital-analysis offers, and what should be aimed at by a systematic continuation of this theory, is a knowledge of the general, *epochal* categories of bourgeois society. By their very nature as epochal categories, the concepts of value, capital, and eventually, the analysis of competition, private life and state, are not suitable for understanding particular, isolated events or the particular history of societies within the bourgeois epoch(3). Nevertheless, the analysis of these spheres of life is concrete, in that in it the totality of *general* relations is provided with a systematic thread which is linked to value-form categories, so that it now exists for thinking as 'a rich totality of many determinations and relations'(4). In picking up the colloquial usage of 'concrete', Fine and Harris are denying that a conceptualism of general, epochal relations can ever be concrete.

The 'concreteness' of the particular phenomenality of, say, 'Britain in the 1970s', however, is a collage of events which has to be transformed by dialectical thinking. For one of the indispensable characteristics of dialectical thinking is that the empirical copresence of phenomena is theoretically separated, and the succession in time of empirical phenomena gains a different ordering in thought.

This leads to another comment on Fine and Harris' methodological chapter. Prodded perhaps by a marxist prejudice that all forms of thinking are somehow idealist, they introduce an ordering of the real beside the ordering of concepts in thought: 'There are then, two hierarchical structures. One is the hierarchy of concepts produced in thought in the movement from the simple to the complex, from high to low levels of abstraction. The other is the hierarchy of reality, the real(?) relationships of determination between real phenomena. The two hierarchies do not directly correspond in any simple manner, but there is a definite and necessary relation between them.'(p.11). It can only remain a mystery what the 'hierarchy of reality' is, if theoretical thinking produces an hierarchy which does not correspond to it. How else is this real hierarchy to be investigated and understood? How can the real hierarchy even be written down, since this presupposes the activity of theorizing reality? One answer offered is 'the existence of a necessary relation between the two hierarchies is given from the fact

that the hierarchy of levels of abstraction of concepts is not arbitrary'(p.11). This, however can be used to show that the ordering of concepts which theorize our modern reality itself reveals a hierarchy of reality none other than the conceptual ordering, which, to be sure, 'is not arbitrary'. A second answer comes a few lines later on where 'the hierarchy of determination in reality is conceived as one where production is determinant, but for Marx this is not only the conclusion of the analysis but also its starting-point...'(p.11) I can agree that production is determinant in a way revealed through the analysis itself, but it is dogmatic to assert such a 'principle of determination'(p.11) as a starting-point which has its own independent validity. If 'production is determinant', this will be revealed by the theory itself in the argumentation of the presentation. Meta-theoretical principles which assert propositions that should be produced as conclusions can only harm the political striving to practically create the critical truth of bourgeois society in the form of a *unified* will for socialism. Fine and Harris overlook that Marx decided not to publish his general introduction to the *Grundrisse*, wherein are contained the considerations of the primacy of production which they cite (cf.p.8), because 'any anticipation of results still to be proven appears to me to be disturbing'.(1859 Preface)

The most Abstract and the most Concrete Level of the Capital-analysis.

The ascent from the abstract to the concrete in the marxian capital-analysis can be partly assessed by considering the starting-point and end-point of the presentation, which represent, respectively, the most abstract and the most concrete categories of the analysis of capital. The beginning, as is well known, is an analysis of commodities in which the concept of value is constructed, along with the forms of expression of value. The development of the concept of money out of the value-form inaugurates the dialectic of the value-form, which underlies the rest of the capital-analysis. The abstractness of this analysis results from the relatively few, very general phenomena of bourgeois society that are dealt with there. The elements of this initial piece of the presentation are industrial commodities which are the product of labour, commodity exchange, money, circulation of commodities, and all these are handled at a very general level without considering, for example, exactly how the commodities are produced. At the other extreme of the presentation, the matter is not so simple because the third volume was left by Marx in such an unfinished state and because the capital-analysis has still to be supplemented by the analysis of competition to bring the presentation of the economic sphere to a close. Nevertheless we require a general conception of what the final level of the analysis in *Capital* is to form an opinion of its 'concreteness'.

The final part of Capital is called 'Revenues and their Sources', and on this level the activity of the agents of capitalist economy is treated from the viewpoint of receiving revenue from revenue-sources, and, for the entrepreneur, of earning profit of enterprise. On this level, all connection of economic activity as gaining revenue with the valorization of capital through the exploitation of living labour is totally absent in the consciousness of the agents. Only through the presentation can one find the systematic thread that traces back these surface-forms to the essential categories of value and surplus-value production.

On the basis of this thumb-nail sketch of the beginning and end of Capital, one could well ask what is concrete about the end-point (the abstractness of the starting-point is obvious). By all criteria of what is usually meant by 'concrete', especially on the context of talk of 'concrete analysis', the level of revenue-sources fails to fill the requirement. On this level there is only a very general picture of the framework of economic life on the surface of society. True, it has taken a long development through many categories of the analysis of value in process and its various forms of appearance for the presentation to reach this final level on which the whole process dissolves into relations between revenue-source loaners and entrepreneurs, but nonetheless, there is much in the phenomenality of capitalist life that is left out of this final picture. Many of the earlier stages of the presentation appear much more 'concrete' because the categories are richly illustrated with historical details. I say illustrated, because the concepts which are developed have a validity which is not bound to a particular historical stage within capitalism but rather hold for capitalist society in general within the bourgeois epoch. As already pointed out above, this meaning of concreteness is unrelated to the methodological meaning of the result of a progression of concepts. The use of historical material by the presentation is drawing on the particularity of the bourgeois epoch, not its concreteness. I agree, however, that, although the historical material provided by Marx, especially in the first volume of Capital, can be said to be illuminated by the conceptual context in which it is presented, that is, that the phenomena are thereby conceptually explained in terms of the nature of capital, it can equally well be said that the historical material is used to elucidate the concepts (5). Preferably, however, the illustrations can be brought closer to home by drawing such material from present-day capitalism (the financial press, in particular, abounds in such illustrations).

The most concrete level of the capital-analysis, therefore, is not swarming with particularity. Rather, it is concrete in the sense of being only able to be articulated on the basis of the preceding conceptual unfolding. The revenue-form level is the

is the general surface form of appearance of the total reproduction process of capital, on which all the forms of appearance of value have been developed. It is, for example, much more concrete than the level of simple commodity circulation, on which only money, commodities, their circulation and the still undeveloped character-mask of the commodity producer figure. A single level of the presentation cannot in itself be concrete in the sense of encompassing the totality of phenomena, simply because it is only *one* level in a wider conceptual development. As transition level to a furthergoing development, the concreteness of the revenue-form level is shown by the fact that it provides the basis for the treatment of economic activity as a competitive struggle within forms of property and right in which such considerations as fluctuations of the market, the fight over the level of wages, the creation of unemployment as a background to the struggle between wage-labour and capital, the difficulties which capital encounters in continuing its accumulation, all find their systematic treatment. That such an analysis was not undertaken by Marx is due to the fragmentary character of Capital, which has to be supplemented by a competition analysis, as many references in the third volume of Capital testify (6). In the competition-analysis, economic activity is developed in its inverted form in which it proceeds from the willed action of individual subjects, rather than the domination of all by an alien relation of production, capital. This further analysis does not come to the particularity of phenomena, but rather comes to conceive new general phenomena of everyday economic life which are not restricted to a particular historical phase of capitalism.

In the last decade, especially in West-Germany, there has been a growing awareness of the fragmentary character of Marx's capital-analysis which has resulted in vigorous debate over a marxist theory of state. The German attempt has come to be known as the state-derivation debate (7), since it attempts to derive the state on the basis of the capital-analysis. The parallel attempts in France (Poulantzas) and Britain (Miliband) have not been so consciously oriented towards a conceptual derivation. The German attempts, at least, are based on the awareness that, in order to handle the spheres of bourgeois society apart from the economy, a progression is necessary from the capital-analysis to the more visible categories on the surface of bourgeois life. These concrete forms of consciousness and social relations are only theoretically accessible in a connected manner via the mediation of an analysis of the essence, the capitalist mode of production, which, as the completed theory shows, forms the basis of bourgeois society. According to this marxist research program, the long series of attempts starting with Hobbes to give a theory of the bourgeois

society, is only to reach a successful conclusion when a (reconstructed) capital-analysis is taken as the initial piece of the presentation. For a critique that aims at the comprehension of the bourgeois totality, an ascension from abstract categories with relatively few determinations to ever more concrete categories which require a lengthier mediation in thought is demanded. Sociological thinking, which starts from the immediate object of its concern, be it the family, work-place interaction or the functioning of the state bureaucracy, is only ever able to describe and rationally order one constellation of phenomena, which remains separated from other constellations. This awareness is coming more to the fore in marxist theory, in that it is generally accepted that levels of the analysis have to be distinguished one from the other. (Needless to say, the recognition of this elementary feature of dialectical thinking has not come to the social sciences, including the neo-Ricardians.) There is, however, a reluctance to think conceptually and, instead of providing stringently argued conceptual developments, all sorts of meta-theoretical admixtures are used which serve to come to results on the basis of 'materialist principles', 'history', 'ontological principles' and the like, rather than on the basis of a development of thought which is capable of consensus. Fine and Harris are not alone when they argue against the neo-Ricardians on the meta-theoretical grounds that they cannot conceive the unity of the 'spheres of production, exchange and distribution' and that they abandon the principle of the determination of the spheres of exchange and distribution by the sphere of production. Marxists are reluctant to take conceptualisation seriously and to only think the concepts developed in the presentation of the capital-analysis, and thereby judge their adequacy. Hegel's admonition to only think the concepts without any foreign admixtures (8) also has relevance to the material dialectics of the value-form.

Consequently, the critique of other theoretical positions, such as the neo-Ricardians, is not undertaken in an immanent way, which draws out its conceptual (not only logical!) flaws. Rather, materialist standpoints, or other meta-theoretical considerations are counterposed to purportedly 'formal' and 'static' analyses. Why, after all, does not someone challenge the neo-Ricardians to give a concept of money, a central concept of any economic theory? Fine and Harris do not do this, because they themselves totally ignore the beginnings of the value-form analysis and its development of the concept of money (9). For them, value theory remains a labour-content theory, with only a contingent connection to form.

One of the general failings of the state derivation debate has been its failure to consider and give weight to subjectivity in

its own right. Somehow, subjectivity always manages to get reduced to economic categories. Sartre was one of the first marxists to take up the attack on orthodox marxism for its refusal to take subjectivity seriously. 'There are two ways to fall into idealism: The one consists of dissolving the real in subjectivity; the other in denying all real subjectivity in the interests of objectivity. The truth is that subjectivity is neither everything nor nothing; it represents a moment in the objective process (that in which externality is internalized) ...' (10). His conception of material dialectics, however, is deficient insofar as particular, not general, phenomena come to the fore as examples of areas which marxism has not yet adequately treated. 'If I want to understand Valéry- that petit bourgeois intellectual, sprung from that historical, concrete group, the French petite bourgeoisie at the end of last century - then it is better for me not to consult the Marxists' (p 53). His railings against the abstract, 'historical-materialist' marxism, which ossifies everything in formulas of relations of production and class oppositions, is fully justified in that this kind of marxism reduces everything to economic relations and material interests, systematically excluding any treatment of phenomena in which subjectivity has to be treated in its own right. Sartre has in mind a form of materialist analysis which is oriented toward tracing the particularities of the course of bourgeois history, and even of particular individuals. I am simply very sceptical about the power of dialectical thinking to come to the analysis of the minutiae investigated by sociology: 'If we do not have the instruments necessary for studying the structure and influence of this "social field", it will be altogether impossible for us, by simply determining the relations of production, to bring to light typically Roman (!) attitudes' (p 82). Thus, while I can agree that 'the very development of the dialectical philosophy must lead it to produce totalisation in depth. So long as Marxism refuses to do it, others will attempt the coup in its place' (p 82), the 'concrete determinations of human life' (p 82) which Sartre should aim to theoretically capture are not the historical particularities of 'Roman attitudes' or Valéry. Sartre, like Fine and Harris, confuses 'concrete' with 'particular'.

Systematic Categories and Empirical Studies

What relevance does systematic theory of the capitalist mode of production and its surface forms of competition have to the concrete analyses and historical studies which are put forward by many marxist intellectuals as being vital for the political fertility of marxist theory? If one considers attempts to make use of the categories of Capital in an analysis of a particular conjuncture of capitalism, one is at once struck by the ineptitude of the concepts in treating fine-grain detail. Does this

matter, if '... the same economic basis - the same according to the principle conditions - can show infinite variations and nuances in appearance due to innumerable different empirical circumstances, natural conditions, race relations, exogenous historical influences, which only can be conceptualised through the analysis of these empirically given circumstances?' (11)

We consider this question by looking at the Journal of Australian Political Economy, a first class instance of left-wing dedication to concrete analyses in the most empirical sense. In the editorial to the seventh issue stands in crystal-clear lucidity the aims and therewith the limited nature of its enterprise: '... there is a clear need for a greater unity and co-ordination between organizations that provide serious analyses for and on behalf of Australian workers. As always, the labour movement still suffers from a critical lack of political/economic information upon which it can act in its own interests. ... The Journal of Australian Political Economy will continue this tradition (of labour movement research) by publishing a broad range of political/economic analyses for particular industries' (12). There follows in this issue empirical investigations of the Australian computing, whitegoods, mineral and agribusiness industries, as well as studies of the Papua New Guinea bourgeoisie ('This paper takes as its main concern this otherwise neglected class of Papua New Guinean capitalists, and seeks to establish its existence ...' p 63), and of the Warren thesis on Third World industrial development. With the first four articles the intention is clear. The left-wing researchers are seeking to put empirical information at the disposal of the Australian trade union movement, so that it can plan 'practical counter-strategies' (p 1). They thereby spend their time, on the side of the working class, helping to wage the normal, everyday class struggle, insofar as the working class is part of it. (The landlord class and the functioning capitalists, for example, are left to fight it out among themselves.) In aligning themselves with given working-class interests within the existing bourgeois relations, this journal is not in a position to offer a critique of the limited nature of these interests or of trade unionist struggles. For such an enterprise, Marx's critique of capitalist economy is hardly necessary, since the class interests and the types of empirical data required are immediately determined by pragmatic common-sense. And since the practical, day-to-day politics of the trade union movement are in every sense immediate to the given conjuncture, these researchers feel justified in by-passing a long-winded general critique of bourgeois relations which, purportedly, provides only an 'abstract' theoretical framework for their analyses of the 'concrete' particular class struggles and their work of uncovering the 'true class nature' (p 1) of all kinds of economic and state activities. Categories of

value, surplus-value, valorization, etc. are rightly seen to be of no use in the sociological investigations they undertake. In short, all they use of Marx's theory could equally well be provided from numerous other non-marxist sources.

The investigation of the Australian whitegoods industry by Clive Hamilton could just as well be found in a well-researched article in the financial press. This by no means damns Hamilton's article, as information from the Australian Financial Review is also of use to the trade union movement. Perhaps the only indication of the writer's left-wing politics is given in the conclusion and an accompanying footnote: '... technology which eases the burden of work should be welcomed, on the vital condition that enough work, and work which is no less satisfying (why not *more* satisfying?), is provided'(18). Footnote 18 then reads: 'Capitalist efficiency is concerned only with getting as much value (?) out of the work force. The concept of socialist (!) efficiency recognises that the labour process has a social product as well as a physical one (!?) Therefore work itself - type of work, conditions of work, work relations, levels of satisfaction, etc. - becomes extremely important.' (p 26, 27) The mention of socialism in a discussion of rationalisation of the Australian whitegoods industry is surprising. The reports on the whitegoods industry cited provide compelling arguments for why this rationalisation must take place and therefore why workers must lose their jobs in the context of the survival of the industry in the market place. Swimming against the tide, Hamilton raises the supposedly socialist demand that 'enough work' (that is, no retrenchments) and 'satisfying work' remain. As if socialism meant satisfying full employment under capitalist relations of production! The writer proposes that instead of these rationalisation decisions being made by 'the representatives of capital, foreign and domestic' (p 26), they should be undertaken through 'democratic planning' (p 26), which would only lead to the same or similar rationalisation decisions being forced on the workers directly, rather than on the managers and capitalists, by the exogenous value relations of the market, (that is, if appeals for state aid have no effect). There is a point in Marx singling out the relations of production themselves as the target of his critique of capitalist economy rather than the capitalist (or labourer) bearers of these relations (13). This lies with the critical kernel of his theory, the value-form critique, which has the political consequence that the indirect form of social production mediated by the value-form itself must be overcome, and not merely that the present capitalist bearers be replaced by workers, who would manage a democratically-run capitalism. Since Hamilton's article is plainly an empirical

investigation of a particular branch of capitalist industry, he is not in the position to draw any conclusion regarding the political alternative of socialism. The leap from the description of the inexorable logic of capitalist relations to a proposal for socialist reconstruction can be nothing other than unmediated and ill-founded.

The above discussion was to exemplify the lack of relation between systematic theory and empirical studies. There is a reason for this unconnectedness. The concepts of the presentation cannot be simply extracted from it and used as self-supporting notions. They are only developed within the presentation and, moreover, at specific points within it; they form parts of a structured totality of thought which only as a totality can provide knowledge of the capitalist mode of production and its competitive life. Dissociated from the presentation, the concepts have no determinations and, even as loose notions, do not add anything incisive to empirical studies, as many marxists have discovered through experience.

The Political Relevance of Systematic Theory

a) Capital-analysis

If the capital-analysis has nothing to offer to the assessment of the conjuncture in detail, the question arises as to its political relevance. In considering this question, I want to avoid a detailed discussion of the contents of Capital and of questions of content regarding the building out of the capital-analysis to a system, in order to focus on the general question of what a successful systematic theory of bourgeois society can offer to the historical struggles to cast this form off and construct a socialist society. My view is that dialectical theory is to be considered as a dialogue with the everyday knowledge of capitalist society, through which the chaos of everyday conceptions are brought into a systematic order which reveals an inner connection, so that naive critical consciousness can be thoroughly criticised. This conception of method lies at the foundation of our attempts to reconstruct and further the capital-analysis (14).

Far from being able to grasp historical tendencies towards the collapse of capitalism, value-form analysis occupies itself with a presentation of the form-determinate capitalist valorization process. The grasping of these forms on the basis of everyday experiences from normal bourgeois life seems to us to be within the scope of rigorous conceptual comprehension. The determination of historical tendencies, periods within the bourgeois epoch, conjunctural movements of the world economy, in contrast, cannot be treated with the

same conceptual precision, and this lack of precision gives room for strong political opinions to displace well-founded knowledge.

When one has gained a systematic understanding of the forms of social life, what has one learnt? So far as the capital-analysis is concerned, systematic knowledge consists in knowing how, in capitalist society, productive activity is organised by a relation of production which takes the form of a process with things (commodities and money) and that this relation of production brings forth a compulsion towards the highest tension of labour in order to try to satisfy the unquenchable thirst of capital for living labour. Furthermore, as long as capital is the determining relation of production, the material reproduction of society will take the perverted form of a process not directly and consciously organised by society, and in which the paradoxical contrast between the most highly developed level of social production and the most extreme form of dissociation of the members of society necessarily reigns. The attempt of people to make humans the subject of material reproduction and thus to invert their subordination to an absurd principle of social reproduction, the valorization of value, is thereby shown to be realizable only with the most radical overthrow of the present form of economy. We will return to this below.

b) The Analysis of Bourgeois Private Life and State

A major part of social activity, economic life, takes the form of a system in which people are reduced, against their will, to mere objects, bearers of relations. Thus a science of economics becomes possible in which people can be handled in mathematical terms; hence a separation of the economy as an independent object from the 'real' social spheres of bourgeois society, in which people attempt to live. In our current attempts to gain a sounder understanding of the further consequences of the capitalist form of reproduction for the form of bourgeois society, we have come to delineate spheres of society, private life, on the one hand, and (outer and inner) state, on the other. The indirect form of social synthesis (*indirekte Vergesellschaftung*) which characterises the economy has the consequence that the other spheres are the attempted resolution (*Aufhebung*) of contradictions arising from the lack of an economic social subject-private life, in which people try to compensate for the abstract form of recognition in the outside world through relations of friendship and love; the outer state, which in filling the place of a social subject, subjects society to itself; the inner state, in which individuals become members of society only in relation to a subject standing outside society. Such a systematic presentation of

private life and state is to reveal the extent to which the contradictions experienced in life as a private individual and as a person and citizen have their origin in the capitalist mode of production and hence indicate the degree to which their resolution depends on a revolution which overturns capitalist relations.

This comprehension of the bourgeois totality is to be achieved in a dialogue with everyday thinking which avoids invoking principles concerning the nature of humankind, or meta-theoretical 'materialist principles', but rather seeks to reveal the contradictions in bourgeois life by working up bourgeois understanding into adequate concepts of itself. Insofar as it is necessary for the political struggles to cast off capitalism to have a clear grasp of the form of society which is to be overthrown, and to be able to argue undogmatically that such an overthrow is necessary to resolve the antinomies of modern life, dialectical theory has an indispensable role to fill. Only through the successful completion of a systematic theory and its impregnation in the consciousness of radical political movements will it become possible for apparently progressive social reforms to be recognised as half-measures on the basis of well-founded knowledge rather than political ideology. The overcoming of capitalism will not result from the working out of the immanent contradictions of capitalism, but rather from struggles in which large numbers of people act consciously and with unity on the basis of knowledge which reveals the radicalness of the changes necessary.

A central theme and result of value-form analysis is the indirect form of social synthesis which prevails under capitalism. The 'cell-form' of this synthesis is the commodity as value-form. Capital itself, the relation of production within which all productive activity is performed, is a process of valorization of value and only persists as a form mediated by the market. Any attempt to think constructively about socialism has to take into account the value-form and its consequence of a compulsion of things and a necessarily conflict-ridden form of material social reproduction. For, the organisation of material reproduction consciously by society poses an enormous problem for the construction of socialism, but one which has to be tackled and solved nevertheless. The litmus test for the achievement of a consciously organised reproduction of society is whether, or the extent to which, the value-form, that is, money itself, has been eliminated (15).

Other social forms such as competition, the egoistic form of subjective will, right, person and property; the state with

its repressive and welfare apparatuses and its democratic constitution; private life with its escape into love and the enclosed realm of the family, are conceptualised in a development which starts from the basis of the value-form analysis. This development reveals in what sense the 'superstructure' is 'determined' by the 'base'. The transcending of these contradictory forms of life cannot be assumed to follow of its own accord from the transformation of the capitalist economy into a more 'socialised economy'. The systematic theory of bourgeois society offers a negative critique of the existing totality of social forms. The construction of socialism on the other hand, requires the positive development of a new totality. Material dialectics cannot provide systematic answers to the pressing questions which face a radical political movement which has the opportunity to create new forms. Nevertheless, the proposals which are made in discussions within a political movement have to be assessed in terms of whether they provide an alternative which is only superficially different from the bourgeois forms. The assessment of more communal forms of personal life, for example, will have to be made against the background of the systematic understanding of bourgeois private life.

We cannot assume the persistence in socialism of the characteristic separation of spheres of life in bourgeois society. To talk of an economy as a distinct and separate object within society is already to talk implicitly of the value-form. To talk of a socialist economy as a distinct and separate sphere is a contradiction in terms, for a socialist form of material reproduction would overcome this characteristic doubling of society and in such an integration, the term 'economy' would lose its bourgeois sense. The problem of the construction of socialism, therefore, is not restricted to that of developing a new form of material reproduction, but extends to the development of a new social totality which does not duplicate the antinomies of the bourgeois forms, and which does not introduce new fundamental antinomies into social life. This is to be one of the major results of a completed critical dialectical theory: that the bourgeois form of society is a totality which can be transcended only by considering it as a totality and replacing it by a new one.

The Problem of Making Systematic Theory a Material Force

How is systematic theory to become the background against which radical political movements are to struggle for socialism? This problem constitutes the fundamental problem of revolutionary politics, as expressed by Lenin's famous dictum: No revolutionary movement without revolutionary theory. Our closer specification of 'revolutionary theory' is: a critical, systematic theory of the bourgeois form of society. The

following remarks do not and cannot provide theoretical answers, for it is in the realm of politics, in the course of the practical history of political movements, that such a problem has to be posed and solutions attempted. There is no general theory of revolutionary politics; but there is the political task of making theory a political force. Nevertheless, there are general aspects of this task and these are worth commenting upon without claiming, however, an exhaustive treatment of even these general aspects.

The first thing to consider is whether there are reasons for thinking that the problem is insoluble. Indeed, in the present conjuncture in developed capitalist societies, the obstacles can easily appear unsurpassable. For the gulf which exists between the culture of marxist intellectuals on the one hand, and the ethos of practical political activists on the other, could hardly be greater. Intellectuals criticise political activists for engaging in struggles whose perspectives are confined within horizons compatible with the continued existence of capitalism. Political activists, in turn, criticise intellectuals for not getting involved in the struggles themselves and for standing on the sidelines with their ivory-tower thoughts. This caricature, although crude, captures the kernel of the existing separation between marxist theory and left-wing politics. The separation of intellectuals and radical activists in periods when struggles are waged within the limits of bourgeois social relations, is no wonder. For, the fact that everyday consciousness is different from systematic knowledge implies: i) a process by which everyday consciousness comes to understand itself systematically and ii) that before a radical political movement has engaged in the process of the dialectic, there is a separation between those who have already engaged in the dialogue with systematic theory and those who haven't. A false response to this separation has been the demand for intellectuals to renounce systematic theory precisely because it is not the same thing as everyday understanding. In Australia and in Britain these complaints are usually expressed with the accusations of 'academicism' and 'theoreticism'. This amounts to tarring with the one brush all kinds of intellectual occupation, be they critical theory or the normal sociological rationality. The intellectuals are not to blame for demanding conceptual rigours from their readers; rather the reality which demands a long mediation of thought in order to grasp it is guilty.

It is all too easy for radicals to take on a mistrustful stance towards intellectuals, even when the intellectuals have a similar social background, since the normal society looks askance at anyone who does not *immerse* themselves in everyday

life, and in withdrawing from its immediacy, rather reflects upon it. For those who earn their money through jobs as intellectuals exists the further prejudice that they only use ideas to make a career. And these prejudices have a ground: 'For s/he who doesn't take part exists the danger that s/he holds him/herself for better than the others and misuses her/his critique of society as an ideology for her/his private interest' (16). A further material ground for this mistrustfulness springing out of the life of competition is the resentment of those who are caught in the everyday drudge and tensions of the world of work against those who have won a small space of freedom (most often, in these times, without status or reward) in which to speculate. 'However, as soon as the simple people have to tussle over their portion of the social product, they outdo themselves in envy and spitefulness against everything which can be viewed as *literati* or choirmasters' (no 7). These elements of everyday ideology, together with the intellectuals' privilege that 'they are still granted thinking at all over and above the naked reproduction of existence' (no 6), are sufficient fertile grounds for an ideology of anti-intellectualism to have a virulent existence also in radical, even marxist, movements. These elements of bourgeois consciousness should not be allowed to 'become an excuse for the "idiocy of country life"' (no 7), as often happens in left-wing activist-oriented organisations. In addition, it should not be forgotten that anti-intellectualism is one of the most effective ideological weapons an organisational leadership has against intellectuals who criticise it. The leaders, who appeal to plain common sense, often win the day over intellectuals who, through occupational predisposition, attempt to argue more subtle, theoretical points which presuppose a background level of systematic knowledge. This dearth of intellectual political culture in Australia should be recognised as a great obstacle to the growth of a critical consciousness which is not constricted to a mere emulation of the workers' way of life and their material interest (17).

There can be no doubt that left-wing struggles carried on in normal bourgeois times, when the fabric of bourgeois social relations is more or less intact, have to be waged to a large extent within the structure of the existing forms and institutions. To avoid the existing structures altogether would be to disengage from struggle. The aims of these practical struggles are thus formulated in terms which do not go beyond what is assimilable - even when only after a bitter struggle - by bourgeois society. Nonetheless, it is in the context of such struggles that the germ of a radical political movement lies. For many people engaged in left-wing politics, the immediate goals of struggles are regarded

in the light of a broader, more radical movement towards the overturning of bourgeois society itself. And this will to find a way out of the existing social forms is expressed in the discussions and debates about socialism, which are mostly carried on on the basis of various kinds of ideology. The political arena into which critical systematic theory is to be introduced thus consists of a plethora of political ideologies which the proponents of dialectical theory have to tackle.

A radical political movement with a background in systematic theory cannot be achieved automatically by the formulation and pursuit of a plan of action by a group of intellectuals, but is dependent upon the conjuncture in which such an attempt is made, as well as the general level of *Bildung* of the population. The development of critical systematic consciousness in a radical movement is itself an historical process which is open to the external effects of history. Furthermore, I do not see any compelling reason for thinking that a radical movement will take the form of a centralised, hierarchically organised party.

A central aspect of systematic theory is to provide the background of knowledge on which a radical movement can become united. If we are talking of socialism, then we require a consensus on the most essential features of this new form of society, if the outcome is not to be decided through a naked power struggle between opposing left-wing groups. Only conceptual knowledge, which is capable of consensus through the activity of thinking, can provide the ground for such a unity, in which the differences of mere opinion become raised to a unity in acknowledged truth. Along with the embracement of a socialist political pluralism goes the danger of conflicts of opinion over central questions which can only have one practical answer, because it holds for society as a whole. By the very principle of pluralism, however, these conflicts can only be resolved through compromise and power struggles. On the other hand lies the danger of an organisation which proclaims it has the truth and therefore disqualifies opposing standpoints as bourgeois, or counter-revolutionary from the start without entering into the long historical dialogue necessary to create a consensus. Lenin's 'socialist ideology' and Lukács' 'proletarian *Weltanschauung*' already represent a relativisation of marxist theory which *in principle* precludes the possibility of consensus on the basis of truth (18).

The historical development of a well-founded consensus in a radical movement is thus predicated upon the development of *Bildung* amongst its participants, to a degree where debates over the adequate theoretical critique of bourgeois society and

its consequences for the construction of socialism can be participated in by sufficient numbers of radicals. Rather than providing merely 'concrete analyses of concrete situations', which are far removed from procedures of dialectical thinking, marxist intellectuals need to turn more to the problem of *Bildung*, instead of conceiving political education as a task of popularisation amongst the masses. True, there exists enormous hindrances to the development of the general level of conceptual thinking on the left, especially when one considers the widespread tendencies towards empiricism, positivism and historicism in the anglo-saxon world. Marxist intellectuals themselves must first become convinced about and educated in dialectical thinking. A further step in this materialisation of theory is the teaching of conceptual thinking, which is simultaneously the task of political education. Learning conceptual thinking is as one and the same time the handling of the content of the critique of bourgeois society; they are not separable from one another. (Of course, the general level of *Bildung* provided by the schooling system is an important first predetermining condition for specifically political education.)

Political education is not to be conceived of as an act of delivering the truth of bourgeois society to radicals, but rather as a process of dialogue in which the attempt is made by the presenter, by the one who is versed in the theoretical critique, to lead everyday consciousness through the presentation, taking care to acknowledge objections and to indicate the place at which they can be taken into account. Ways have to be practically found to overcome the restrictions on radicals to engage in a dialogue with systematic theory, and to stimulate the interest of radicals to take part. Such a knowledge of the problems of and the solutions to teaching conceptual thinking can only be gained practically in the attempt to propagate systematic theory. This practical knowledge becomes the heritage of the political movement itself, which finds new ways of tackling the problems of revolutionary education through its own experiences. The process of political education is one that far exceeds what can be done by intellectuals theorising such a process through the written word. In fact, the presentation of dialectical theory itself, although necessarily taking the form of writing as far as the formulation of its concepts are concerned, provides only the basis for dialogue. In a living dialogue, objections will be raised which are not explicitly anticipated by the written presentation. In these circumstances, it is up to the presenter(s) to try to handle the objection on the basis of their conceptual understanding. In this way, the 'living presentation' becomes a much richer and more varied process than the written one.

Once critical systematic theory has found a central place in a radical political movement, the question arises as to the way in which such a theoretical backdrop aids the practical overthrow of bourgeois forms. As indicated above, material dialectics provides a way of ruling out those proposals for a new way of life which are only superficially different from the bourgeois form. It can also offer something to the attempt to develop non-bourgeois forms of struggle, that is, forms of struggle which do not merely remain confined within the limited range of possible configurations delineated by the existing forms and institutions. Even though the initiation of these 'pre-figurative' forms of struggle depends on the practical imagination of the radical movement, the awareness of the restrictions of bourgeois forms and the assessment of what is a bourgeois form of struggle can be aided by systematic conceptual knowledge.

NOTES

1. Many discussions have contributed to the writing of this paper, including those with Peter Beilharz, John Grumley, Marnie Hanlon, Neil Horne, Lucy Kleiber, Mike Roth, Herbert Runzi and Kath Robinson.
2. K. Marx, Grundrisse (New York 1973) 101.
3. This against the predominant 'stages' theory of capitalism, as represented by Lenin's Imperialism and Baran and Sweezy's Monopoly Capital. Cf. Sweezy Modern Capitalism and Other Essays (New York 1972) 38.
4. Grundrisse, 100.
5. A hint of Marx's own attitude toward the historical material in the first volume is given in a letter to S. Meyer, dated 30th April, 1867: 'Volume I comprises the Production Process of Capital. Besides the general scientific development, I give in fine detail ... the conditions of the English ... proletariat *during the last twenty years*, ditto of the *Irish* conditions. You will understand at once, that *all this only serves me as argumentum ad hominem*' (last emphasis only mine).
6. Cf. for example Kapital Bd. III (MEW 25) 120, 128, 152 or correspondingly, Capital Vol. III (Moscow 1971) 110, 118, 142 ff.
7. Cf. Holloway and Picciotto (eds.) Capital and State: A Marxist Debate (London 1978).

8. Cf. Hegel Enzyklopaedie S.3 Anmerkung.
9. One ground for this ignoring of the value-form lies with Marx's deficient presentation. An attempt at reconstruction is contained in Eldred and Hanlon, 'Reconstructing Value-form Analysis I', to appear in Capital and Class.
10. J-P. Sartre, Search for a Method (New York 1963) 33 n. 9.
11. Kapital III, 800; Capital III 791f modified.
12. JAPE No. 7 (April 1980) 1, emphasis mine.
13. Cf. Capital I (Moscow 1954) 20f (modified; MEW 23, S. 16): 'In no way do I draw the figures of the capitalist and the landowner in a rosy light. But here it is only a matter of persons insofar as they are the personifications of economic categories, bearers of definite class relations and interests.'
14. Cf. M. Eldred and M. Roth, Guide to Marx's Capital (London 1978) for a discussion of method, 9ff. In this book we have attempted to present Marx's analysis in a way which sorts out the systematic argument from other elements of his presentation.
15. The keypoint of Marx's dispute with Proudhon was the question of the necessity of the abolition of money or, more fundamentally, of the commodity form of the products of labour. Proudhon wanted to restrain money without abolishing the commodity-form, while John Gray wanted to 'reform' commodity exchange by the introduction of labour-money certificates. 'What is hidden in Gray and remains a secret, especially to himself ... (is) that labour-money is an economically sounding phrase for the pious wish to get rid of money, with money exchange-value, with exchange-value the commodity, and with the commodity the bourgeois form of production ... It was reserved for Mr Proudhon and his school, however, to preach seriously the degradation of *money* and the ascension of the *commodity* as the kernel of socialism and thus to dissolve socialism in an elementary misunderstanding of the necessary connection between commodity and money.' (Zur Kritik, MEW 13: 68f). It is striking that today the debate around the necessity of the abolition of the commodity form plays no central role in the socialist movement.
16. T. Adorno, Minima Moralia (Frankfurt 1950) aphorism no. 6.

17. Hans Magnus Enzensberger writes in an essay on Cuba ('Bildnis einer Partei: Vorgeschichte, Struktur und Ideologie der PCC' in: Palaver: Politische Überlegungen 1967-1973 Frankfurt 1974 S. 86), 'Away with the theorists of the revolution! Away with these marxist theorists! The Marxist-Leninist who's always developing theories is just sponging off society!' (Fidel Castro, Speech of 30 Oct, 1963). Such outbursts abound in Fidel's speeches. They reappear, of course, often in a more attractive form, for instance, in an anecdote from the years 1954/55 which Raúl Castro (Fidel's brother) told to an American guest. 'We read three chapters of Capital', reported Raúl, laughing, 'and then we threw it away. I'm certain that since then Fidel hasn't once looked at it again.' That has a certain charm; there may be scarcely one communist politician who has gone further than the third chapter; there is however quite certainly no-one besides Fidel who is proud of it.' The grounds which Enzensberger ascribes to this anti-intellectualism, however, do not amount simply to a defence mechanism against intellectuals' criticism of his leadership, for such a layer of intellectuals, who could develop a well-founded critique of the Cuban revolution, is entirely lacking in that country. Cf. S. 87 ff on this point.
18. Richard Gunn provides a good discussion of this problem of organisation and consensus in a paper presented to the 1980 CSE Conference in Manchester. Cf. CSE Conference Papers.