

THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE:
CURRENT TRENDS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
FROM SURPLUS VALUE TO SURPLUS
THEORIES: MARX, MARCUSE
AND MACINTYRE
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My intention here is to point to a new development in critical social theory, namely the valuable use being made both in Europe and America of Marx's concept of surplus value. Moreover, by locating some of the implications of this concept in a discussion of the work of Herbert Marcuse and his recent critic, A. MacIntyre,¹ I hope to indicate that the rediscovery of this concept is hardly less important than the discovery of the Paris manuscripts of 1844. For, as is apparent but unstated, "critical theory"² set out to develop Marx on the assumption that he lacked concepts which would adequately account for a radical change in empirical reality. Indeed, what this theorizing came down to was the search for concepts usable within a Marxist framework but allowing one to deal more successfully with the mediations between subject and object. This became popularly understood as the filling out of Marx with an adequate social psychology. Whether or not this is either a necessary or a possible step is not my central concern here;³ but I am, rather, interested in the way in which such a

¹ A. MacIntyre: *Marcuse*, Fontana, 1970.

² I refer here to that German tradition starting in Frankfurt which, with the help of Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer, *et al.* developed into what is sometimes called the "Frankfurt School of Critical Theory."

³ On this question see J. Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis*, Frankfurt/M., 1963, and *Erkenntnis und Interesse*, Frankfurt/M., 1969.

search leads critical theory, via the work of H. Marcuse, to an incorrect and unexamined assumption, namely, that there were no good theories or explanations in Marx which would account for the lack of revolution in the West.

This assumption of critical theory is unfortunate, for the import of recent work by contemporary scholars such as M. Nicolaus and J. Habermas⁴ is that this position is incorrect. In short, there possibly are good arguments in Marx which account for the rise of a middle class and the consequent lack of class polarization within advanced capitalist society. If it is the case that Marx's much neglected "law of value" can enable us to arrive at a Marxian position which views the lack of proletarian revolution as a possibility, then one must begin to regard as superfluous that "critical theorizing" which engaged in a revision of Marx's work for similar purposes.

What follows is an attempt to sketch out the possible importance of the "law of value" within the context of the writings of Marx, Marcuse and MacIntyre.

MacIntyre advances the charge that Marcuse is an elitist and that his elitism derives support from his later unsubstantiated biologism.⁵ I would present an alternative view, that Marcuse is rather a neo-elitist (we shall return to this) and that his neo-elitism does not derive from shifts in his position supported by a biological argument. Rather, it derives from the fact that Marx's weakness was that he did not take his own "law" of industrial capitalism seriously, and that this has been a chief and characteristic fault of Marxism since Marx; that, rather than engage in detailed economic and empirical revaluation of concepts such as surplus value, it has sought to resolve the problem of a "happy proletariat" by merely incorporating the work of theorists such as Freud, whose image of man and society is not only foreign to but incompatible with that of Marx.

⁴ See M. Nicolaus, *Proletariat and Middle Class in Marx, Studies on the Left*. Also J. Habermas, *Technik und Wissenschaft als Ideologie*, Frankfurt/M., 1968.

⁵ MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-88.

In fact, Marcuse has been a neo-elitist since he published *Eros and Civilization*, the book that attempts to synthesize Freud and Marx. Moreover, it seems that Marcuse's empirical arguments rest upon a fairly crude technological determinism which avoids the very weakness in Marxism he is attempting to resolve. Namely, why are members of the proletariat happy if they are still alienated and exploited? This is not to argue that Marcuse is too theoretical or metaphysical; merely that Marcuse has depended on the wrong type of theory, a theory which is deemed to disaster from its inception.

Now, as MacIntyre indicates, at the end of *One-Dimensional Man* Marcuse saw only one chance of revolutionary protest, and that was nothing but a chance. The chance was that "the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted might turn to radical action." This would involve, as Marcuse puts it, a meeting of "the most advanced consciousness of humanity and its most exploited force."

In 1969 Marcuse published *An Essay on Liberation*, which professes to develop further the ideas of *Eros and Civilization* and of *One-Dimensional Man*. In this work he argues that critical theorists can no longer take as their political maxim "to each according to his needs" because these needs are exactly what stand in the way of the present possibilities for revolution in industrial societies. Marcuse states that,

. . . once a specific morality is firmly established as a norm of social behavior, it is not only introjected, it also operates as a norm of "organic" behavior; the organism receives and reacts to certain stimuli and "ignores" and repels others in accord with the introjected morality, which is thus promoting or impeding the function of the organism as a living cell in the respective society.⁶

MacIntyre argues that this unsubstantiated piece of biologism is used as a "basis for a political theory" in which the implied elitism of *One-Dimensional Man* is made fully explicit.⁷ For the

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

implication of such a position is that "human nature is indefinitely malleable." MacIntyre thus asserts that Marcuse can erect a political theory which is elitist, based upon this position, namely that, "the majority cannot voice their true needs, for they cannot perceive or feel them. The minority must rescue the necessarily passive majority."⁸ While MacIntyre is correct in suggesting that Marcuse's all too "fashionable radical minority" of blacks, students etc., is elitist by implication, he is incorrect in suggesting that it is *necessarily elitist*, and moreover he is gravely wrong in suggesting that Marcuse's statements concerning biology provide the basis for this elitism.

The basis of any elitism in Marcuse stems from problems which have characterized all of his work since his loss of faith in the possibility of a proletarian revolution initiated without any radical catalyst from either a revolutionary group or a "breakdown in society." Logically the situation is simple: if one wants a revolution but does not believe that the proletariat is about to engage in self-emancipation, then one has either to assume (a) a catalyst from outside, or (b) an imminent societal collapse because of some independent factor which will transform the proletariat into a revolutionary force. The catalyst usually subsumed under (a) is a revolutionary party or, as at present, students. The usual factor suggested under (b) is a collapse in the economy.⁹

Since *Eros and Civilization* Marcuse has been pessimistic about revolutionary self-emancipation by the proletariat, because of his quasi-Freudian notion of *repressive desublimation*, which inevitably leads to one-dimensional men. His recent temperamental conversion to optimism is only a function of his genuine belief that students, etc., will create the conditions which will awaken the proletariat. Thus MacIntyre's various remarks about changes in Marcuse's assumptions fail to take account of the fact that Marcuse is perfectly consistent within a quasi-Freudian Marxist framework of analysis.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁹ One can also suggest a third condition, a combination of the other two.

Thus we may conclude that Marcuse is driven not to a *necessary* elitism because of his later biologism, but to a neo-elitism because of his attempts to shore up Marxism, not with empirical statements about the possibility of social crisis, but rather by explaining the absence of social crisis in terms of a Freudian image of man.

What Marcuse assumes is that there are no good explanations in Marx as to why and how the proletariat can be partially integrated. But Marcuse does not—as Marx would have been driven to—give us a detailed analysis of the changing structure of industrial societies. Rather, Marcuse incorporates Freud, who sees *everybody as inevitably oppressed*. A real criticism of the weaknesses of Marcuse's arguments must start with this position and then go on to explain why it is that a critical theorist chooses position (a) to the exclusion of (b) and (c) in seeking to predict a revolutionary transformation of advanced industrial society.

The immediate answer to this question is that, unlike Marx, Marcuse "reifies" technology. He seems to see the system as continuing to deliver the goods whatever the circumstances. But as we know, the limitations to the advance of technology and science are in large part dependent upon the nature of investment and expenditure which occurs in the economy. When Marcuse fails to question this process he makes two errors: (a) he fails to see it as giving rise to social conflicts over needs, therefore he is forced to suggest that all "needs" are false and manipulated (thus his quasi-Freudianism); (b) he avoids analyzing why the conflicts on which Marx *predicated* his own optimism have failed to materialize. For if it is the case that the failure of these conflicts to emerge cannot be explained within a Marxian framework, then MacIntyre is correct in suggesting that "to be faithful to Marxism we have to cease to be Marxists."¹⁰

In short, to criticize Marcuse intelligently we have to re-examine the assumptions of Marxism and understand (a) the

¹⁰ MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

faults in Marx and (b) how industrial societies have changed since he presented his analysis.

First, let us turn to the crucial question of Marx's own confidence in the revolutionary nature of the proletariat, and whether this was empirically grounded or merely a psychological state of mind. I would suggest that Marx's own form of optimism was based upon his belief that he could demonstrate through concrete analysis, first, that capitalism had created the material pre-conditions for socialism; secondly, that capitalist society was founded upon a fundamental structural contradiction between "the social productive forces and the relations of production";¹¹ and third, that the probability existed of the development of revolutionary consciousness in a class that formed a majority of the population, the last exploited class in history. As the sole productive class under capitalism, and at the same time the class which least benefits from the productive process, the proletariat is the negation of the capitalist mode of production; by acting to overthrow the existing social order, its members become aware of their own nature and of the true nature of social reality. They are thus liberated.

Marcuse does not dispute the first two factors. Indeed, he argues that the enormous growth of productive forces has made socialism a still more concrete historical alternative. Nor does he dispute that capitalism still manifests the basic contradiction between the forces and relations of production. He argues, however, that in the transition from "free-market capitalism" to "organized" capitalism, a decisive change occurred. *The capitalist class has gained consciousness of the "laws" governing their own system* and the individuals that compose it. He writes that, "Nothing justifies the assumption that the new form of the classic contradiction can be manipulated permanently."¹² But for the

¹¹ Karl Marx, "Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in Marx-Engels, *Selected Works* (Lawrence and Wishart edition, London, 1968), p. 183.

¹² Marcuse, *Negations* (Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1969), p. xx.

moment it is manipulated, with the result that the third factor in Marx's theory of revolution, the historic agent of change, has disappeared. But if Marcuse truly believes this, he cannot claim to be giving a Marxist analysis, because for Marx manipulation and consciousness of the laws of this contradictory system would not alter the possibility of social crisis. The heart of Marxian social conflict theory lies in its labor theory of value. Simply put, Marcuse's analysis of the contradictions in industrial society differs from Marx's in the following important fashion.

Marcuse's whole social analysis is premised upon the assumption of a stable relation between the needs of the controlling agents of the system and the needs of those subordinate to those agents. Thus, if the capitalists within the system continue to accumulate capital and the rest of the population within the system gain more in terms of consumer durables, then the system is seen as continuing to run smoothly and consciousness is seen as automatically unquestioning and adjusted. The notion of any real, objective contradiction disappears from Marcuse's analysis; instead, we are left with a *metaphysical* contradiction between what is *present* and what is potentially *possible*. For Marcuse's analysis presents us with a picture which depicts a social order in which there could be an eternal satisfaction of all classes within that order. He does not understand that the fact that there are classes at all within society for Marx posed a conflicting limitation upon such satisfaction. He fails to see that there can exist objective and uncontrolled contradictions within the system that affect both controllers and controlled alike: that is, if we consider the needs of the controlling agents of the system and the needs of the controlled to be similar, we could perhaps entertain the kind of equilibrium analysis that Marcuse entertains. *But what if the system creates its own needs and generates its own contradictions which are beyond the conscious control of the ruling class or any other group within the system?* Let us assume a society which cannot meet the demands of the productive system as such, the demands both of the controlling agents or the ruling

class, and of the rest of society. I would suggest that if this were the case, Marcuse's analysis would collapse.

The capitalism that Marx was analyzing in large part appeared to be such a society, and therefore Marx's optimism was not entirely misplaced. What Marcuse does not indicate is in what important respects society was not like this and in what respects it has changed.

The question we have posed turns upon understanding the utility of what Marx himself expressed as his "major contribution to the understanding of capitalism—the *labor theory of value*." The following analysis is an exposition of this "law of value," as Marx called it; it is not an economic reductionist analysis, but an analysis designed to show how social contradictions emerge which tend to force the workers to abolish the bourgeois economy. What we have to do if we are to depart from Marx is either to show in what way his reasoning is incorrect—which does not seem to be the case—or how he occasionally drew incorrect implications from it—which in fact he did.

We may remember that for Marx capitalism meant human mastery over nature. Previous epochs had prepared the ground for this mastery, each with its own configuration of alienated existence. The market grew as a result of capitalist accumulation undertaken by the bourgeoisie, surmounting the prevailing feudal conditions, and became the arena for the satisfaction of human needs; even the former subsistence orientation and direct appropriation of surplus product, which characterized feudalism, was transformed by the development of market relationships. With this transformation, production assumed a new dimension of alienation. Under feudalism, the use value of human labor to the human species had been a matter for calculation by the feudal ruling class on the basis of personal greed. That is, the feudal lord could choose to be more or less philanthropic in terms of the amount of surplus product appropriated from his peasants. But under a capitalist exchange relationship, Marx held, the *market dictates the degree of appropriation*. Thus capitalism

transformed human labor itself into an *exchange value* over which neither bourgeois nor proletarian had control. Not surplus *product* but surplus *value* is appropriated, as human labor-power is reduced to quantifiable units of productive exchange value. That is, labor produces exchange value. The surplus which accrues to the bourgeoisie is a part of the value created by labor-power which is not *equivalently returned in exchange values* (*wages, salaries*). Until this surplus value, in the form of commodities, is used in exchange relationships in the market, it consists of surplus available for reinvestment, and until a certain "state of the market" is attained and investment is made, commodities cannot become available for human gratification.

Marx's humanization of capitalist economics revealed its dynamics as social, as man-made, and therefore as subject to change. But if this surplus value theory is correct and Marx's optimism well placed why has there not been a revolution? To advance theoretically beyond this problem, what we must do—and what both Marcuse and MacIntyre avoid—is to look at the implications of this surplus value theory and assess its applicability to late capitalism. These are clearly stated by M. Nicolaus:

The labor theory of value holds that the only agency which is capable of creating more value than it represents is labor; that is, only labor is capable of creating surplus value. The capitalist system of production consists of the appropriation by the capitalist class of ever greater quantities of this surplus value. In a developed capitalist system, the capitalist class will concentrate on increasing relative surplus value. That is, it will introduce machinery in order to decrease that portion of the working day which is necessary to reproduce the workers' labor power, and to increase that portion which is surplus labor. On the one hand, increased productivity requires increased investment in machinery, so that the rate of profit will tend to fall. On the other hand, the mass of profit will rise, and both the rate and the volume of surplus must rise. What happens to this swelling surplus? It enables the capitalist class to create a class of people who are not productive workers, but who perform services either for individual capitalists or, more important, for the capitalist class as a whole; and at the same time, the rise of productivity requires such a class of unproductive workers to fulfill the func-

tions of distributing, marketing, researching, financing, managing, keeping track of and glorifying the swelling surplus product. This class of unproductive workers, service workers, or servants, for short, is the middle class.¹³

Nicolaus goes on:

. . . it must be considered one of Marx's great scientific achievements (and a great personal achievement, considering where his sentiments lay) to have not only predicted that such a new middle class would arise, but also to have laid down the fundamental economic and sociological principles which explain its rise and its role in the larger class structure. The outlines of what may become an adequate theory to account for the generation, growth, economic function and movement of the middle class have to my knowledge not been contributed by any other social scientist before Marx or after him. Here is a rare accomplishment and a rare challenge.¹⁴

Indeed it is a challenge, for if Nicolaus is correct then there has been much superfluous theorizing and little grappling with central problems. Nicolaus's own contribution is largely derived from his mastery of the "middle" works of Marx such as the *Grundrisse*. From his understanding of the nature of surplus value he has been able to demonstrate that the law of value holds that revolution is imminent when "productive" workers form the proletariat and constitute the mass of society, but that in situations where productive or manufacturing workers form a *diminishing part* of that society then these revolutionary predictions fail. Of course Marx was aware of this as a problem and seemed in his empirical works to be unsure whether the revolution would occur *before* this process was completed, but in an empirical mood he states the following of Malthus,

His greatest hope—which he himself indicates as more or less utopian—is that the middle class will grow in size and that the working proletariat will make up a constantly decreasing proportion of the total population (even if it grows in absolute numbers). That, in fact, is the course of bourgeois society.¹⁵

¹³ Nicolaus, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁵ Marx, *Theories*, III, p. 49, quoted in Nicolaus, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

All of the above helps to demonstrate the importance of a detailed consideration of the theory of the law of surplus value; but what is most surprising is that we have had to wait until recently for this aspect of Marx's work to come to light and to be utilized by a "critical theorist"; indeed, it is only in the comparatively recent work of a leading Frankfurt theorist, J. Habermas, that this question has been seriously tackled. Paradoxically enough, Habermas' own attempt to discuss the nature of the law of value occurs in his essay, "Technology and Science as Ideology," written in honor of Marcuse's seventieth birthday, July 19th, 1968. In this essay Habermas deals with the empirical application of the law of surplus value:

Since the end of the nineteenth century the other developmental tendency characteristic of advanced capitalism has become increasingly momentous: the scientization of technology. The institutional pressure to augment the productivity of labor through the introduction of new technology has always existed under capitalism. But innovations depended on sporadic inventions, which, while economically motivated, were still fortuitous in character. This changed as technical development entered into a feedback relation with the progress of the modern sciences. With the advent of large-scale industrial research, science, technology and industrial utilization were fused into a system. Since then, industrial research has been linked up with research under government contract, which primarily promotes scientific and technical progress in the military sector. From there information flows back into the sectors of civilian production. *Thus technology and science become a leading productive force, rendering inoperative the conditions for Marx's labor theory of value.* It is no longer meaningful to calculate the amount of capital investment in research and development on the basis of the value of unskilled (simple) labor power, when scientific-technical progress has become an *independent source of surplus value*, in relation to which *the only source of surplus value considered by Marx, namely the labor power of the immediate producers, plays an ever smaller role.*¹⁶

Habermas probably overstates his case here, for as my rendering of Nicolaus' position was intended to show, it is not that the labor theory of value is *inoperative*, but rather that the theory

¹⁶ I quote here from a translation by J. J. Shapiro. My italics.

has different consequences than those usually understood by Marxists. Furthermore, as the theory anthropologizes or humanizes the production process it cannot be that science is an *independent source of surplus value*. Independent of labor or man? No, rather it is independent of *revolution* in the classical proletarian sense, and dependent upon new social distribution arrangements. Under these arrangements (the rise of a surplus class), science plays an increasing role in integrating society, for it vastly increases the productivity of the minority of *truly productive* workers.

There is no opportunity here to go into the many possibilities of an extension in social theory which the reinterpretation of surplus value could bring. Let us hope, however, that social theorists will enter into a debate over the importance of this concept; for much serious and thorough discussion is needed to bring to light the possible fruitful uses of this theory which for so long has remained buried and ignored.