

## COMMENTARY

### COMMENTS ON ERICA SHEROVER'S "THE VIRTUE OF POVERTY"

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The dialogue with Marx's writings and theories that has been going on in Europe and North America for the past few decades has had two aims: historical comprehension of Marx and the historical forces that he influenced and that invoke him, and the development of a framework for comprehending and acting on and in the present. It seems that the more deeply we understand Marx from outside the dogmatic traditions, both pro and contra, the more we can identify the assumptions, both philosophical and historical, that shaped his thought, and the more we discover the irrelevance of Marxism to our own situation. With less exaggeration, and with reference to the split in Marxian thought first identified by Lukács, the more Marxism is clarified and refined as a dialectical-critical method, the less the body of Marxian social, economic, and political theory seems useful for the orientation of social theory or political practice. Of course, Marxian theory is still applicable in a sense that makes it prone to dogmatism: it is a schematism into which reality can always be made to fit comfortably. Does it tell us, however, what we need to know or what we ought to do? Kant tells us that the questions: what can I know, what ought I do, and what may I hope are incorporated in the question: What is man/woman? The ongoing re-examination and re-interpretation of Marx's thought appears to have provided better answers to the question: what is man/woman, and ever worse ones to the questions: what can I know, what ought I do, and what may I hope. Capitalism of course, is rotten and we may hope for a democratic, egalitarian society governed by freely associated individuals, but for any more concrete answers to these questions we must abandon the territory occupied by Marx and enter what is still an historical no-man's land — in some ways similar to the one in which Marx found himself before Marxism came into being.

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Marxism contains both liberating and repressive, progressive and regressive elements. It has been progressive to the extent that it has aided and guided or attempted to aid and guide humanity to a completely democratic and rational society of autonomous and co-operating human beings by supporting and refining the revolutionary, radical, and creative impulses and innovations of oppressed groups, classes, and individuals in capitalist society; and that it has helped in the formulation and promotion of their authentic needs. It has been repressive and regressive to the extent that it has become an accomplice of totalitarian, authoritarian, sectarian, and dogmatic nations, parties, organizations, and individuals and their manipulative, exploitative policies, practices, and ideologies. Marxism is not something finished that can tell us what is true, right, or correct. Rather, it is an historical project and intention that needs to be continually created in order to be a revolutionary force. It can serve as a useful accumulation of theoretical and practical guidelines as long as these are recognized to be modifiable in the light of new social forces and historical situations. It can serve as a form of reaction, as part of the debris of history, when it is employed to define in advance what can or cannot happen, to squeeze the flow of history into a rigid mold.

These considerations and the present global context of social oppression give significance to the task of unraveling Marx's assumptions and isolating those that contribute to dogmatism and limit the flexibility of Marxian theory. Probably the most central and recurrent source of dogmatism in the Marxian tradition is the notion of the proletariat as an ontological entity which by its very nature is the demiurge and negation of capitalism. This conception has a number of weaknesses: 1) It has introduced into the concrete, dialectical analysis of history a metaphysical conception that immunizes the theory against empirical analysis of actual capitalist development, the working class, and forces of negation. 2) It makes absolute the features of capitalist development of the period of liberal capitalism that have been rendered obsolete by advanced capitalism. 3) It is particularly suited to absorbing cultural, religious, and psychological elements that operate to reinforce dogmatism and inhibit critical thought and activity. 4) It begs the question as to the manner of the formation of revolutionary consciousness and political organization. 5) Because it serves as the metaphysical foundation and justification of the labour theory of value, it impedes understanding economic developments that supersede Marx's formulation of this theory. 6) It impedes comprehension of other social groups that play an anti-capitalist role, *e.g.* peasants, women, youth, ethnic minorities. 7) By assuming that there is a self-subsistent essence of the proletariat, it justifies authoritarian political practices that claim to act in the name of this essence, regardless of the actual will of the working class.

The value of Erica Sherover's research, as formulated in her paper on "The

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Virtue of Poverty," is to have demonstrated that the moral-ontological interpretation of the proletariat as possessing inherent universality and negativity preceded Marx's economic and historical analysis of capitalism and of the working class and is independent of the labour theory of value. By isolating this assumption of Marx's, Sherover has made it easier to understand the genesis of Marxian theory, to see clearly its separate components, and to sort out the truth value of the theory from its metaphysical and mythical accretions. Of course, in itself the fact that Marx did think of the proletariat ontologically in 1842 does not necessarily mean that Marx's later thought shares this assumption. Nor does the fact that moral and ontological elements entered into Marx's conception of the proletariat necessarily mean that there is no place for such elements in a critical, emancipatory theory. Yet it does appear that the unity of classical Marxian theory is provided by the background assumption, ultimately of Hegelian structure, that proletariat, commodity production, and revolutionary practice do relate to one another as being, essence, and concept (or objectivity, reflection, and subjectivity) in Hegel's logic. The revolutionary practice of the proletariat is the arrival at self-consciousness of an already existing being, the working class, whose nature possesses universality and negativity owing (as Sherover points out) to its lack of property and exclusion from civil society. This arrival at self-consciousness from the realm of alienated labour in commodity production is at the same time morally good, because it is the concrete realisation of essential spiritual capacities that at first existed only in a negative form. Now it may be that the Hegelian model of self-reflection is the legitimate basis of emancipatory theory (as Habermas has argued from a materialist point of view). However, that this model has the same structure as an empirical social class and its history is not something that can be assumed.

For Marx this conflation made sense because of an unusual historical circumstance. Marx stood at the historical threshold between estate and class society. Prior to advanced capitalism, the distinction between the ruling and ruled classes expressed itself in different rights. The working classes in the initial stages of industrial capitalism did not have the right to vote, the right of association and combination, the right to education. Hence the accuracy of describing the proletariat as outside of civil society. Hence the significance of the contradiction between bourgeois liberalism and the proletariat's lack of right (which Sherover shows to be the link between Hegelian and Marxian social theory). Hence also the importance of seeing that, under these conditions, the growth of the working-class both numerically and in its economic importance in the social order was bound to be an explosive cause of both political and social change. If the development of capitalism was to lead to the first (non-estate) class society, it would also change the historical import of a social and political analysis based on the vestiges of estate society. More of the

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political struggles of 19th and 20th century industrial capitalism in Europe (and the concepts of revolution, reform, and dictatorship of the proletariat) have been concerned with estate society and its legacy than with class society *per se*. This is as true for imperialism and national liberation movements as for domestic politics in national capitalism.

The embourgeoisement of the proletariat, often used by Marxists as a dirty word and an unfortunate historical *bad thing*, is actually as inherent to capitalist development as is the construction of a rational legal system. Yet so heavily does the moral and ideological tradition of the virtue of poverty and the moral/ontological superiority of the proletariat weigh on the consciousness of the Left, that breaking out of it is as difficult and traumatic as the Reformation. This is not the place to analyze why this is so. However, it is worth pointing out that the model of the "virtue of poverty" appears to be quite common to members of ruling elites (and here Sherover's linking of Marx's concept of the poor with that of the Jacobins is important). In *The Ritual Process*, Victor Turner points out that in a wide variety of societies, rituals of status elevation for members of the ruling classes involve stripping down the individual to his bare humanity, to a "liminal" state devoid of roles and statuses which emphasizes communitarian values. Furthermore, founders of religious and ethical movements are often members of high status groups who teach the virtue of poverty and the stripping off of property and status distinctions. Is it possible that Marxist dogmatism is a ritual process for those members of the middle and upper-classes in capitalism who have been the standard-bearers of the ideology of the proletariat's moral/ontological superior status? If so, this dogma will not be effectively combatted by intellectual argument. Indeed, little of dogmatism, Marxian or otherwise, can be combatted by argument. Nevertheless, Erica Sherover's paper does locate the fork in the road that separates, in her terms, ontological and dialectical-historical Marxism.

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