

# MARXISM AND SOCIALIST THEORY

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## TWO: SOCIETY AND HISTORY

It is our understanding that revolutionary thought must take a new course; it is our understanding that we must leave behind old vices, sectarian pursuits of all kinds and the positions of those who believe they have a monopoly on the revolution or on revolutionary theory. And poor theory, how it has had to suffer in these processes, poor theory, how it has been abused, and how it is still being abused. And all these years have taught us to meditate more, analyze better. We no longer accept any 'self-evident' truths.... A whole series of old cliches should be abolished. Marxist literature itself...should be renewed, because by repeating cliches, phraseology, and verbiage that have been repeated for thirty five years you don't win over anyone; you don't win over anyone.

Fidel Castro

Numerous social theorists have been enthralled by a conundrum: If individual people each possess a will of their own, independent from that of any other individual, how could such a vast network as a society evolve and persist? How could such a multitude of independent actors become an integrated whole unless each was subject to forces beyond themselves? Even the individual molecules of air within a balloon form the structured sphere only because of the pressure of the confining walls, an outside force. How much more true must this be for millions of people with consciousness and wills capable of generating independent programs of action? Yet if social order is the result of forces beyond each individual, what becomes of the role of human will? If we exist in a social network not by the creativity of our separate wills but instead due to large scale pressures within which our wills are constrained only to function in particular ways, then doesn't the character of history transcend the personalities of its starring players? Do we create freely, the subjects of history, or is our creativity but a facade, its product foreordained, ourselves but the object of history?<sup>1</sup>

Our answers to these questions will emerge in this chapter as we address issues of human nature, society, and history. In short, we will argue that each individual does create his or her environment and even, to an extent, him or herself, and that the fact that this creativity is accomplished by people with a shared human nature acting in a setting which is also largely shared, leads to common projects: the construction of diverse networks of social relations which in turn themselves then act as both beachheads and also limitations for further human creativity. To introduce our general theory and motivate it as well, we would first like to make a brief survey of some other efforts to move beyond the limitations of orthodox Marxism.\*

#### The Problem of Totality In Four Modern Marxist Approaches

In the orthodox view "base" refers to the mode of production and encompasses both the forces and social relations of production. "Superstructure" refers to political, familial, cultural, legal, and other institutional and ideological relations which are deemed to be both derivative and reflective of the society's base. The mode of production determines class relations and the contours of class struggle—society's laws of motion derive from the interaction of class struggle and the imperatives of the mode of production itself. The superstructure must accord with the requirements of the economic base.<sup>2</sup> Many new readings of Marx, however, including those we will address here, have in common a rejection of the "base/superstructure" conceptualization which they find too mechanical and too insensitive to issues of culture, consciousness, and the importance of the state. The aim in these new theorizations is to retain a powerful understanding of economic relationships while further developing an analysis of other aspects of social life.<sup>3</sup>

\*We have chosen these four perspectives not because we think them necessarily superior to all others but because in sequence their examination provides a useful introduction to some of the theoretical problems our own approach seeks to overcome.

One line of thought, followed for example by Raymond Williams, is to broaden the conceptualization of production to include cultural phenomena. Williams effectively eliminates the conceptual differentiation of base and superstructure by assimilating the latter into the former.<sup>4</sup> A different strategy is to make the boundary between these spheres even less penetrable than it is in the orthodox view. The economy is set off distinctly from all other realms which may then be investigated not as derivative but in their own right. On the one hand, this investigation can be unitary (ala Habermas) and on the other variegate (ala Althusser).<sup>5</sup> For Habermas, there is simply the economy on the one hand, and the non-economic, more subjective sphere of society on the other. For Althusser, there may be diverse autonomous spheres of social life each requiring attention, for example, not only the economy, but also a polity, culture, and so on. Finally, the practice of the new left also addressed the same underlying issues as these three theoreticians.<sup>6</sup> For the new left, the relevant boundaries between social spheres were seen as porous and firm simultaneously. For some purposes, an approach blind to the demarcations of separate spheres was useful, but at other times clear recognition of differences was essential. In any case, here we would like to briefly address these four orientations in turn, in order to situate our approach within modern Marxist theory as well as clear up possible confusions over what we mean—as opposed to what others mean—by certain concepts.

#### Raymond Williams: The Theory of Production and Holism

One problem many critics of the orthodoxy focus on is its relative insensitivity to the importance of culture. Marcuse, for example, says that in the orthodox framework "a devaluation of the entire realm of subjectivity takes place," and that "it is all too easy to relegate love and hate, joy and sorrow, hope and despair to the domain of psychology, thereby removing them from the concerns of radical praxis." And he goes on to point out that while, "indeed, in terms of political economy they [the emotional states] may not be 'forces of production,' for every human being they are decisive, they constitute reality."<sup>7</sup>

Raymond Williams has elaborated a reading of Marxist theory aimed at overcoming this deficiency. He argues first that the notion

that culture and ideas are but a "reflection" of material relations arises from a misreading of Marx's original formulations. This misreading "is not materialist enough."<sup>8</sup> By adopting the metaphor of reflection by a mirror, a passive process, the orthodox view "succeeds in suppressing the actual work on material which is evident in cultural creation. By projecting and alienating this material process to 'reflection,' the social and material character of artistic activity—of that art work which is at once 'material' and 'imaginative'—was suppressed."<sup>9</sup> Williams' point is straightforward: The reflection theory relegates cultural production to a passive role when actually it is an active process itself. Like any other activity, cultural production is material and significant in its impact, both due to its product, and more important, due to its effects on the people involved in the activity, the "workers." For example, the creation of the painting *Guernica*, the novel *Catch 22*, or the movie *Apocalypse Now*, all affect the diverse participants in creation (production) and appreciation (consumption). Surely Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* and Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited* are both art, but also parts of economic processes. The social relations of aesthetic production and consumption are a priori no less important than those of the factory or market.<sup>10</sup>

Williams' reinterpretation of Marxist theory is centered on a redefinition of what we mean by "production." Where most orthodox Marxists use the term to refer to industrial labor, or at best to wage labor, Williams means all activity related to the "production and reproduction of real life."<sup>11</sup> Production of "social cooperation" is production. The parent, preacher, and politician all work. Production of social knowledge is production. The author, artist, and philosopher are all workers. In each case, we not only satisfy needs but also produce "new needs and new definitions of needs." We produce "ourselves and our societies" via many forms of activity and, in Williams' view, each of these activities is a kind of "material production."<sup>12</sup>

This certainly constitutes a severe break with the orthodoxy. The lens Williams uses to scour society for important relationships is different. Now, for example, "establishing a political order"<sup>13</sup> is a kind of production, and therefore part of what should be the primary focus for Marxist analysis. It is "beside the point" and misleading to isolate the creation of material commodities in industry

from the creation of "law and order," "welfare," "entertainment," and the arts in general. They are all acts of human production and all must be centrally addressed. In this view "the concept of the 'superstructure' was then not a reduction but an evasion."<sup>14</sup> For what had been relegated to the superstructure was for Williams as much a critical part of society's foundation as industrial production. It is all of one piece. Certainly, it must be agreed, with this view one is no longer as likely to fall into the trap of downgrading the importance of "subjectivity," "joy and sorrow, hope and despair." Williams has developed a relational approach which extends previously stagnant, narrow concepts to new reaches and power. Society is a whole. The base/superstructure metaphor may be useful for particular analytic purposes but to reify our overall perceptions of reality according to this demarcation is misleading. We must examine all sorts of production as critical, not simply that which takes place in industrial factories. We must approach the interrelations between different productions with a more open mind rather than simply assuming a priori that they are hierarchically arranged in an order whose "top" and "bottom" we know *in advance* of examination. A more totalist approach is urged: "Determination of this whole kind—a complex and interrelated process of limits and pressures—is in the whole process itself and nowhere else: not in an abstracted 'mode of production' not in an abstracted 'psychology'."<sup>15</sup>

This theory of production embodies improvements whose virtues we should retain in any further efforts. It is important to realize that temporary conceptual differentiations (base/superstructure) shouldn't be fetishized. The lines dividing such concepts are drawn for specific purposes and may be misleading for others. It is also important to realize that the concept "production" can be extended to encompass all forms of social activity. Indeed, a brilliant analyst might develop a compelling theory of society as a whole and of its various "parts" as well by following just such a course. But alas, it is not likely. For the approach gives no more guidance to such an analyst than would an excellent motion picture. Like the picture, it is too undifferentiated *and* too comprehensive.<sup>16</sup> With no boundaries and nothing "left out" there are no guides and ultimately little explanation. It is useful to learn from Williams the art of successively extending the domain of a particular concept toward the

outer limits of the whole.<sup>17</sup> But to do this with only the concept "production" and claim this as a theory of all society is insufficient. The approach fails to recognize that if we want to understand society to change it, some types of activity and some institutions are more important, more causal, and deserve more focused attention than others. Williams can write without allusion to specific qualities of the "production and reproduction" of differences between men and women, adults and children, people of different races, and people of different religions. Thus all the concrete work remains to be done with this approach. An error is overcome, but by using a new insight to move back toward the starting gate and not forward down the track. A full theory of society must certainly address economic, cultural, and political activity (and other forms as well) alternating between a treatment of each activity in-and-of-itself and in relation to one another—becoming steadily richer with each successive round. But if we wish to intervene and transform society, it won't do to act as if all kinds of activities and social divisions arising from them are one—that all activity is productive activity and all social divisions class divisions.<sup>18</sup> For not all divisions feel the same, have the same roots, generate the same social dynamics, or yield the same sorts of organizing possibilities. We say all this while also recognizing that as we make differentiations we should also remember the point Williams is impressing upon us and remain sensitive to "entwinement."

Let us not belabor. The relational approach Williams uses can help us overcome the mechanicalness of orthodox Marxism and push us past old conceptualizations.<sup>19</sup> His efforts to extend the concept "production" should suggest the possibility of other "starting places" for a non-myopic approach to society. For "production" is not the only concept which can be made comprehensive. We could, for example, begin an analysis from the concept "cultural creation" or "socialization" or "politics" and elaborate their pervasiveness by demonstrating the possibility of encompassing the bulk of social relations within *their* domains. Indeed, perhaps it would be useful to develop a conceptual dictionary that would allow us to come at any society from a number of directions. In each case, we would work toward an understanding of the whole somewhat differently, along different paths, though in ways that overlap and augment one another's insight. For beyond production, we will find other types

of activity from which to usefully interpret any social formation. And so this is another insight which emerges from a critical evaluation of Williams' extension of the theory of production, though the extension itself is insufficient.

### Jurgen Habermas: The Divorce of Culture and Economy

This is not the place nor are we especially equipped to attempt a full summary of the theoretical views of Jurgen Habermas and the school of critical theory.<sup>20</sup> Despite having considerable difficulty with his style, we have learned much from his work and that of the whole Frankfurt School. But here we need to address only one aspect of his approach.

As we understand him, social activity has two forms for Habermas: "subject/object" and "subject/subject." In the first, the main relation is one of appropriation. A thing, the object, is appropriated—made, altered, used—by a person, the subject. In the second form of interaction, it is two actors who encounter each other. The relation between them could be one of understanding and equality or of domination.<sup>21</sup>

The first type of social activity constitutes the main locus of orthodox Marxism, at least in Habermas' view.<sup>22</sup> The orthodox theory addresses the interaction between people and nature, people and economic inputs and outputs, people and wealth, people and economic institutions, and so on. The theory is well conceived, the analysis, by and large, is powerful and important.

But the subject/subject realm has got to be addressed as well. The reproduction of the species, the socialization of children, the creation of culture and its dissemination will otherwise be accorded too little importance. Instead of "base/superstructure" it is desirable to see that there are two realms of social activity—and more than likely different sites where one or the other type is more preponderant. But according to Habermas, neither of these two types of social activity should be viewed as more important, or prior, to the other.

Thus the result of the orthodoxy that most irks many modern Marxist commentators—that it asserts the dominance of economics over other aspects of life and the reducibility of these other aspects to economic causes—is overcome by Habermas too, though by a route opposite to that travelled by Williams. For Habermas, that is,

the material realm has one kind of fundamental interaction, subject/object, while the cultural and socialization realm has another, subject/subject. Obviously the latter is *not* reducible to the former. Finally, we are forced to understand the latter in its own right.

This advance should not be minimized. The orthodox framework tended to lead analysts to ignore all that was most human about societies. The orthodox analysis of change could hinge only on largely technical contradictions within institutional forms leaving little place for human desire, need, and will. With Habermas's innovation these aspects rightly reenter the analysis. Contradictions may now arise from the complex relations between people and from the production and reproduction of consciousness, behavior patterns, and even myth and ideology.<sup>23</sup> It becomes necessary to ask questions about what distinguishes people from "objects," and why people are subjects even when they are "done-to," more than "doing."

But there are still grave problems. Is the economic realm to be relegated to essentially the same mechanical treatment as it received at the hands of orthodox Marxists? Are there no significant subject/subject relations established in the economic realm? Are people only actors, and market institutions only acted upon? And in socialization, for example, aren't there subject/object relations as well as subject/subject relations that should at times be kept in focus? Are we to relegate socialist economic activity to subject/object analysis—perhaps calling it the time of necessity—and only worry about revolutionizing subject/subject relations outside the economy, in the realm of possibility? For Habermas, in fact, this is the right course to follow. For him the main step to establishing socialist relations has to do with ensuring that subject/subject relations—communication—are free, equal, and honest. Change of the economy is secondary and not likely to significantly overcome workplace alienation in any case. For this is intrinsic to subject/object interaction, to be ameliorated only by shortening the workday. But there is something very misleading about a sharp division of society into realms divorced from one another.\* There is

\*There is another, more subtle dimension of inadequacy in Habermas's approach, pointed out to us by Ward Churchill after he read an early version of this work. The subject/object, subject/subject pantheon of

too much commonality among all forms of human activity to be adequately reflected in a conceptual framework of disjoint sets. What is wrong with the orthodox approach isn't merely that it misunderstands culture *outside* the economy, but that it ignores the existence of cultural aspects *within* the economy and therefore the need for economic relations themselves to be free. Habermas' subject/subject formulation can propel us to reinsert what is most critical about human characteristics into our understanding of social activity. But it is wrong to suggest a *permanent divorce* of social life into two realms, even with the proviso that neither is subordinate or reducible to the other. It fails to recognize that all types of human activity are more complex than simple materialist analysis lets on. It fails to discern that in all interaction each agency is always *both* subject and object. And it fails to assist us, again, in discerning just which types of interaction are most important to look at. From the point of view of the activist who wants to change the world, Habermas' concepts are just too far from the issues that must be addressed daily. The dynamics of race, sex, class, and authority divisions do not fit easily in a world of subject/objects and subject/subjects.\* As with Williams, the concepts are too far from the ground on which our practical political decisions must be made.

#### Louis Althusser: The Theory of Levels and the Last Instance

Althusser charts another solution to the problem of discerning alternative types of social relationships. In all societies he sees a political, economic, and cultural level corresponding to the existence of separate and distinct political, economic, and ideological

relations relegating the person/nature interface to the same instrumental realm it occupies in Marxism (and virtually all other "Western" thought). The conscious people appropriate unconscious separate nature to their own ends. But what of a subject-object/subject-object understanding—people and nature as parts of the same undifferentiated whole—that could allow an ecological perspective? What is perhaps paramount in Native American and many Eastern and African cultures is here ruled out a priori in the guiding conceptual structure.

\*At the risk of this note being torn from context to demonstrate that we are mindless empiricists, readers of Habermas' published volumes in English will certainly have to admit that very few pages are given over to discussions of racism and sexism and that few of the discussions of class or political relations adequately treat the concrete conditions of organizational work.

practices. Here, labor as understood by more traditional Marxists provides a kind of metaphor for the development of a broader—and to Althusser, non-economistic—theory.<sup>24</sup> For as work involves the transformation of raw materials into products by a “determinate human labor, using determinate means of production,” so we can see political and ideological activity in similar terms.<sup>25</sup> As there is a mode of economic production encompassing the social relations of economic transformation so there is a mode of political and a mode of ideological production. Science too is merely the product of a “theoretical mode of production,” or mode of production of knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

So for Althusser there is an economic, an ideological, and a political practice, and associated with each a set of “raw materials,” a set of forms of activity and technique, and a set of institutional relations—the whole of which constitute three distinct structures, the society then being a “structure of [these three] structures.”<sup>27</sup>

Of course there follows the issue of the interrelation of these structures. Each contributes to the determination of the social whole, and that whole in turn contours the characteristic features of each of its component parts. Moreover, as each structure has a certain autonomy due to its practices being separate and distinct, so all social outcomes are affected by three factors and thus “overdetermined.”<sup>28</sup> But Althusser doesn’t stop with this seeming pluralism which is already economically infected since the concepts for understanding each practice are constructed not with specific regard to the different spheres but simply by transposing economic categories.<sup>29</sup> Althusser goes on to reassert that the economic level is determinant “in the last instance.” That is, while each level has a certain autonomy, one will be dominant in any particular social formation. And for Althusser, in any society it is always the economic level that determines which of the three will be dominant. So in feudalism the economy makes the political realm primary, while in capitalism the economy makes itself primary.<sup>30</sup>

The economy remains “determinant in the last instance” for Althusser, but in his theory some other spheres have histories of their own as well. It is only the relative importance of these other structures that is finally determined by the economy, though of course all of the structures are permitted to influence one another. So Althusserians *might argue*, for example, that as politics is

relatively autonomous from economics, in the Soviet Union the economy may still be socialist even in face of the obvious existence of a totalitarian polity.

Althusser doesn’t make the “holist” mistake of reducing all activity to one. He recognizes this is just too high a level of abstraction for useful social theory. But, like Habermas, he draws dividing lines that are too impermeable. Specific practices and their structures are bound so tightly together that the interpenetration by each structure of other practices is ignored. There is no understanding that activity in the economy, for example, entails cultural or political practice as well. For Althusser the structures push and pull one another only from without. The relations are exterior. The practice of each structure is confined to that structure alone. But this is too rigid. The economy does not just produce goods, but also produces people. The political sphere includes economic as well as political practice. There is cultural practice within both economic and political institutions. Of course, particular practices may be predominant in one institution in a society—for instance, kinship activity in the family, or production activity in the workplace—but in general, any practice can appear in any institution and for many purposes this is a critical insight. In other words, there is an interpenetration of practices into diverse spheres and even further, each practice embodies elements of the others.

Althusser is attempting to overcome economism, but he has failed miserably. Tempering the economic notion that production directly governs history by his “in the last instance” interpretation of historical materialism is a step forward in that it begins to discern the need to recognize other spheres of social life which are also causal. But it is an unfinished attempt. The main stumbling block seems to be that Althusser has been able to reach into new sides of human interaction only via extensions of economic concepts—everything is compared metaphorically to production. There is intrinsic to this an inability to discover the *new features* which characterize the social relations surrounding socialization and culture. Indeed, these spheres are understood only in their economic—perhaps better “economistic”—dimension.\*

\*Beneath the above perspective lies Althusser’s particular epistemology and structuralism. His epistemology allows him to be one of the most

This could be a simple theoretical error, or perhaps an error of habit. But there is also a possibility that political/material interests might be acting as a propellant for such "inaccuracy."

For by confining practices to separate spheres and making the relations between them exterior, Althusser preserves the orthodox analysis of the economy largely in tact. His economic structure is to be understood economically permitting no new insights from feminists, nationalists, or anti-authoritarians to intrude. With the orthodox theory of the economy thus preserved, Althusserians can be quite liberal in their tolerance of feminist, nationalist, and libertarian analyses of the family, community, and state since Althusser has already concluded that the economic structure is determinant in the last instance and also always dominant in capitalism. When push comes to shove, therefore, those who theorize the economy and "lead the working class" will attain dominance.<sup>31</sup>

So while Althusser leads us in the direction of treating non-economic activities seriously, he ignores Williams' relational insight entirely. But how can we utilize both lessons? How can we focus on autonomy and yet on interpenetration at the same time?

#### New Left Intuitions

One can certainly become sensitized to diverse types of social activity, institutions, and social divisions, through theoretical discourse—but this is an inevitably abstract and tortured route. It is simpler to look out the study's window. Better yet, one can go through the door and participate in change itself.

One strain of development in the U.S. new left which was particularly strong in our own training ground of Boston, was a

extreme idealists on the scene even while laying claim to the mantle of "materialist science." His brand of structuralism leads him to explicitly write people out of history—an advance in honesty over the orthodoxy which kept this mass purge a secret. Althusser sees history as subjectless save insofar as we might want to attach the term "subject" to social relations. There is no human agent in any case. But the ignorance and harmfulness of Althusser's idealism and anti-humanism have been dealt with elsewhere and, since neither of these trends represent the slightest advance over even the most mechanical orthodoxy, we needn't add our own critique of these weaknesses here.

simultaneous sensitivity to what was called "totality" and "autonomy."<sup>32</sup> There was class struggle, sexual struggle, struggle over race, and struggle over political power. There were movements and organizations centered around each of these foci. While debates over priorities never ceased, it was agreed in general that each focus was critical, each was to be respected, and none were subordinate. Yet there was a continual emphasis on "finding the connections," "drawing the links," and "understanding the whole." For example, the sexual struggle was not relegated to the family, but expanded to encompass all of society. Somehow, everything was implicated in everything else. Yet, at the same time, it was essential to guarantee those people most involved with a few key areas an autonomy in elaborating the struggle in their own areas.

It would be wrong to say the new left produced a theory consistent with its practice. In a sense we were all much too busy. The theories we used were all less advanced than the practice we haltingly elaborated. Orthodox Marxism was predominant in intellectual discussions, even if it seldom determined the actual programs and actions people took. Even so, the theoretical contributions of the new left were profound.

Foremost, the daily confrontations of the sixties showed perceptive theorists that whatever their other innovations, they had better address class, race, sex, and authority relations centrally. Otherwise, they would be talking a language unsuited to the tasks of the day. "The personal is political" shed light on the interpenetration of kinship and cultural aspects into all spheres. The women's movement questioned both political and economic forms, seeing patriarchy in the different options they offered both men and women. To continue with this enumeration would be to present this book in an alternative form. For our theory is only an attempt to make more formal the ideas common to the new left and created in its collective experiences.<sup>33</sup>

But why seek to formalize these ideas at all? First, it is necessary so that they may be used by ever wider circles of people. Second, it is necessary so that they may be systematically strengthened. And third, it is necessary so they can compete. For among the many reasons for the decline of the new left was the lack of a common language and framework that would allow clear analysis, a comparison of thought, and a ready approach to facilitate solving

problems rapidly. With their orthodox Marxism, Leninist sects could always generate "answers" more quickly, reach agreements and communicate more swiftly, and argue more "logically." In contrast, new leftists had only good intuitions, and this was not enough. In the "next round" we must confront the status-quo and the orthodoxy not only with energy and intuition, but with a new theory as well. Finally, it is also true that clear expression of a political approach is necessary if the approach is to be democratic. To be democratic, that is, new concepts and ways of thinking have to become the property of all members of the movement and this cannot happen if they are always clouded in mystery, or presented only in the most obscure language.

For Marxists throughout history, attention to the woman, national, and democratic questions is evidence of a practical awareness of the importance of spheres beyond the economy. But insofar as these issues have been addressed as "problems" to be analyzed with a powerful theory that is already developed, success has been impossible. To address the question of socialism—what is the character of the societies which deem themselves socialist and what might socialism be like in the United States in the future—we need an approach that extends beyond economic determinism, simplistic holism, and all particularisms of the past.

The early development of Marxism eventually led to the solidification of historical materialism and the labor theory of value as whole, "closed" theories. They were elaborated as far as they might be. Minor alteration or slight redefinition would no longer lead to improvements. At this point the task was to apply these theories to ever widening concrete problems and to the development of sub-theories of ever more diverse realms of social life. At first this was rather successful. Such areas of investigation as anthropology, aesthetics, law, politics and the problems of the state, the relations between men and women and the dynamics of nationalism were all powerfully elucidated by the new theory. But in time the study of these diverse realms got out of control. The new insights unearthed in this investigation began to escape from under the umbrella of the sponsoring theory. New realms seemed to be beyond the reach of historical materialism and the labor theory of value. After a time, therefore, analysis destroyed the prior synthesis. The monist, materialist theory could no longer encompass the insights to which

its applications had given birth. The ensuing crisis has led to such attempts at reconstruction as we have discussed in the prior sections and many others as well. Althusser gives autonomy to diverse structures but saves economics as main focus by suggesting that it has a determining position. Williams attempts to redefine the classical concepts so the words and formalism may be retained—with only the meaning changed. Habermas seems to give up the original plan entirely. By positing two separate realms he forgoes the prior materialist priorities. The new left looked to retain plurality in context of some sort of new and enlarged unity.

We will follow the last course as well. Rather than looking for a new synthesis which replaces economics by a new "master science," we seek a synthesis *without* the old kind of pinnacle. Our aim is to simultaneously combine analysis and synthesis to create complementarity within totality. We orient ourselves rather differently than is common for most socialist approaches and as a result innovations in focus and conceptualization will be necessary right from the outset. Thus, to develop even suggestions of a new orientation, we must start at a new beginning, at the root, with a new understanding of human nature, people, and what we mean by history itself.

### The Importance of Human Nature

Humans have biological, genetic characteristics whose impact extends beyond determination of physical appearance to psychological and cognitive attributes. Recently many Marxists are seeing the obvious reality of "human nature" and likewise "rereading Marx" to uncover his use of the concept as well. Melvin Rader's discussion is representative, as is his view of the late Marx that "he by no means abandoned the view that there is a relatively constant human nature that is fettered by the inhuman condition of existence. He still thought of man as alienated in capitalist society, and he still used the terms 'human nature' and 'species being'."<sup>34</sup> Of course, contrary views on Marx's own opinion and supporting textual evidence for them can also be found. Of more importance than the argument over what Marx truly believed, however, is the relative merit of the opposed conceptualizations themselves.



Within biological science the idea of innate genetic characteristics affecting not only such physical attributes as our having arms and not wings, or of our developing mature reproductive organs only at a certain stage of bodily development—and also perceptual, conceptual, linguistic, and even emotional attributes, is not uncommon. Note, however, we do not mean the kind of biological determinist arguments of Edward O. Wilson and other sociobiologists.<sup>35</sup> Rather biological studies assert that *our genetic endowment provides a rich and also restrictive foundation* upon which our personality, skills, knowledge, etc. develop socially. For example, Noam Chomsky quotes two neurophysiologists in a way supporting our general (and his linguistic) conception:

By this we mean to emphasize that the developing nervous system is not a *tabula rasa*, free to reflect whatever individual experiences dictate. Rather, the development of the nervous system is a process sharply constrained by a genetic program. At certain points, the genetic program permits a range of possible realizations, and individual experience acts only to specify the outcome within this range.<sup>36</sup>

The use of the word “only” is relevant for the neurophysiologist’s point, of course, yet it is precisely the choosing from a range of possible outcomes that leads to all human diversity. In our idea of human nature there is therefore both constraint and potential—the two in fact being intimately related and basic to human progress. Humans are able to elaborate intricate shared conceptual schemes and behavior patterns because their genetic endowment disposes them toward these accomplishments as some among the “many potential outcomes within the range” their natures allow. At the same time, outcomes outside this range are simply unreach-able. Chomsky’s view is one from which we have learned a great deal:

Consider again the question whether cognitive functions are both diverse and determined in considerable detail by a rich innate endowment. If the answer is positive, for some organism, that organism is fortunate indeed. It can then live in a rich and complex world of understanding shared with others similarly endowed, extending far

beyond limited and varying experience. Were it not for this endowment, individuals would grow into mental amoeboids, unlike one another, each merely reflecting the limited and impoverished environment in which he or she develops, lacking entirely the finely articulated, diverse and refined cognitive organs that make possible the rich and creative mental life that is characteristic of all individuals not seriously impaired by individual or social pathology—though once again we must bear in mind that the very same intrinsic factors that permit these achievements also impose severe limits on the states that can be attained; to put it differently, that there is an inseparable connection between the scope and limits of human knowledge.<sup>37</sup>

In our view, beyond simple features like the need for sustenance and the power and proclivity to reproduce, people also innately have more distinctly human characteristics: a highly developed sociality, a capacity for empathy, a need for freedom, love and community—and unique capacities for conceptualization and communication which allow us literally to change ourselves while also changing our environment. This last attribute, it should be added, distinguishes us not only as acutely social beings, but also as beings of “praxis.” The fact that the particular biological basis of these traits has yet to be understood makes us cautious, but it in no way precludes our developing a general theory built around the “human nature hypothesis,” yet not completely dependent upon it. From here on we will be assertive about only a few traits taken to be a part of human nature, though a compelling case could be made for using a still longer list.

We are *social* in that to meet our needs we require social interaction and to employ our capacities we require collective involvement. Even more important, previous accomplishments always form the basis for each new human advance. Thus, unlike other organic creatures, far from continually starting from scratch, humans are historical. We build upon our understanding and experience of past human achievements in a way that makes us the social subjects, as well as the social objects of history.

On the other hand, we are also beings of *praxis* in that we con-

sciously act to change our historically bequeathed environments and in doing so change ourselves as well. That is, even though our genetic make-up has changed little in historical times, our human personality, skill, and consciousness can change over periods as short as a day. These attributes are a cumulative flexible imprint of our life histories and also largely determine our future options. A product of past praxis and foundation for future praxis, our activity always affects our beings. Therefore, though personality and consciousness are often persistent, they are never totally fixed. In short, as beings of praxis, changes in our activities engender changes in the historical fingerprints that compose our social natures, and this constitutes one basis for human progress both for individuals and for the species as a whole.\*

### Human Development

It seems to us quite reasonable to hypothesize that people have an intense "built-in-need for positive self-image and for social recognition."<sup>38</sup> The creation of an identity, of purposefulness, and of a path of action is dependent upon this. We act. To be satisfied with ourselves we have to be able to see our actions as intelligent and good ones—the more so as they become more controversial and involve more of our time, energy, and identity. For this reason, behavior can affect personality and consciousness as much as the reverse. That is, we often mold our consciousness to rationalize prior behavior. As but one example, to retain a place in our circle of

\*The contrast between our own view and that of various orthodox schools—for example, the Althusserians or revivers of Second International theories—should be clear. For us the individual is a subject who acts on him or herself and on society and social relations simultaneously. Moreover, the individual has a species and even a personal biological nature meshed inextricably with a historical being that is a product of social interaction and in turn acts—within certain given conditions—as a cause of further interactions and changes. For the orthodox schools, however, individuals are only ciphers for external causes—we imagine ourselves to be cause but that is an illusion. Furthermore, our beings are entirely—at least for all historically relevant discussion—a function of imposition from without. Colletti says of Plekhanov's view (one which is always refreshingly clear, if often also wrong): "The argument could not

friends, we might act as they do in response to the detention of U.S. citizens by Iranian students. This could be relatively thoughtless, just an action designed to retain access to friendship and community. Yet shortly later, to preserve our dignity we may have to justify our act on its own terms. Our consciousness may take a reactive racist turn.

It is critical to see how in this way traits may develop not only through individual error or coercive imposition, but by intelligent accommodation to the limits of our social environment. In certain settings, to obtain essential food, shelter, and clothing we may have to act in ways detrimental to meeting other equally human (though immediately less pressing) needs. This can engender personality traits and consciousness unsuited to ever fulfilling the latter needs. Moreover, these alienated characteristics, "self-developed" in restrictive settings, may survive long after those settings disappear. The street urchin, ex-convict, or child from an upper class home may make necessary adaptations to their immediate environments which will nonetheless restrict their fullest development in a more general setting.

In acting upon the world, therefore, we also develop our consciousness and personalities. Initially, changes are rooted in particular human purposes, of course, but in time they can come to have "roots" of their own. We become what we once were not, and it is not necessarily to our advantage. Still more serious, in an alienated environment there is no escape from the conditions generating detrimental consciousness and personality. In context of particular combinations of ongoing institutional relations it may be that individuals can achieve fulfillment of one type *only* by accepting or even self-inducing oppression of another kind. For example, to gain wealth we must often sacrifice integrity. To have

be clearer: man who in his own *consciousness* imagines himself to be the cause, is *in reality* the effect and nothing but the effect....Freedom for Plekhanov, repeating Engels and through Engels, Hegel, is the 'recognition of necessity.' Freedom, in other words, is the consciousness of being determined." (Lucio Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin*, Monthly Review, 1974, pp. 68-69). Whatever one may think of Colletti's inclusion of Engels in the indictment, his critical assessment of a prevalent view of human non-agency is a useful counterpoint to our own formulation.

children, we may have to sacrifice our own careers and identity. To maintain friendships and social recognition, we may have to conform to views we know are false. And so on.\*

#### Four Moments In All Human Practice

Any human activity can be seen, in relation to the whole society, in a number of ways. To describe the different realities revealed by different angles of view, so to speak, we use the term "moment." A ball thrown fifty feet across a field by a person five-and-a-half feet tall travels in a single line—a curve. But it's affected by different physical forces—the earth's gravity pulling it down, friction with the air slowing it, and the muscles which sent it across the field in the first place. In physics sometimes these are loosely described as different moments of force which together create the ball's trajectory. We think human activity must be viewed in terms of at least four *social moments*:

- 1-To one extent or another all human activity necessarily involves creation and use of material objects and this production and consumption defines the *economic moment* of human activity.
- 2-As humans produce other humans, human activity also embodies what we (following many feminists) call a *kin-*

\*The difference between our view—changes of personality and derived needs on top of an essentially fixed biological human nature—and that of orthodox Marxists—there is an infinitely malleable human nature; nothing is fixed even over human lifetimes—must not be minimized. Its essence might best be understood by meditating upon the following brief formula quoted from G. A. Cohen's very much heralded defense of the orthodox historical materialist orientation, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*, Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 103: "Society continually alters human nature, and it may become part of a man's nature to want a Jeodorant." For this is only an exaggerated and depressing variant on the many kinds of dehumanizing notions that emerge once one adopts a logic denying the existence of any essentially fixed biological human nature. It is remarkable and worth contemplating that on this point—the denial of human nature—orthodox Marxists and the worst of Skinnerian behaviorists share the same fallacious reasoning despite the complete absence of scientific evidence to support their claims.

*ship moment* principally involved with the reproduction and socialization of people themselves.

3-As social beings our activity is meaningful only in interaction with others (or with an environment in which the history of others is embedded) leading people to elaborate a collective social and historical identity. This aspect of activity encompasses what we might call the *community moment* of human behavior.

4-It is also the case that human activity must be organized with reference to extension over time. We are influenced and act in terms of both our past and our projected future and our activity has a related *political moment*—the regulation of what is socially acceptable (or outlawed) and thus to be encouraged (or punished)—aimed at regularizing outcomes to obtain social stability.

So in general, though particular human activities are often more consciously oriented toward one of the "spheres" of social life than others, every activity can nonetheless be viewed from each of four angles to reveal in turn its economic, kinship, community and political attributes. In the factory, for example, activity is usually thought of in terms of its economic features, yet workers' personalities are altered, cultural norms are affected on the line, and rules are continually elaborated, obeyed, or broken. In the family, by the same token, activity is usually conceptualized in terms of kinship relations yet goods are consumed and dinners produced, cultural and religious norms obeyed or altered, and political attitudes inculcated. Similar examples of multiple effects could be pointed out within community and political activity, but the essential point is clear: the price of abstracting from the "secondary" moments of activities that are classified to be of "one particular sphere" is too high to endure in all but the most peripheral instances. Each type activity incorporates all the others—none is isolatable.

So while we often usefully label factory production "economic activity," and electoral involvement "political activity," it is important to remember that each process actually displays all four moments. We can certainly find a principal purpose or defining feature for any activity and then classify the activity accordingly into one particular sphere for particular analytic purposes. But in the end we must always retrace our steps and interpret all activity as fourfold