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Marx's critique of culture—a new study

THEORY / PRACTICE

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Professor Louis Dupré's *Marx's Social Critique of Culture** is a most original critique of all of Marx's works by an independent scholar who has previously made a serious contribution to the study of the young Marx with his *Philosophical Foundations of Marxism*. He achieves this, not by extending his study, nor merely by now focusing on what Marx is best known for—his "Economics." Rather, he has embarked on a totally new venture, which is at once disclosed in the Foreword, where he states: "What started as an attempt to correct and further explore certain theses I proposed in an earlier publication eventually led to a wholly new assessment of Marx's significance in the history of Western consciousness." (p.vii)

The uniqueness of a study of Marx as "the first major critic of a process of cultural disintegration that began with the modern age and has continued unabated to our time," challenges both Marxists and bourgeois interpreters of Marx.

CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY

Dupré grasps most presciently the impact of Marx's concept of ideology as a false consciousness when he writes, toward the end, that "the term ideology receded almost as suddenly as it had risen to prominence. But the concept reemerges..." (p. 217). To stress that it was not limited to Marxists, Dupré prefaced that statement with: "No aspect of Marx's work has more profoundly affected the modern mind than his critique of ideology" (p. 216).

Nevertheless, none before—and this includes Marx himself—had ever viewed Marx's works from the vantage point of culture. Furthermore, far from that vantage point having been embarked upon by Prof. Dupré as some sort of specialized study, it indeed excludes no major work, be it philosophic, economic or political, from his purview. Let me begin with the most specialized field—that of the "law of motion of capitalism" to its collapse, and not restrict that to Chapter 4, "Economics as Sociocultural Activity," which is entirely devoted to "Economics," since it pervades the whole work.

Thus, in the second chapter, "Culture as Historical Process," Dupré not only deals with "Base and Superstructure" but touches on something as pivotal for that final decade of Marx as his critique of Mikhailovsky who tried to make a universal of Marx's law of accumulation of capital. Marx insisted that he had been analyzing West Europe only and that precapitalist societies could find another path to revolution. Thus, in Chapter 3, "Structural Dialectic," Dupré tackles the whole question of "The Dialectic of Economic Concepts" as well as "The Historical Principle Radicalized: Capital"; and in Chapter 5, "The Uses of Ideology," to which we have already referred, what stands out is the relationship of ideology to superstructure.

There is no escaping from Dupré's preoccupation with "Economics" as both what he considers his most pivotal analysis of Marx's concepts and his concern with

righting the record on the manner in which critics of Marx have not given sufficient attention to Marx as a serious, indeed "the first major critic of a process of cultural disintegration" in Western consciousness. To further emphasize that, he keeps returning to the point that it simply isn't true that Marx meant to completely subordinate culture to economics. Furthermore, he seldom says anything on economics without stressing it as a social phenomenon. Therein precisely lies also the weakness because it leads to very nearly so subordinating human activity to "social" as to make the two appear synonymous. I therefore will start with the very first chapter, where Dupré is strongest and most convincing, as he tackles the question of fetishism of commodities.

ALIENATION OR CLASS STRUGGLES?

His subtitle for the section on *Capital* is "Alienation as Economic Contradiction." Dupré holds (correctly in this writer's view) that alienation and fetishism are not at all synonymous, that fetishism of commodities is directly related to the process of production where the "reification of all aspects of man's productive activity" occurs. He also denies a direct relationship of fetishism as Marx develops it in *Capital* to his concept of the fetish as he presented it in his 1842 Notebooks, when he was summarizing Charles DeBrosses's famous 1785 work, *Ueber den Dienst der Fetischgötter*. Dupré approvingly quotes Theodore Adorno's letter to Walter Benjamin: "The fetish character of commodities is not a fact of consciousness, but dialectic in the eminent state that produces consciousness."

At the same time, however, Dupré shows an affinity to what the Frankfurt School later did by extending the question of fetishism to the whole cultural field. His ambiguity continues though he is well aware of the fact, as he himself put it, that thereby "we have left the area of Marxist hermeneutics for what is in fact a critique of Marx" (p.50). Nowhere is this more jarring than on the question of praxis. No wonder that in a "Provisional Conclusion" to that chapter, Dupré suddenly questions why Marx concentrates "primarily on the capitalist mode of production and its exclusive orientation toward the production of exchange value" (p. 55). He points to the determining factor of "the negativity of praxis, in alienation, in the total dialectic of society, and indeed of all history" (p. 57), which is exactly where Dupré's ambiguity stands out most sharply. It is only now that we can turn to that Chapter 4 on "Economics" and, with it, the greatest weakness of the whole work.

Dupré fails to see that it is because of the priority of the mode of production and the relations between capital and labor at the point of production that Marx is not dealing only with "economic laws." It is there that Marx hears the "stifled voice" of the worker, follows his actions of resistance in the factory and extols the workers' struggle for the shortening of the working day. Dupré pays no attention whatever to the 80 pages Marx devotes to the chapter in *Capital* on "The Working Day." While Western ideologists have dismissed that as a sob story, it is precisely there that Marx credited the workers with creating the ground for a philosophy greater than what the Declaration of Independence expounded: "In place of the pompous catalogue of the 'inalienable rights of man' comes the modest Magna Charta of a legally limited working-day, which shall make clear 'when the time which the worker sells is ended and when his own begins'" (*Capital*, Vol. I, Kerr edition, p. 330).

**Marx's Social Critique of Culture*, by Louis Dupré (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) \$25.

All this is missing from Dupré, as if it had nothing to do with "culture." Marx, on the other hand, as early as the Communist Manifesto, referred to it as "class culture." But to see that, one has to not separate culture any more than philosophy from revolution. So all-present was that concept of revolution to Marx: that he called the whole struggle nothing short of a civil war. "The creation of a normal working day is, therefore, the product of a protracted civil war, more or less dissembled, between the capitalist class and the working class" (Capital Vol. I, Kerr edition, p. 327).

MARX'S LABOR THEORY OF VALUE

Dupré prefers, when he comes to that "Economics" chapter, to make the usual beginning—critique of Marx's law of labor value, and to stress the fact that "outside the strictly Marxist ambit no living economist accepts Marx's value theory" (p. 179). The expression "living economist" is supposed to lude the fact that Dupré is both relying on bourgeois economists, and, at the same time, excluding Third World economists. It is true that he quotes two great economists who are sympathetic to Marx—Joan Robinson and Joseph Schumpeter, but both are pragmatists, hostile to Hegelian dialectics which Dupré certainly is not. Somewhere (I believe in the very essay Dupré quotes) Joan Robinson expresses her great indignation at Marx for constantly allowing Hegel to "stick his nose" into the field of economics. "The concept of value seems to me to be a remarkable example of how a metaphysical notion can inspire original thought, though in itself it is quite devoid of operational meaning."

Schumpeter, who is just as hostile to Hegelian dialectics in the economic field, nevertheless was most profound in understanding why it was impossible to argue with Marx on strictly economic grounds, asking how you can argue with an "economist" like Marx when he is forever "transforming historic narrative into historic reason."

The very first sentence of the "Economics" chapter states: "While the tendency in the modern age has been to emancipate itself from any other functions of the cultural process, Marx's theory aims at reintegrating economic activity with the overall process of socialization" (p. 165). Despite that declaration, and despite the fact that Prof. Dupré over and over again disclaims any attempt on his part to consider Marx an economic determinist, we will see him here falling into what I consider the Engelsian trap, that is to say, quoting Engels as if that were a statement of Marx.

MARX AND ENGELS AREN'T ONE

On the second page of that "Economics" chapter he suddenly declares: "...Ever since he (Marx) had read Engels' 'Outline of Political Economy' (1844), he had known that an economic system, once established, cannot be simply dislodged by a better one" (p. 168). It is true that the young Marx as a philosopher was overly impressed with Engels' early essay on political economy. It is not true that he first got from Engels the concept of the solidity of the capitalist system.

Marx's Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts—which he described only orally to Engels that same year—had already singled out a great deal more than the need to break with capitalist society. Marx's Promethean view of new human relations had projected not only the need to overthrow capitalism but to establish such totally new human relations that communism was also rejected as "the goal of human society." On the contrary, Marx insisted: "Only by the transcendence of this mediation, which is nevertheless a necessary presupposition, does there arise positive Humanism, beginning from itself."

Prof. Dupré has such a profound grasp of those 1844 Manuscripts, and so much stresses the fact that Marx totally opposes a purely economic view, that it is hard to know how Dupré could have fallen into the trap. I believe it results from not grappling with the last decade of Marx's life. Despite Dupré's appreciation of Marx, not Engels, as the founder of a whole new continent of thought and revolution, he still treats Marx and Engels very nearly as one. Thus he writes as though Engels was right to claim that his Origin of the Family was a bequest of Marx: "It is, of course, impossible to verify this claim. Yet Marx's recently published ethnological notebooks appear to support it. Hence there is every reason to take Engels' word as, at least, in substance, concordant with Marx's latest development" (p. 95). Nothing could be further from the truth, as can be seen from the actual transcription of Karl Marx's Ethnological Notebooks, which disclose the wide gulf between Marx's multilinear view of human relations and Engels' unilinear view.

Engels' near identification of Lewis Henry Morgan as a "materialist" differs sharply from Marx's critical attitude to Morgan; Engels' view of women as suffering from some sort of "world historic defeat of the female sex" ever since the victory of patrilineal over matrilineal society sharply contrasts to Marx's multidimensional view of all human development.

Dupré couldn't have fallen into this trap if what he calls Marx's "application" of the dialectic to economic categories were actually Marx's transformation of that dialectic of thought to the dialectic that emerges out of the actual praxis of the masses, of the historic events that shaped and reshaped history, and developed into the dialectic of revolution itself—not only as an opposition, as a first negation, but as a continuity, as what Marx called "revolution in permanence."

WHAT IS ECONOMICS TO CULTURE? AND WHAT IS IT TO REVOLUTION?

Dupré himself—despite his deep comprehension "in general" that Marx had the category of praxis as the divisive line between all different varieties of socialism and his own philosophy and practice of revolution—nevertheless makes this fantastic conclusion: "Since the production of surplus value by means of surplus labor practically vanishes, revolutionary action loses its purpose. Marx did not pursue this line of thought. If he had, it might have changed his entire political program" (p. 192).

It is true he, himself, rejects that as Marx's view, but he nevertheless continues to manifest this ambiguity when he writes: "Our present criticism bears only on the fact that Marx singled out economic relations of production from the social complex as a whole being more fundamental, and that his work displays a tendency to regard these relations as being primarily determined by the means of production... Yet the ambiguity remains..." (p. 215).

The "ambiguity" is Dupré's, not Marx's.

From Dupré's Introduction: "The Reintegration of Culture" to his Conclusion: "Culture Reintegrated through Praxis," he develops the unique view of Marx as a social critic of culture without in any way trying to hide Marx's disdain of bourgeois culture as he shows that Marx "the great critic exposed the spurious claims of a culture which had erected itself into an independent, quasi-religious reality, a dehumanized, denaturalized fetish" (p. 3).

And though he sees that praxis is a dividing line also within the Marxist movement, Dupré himself does not fully comprehend what Marx meant to express in the category of praxis. It was certainly a great deal more than practice, especially as intellectuals consider practice to be merely the practice of theory, rather than grasping that theory itself emerges out of praxis—and that praxis is an activity both manual and mental. Put differently, and as we have tried to show throughout this review, Marx saw workers' activity not only as action, not only as practice, but as Reason. Dupré grapples with it, and does tend to conclude that: "Marx rescued productive labor from its cultural isolation. In his concept of praxis he attempted to reintegrate all facets of culture, the theoretical and aesthetic as well as the practical" (p. 280).

But since revolution is not exactly a preoccupation of Prof. Dupré, his view of Marx's Economics is presented quite ambiguously—for, without revolution, "Marxism" is not Marx's Marxism. Nevertheless, Marxists as well as non-Marxists will find it a serious study to grapple with as a challenging interpretation by an independent scholar.