

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness. Volume I: The Social Determination of Method* by István Mészáros

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BOOK REVIEWS

Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness. Volume I: The Social Determination of Method, by István Mészáros. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010. \$29.95. Pp. 432.

In what promises to be the first volume of a larger work on *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness*, István Mészáros undertakes two important and inter-related tasks: first, to subject the “various systems of thought, which emerge within the historical framework and in support of capital’s social formation” (13) to a thoroughgoing Marxist critique; and second, to adumbrate the main features and methodological principles of a project of social transformation and historical transition that points beyond the “capital system” and that can secure the necessary conditions for a “qualitatively different, *non-antagonistic* way of mediating the social metabolism” (280). The first seven chapters of the book are devoted to the first task, and the (very lengthy) final chapter to the second.

The principal strength of the volume lies in its powerful Marx-inspired critiques of a range of leading intellectual figures of both the “ascending” and “descending” phases of capitalist development. Drawing on Marx’s own writings with rich interpretive mastery, Mészáros subjects to devastating critique not only such “representative figures of capital’s social horizon” as Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Smith and Mill, but also such radical thinkers as Sartre and Marcuse. Along the way, Mészáros also elaborates some very useful Marxist critiques of Weber, Heidegger, Husserl, Arendt, Levi-Strauss, Foucault and several other 20th-century figures.

What Mészáros’ diverse targets of criticism have in common is their full or partial submission to several “methodological characteristics” that are discussed at length in the first two-thirds of the book. These characteristics are rooted in a number of “fundamental practical premises” that are crucial to capital. They include the radical divorce of the means of production from

living labor, the monopoly of decision-making regarding production/reproduction in the hands of the “personifications of capital,” and the domination and regulation of the relations between human beings and nature, and between human individuals themselves, by specifically *capitalist* social relations and imperatives. These practical premises constitute the ground upon which the prevailing social structure defines the methodological framework that constrains the efforts of a wide variety of (non-Marxist) thinkers to interpret the human world adequately and to address its most obvious problems. The contours of this framework are fleshed out by Mészáros’ in-depth discussion of the “methodological characteristics” of bourgeois thought.

The first of these characteristics is “the programmatic orientation to science” — “the expectation to solve the problems of humankind through the advancement of science and productive technology alone” (21) and without the guidance of a critical social science that grasps the irreconcilable contradictions of the existing social order and acknowledges the need for a fundamental transformation of social relations.

The second is the “general tendency to formalism” which insists upon a formal, non-dialectical understanding of the relationship between form and substance, values and facts, and so on, thereby discouraging a critique of the qualitative deficiencies of the existing social order, above all its extreme *substantive* inequalities.

The third characteristic is the “standpoint of isolated individuality” which treats the antagonisms of “civil society” as emanating not from “the individuals’ social conditions of existence” (Marx), but “from their alleged constitution by nature itself as ‘egoistic individuals’” (69). A fixed human essence or “nature” is thereby posited as the eternal ground of human conflict.

The fourth characteristic is the “negative determination of philosophy and social theory” — most obviously expressed in Hegel’s interest in the “reconciliatory preservation” of the existing social contradictions rather than their removal, but also in the thought of radical critics like Sartre and Marcuse who display a “tendency to disregard the key role of socially effective mediation in bringing about the necessary structural change” (97).

The fifth is the “suppression of historical temporality.” Historical consciousness — involving an interest in historical agency, meaningful progress, and the explanation of specific events in terms of their broader historical significance — was a prominent feature of bourgeois thought during the ascending phase of capitalism, but has given way to historical skepticism and a pronounced anti-historicism in its descending phase.

The sixth characteristic is the dualistic outlook and dichotomous articulation of the categories of philosophical and social thought that serve to conceal the origins of human misfortune in the antagonistic social relations of capitalism. At the core of this conceptual dualism are the practical premises

of capitalist society: the dichotomously articulated structure of domination and subordination, and the “most absurd of all conceivable dualisms: the opposition between the *means* of labor and *living labor* itself” (176).

Finally, the seventh characteristic is the wholly inadequate way in which the “dimension of unity and universality” is conceptualized. Ultimately, unity and universality, within the bourgeois horizon, can only be “assumed, postulated or hypostatized, but never really established” (205).

To grasp the mystifications and deficiencies of these methodological characteristics of bourgeois thought is a necessary condition for elaborating a positive vision of — and methodological framework for — emancipatory social change. The articulation of a hegemonic alternative to the “capital system” necessitates a project of transition toward a communal system that aims at the restoration of fully social human subjects capable of *directly and consciously* addressing the first-order mediations between humanity and nature, on the one hand, and the freely associated individuals, on the other. Mészáros’ vision in this regard is an uncompromisingly radical one. For the capitalist division of labor, with all its reifications and fetishisms, to be overcome; for it to be replaced by a socialist organization of labor, free of exploitation, domination and oppression; and for a satisfactory and sustainable metabolism to be established between socialized humanity and the natural realm, the capital system must be completely dismantled, root and branch, through the development of “communist mass consciousness.”

Mészáros’ discussion of these crucial issues in the last chapter of his book provides much useful food for thought concerning the strategic requirements of a socialist movement that can avoid the pitfalls of both Social Democracy and Stalinism — the dominant forms of “socialist opposition” to capitalism in the 20th century. But, in the end, he fails to address the hard programmatic, strategic and even tactical questions that have divided professed Marxists as to *how the necessary transition to the communal system can actually begin* — that is to say, how the power of the existing capitalist class can be overcome and replaced by a viable power of emancipated labor capable of effecting the social transformation that Mészáros so passionately advocates. It is to be hoped that in the second volume of this important work Mészáros will attend to this glaring omission of the first.

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