THE CONCEPT OF NEGATION IN THE DIALECTIC*

by

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I believe we all agree that, in terms of the original or even the expanded concepts of Marxian theory, determining the content of the present historical period and particularly the developments of late capitalism presents certain difficulties. Rather, we can do so, but only at the risk of generating additional difficulties. If the same theory can equally well deal with the development A as well as non-A, prosperity as well as crisis, revolution as well as the absence of revolution, or the radicalization of the working-class as well as its integration into the existing system, then although this may indicate the validity of the theory, it also indicates its indifference. Given this state of affairs, Marxian theory has been reproached for precluding every possible refutation. These difficulties involve the origin of the Marxian dialectic from the Hegelian — a relation I will discuss briefly in the context indicated.

The present period seems to be characterized by a stalemate of the dialectic of negativity. We face new forms of late capitalism and thus also the task of developing revised dialectical concepts adequate to these forms. The main problem seems to lie with the dialectical concept according to which negative forces develop within the ruling antagonistic system. Today, this development of negativity within the antagonistic whole is barely demonstrable. Thus, I would like to begin with a discussion of the negative, and specifically with the controversy in France concerning Althusser's efforts to redefine the connections between the Hegelian and the Marxian dialectic. The positive and conformist character of the Hegelian dialectic has often been emphasized. I venture to say that in the Hegelian dialectic negation takes on a false character: notwithstanding all the negation and destruction, it is always being-in-itself which ultimately develops and rises to a higher historical level by negation. Thus, it appears that in all the explosive, radical revolutionary transitions and destruction of Hegelian philosophy, it is always only one essence which develops: namely, the one whose repressed possibilities are freed by negation. This conformist character is not Hegel's capitulation to external circumstances; on the contrary, it is located in his very concept of the dialectic in which the positivity of reason and progress eventually prevails.

Althusser maintains that, had Marx just set the Hegelian dialectic on its feet, he still would only have substituted another system of reason for the Hegelian one even though he would have transformed its basis. That is, he would have remained within philosophy instead of transcending it. According to Althusser, Marx actually broke with the Hegelian dialectic, since he developed it in terms of "real development" — one of Engels' expressions — a new dialectic in its own right.

I would submit an alternative to Althusser's thesis: even the materialist dialectic remains under the influence of the positivity of idealistic reason so long as it does not destroy the concept of progress whereby the future is always deeply rooted in the present; so long as the Marxian dialectic does not radicalize the concept of transition to a new historical level, i.e., the reversal, the break with the past and the present, the qualitative difference built into the theory's tendency for progress. This is no abstract claim. On the contrary, it is a very concrete problem in view of the question of whether and to what extent advanced industrial societies in the West can at least serve as models for constructing a new society based on productive forces.

I would like to clarify two central dialectic negation as the internal development of an concept of the whole whereby each individual As to the concept of negation as overcoming Hegel it is essential that the negating force contradictions to a new stage develop within of the bourgeoisie within feudal society and force within capitalism are examples of deters and yet within it. Moreover, by means of thinking, movement towards a new stage unleshes the fettered productive forces in revolutionary transformation of the existing essence already existing in itself cannot be. Thus, the material foundation for the development of the highly developed production. But isn't that another form of the new form of the self-reproducing superiority the technological apparatus — i.e., living labor.

Against this concept of dialectics, I ask an antagonistic system develop with historical liberating manner. Must classes and class struggle dynamic? This problem involves historical materialism, or the idealist dialectics. Doesn't dialectical sociology depend on the commodity identity of the form of productive relations? And by undervaluing the role of the formation of and determination of needs, does Marxian materialism undervalue the forces of capitalism?

While there may be no intellectual but at least there are social forces strong and contradictions for a whole period and transform them into positive ones which re-destroying it. This hypothesis casts doubt on the way in which the new materialist concept of revolution comes to be. The concept of praxis from its coupling in the outside upon which the schema has been fixed. With this intentionally undialectical inside and outside, I now come to the idea raised here concern the real possibility that the antagonistic whole is negated and superimposed upon a new historical stage is reached. I believe that want to examine briefly also has a place in its legal philosophy. I am thinking of the state. Despite all the very skillfully worked out the state within bourgeois society, it is a state from outside bourgeois society and a power outside the whole interest system, advocate the universal in this hopelessly
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constructing a new society based on technological development of the productive forces.

I would like to clarify two central dialectical concepts: the negation of the negativity as the internal development of an antagonistic social whole, and the concept of the whole whereby each individual position finds its value and truth. As to the concept of negation as overcoming (Aufhebung), for both Marx and Hegel it is essential that the negating forces driving a system's self-evolving contradictions to a new stage develop within that very system. The development of the bourgeoisie within feudal society and of the proletariat as a revolutionary force within capitalism are examples of determinate negation against the whole and yet within it. Moreover, by means of this negating which develops within a system, the movement towards a new stage becomes the higher stage as it unleashes the fettered productive forces in the established system. But in any revolutionary transformation of the existing whole, the development of an essence already existing in itself cannot be realized within the existing order. Thus, the material foundation for the development of socialist productivity already exists in the highly developed technological basis of capitalist production. But isn't that another form of the progress of objective reason and a new form of the self-reproducing superiority of past labor — labor objectified in the technological apparatus — over living labor?

Against this concept of dialectics, I ask whether the negating forces within an antagonistic system develop with historical necessity in this progressive, liberating manner. Must classes and class struggles be placed within this perspective? This problem involves historical materialism as a whole in its relation to the idealist dialectics. Doesn't dialectical materialism reduce its own material basis by not dealing profoundly enough with the effects of social institutions on man's being and consciousness by belittling the role of brute power as well as the power of facts (i.e., the mounting productivity of labor and the rising standard of living), and by undervaluing the role of science and technology in the formation and determination of needs and satisfaction? That is, does not Marxian materialism undervalue the forces of integration and cohesion in late capitalism?

While there may be no intellectual or ideological forces strong enough, at least there are social forces strong and material enough to neutralize the contradictions for a whole period and to suspend negative forces or even transform them into positive ones which reproduce the existing order instead of destroying it. This hypothesis casts doubt on the concept of self-developing negation as liberation within an existing whole. Thus, it also casts doubt on the materialist concept of reason in history. Consequently, it is necessary to separate the concept of praxis from its coupling in this schema and rejoin the inside and the outside upon which the schema has been historically dependent.

With this intentionally undialectical formulation of the contradiction of inside and outside, I now come to the concept of the whole. The questions raised here concern the real possibility that in the historical dynamic an existing antagonistic whole is negated and superseded externally and that this is how the next historical stage is reached. I believe that the concept of outside which I still want to examine briefly also has a place in the Hegelian philosophy, especially in its legal philosophy. I am thinking of the relation of bourgeois society to the state. Despite all the very skillfully worked out dialectical transitions which bind the state within bourgeois society, it is nevertheless decisive that Hegel brings the state from outside bourgeois society and does so with good reason, because only a power outside the whole interest system, the bourgeois "system of needs," can advocate the universal in this hopelessly antagonistic society. In this sense, the
universal remains outside the system of bourgeois society. If there is an historical place for such an outside, then every determinate social whole must itself be part of a greater totality within which it can be effected by the outside. This greater totality itself must again be a concrete historical totality. For Marx, national capitalism is such a partial whole of global capitalism. But here also, there is the difference between inside and outside, particularly in the concept of imperialism: inter-imperialistic conflicts appear as an external destructive power opposed to the inner revolutionary action of the proletariat, which is the decisive force.

What, then, is the relation of this partial whole to the totality? Today, the global system of capitalism that was the totality for Marx, is a partial whole in the world-system of co-existence of capitalism and socialism. Within this totality, we witness the absorption of the revolutionary potentiality of late capitalism itself. As a consequence of this absorption, negation and negativity confront each other as geographically and socially separate, independent wholes. The inner contradiction develops and transforms itself in this global antithesis. Today, the dialectic faces the task of theoretically working out this essentially new situation without simply cramming it into worn-out concepts. Here are some suggestions: the outside of which I have spoken is not to be understood mechanistically in the spatial sense but, on the contrary, as the qualitative difference which overcomes the existing antitheses inside the antagonistic partial whole (e.g., the antithesis of capital and labor), and which is not reducible to these antitheses. That is, these social forces are outside the whole: their needs and aims represent what is suppressed and cannot develop in the existing antagonistic whole. The qualitative difference of the new stage of the new society would then not only the satisfaction of vital and intellectual needs (which, to be sure, remain the basis of all development). Much more, it would be the formation and fulfillment of new needs stifled in the antagonistic society. These new needs would find their expression in radically altered human relations and in a radically different social and natural environment: solidarity instead of the struggle of competition, sensuality instead of repression; the disappearance of brutality, vulgarity, and its language; and peace as a lasting state.

I speak here not of values and aims but of needs. As long as these aims and values do not become real needs, the qualitative difference between the old and the new society will not be able to develop. This humanism can become a concrete social force only when it is supported by the already existing new social and political powers which have stood up and will stand up against the old repressive whole.

To the degree to which the antagonistic society unites itself in an immensely repressive totality, the social position of negation shifts. The power of the negative arises outside this repressive totality from forces and movements still not grasped by the aggressive, repressive productivity of the so-called “society of abundance,” from forces and movements which have already freed themselves from this development and thus have the historical opportunity to actually industrialize and modernize humanity. The force of negation which rebels against this system as a whole from within the “society of abundance” corresponds to that opportunity. Today, the force of negation is concentrated in no one class. Politically and morally, rationally and instinctively, it is a chaotic, anarchic opposition: the refusal to join and play a part, the disgust at all prosperity, the compulsion to protest. It is a feeble, unorganized opposition which nonetheless rests on motives and purposes which stand in irreconcilable contradiction to the existing whole.

Karl Korsch, Marxismus und Philosophie (Leipzig: 1920).

At present (1924) ed., unknown to me, the Marxist movement is undergoing a deep crisis not only in the West but in the rest of the world as well. Marx, since its effects on the Marxist praxis itself are discerned as latent or manifest in every aspect. This crisis of Marxism affects the relation of social spheres and the relation of economic to political spheres. The foundations for the clarification of these contradictions did not go into the concrete details of Marx's followers to the point of losing sight of Marx's method, the connections between the spheres. Either they seek to purge Marxism of Kantian thought, or they seek to substitute the doctrine of social classes for the doctrine of the economic sphere. Or else they see Marx's materialism, within which they conceive every individual as product of economic realities, as though it could be derived automatically and mechanically from the Marxist doctrine that the economic sphere derive the doctrine and the only apparent reality of everything Marx's teaching can be understood by his followers.

Marxist practice of this period lost sight of the whole and became bourgeoisified, as it is Hegelian-oriented revolutionary theory and practice. The post-revolutionary ideology of a new direction: partly towards a specifically bourgeois scientific materialism, partly towards an equally bourgeois scientific materialism.

At present, the crisis of Marxism lies in the fact that the political and economic aspect has not yet been derived from the bourgeois one even more simplistic post-revolutionary uncritical scientific materialism so strong in the form of an intricate pre-Kantian materialism as the Marxian theory of the economic sphere towards the “economic absolutism” or “pan-economics” of the economic sphere is the only reality for the Marxian followers, as in the leading philosophical theoretical appearances: the results of the absurdity.

This view prevents an understanding.

* This review of Korsch's Marxismum und Philosophie was translated into English and edited by Patricia Tomlinson and published in the Autumn 1970 issue of Socialism and Democracy. It was written by New Left Halliday and includes a set of essays different from the historical relevance of Korsch's review in Radnitzky's collection.