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THE PRODUCTION of DESIRE

**The Integration
of Psychoanalysis
into Marxist Theory**

Richard Lichtman

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into Marxist Theory*

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Preface and Acknowledgments

I have written this book with several distinct but overlapping interests in mind: first, as a contribution to the growing body of Marx-Freud analysis. Over the past several decades a small but active enterprise has arisen around attempts to synthesize the theories of these seminal thinkers. At its root, the basic contention of this work is that no such synthesis is possible, if that term is used to mean a compromise between the two positions. I argue instead that the systems of Marx and Freud are incompatible and that, consequently, a choice must be made for one and against the other. Once this initial commitment is made, it is possible to integrate the second position into the first. A great deal of the confusion that distinguishes the current Freudian-Marxist literature is engendered precisely by a “tolerant” wish to blend Marx and Freud into a homogenized amalgam. In this era of “the end of ideologies” such a wish is understandable. But, as we shall see, the structure of the two theories makes them ultimate rivals, and so priorities must be established. My own position, for which the following analysis is argument, is that while the doctrines of both Marx and Freud are inadequate as they stand, the Marxist position can be corrected, while Freudian theory is fundamentally unsound. However, working through the limitations of Freud’s

view makes its very significant insights available for incorporation into an expanded Marxist theory.

Thus, a second interest manifests itself: to move Marxist theory itself further away from its traditional, mechanistic heritage without sacrificing what is profound in its “materialist” conception of human existence. Marxist theory has tended to divide between structuralists and humanists. But both camps have some hold on the truth; for while social structures “act” independently of the professed conscious intentions of human agents, they are nevertheless wholly dependent upon the character of concrete men and women. It is at precisely this juncture that Freudian theory proves so suggestive when restructured through social categories. For the conjunction of individual intention and social structure is embedded dialectically in the alienated institutions of social life *and* in the repressed unconscious of specific social agents. It is therefore not only for such historical reasons as are set forth in chapter 1, nor even for the insight Freud’s work provides into the failures of actual and latent social revolutions in this century, that I have undertaken this examination. It is rather for the theoretical-practical consideration that human life cannot be grasped adequately without careful consideration of the mutual interrelation between Freud’s understanding of the repressed unconscious and Marx’s discovery of the fetishism of social economic structures.

I am well aware that such attempts have been made before. But, in my judgment, they have failed, either through an uncritical reliance on basic Freudian concepts—as in the case of Reich’s theory of instinct—or through so attenuated a version of Marx—as in Fromm’s avoidance of class analysis—as to prove irrelevant. What has thus far been lacking is a detailed statement of the basic theoretical assertions of Marx and Freud, a comparison of their diverse methodologies and doctrines, and a consideration of the “logic” that accommodates them both. This is a logic, I argue, that affords priority to the social order without losing awareness of the reciprocity of individual and social categories. I know only too well that this book is simply a beginning of such efforts. I am far from satisfied with the completeness or integration that has been achieved here. But I wish to mark off an enterprise devoted to directing Marxist inquiry along lines that can fruitfully explore and absorb the works of non-Marxist writers into a variegated but focused Marxist perspective.

For a third interest consists in setting out the preliminaries of a *Marxist psychology*. This is a more difficult phrase to make intelligible than may appear at first sight. For the term “psychology” has come to stand for so subjective and privatized a notion, corresponding to the real atomism and isolation of contemporary life, that the phrase itself will have to be reconstituted in the process of its realization. And in this regard it is important to insist that Freud is only one figure whose insights

need to be critically incorporated into a Marxist perspective. There is as much to be learned from Mead, Merleau-Ponty, Binswanger, and Piaget as well as from a host of lesser figures. But Freud's doctrine is isomorphic with the social self-reflection of the contemporary world in a way that does not apply to the work of other thinkers, not only for the pervasive sense of determinism and privatized subjectivity that marks his system but also for the obvious significance the practice of psychoanalysis has had for modern life.

This last consideration helps to situate the theoretical level of the present work, which lies between pure theory and empirical social criticism. This is neither a philosophical work dealing with the pure theory of mind nor a practical critique of the changing structure of American life. I hope in later writings to deal with these subjects; the former because it is the ground of this study and the latter because it is the application. My major concern for the present is with the social origins of the self and its relationship to capitalist repression and the technology of psychoanalysis as a therapy. I have not attempted anything like an objective or dispassionate account of these matters, not only for the perfectly adequate reason that such attempts are logically impossible but for the additional reason that the sentiment and conviction that stand behind such efforts seems to me an expression of the alienation of contemporary life, which this work is concerned to critique.

This work has proceeded through a lengthy incubation, and many individuals have helped along the way: my students at the Wright Institute, with whom I shared and argued many of these notions in classrooms and corridors; Michael Lerner, who contributed a continual critical commentary and discussed and debated with me all the basic issues contained in this work—always to my enlightenment; Jim O'Connor, who offered an invaluable blend of theoretical and personal reflection and steady support where it was most needed; Michael Bader, who read the greatest part of the manuscript and offered important suggestions; Eli Katz and Kathy Johnson, who read and corrected the most difficult parts of the work and were unfailingly supportive; Ray Barglow, who was an insightful critic and meticulous reader; David Plotke and Harry Chotiner, who cut and edited the early sections to my advantage; Barbara Safran, who provided me with constant interest and careful, devoted participation in the ongoing dialogue that so helped me to clarify my developing thoughts; Ciele Ogren, who nurtured the roots which aided in the present flowering; and Jennifer Church and Karen Mann, who typed my continuing transformations of the original when there were other, more enjoyable, things for them to do.

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INTRODUCTION

Marxist Despondency and the Turn to Freud

Perhaps Marx's most portentous reflection is the following passage from the first volume of *Capital*:

The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by *education, tradition, habit*, looks upon the conditions of that mode of production as *self-evident laws of nature*. The organization of the capitalist mode of production, once fully developed, breaks down all resistance. The constant generation of a relative surplus population keeps wages in a rut that corresponds with the wants of capital. The dull compulsion of economic relations completes the subjection of the laborer to the capitalist. Direct force, outside economic conditions, is of course still used, *but only exceptionally*. In the ordinary run of things, the laborer can be left to the "natural laws of production," i.e., to his dependence on capital, a dependence springing from, and guaranteed in perpetuity by, the conditions of production themselves.¹

The grave power of this insight has, to paraphrase Marx, weighed like a nightmare upon the lives of our generation. The feeling that permeates Marx's judgment is more than pessimism; it is despair. So much is evident in the phrase "breaks down all resistance."

Marx himself did not accept the implication of this vision. The tone of the great mass of Marx's commentary is clearly optimistic. Perhaps "ten, twenty, or even fifty years" will need to pass, but finally the working

class will rise up against its masters and initiate the movement of human life from the sphere of necessity to "the kingdom of freedom."²

But one hundred years have passed without revolution. The apparent stasis of the dialectic and the failure of revolution is the one fundamental problem that Western Marxists face in the twentieth century. Paul Baran put the problem this way:

While it was thought earlier that people would be incensed by injustice, inequality, and exploitation but would be prevented temporarily from rising against them by fear of divine or civil opprobrium and punishment, under monopoly capitalism they actually do not understand and feel injustice, inequality, and exploitation *as such*, do not *want* to struggle against them but treat them as aspects of the natural order of things. While it used to be thought that bourgeois ideology would guard the existing social order from man's efforts to satisfy basic human needs—decent livelihood, knowledge, solidarity and cooperation with fellow-men, gratification in work and freedom from toil—the actual *wants* of men in the societies of advanced capitalism are determined by aggressive drives, are directed towards the attainment of individual privileges and the exploitation of others, towards frivolous consumption and barren entertainment. With bourgeois taboos and moral injunctions *internalized*, people steeped in the culture of monopoly capitalism do not want what they need and do not need what they want.³

Is it possible, from within Marx's theory itself, to account for this tragic division between want and need? Baran offers two reasons for the failure of Marxist theory to anticipate this catastrophe:

In the first place, even Marx and Engels, much as they were aware of the plasticity and moldability of human nature, seriously underestimated the extent to which man's wants can be influenced and shaped by the social order within which he is enclosed. And, collaterally, giving capitalism only a relatively short life, they could not possibly anticipate the scope and the depth of *habit* formation resulting from centuries of capitalist development.⁴

In his conclusion, Baran is driven beyond the traditional Marxist vocabulary of productive forces and relations of production, beyond even alienation and ideology, to a distinctly therapeutic mode of discourse:

If the above considerations are valid, the societies of the advanced capitalist countries are *ill*. Just as protracted *addiction* to alcohol or to narcotics leads sooner or later to disaster, so a prolonged divergence between the needs of men and their wants cannot but result in catastrophe. The failure of an irrationally organized society to generate internal forces pressing towards and resulting in its abolition and replacement by more rational, more human social relations results necessarily in economic stagnation, cultural decay, and a widespread sense of *despondency* [emphasis added].⁵

"Illness," "addiction," and "despondency" are not the vocabulary of Marx and Engels: this is the terminology of mental pathology, of psychic

disease. However grave the power of Baran's judgment that "people steeped in the culture of monopoly capitalism do not want what they need and do not need what they want," there is an even more ominous conclusion to be wrung from these reflections: *that people come to want what is destructive of their need.*

Marx grasped ideology as the condition under which men and women could be made to accept as natural, and therefore unalterable, a society in which their human condition was continuously diminished. But he did not consider that people would "willingly" seek out the conditions of their own extinction. Addicts are not only incapable of acting for the sake of their own well-being, they actively pursue the substance that destroys them. Baran is driven to employ the discourse of "illness" and "addiction" because the disaster he is describing has gone beyond passivity to self-destructiveness. He has, almost against his will, been forced onto the terrain of Freudian psychology.

Why did Marxist theory fail to deal with the darker side of social reality? The prevailing thought of the nineteenth century was bound to the theory of the rise and fall of capitalism. Beneath the optimistic façade of progress a countervailing tendency toward stagnation had begun to manifest itself. More perceptive bourgeois writers like Ricardo sensed this growing dissolution. Therefore, while the theory of inevitable progress was the orthodox view of the liberal intelligentsia, a contrary vision of inevitable diminution and final stagnation also haunted bourgeois culture.

Profound transformations racked European life from the end of the eighteenth to the beginning of the twentieth centuries: the French Revolution; the Napoleonic conquests; the uprisings of 1830 and 1848; the unification of Germany, Italy, and the United States; the colonization of Africa and Asia; the continuous growth of industrialization; the expansion of technology; the ruin of artisans and peasants and the breakdown of the previous feudal structures; the mass migration of people from country to city; the development of a world market; the growth of a world socialist movement; and the transformation of the bourgeoisie itself from a progressive to a conservative world historical force. The world was being transformed at an incredible pace. It is hardly surprising that everyday consciousness and social theory reflected this development.

The central intellectual contributions of the nineteenth century were organized into a general cosmic history stretching from physics and chemistry, through biology to the evolution of the animal species and human life. Process supplanted substance as the primary category of reality and thought. Hegel's monumental corpus systematized the transformations that violently remade the fabric of nineteenth-century existence.

If the world view of feudalism was shaped around the conviction of a great chain of being linking the heavens and the most inglorious aspects of matter in a single, continuous and permanent stratification under God's eternal plan, the world view of the nineteenth century was dominated by the conviction that human life was being totally transformed by social forces. This new vision asserted the power of human beings, their ability to transform the universe and even their own nature through their capacity to remake the social world. Agency was relocated. It no longer belonged to forces beyond the human realm, to God and divine law. It belonged, rather, to humanity itself.

However, humanity is too abstract a category. For if humanity were in fact remaking itself, some were certainly more the made than the makers. Few men and women could direct this process of social transformation. Indeed, social forces were recreating human existence, but what precisely were these forces? To some they appeared the prerogative of a minority of powerful men who dominated the new forms of social wealth. To others, the vast majority, they were under no control at all. As Alvin Gouldner has noted:

The modern concepts of society and of culture arose in a world that, following the French Revolution, men could believe they themselves had made. They could see that it was through their struggles that kings had been overthrown and an ancient religion disestablished. Yet, at the same time men could also see that this was a world out of control, not amenable to men's designs.⁶

The world could be viewed simultaneously as the product of human creativity and as an autonomous, alienated realm, inexorably imposing itself on the raw material of human existence.

In time the two views merged and the split between them broke out in a new way. For as it became less credible to deny the existence of independent social forces, it became more significant how one interpreted their *direction*, that is, their relation to the attainment of human happiness. The autonomy of social forces could be viewed as either benign or malignant. With the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie the doctrine of progress became the official ideology. Yet softly at first, then with increasing intrusiveness, the theme of decline and stagnation appeared, a terror of revolution or of slow coagulation and death.

Adam Smith thought it was advantageous that human beings could not control the social consequences of their separate actions. For then the natural laws of the market could not be flawed by human incompetence, or even by human malice. The "genius" of market exchange was that it flourished on egoism. For though the individual

intends only his own gain, he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it

worse for the society that it was not part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good.⁷

At the moment of capitalist ascendancy Smith viewed "alienation"—the separation of intention and consequence—as a decided advantage.

By the time of Ricardo's writings, capitalist optimism had begun to evaporate. The defects of the system were now being revealed as permanent afflictions rather than temporary aberrations. Bourgeois theory could not grasp the root of capitalist dehumanization, but it could feel its effect and respond on rare occasion with a limited but painful honesty. Ricardo's theory was based on the belief that as progressively less fertile lands were available, food prices would rise, pushing up the level of wages and forcing profits into a steady decline. He saw the interests of the landlord as opposed to those of the manufacturer, the consumer, and society as a whole. It is not the factual correctness of Ricardo's view that is here in question, but the previous view of natural harmony and the automatic benevolence of capitalist technological development. In the third edition of the *Principles*, Ricardo stated that "the opinion entertained by the laboring class, that the employment of machinery is frequently detrimental to their interests, is not founded on prejudice and error, but is conformable to the correct principles of political economy."⁸

Smith's view of the benevolence of the invisible hand gradually turned to a conviction of impending chaos. The whole arc of capitalist optimism and despair was captured in Rousseau's prophetic announcement that while human beings were born free they were everywhere in chains. Society came more and more to be viewed as a natural object following quite autonomous laws: when Durkheim advised social theorists to "consider social facts as things," he was articulating a methodology that reflected the reification of bourgeois society. Bourgeois exhaustion reached its nadir in the weariness of Max Weber, its most profound expositor:

The puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate wordly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determines the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the "saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside any moment." But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.

Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and to work out its

ideals in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. Today the spirit of religious asceticism—whether finally, who knows?—has escaped the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer. The rosy blush of its laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems also to be irretrievably fading, and the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. . . .

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved."⁹

What is most significant about Weber's consciousness of degradation is not merely that he records the atrophy of alienation—the cage, the loss of spirit, mechanized petrification, the ascendancy of material goods. What is most significant is the alienated voice in which he speaks. Weber does not merely describe the decay of bourgeois life; he participates in it. The mode of his consciousness is isomorphic with the world process upon which he reflects. For he views social life as proceeding not through the actions of human beings but through the decrees of fate, the undertakings of asceticism, irretrievably, inexorably, irresistibly. The inexorable fate which he records is not merely in the object of his inquiry but in himself, simultaneously, as its subject. The iron cage holds not only social life, but social awareness as well. From the benign independence of the invisible hand to mechanized petrification, the independent forces of social labor turn golem-like against their master.

Marx's theory contains its own version of the bourgeois attitude toward progress and dissolution. But in his view, the stagnation and decline of capitalism are preconditions for the triumph of socialism. And these tendencies are seen as following from independent laws of historical transformation that are autonomous of the wills of individual men and women. In a preface to *Capital*, Marx quotes a Russian reviewer's description of his method:

Consequently, Marx only troubles himself about one thing: to show, by rigid scientific investigation, the necessity of successive determinate orders of social conditions, and to establish, as impartially as possible, the facts that serve him for fundamental starting points. For this it is quite enough if he proves, at the same time, both *the necessity of the present order of things, and the necessity of another order into which the first must inevitably pass over; and this all the same, whether men believe or do not believe it, whether they are conscious or unconscious of it.*

*Marx treats the social movement as a process of natural history, governed by laws not only independent of human will, consciousness and intelligence, but rather, on the contrary, determining that will, consciousness and intelligence. [emphasis added].*¹⁰

Marx significantly added the comment that "the writer pictures what he takes to be actually my method, in this striking and (as far as concerns my own application of it) generous way," thereby indicating his approval of the presentation. It is certainly possible to argue that this line of Marx's thought does not express his total position. It is also true that history is "broken," that laws are tendencies, and that men and women are free. Nevertheless, Marx viewed social transformation as "a process of natural history," and it was central to his perspective to maintain that "capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of Nature, its own negation."¹¹ Marx no more denied the existence of individuals than Freud denied the existence of society. The question for him was the origin and the status of individuality. Individuals make history only insofar as they intersect with historical forces that are fundamentally beyond their personal control. Marx was concerned with individual persons in the mode of their *interpersonal* contact and as the manifestations of social forces.

To prevent possible misunderstanding, in a word, I paint the capitalist and the landlord in no sense *couleur de rose*. But here individuals are dealt with only insofar as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests. My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them.¹²

For Marx, as opposed to Freud, individuals are derivatives of the social system rather than primary elements from which the system is itself constructed.

So far we have painted a portrait of his method that renders it as uncomfortably similar to that of the major bourgeois writers of his time. All seem to have stressed alienation as the primary fact of social life, either as an "invisible hand," "mechanized petrification," or as life "governed by laws not only independent of human will, consciousness and intelligence, but rather, on the contrary, determining that will, consciousness and intelligence."

What totally distinguishes Marx's system from the world view of the bourgeoisie is his insistence that alienation is self-negating. But this contention can be interpreted in very different ways: either (1) that reified human activity comes gradually to suffocate the activity that has produced it, leading to stagnation and eventual death for the system; or (2) that while objectified human labor proceeds through autonomous trans-

formations that produce inevitable crises for capitalism, it is the power of the proletariat, as the subject of history, that finally destroys the system; or (3) that the forces of alienation themselves produce the transformation of society and the passage from capitalism to socialism, either gradually or violently, depending on particular historical circumstances.

Some combination of all these views is to be found in Marx's writings. We began this essay with the pessimism of the first position—applied to the role of the proletariat. In *The Holy Family*, Marx presents the unique form of optimism contained in the third position:

Since the abstraction of all humanity, even of the semblance of humanity, is practically complete in the full-grown proletariat, since the conditions of life of the proletariat sum up all the conditions of life of society today in all their inhuman acuity, since man has lost himself in the proletariat, yet at the same time has not only gained theoretical consciousness of that loss, but through urgent, no longer disguisable, absolutely imperative need—that practical expression of necessity—is driven directly to revolt against that inhumanity; it follows that the proletariat can and must free itself. But it cannot free itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life. It cannot abolish the conditions of its own life without abolishing all the conditions of life of society today which are summed up in its own condition. . . . The question is not what this or that proletarian, or even the whole of the proletariat at the moment considers as its aim. The question is what the proletariat is and what consequent on that being, it will be compelled to do.¹³

This form of optimism is most relevant to the question of why Marx failed to deal with the darker side of life.

Behind Marx's apocalyptic optimism lies the logic of a Christianized, Hegelian dialectic. The power of alienation defeats itself through the cunning of material reason. The externalized shell of human labor—reified humanity itself—will proceed through a series of stages which will assure both the demise of alienation and the eventual victory of the proletariat. Through this vision, the victory of the proletariat is inexorable. But the worker becomes as much the personification of external forces as the capitalist and landlord to whom Marx previously referred.

It is precisely this move in the argument that is not convincing. Marx becomes as open to the charge of reification as Weber. For the laws of necessity have been used to account for the realization of freedom. And yet, according to Marx himself, the unfolding of capitalist society follows necessary laws, and is consequently predictable, *for the very reason and to the extent* that these laws are the reflection of institutions over which men and women have no control. The Marxist analysis of the prehistory of human existence is the dissection of human life as lost to its own self-determination.

Men make their history themselves, but not as yet with a collective will according to a collective plan . . . and for that very reason all such societies are governed by necessity.¹⁴

The inexorability of law follows from the alienation of humanity.

But freedom can only grow *from* the life of the subjects of history; it cannot be imposed *upon* them as a fate.

The laws of his own social action . . . will be used with full understanding, and so mastered by [man]. Man's own social organization . . . becomes the result of his own free action. The extraneous objective forces that have hitherto governed history pass under the control of man himself. Only from that time will man himself, with consciousness, make his own history.¹⁵

Freedom is the victory of the subject, not the manifestation of the object, it cannot be given, it must be taken. That men and women have "an absolutely imperative *need*" to revolt against the conditions of their inhumanity cannot be denied. But as Baran noted, between the need and the want lies the pathos of stagnation. For revolution to become a practical necessity, the requirements of liberation must become as clear and compelling, as deeply initiated, as the process of alienation through which mankind has become lost to itself.

The Relevance of Freud

At this point, Reich's theory marks a real advance over orthodox Marxism.

An effective policy, whose ultimate goal is the achievement of socialism and the establishment of the rule of labor over capital, must not only be based on a recognition of those movements and changes which occur objectively and independently of our will as a result of the development of the productive forces. This policy must also, simultaneously and on the same level, take account of what happens "in people's heads," i.e., in the psychical structures of the human beings who are subjected to these processes and who actually carry them out—people from different countries and cities, people of different occupations, ages and sexes.¹⁶

If a need for revolution is to be generated throughout capitalist society, it will come neither from the alienation of independent laws (structuralism) nor from the pure freedom of the working class (humanism), but through their dialectic in a manner yet to be invented.

It is necessary to explore "the psychical structures of the human beings who are subjected to these processes and who actually carry them out." It is necessary to create a psychology of alienation, of "pseudo-man," of the human being as commodity. To Reich and the members of