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Marx's State Theory after "Grundrisse" and "Capital"

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When we speak about the development of state theory in Marx, we have to take into account the level of development of his economic theory. Much discussed was the so called "break" between the "young" Marx and the "old" Marx. But I don't want to stress the discussion about this break and also I don't want to speak about the young Marx and his rather philosophical discussion of state theory, which was a step on the way to reach economic theory, but which was not informed by economic theory

In order to discuss Marx's state theory I want to stress another "break", which took place only *after* 1845 (the year in which Marx criticised his former philosophical conceptions, as he told us, in the Preface of "A Contribution"). In the same preface, Marx mentioned another break, or if you like, the reaching of a new level of research, which was much less recognized by his readers. Marx stressed, that after he moved to London, the enormous material in British Library and the new developments of capitalism induced him "to start again from the very beginning" ("ganz von vorn wieder anzufangen"). But this new start was not a minor point, it was one of the decisive points in the development of Marx's studies, what we can realize, when we compare his economic writings of the late 1840ies and with the writings, which emerged since 1857.

In the second half of the 1840ies we find several writings of economic importance, especially "German Ideology", "Poverty of Philosophy", "Wage labour and Capital" and "Communist manifesto". In all these writings, especially in the second and the third, Marx strongly relies on Ricardo's economic theory. He criticizes Ricardo for not seeing capitalism as a historical, transitional mode of production, but he has no fundamental critic of Ricardo's analytical achievements or of the categories used by Ricardo. In this period Marx used Ricardo's categories and results to explain the functioning of capitalism and to criticize other socialist conceptions like that of Proudhon. In some respect we can say, that in this time Marx's had much in common with the left wing of the Ricardian School. Marx made a *critical use* of political economy, but he didn't fundamentally criticize political economy.

The critic of Ricardo's theory itself only starts in the early 1850ies, at first Marx criticizes Ricardo's quantity theory of money, then Ricardo's rent theory, later his value theory. This process finally culminated in Marx "Critique of Political Economy" (a critic which aimed not only to Ricardo but to the whole science of political economy). "Grundrisse" was the first main text of this new level of dealing with political economy. Not only the applications of Political Economy are challenged, but also (and above all) the formation of the categories, so the whole science is criticised in the way, its object is formed and recognized.

Regarding Marx economic writings after 1845 we have to distinguish between writings with a prevailing "Ricardian discourse" during the late 1840ies and a real "Critique of Political

Economy” since the 1850ies. Like in the development of Immanuel Kant, also in Marx we should distinguish a “pre-critical” period from the period of the great “critique”. But what has all this to do with the theory of state?

In some respect we can say, that society, the structure of economy in the *Ricardian discourse* is taken for granted. The *specific* relations of power and of exploitation are questioned, and it is clear that these relations have to be investigated. But beneath this relations of power and exploitation, there seem to be just general features like “production” or “society”.

The discourse of “Critique of Political Economy” tells us, that this impression is wrong. Neither economy nor society we can take for granted entities. We have to ask for their “*constitution*”. But not for their constitution in a historical sense. The constitution, which is crucial, is a contemporary constitution. A constitution, which is the result of intermediating (“*vermittelnden*”) processes, which are not directly visible.

May be, this sounds a little bit strange. Perhaps it sounds less strange, when we remember, that exactly this kind of reasoning we can find very explicitly in Marx’s theory of money. In political economy (no matter, whether it is political economy of 19th century or neoclassical or Keynesian economics of 20th century) money is taken for granted. This doesn’t mean, that economists deny the existence of societies without money, also they don’t deny a historical process, which produces money. But when money has come into existence, it seems to be a simple, transparent thing, which is defined by its functions: measure of value, means of circulation, storage of wealth, and so on. For political economy the explanation of money is done by explanation its functions.

Marx also explains its functions, but only in Ch. 3 of “Capital”. But already Ch. 1 and 2 dealt with money. What Marx shows in value form analysis of Ch.1 and the analysis of the exchange process in Ch. 2 is just this (contemporary) constitution process of money: the relation between value and money (the generality of value needs a general form of value, the *money form*) and the contradicting situation of the commodity owners (everyone wants that his commodity is the general equivalent) makes it necessary that the commodity owners exclude one thing as *real* money.

Money is not just a thing with certain functions. Money is the result of certain relations (of commodities and of commodity owners) but a result which reifies these relations. The relations disappear in the result, which is stressed by Marx, when he writes about money at the end of the second chapter of “Capital”:

“The intermediate steps of the process vanish in the result and leave not trace behind”
 (“Die vermittelnde Bewegung verschwindet in ihrem eignen Resultat und lässt keine Spur zurück“)

But this proposition holds not only for money, it holds also for the constitution of capitalist economy and society:

The intermediate movement disappears in its own result

To discover that there is an *intermediation*, was already an important step, in Marx's theoretical development. That there is a hidden structure, was not clear for Marx during the second half of the 1840ies. The Empiricism of "German Ideology", the permanent stressing that we only have to state the empirical facts, the real process and so on shows no recognition of the complex visible/invisible, sensuous /over-sensuous ("sinnlich-übersinnlich) structure of reality, which is revealed in "Capital"

In "Communist Manifesto" Marx stresses that with the emergence and development of capitalism not only the old structures disappear, also the social structure shall become simple and transparent. This is an almost Weberian proposition (Max Weber sixty years later told us about the demystification of the world, which happens in modern capitalist societies).

Compare this with Marx's discourse of fetishism and mystification in "Capital": capitalist societies only *seem* to be simple and transparent. What was appreciated in "Communist Manifesto", now is recognized as a wrong appearance and the constitution of this wrong appearance has to be revealed. But this revealing is not possible with the economic categories of political economy, which Marx used in the late 1840ies. In order to make this revealing possible a critic of categories is necessary, only the "Critique of political economy" allows this revealing.

The pre-critical reasoning of "Communist Manifesto" touches also the way Marx deals there with classes and the state. Both are taken for granted, the only constitution Marx recognizes at this time is a historical constitution.

Classes are taken for granted to such a degree that the "Manifesto" can start with, without any explanation. You all know the famous first sentence of the first paragraph:

"All history is a history of class struggle"

The message is rather clear: the notion of class needs no explanation, it is a tool for giving explanations and in this way Marx explains the emergence and the development of capitalism.

And now compare this with the structure of the argumentation in "Capital". Not only that classes don't appear at the beginning. When they appear for the first time in the second section they are not very determined. It is only a very preliminary and implicit notion of class, which Marx uses in volume one of "Capital". Nevertheless, volume I prevailed for a long time the reading of "Capital" and so this preliminary notion of class, was seen as "Marx's concept of class". More complex views on class we can find in volume III and only at the end of volume III Marx planned to a chapter on classes, as the *last* chapter.

To come to a precise notion of class, it needs all three volumes of "Capital". And this has a reason. Already in the preface of "Capital" Marx made the well known remark, that in his investigation persons only count as personification of economic categories. What he already had recognized in "Grundrisse", "Society does't consist of individuals, it consists out of the relations between the individuals" now becomes the decisive point:

Although all structures of society are produced by persons, you cannot explain structures by the action of individuals. Contrarily: you have to explain the actions (the normal, average actions) by the logic of the structures.

How this works you can observe in the first two chapters of “Capital”: only after the analysis of the “commodity-form” of the labour product (ch. 1), Marx can analyse the actions of the commodity owners (ch. 2).

But the same is true for classes. Not only individuals act in form-determined context, also classes do. Not only the charactermasques of the commodity owner also the classes are constituted by a certain logic of structure, including the fetishism and the mystifications inherent to these structures. When Marx analyses the wage-form in volume I of “Capital” he gives the hint (without deeper reasoning) that from the illusionary wage-form (it appears as if *labour* is paid, so that you can debate whether the price of labour is just or unjust) all the imaginations of freedom and justice, as well of the workers as well of the capitalist derive.

We can generalize this insight. The wage-form is a constituent part of the Trinitarian Formula, which Marx presented at the end of volume III. It expresses not only a false appearance of the capitalist production process (the three factors of production cooperate and every factor gets back what it delivers) it also gives an imaginary picture of the position and functioning of the classes. Only after the presentation has reached the Trinitarian Formula Marx can in a scientific way (and not only in a preliminary way) speak about classes. And not sketched by Marx but to me it seems very obvious: the magic everyday world of the Trinitarian Formula leads to an understanding of the imaginary community of “nation” which is not founded in ideological narratives but in structural features of capitalist societies.

What holds for classes is also true for the state. In “Communist Manifesto” Marx takes the state for granted. He considers it as an instrument of power, as a “machine” as he later wrote. This instrument can just be used by different classes, so there is also a class struggle about this instrument and the ruling class uses it to defend its power.

This line of reasoning is also used by Engels, when he wrote much later the “origins of family, property and the state” and it also influenced a lot the Marxist tradition of thinking about the state from Lenin to Gramsci until Poulantzas. I don’t want to deny all the results of this tradition, but it looks very incomplete. It is above all a sociology of power, but it doesn’t reach the continent, which is opened by Marx’s “Critique of political economy”

Marx’s “Critique of Political Economy” at the same moment makes it possible and necessary to have an analysis of state and politics which is radically different from this sociology of power. It makes it possible because with critical analysis of social forms, with the analysis of fetishism and mystifications inherent to social structure, the field for such an analysis is reached. But also this analysis is necessary: Marx’ critique of political economy starts with the category of commodity, proceeds to money and capital, but always (as already the first sentence of the first chapter of “Capital” indicates) a society, in which the capitalist mode of

production prevails, is presupposed. This means a society not only with full developed capital relations but also with the bourgeois state as political form and with the capitalist world market around (including all economic and political “exterior” relations).

But how does this analysis of state as a political form, which is different from a sociology of power looks like? Quoted again and again is the short abbreviation of the Preface of 1859, where Marx talks about the “real foundation” and the “legal and political superstructure”. The notion of superstructure, often misused in an economistic and deterministic context, just relies to the relation of structures, to a certain compatibility, necessary for the functioning of the society (a much less “heavy” formulation about this necessary compatibility can be found in a footnote of the section on fetishism in “Capital” in which Marx concludes that, “Don Quichotte ... paid the penalty, for wrongly imagining that knight errantry was compatible with all economic forms of society”).

But the necessity of compatibility makes no proposition about the character of the structure. Marx, as well in the Preface of 1859 as well in this footnote only marks a certain result he has reached, without explaining this result. A more concrete hint gives a short remark in volume III, where Marx noted, that the “specific economic form”, in which surplus labour is extracted, determines the relations of power and rule, which directly origin from production.

Indeed, the extraction of surplus labour under capitalist conditions has a very specific form: it doesn't rest on *personal rule* and personal dependency, it has the form of a treaty between independent (free and equal) commodity owners. Of course there is inequality and dependency but not directly between persons, like in the feudal society of middle ages or the slaveholder society of the ancient Greek and Rome. There is a dependence intermediated by things, the “quiet force” of the economic conditions, as Marx wrote in the first volume of “Capital”. Instead of personal rule in capitalism we have prevailing *impersonal rule*, the rule of structure, mediated by the fetishism, which is inseparably connected with the objects of this mode of production. And to this fetishism not only the subordinated classes, also the ruling classes are submitted.

The bourgeois state, no matter what is its historic shape, has to intermediate and to secure this impersonal form of rule. So we can identify a certain “core”, which does not cover all of the state, all its functions and attributes, but something like the “ideal average”. Presenting the “ideal average” of the capitalist mode of production was the aim of “Capital” (as Marx told us at the end of presenting the Trinitarian Formula in volume III). We can suppose that the book on the state, he had planned as a part of his “Critique of Political Economy”, had also to present such an “ideal average”.

The first basic attribute we can articulate is, that a state which has to secure the structures of impersonal rule itself cannot essentially be based on personal rule it must be (to use the expression of Heide Gerstenberger) a “power without subject” (subjektlose Gewalt).

Of course there is a government, a president or a prime minister and parliaments in bourgeois states. But can we say there is a personal rule like in the case of medieval count? Surely not.

And what about the “lords of monopoly”, which play such a decisive role in Leninist traditions? Of course they try to get influence by legal and illegal ways. Also the bourgeois press is full of such stories. There is always a struggle: some groups try to extend their influence, other groups try to restrict such influences. But is this already the mechanism of bourgeois rule? Here is not the time for extensive explanations, but insofar the economy is ruled by the impersonal “law of value”, which is not established but only executed in the actions of capitals, then also the political form must be submitted to such impersonal structures.

Or with other words: What the Marxist sociology of power maintains about classes, class fractions and their struggle for influence on the state is not wrong and also it is not without importance, but it is only the surface behind which we have to search for the deeper forces or more precisely the *form-determinations*, which impose a structure to this permanent battlefield about influence on the state. There are not only power relations, there is a already form determined field in which these power-relations take place.

Three spheres of this form-determination we can distinguish

- the execution of power in form of the rule of law, guaranteeing freedom, equality and property of the subjects, so that the subjects without property are forced so sell their labour power, but also with the possibility to execute “general interest” (which is general interest in capitalist sense) to execute against some fractions of the capitalist class
- providing the general conditions of the existence of society as a capitalist society: providing infrastructure which cannot be produced in a profitable way by individual capitals, and providing the existence of the labour power as labour power (not providing a good life for the labourers, but providing that labour power continues to exist although it is confronted with certain risks like unemployment, disease etc.)
- finding and legitimating the “general interest” (as a capitalist interest): the “ruling class” of capitalist societies consists out of competitors, their common “class interest” is not clear, it has to be found and balanced against the different fractions. But also it has to be legitimated to the subordinated classes (otherwise pure repression is necessary, which not only contradicts the first determination, but which is also rather expensive and diminishes the total profit).

The concrete shape of these three spheres is always changing and it is always the object about which classes and class fractions fight. But at least in a developed capitalist society, we will find all three spheres as direct fields of state policy or as fields which the state regulates. Some closer investigation of this “ideal average” may help to understand what is going on “behind” the political fights which are in the centre of the considerations of the Marxist sociology of power, to which the biggest part of Marxist state theory belongs. Also it can help to understand what happens on an international level, in how far international institutions are starting points for new state structures (like in the European Union) or in how far they just intermediate and moderate the competition between the nation states (like the IMF or the WTO).