

THE SOCIOLOGY OF NON-EQUILIBRIUM

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The renewed discussion around the so-called inconsistencies in Marx's transformation procedure has had at least one important side effect: that of bringing to full day light the incontrovertible fact that a proper understanding of Marx's method is absolutely necessary in order to avoid the mistakes in which Marx's critics have fallen even since the publication of the third volume of *Capital*. [ENDNOTE 1] Two aspects of this method are especially important for the present purposes. First, his method is dynamic, i.e. based on a sequence of production, distribution, and consumption periods (rather than on a timeless reality) which tend towards crises rather than towards equilibrium. Empirical observation confirms this. Second, his method is dialectical. For our present purposes this means that reality is seen as structured in relations of determination between its different constituent elements and as a continuous transformation of what is potentially present into a realized state and vice versa of what has been realized back into a potential state. The usually forgotten distinction, and relation, between individual and social values is a pertinent case.

Rather than repeating an analysis which has already been carried out by many authors, including the present one, this paper addresses a different but related question. In neo-classical, as well as in almost any branch of economic theory, including equilibrium Marxism, reluctance to discharge the notion of equilibrium can be explained also by the theoretical void which, it is held, would be created by renouncing the notion that reality (including the economy) tends towards equilibrium. In plain terms, if the economy does not tend towards equilibrium, what keeps it together? If the market does not perform an equilibrating function, how come the economy as well as society do not fall apart and disintegrate? Surely, Marx too must have held onto the notion of equilibrium. The thesis in this paper is that the notion of equilibrium is not only alien to Marx's economic theory; it is also not necessary for a theorization of the economy and society. An inquiry into that which keeps society together will allow us to gain some insights into the dynamics and the dialectics of social reality (including economic reality) thus placing the dynamic and dialectical treatment of Marx's transformation procedure in a more general theory of society.

Simple observation tells us that people, just because they live in a society, interact with each other. They might not interact all the time, but certainly this interaction is an essential element of their life. Moreover, observation tells us that the purpose of this interaction is to engage in some sort of activity, or process. In short, then, society is a complex of processes embedded in human interactions, or relations. Our investigation must therefore begin with the analysis of both processes and relations.

A relation is an interaction between two or more people. Every time a relation arises, or changes into a different type, or ends, there is a change in the social fabric. From this point of view, society is a kaleidoscope of continuously changing relations among people. Consider next the notion of process. This is an activity and therefore a transformation, considered in its (i.e. as) movement rather than as a result of that transformation. There are four different types of processes. A process can be a personal transformation, i.e. a transformation of the interacting people, a material transformation, i.e. a transformation of physical reality, a relational transformation, i.e. a transformation of the relations in which people engage, and a mental transformation i.e. a transformation of our conceptualization (knowledge) of this all (including our conceptualization of how we conceptualize i.e. of the production of knowledge). A more precise notion of society is then: a four-dimensional process embedded in ceaselessly mutating human relations. [ENDNOTE 2]

Relations and processes are here conceived of as existentially interdependent (i.e. one cannot exist without the other) in the specific sense that relation determine processes. As used in this paper, the notion of dialectical determinations stresses the relation between two (or more) elements of social reality, or instances: the determinant and the determined. Logically, but not chronologically, there are two phases in this relation, the active and the reactive. In the active phase the relation goes from the determinant to the determined instance and in the reactive phase the relation goes in the opposite direction, i.e. from the determined to the determinant element.

Consider first the active phase. In it, the determinant element acts upon the determined one in the sense that it transfers its social content to this latter (the notion of social content will be clarified shortly). A prerequisite for this is that the determinant instance must be ontologically, but not necessarily chronologically, prior to the determined one, i.e. that it must exist before the determined instance. Then, the determinant element, by being ontologically prior to the determined element and by transferring to this latter its specific content, is the determined element's condition of existence. If R indicates relations (among people) and P indicates processes, the relation of determination between relations and processes can be symbolized as $R \Rightarrow P$.

Consider next the reactive phase. The determined element is not passive but, being ontologically subsequent to the determinant element, reacts upon and either maintains or modifies (either radically or not) the determinant element's social content. It is in this sense that the determined instance becomes the condition either of reproduction, or of radical change, or of termination of the determinant instance. If we consider again the relation between relations and

processes, the reactive phase can be represented as

$$R \Leftarrow P.$$

Thus, the active phase cannot exist without the reactive phase (or, the determinant and the determined instances are mutually and existentially interdependent). This separation is possible only analytically. Symbolically, if the two phases are combined, we get

$$(1) R \Leftrightarrow P$$

Then, to submit that relations determine processes means to pose that (a) relations are the conditions of existence of processes because the former are ontologically prior, and transfer their content, to the latter and that (b) processes are the relations's conditions of reproduction, radical change, or termination because the processes's content reacts upon and either maintains or (radically) modifies the relations's original content. It is important to keep in mind that \Rightarrow and \Leftarrow have these two quite different meanings, i.e. that the way in which R is an existential condition of P is different from the way P is an existential condition of R.

A key concept in the above is that of social content. If relations are interactions and processes are transformations, then social reality is in a permanent state of flux. This means that society is a dynamic whole whose movement, change, results in society's own reproduction, or radical change, or possibly termination. But if this is so, then each of the constituent elements of society (specific relations and processes) must contribute to, be functional for, the reproduction, or radical change, or termination of society. The social content of relations and processes, then, is their functionality (i.e. the specific way in which they are functional) for the reproduction, or radical change, or termination of the whole of which they are part, society. The determinant element, then, transfers this functionality to the determined one. This latter, in its turn, reacts upon and possibly radically modifies the determinant element (and also the other determined elements) by reproducing or radically changing that functionality. [ENDNOTE 3]

At this juncture we must introduce the notion of individual and social relations and processes. Individual relations are forms of interaction among individuals who are here considered in their uniqueness, as unique individuals. An individual relation depends for its inception, continuation, transformation, or termination only on the uniqueness of those individuals and on their capacity and will to freely engage in that relation. This should not be interpreted as if other, 'external', factors did not play any role. They do, but only inasmuch as they change the specific and unique features of those individuals and thus of their individual relation. From now on, the individuals seen in their uniqueness will be referred to as concrete individuals. For example, a friendship emerges, (or continues, or changes radically, or ceases to exist) only because of the unique features of those friends and inasmuch as they are willing and able to continue (or change, or terminate) that relation. An individual process is then a process determined by individual relations. For example, they go fishing together.

For sake of brevity, in what follows, individual relations and processes, tied by a relation of dialectical determination, will be called individual phenomena. Notice that often by phenomenon it is meant a form of manifestation of some essence. This is not the case here. A process is the condition for the reproduction, radical change or termination of the relation and thus equally essential as the relation itself.

Social relations, on the other hand, are forms of interaction among individuals considered as possessing some common features (for example, they are all catholics), irrespective of the specific, individual, forms taken by those common features (e.g. one's specific way to be a catholic). It is because of these common features that these individuals are considered as members of a certain group. From this angle, those individuals are considered not in their individuality but as members of a group who share certain characteristics. As members of social groups, individuals are abstract individuals (since abstraction is made of their specific features, of their concrete forms of existence), while as unique individuals they are concrete individuals, the opposite of abstract individuals. [ENDNOTE 4] An important difference is that abstract individuals are replaceable (on account of their common features), while concrete individuals, being unique, are not. Given that all the individuals sharing certain qualities can participate in the same process, and thus can carry out the same tasks or activities (e.g. a soldier in a battalion), all individuals having certain qualities can carry out the same (tasks within a) process. If that process is replicated elsewhere (i.e. if more battalions are created), then the same tasks are replicated as well within those similar processes and thus the same individual can carry out those tasks within all those processes.

Notice that in reality individuals are always both concrete and abstract. However, analytically, individuals are either concrete or abstract: if we consider their unique features we disregard their common features, and vice versa. While the concrete features differentiate, the general features unify. Given that in reality an abstract individual is also at the same time a concrete individual, when people engage in social relations and processes they inevitably give a personal, concrete form to those phenomena as well. For example, "the capitalist is but "personified capital endowed with a consciousness of its own and a will" (K.Marx, 1967c, pp.289-290). In a classroom, a teacher and a pupil engage in a social relation (as teacher and pupil they are abstract, replaceable, individuals) but, just because both teacher and pupil are also concrete individuals, they necessarily give that relation a particular form which depends on

the specific persons (concrete individuals) involved. That specific form is not essential for that social relation because any other teacher and any other pupil could carry out the same process of education and thus be a carrier of the social relations of education. Only, other teachers and pupils would give that same social relation another concrete form. From this angle, the personal is the form of appearance of the social, i.e. concrete individuals are the personification of social phenomena.

Thus, a first condition for relations, and thus for the processes they determine, to be social must be sought in the principle of substitutability, and more specifically in the substitutability of people within relations and thus within processes (and their tasks) as well as in the substitutability of people among processes (and their tasks), so that any qualified individual can perform the same tasks in similar processes. Notice that replaceability implies the possibility to be replaced, even if the actual substitution does not take place. Notice also that a social process might arise as a unique example and that therefore there are no other similar processes in whose tasks people are substitutable.

When a social process is replicated in a number of similar processes, their tasks must also be similar so that both the process and its constituent tasks are standardized. Abstract tasks are then tasks which both can be performed by people with similar qualifications (who, therefore, are replaceable within those tasks) and which are replicated within similar processes (and which, therefore, are standardized). In other words, the structure of the abstract tasks constituting a social process is not discretionary because each of the processes replicating that social process must be similar, i.e. must have a similar structure of tasks.

But there is another pre-requisite for relations and processes to be social. Once people become carriers of a social phenomenon, they must perform those tasks and only those tasks which constitute that process and thus that relation. If a process is structured in clusters of tasks (positions) to be performed by different people, once an individual has taken up a certain (position within a) social process, his or her tasks are fixed and he or she has to perform only those tasks. Thus, the second principle is that of the rigidity of the tasks to be performed by each abstract individual once he or she takes up a certain position. Within a fixed structure of tasks common to similar processes, abstract individuals must perform specific (clusters of) tasks and are not free to determine which tasks to perform. The only way for them to change the tasks to be performed is to take up a different position within that process and thus within those relations.

Of course, the structure of tasks making up a process can change, as in organizational changes within an enterprise. But, given a certain structure of tasks, the agents who perform those tasks are under (legal or otherwise) obligation to perform those and only those tasks. An agent might be given some freedom as to how to perform a task but there must be limits to this freedom or that task will not be standardized and that person will not be replaceable. Moreover, since, as we shall see below, people's behaviour is what they do when they carry out processes (or their constituent tasks), social relations and processes required standardized behaviour as well.

A social process is then a process determined by social relations and thus a process in which people are replaceable within (a structure of standardized) tasks (in similar processes) so that all people having the required characteristics not only are able to perform those abstract tasks (in all similar processes) but also, once they have taken up a certain position, must perform only those tasks in a standardized way. In other words, a social process is a process whose tasks (a) are independent of the will of the (concrete) individuals who must perform them and (b) can be performed by any individual with the necessary qualities. What defines a task in a social process (and thus an abstract task) is not the unique way in which each individual carries it out but its opposite, what all individuals must do, irrespective of their individualities (and thus irrespective of the specific way in which that task is carried out), in order to carry out that task. Again, for sake of brevity, social phenomena are here defined as the social relations and processes considered in their relation of determination.

Having examined above some of the features of, and some of the differences between, individual and social relations, we must now tackle the question of the genesis of social relations (and what follows applies to processes as well, given that they are determined by relations). [ENDNOTE 5] Only one among the different possibilities will be examined here, due to its importance for our present purposes, that of social relations emerging from individual ones. There are two sub-cases. Either social relations emerge as the result of the transformation of individual relations into social ones (but of course, not all individual relations change into social ones). For example, suppose two individuals get together as a way to cultivate their cultural interests. If more individuals join that group, at a certain point the satisfaction of that cultural need will become independent of the concrete individuals forming that group. Any sufficiently qualified individual can lecture, play music, etc. At that point an individual relation has been transformed in a social one.

Or social relations emerge as the result of the generation by individual relations of a separate social ones. Consider two or more friends deciding to set up an enterprise. In this case, the relation of friendship generates a new, different, relation which, inasmuch as those two persons are substitutable in that enterprise, is a social one. The former relation can continue to exist side by side the business one and the two relations can condition and modify each other. Alternatively, the relation of friendship can be completely replaced by the business one and disappear.

The possibility that social relations emerge from individual ones has three important theoretical consequences. First, if individual phenomena can either be transformed into or generate separate social phenomena, then individual phenomena can be considered as potential social phenomena. Second, it follows that, given that concrete individuals are carriers of individual phenomena and given that these can turn into social phenomena, concrete individuals can be considered as potential abstract individuals. Third, it also follows that social phenomena determine not only other social phenomena directly, as realized conditions of their own reproduction, or radical change, or termination. They also determine other social phenomena indirectly, by determining individual phenomenon as potential conditions of their own reproduction, radical change, or termination. This potentiality reveals itself when and if individual phenomena transform themselves into, or generate, new social phenomena. In other words, social phenomena determine indirectly other social phenomena through individual phenomena. It is because they already exist potentially in individual phenomena that social phenomena can emerge again, in a realized state, as new social phenomena.

We can now tackle the question mentioned at the beginning of this paper: what keeps society together? Continuity in social life requires a type of relations and processes which are independent of, and thus both pre-exist and survive, concrete individuals. These are the social phenomena. Without them, society would collapse and disintegrate. Social phenomena are independent of concrete individuals, given that only abstract individuals enter into social relations and processes. It is the interconnectedness of social, rather than of individual, phenomena which keeps society together, while at the same time causing it to reproduce itself, or change radically or terminate its existence because of the dialectical relation between social phenomena.

Let us call social structure, i.e. the structure of society, the whole of social phenomena bound by the relation of determination (in which the ownership relations are ultimately determinant). Three points follow. First, it is the social structure which, by being independent of which concrete individuals become abstract individuals, i.e. carriers of those relations and agents of those processes, keeps society together. There is thus no need, as in the neo-liberalist view, to ascribe this cohesive factor to the self-regulating and equilibrating function of the market, i.e. to the fact that the market, if not tempered with, tends towards equilibrium. As this analysis has argued, the cohesive factor is given by social relations and processes, i.e. by the social structure and not by the market. Second, it is because of the complex relation of determination binding all social phenomena that the social structure is not static but dynamic. Without the relation of dialectical determination among its constituent parts, society could neither continue to exist in a changed form, nor change radically, nor (possibly) cease to exist. Any contraposition between structure and movement is artificial. Third, the social structure is a subset of society, which is the whole of all relations and process, both individual and social, in their relation of determination.

To conclude, this paper has argued that the same methodological principles which guide us in the study of society guide us also in the study of the economy, and therefore in the inquiry into the transformation process, imprudently called the transformation problem by Marx's critics. And this is not surprising, given that the economy is only one of society's many aspects.

ENDNOTES.

(1) This is a short version of a much longer piece and cannot but highlight only some of the relevant themes in an incomplete way.

(2) This definition is more precise than the one given above. A third, and final definition will be given at the end of this paper, after the concepts of determination and of individual and social relations and processes will have been provided. These are not three different notions of society but successive approximations to the final definition.

(3) There is no room here for arguing that, of all relations and processes in which a society is articulated, the relations of ownership are ultimately determinant, i.e. are those which transfer their social content to all other relations (and thus to all processes). The basic assumption is that the relations of ownership's social content is their functionality, on the one hand, for the thwarting of the producers's human nature and, on the other hand, due to the producers's resistance, for the all round development of each and all. It is this double functionality which is transferred to the rest of society. Therefore, a determinant element transfers its social content to a determined one because it itself has gotten it in the last instance from the relations of ownership. It thus contributes (in a contradictory way) either to the reproduction or to the radical change or to the disappearance of those ownership relations (and thus of the society of which it is a part) at the same time contributing to either the full and all round development of each and everybody or not.

(4) Notice that both concrete individuals and abstract individuals are social individuals: the latter because they are carriers of social relations, the former because they are subject to socialization and thus are potential carriers of social relations.

(5) What follows does not deal with the genesis of new fundamental social relations, i.e. of those relations which, by being the essence of society, cannot change without at the same time determining a change from a type of society

to another. These, as mentioned above, are the relations of ownership.