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OBJECTIVITY VS. PRAXIS:
ON THE
EPISTEMOLOGY OF SOCIOLOGY

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ALICE L. PILOTTI

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Alice L. Pilotti
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Karl Mannheim once described psychologists as having a "trained incapacity to deal with problems of the mind."¹ In like manner, sociologists might be described as possessing a trained incapacity to understand social reality. The epistemological assumptions underlying sociology, like those of too many disciplines, are taken for granted; rarely are they articulated, let alone analyzed. The result is a situation in which one may be trained in the method without having understood its basis. Indeed, as Mannheim argues, he may have been trained to overlook the essence of the reality which he is studying. Since the question of the source of knowledge is so often ignored, we have a situation today in which sociologists exert every effort in studying social reality without asking whether the method they use is fruitful, or merely adequate, or in fact a hindrance.

In this paper I intend to examine what the general epistemological assumptions of sociology consist of, and whence they stem. Then I will discuss Marx's concept of praxis as a method for understanding social reality. The comparison of these two methods, with their radically differing assumptions concerning not only what reality is, but how we know what it is, leads to a number of questions which need to be considered by any student of society.

To begin, it seems appropriate to look at the sociological method as described by the two thinkers who did most to shape its beginnings, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Both of these men are important for the work which they did in understanding

society, and for the impact which each of their methods was to have on later generations of sociologists. Particularly important for our present purposes is that each of them attempted to articulate just what the methodology of the social sciences ought to be. This gives us the opportunity to examine some of the traditional assumptions of current sociology by going back to the somewhat more explicitly stated views of the originators of these traditions.²

Durkheim in many ways represents a radical break with the assumptions of social thinkers from Plato through Hegel. Like many thinkers of the late 19th century, he was concerned with the material, rather than ideal, aspects of reality; but he went farther than any of them in positing that society has a real, objective existence apart from the individuals of which it is comprised. "It consists of ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him."³ The individual at birth is confronted with a world which he did not create; this is as true of the social realm as of the natural one. It is something that exists in itself and stands alone, opposed to him. And, to understand this realm, "the first and most fundamental rule is: Consider social facts as things."⁴

The description of reality as consisting of "social facts" which should be treated as real and objective (if not material) things is central to Durkheim's method--in fact, it is the key to an understanding of it. He is arguing against the traditional

attempt to understand society through analyzing and interpreting ideas and concepts about reality. For him, a concept is a mere substitution for a real thing. It represents the thing, but not necessarily faithfully. Consequently, by theoretically analyzing a concept like "suicide," without reference to the social fact which the concept represents, the theorist is looking at what is probably an incorrect reflection of what he is really interested in. A good demonstration of the failings of this approach and the appropriateness of going to the objective reality rather than the concept occurs in Suicide. First, he describes the traditional approach of the social theorist (in this case, Montesquieu) to suicide:

If, without reference to (social facts) one were to try to foretell logically what season should be most favorable to suicide, one might easily assume the season when the sky is darkest, and the temperature lowest or most humid. Does not the desolate appearance of nature at such times tend to incline men to revery, awaken unhappy passions, provoke melancholy?⁵

However, as Durkheim goes on to show, when the social facts are examined (in this case, suicide statistics from all over Europe), it is obvious that a significantly higher proportion of suicides occur during the warmer months, and during the daytime.

Durkheim believes that there is a kind of reality inherent in the facts themselves. Values and interpretations do not enter into the matter. All who look at the social facts will come to the same conclusions; only those who look at concepts will get into difficulty over interpretations. He believes that, eventually, we will find "an objective criterion, inherent

in the facts themselves, which enables us to distinguish scientifically"⁶ between the normal and pathological. (In general, he uses "normal" to refer to those social conditions which are statistically the most common; the rest are "morbid" or "pathological.")

Social reality is as "knowable," for Durkheim, as the physical world. By starting with an examination of those aspects of it which are the most easily accessible (readily quantifiable aspects, for example, especially those about which there are already statistics available), social science can build a base from which to expand into the less easily accessible areas and "to encompass, little by little, this fleeting reality."⁷ Although he admits that "perhaps" this expansion will never be completed, he expresses no doubts as to the possibility of its completion, if social facts are treated as things.

Unlike other methods, Durkheim claims, his "is entirely independent of philosophy."⁸ This follows from his belief that there is an objective social reality which exists in itself, apart from any interpretation of it, and that it is possible to know "social facts" directly, without interpreting them. Let us now examine this as a philosophical viewpoint in itself, and see what assumptions are inherent in it.

For centuries philosophers have been concerned with the problem of the ideal and the real. To Plato, the real world which we see about us is but a reflection of the ideal world--an imperfect reflection, at that. Each particular chair may

partake of the ideal form "chair," but it can never be all that the form is. It is important to realize that at this point man is generally considered part of the imperfect, real world. The Christian concept which held throughout the Middle Ages, for example, describes man as having been created "in the image of God"--a materially real, but imperfect, copy of an ideal form. Due to historical conditions which I will discuss later, the position of man in this scheme shifted. Descartes, in trying to understand how we know, has redefined man. To say "I think, therefore I am," is to locate the essence of man in the realm of the ideal rather than that of the real. Man is no longer seen as an imperfect reflection; as thinker, he belongs to the sphere of thought and of idea. One of the main effects of this shift is a concomitant shift away from the problem of "ideal vs. real" and toward the problem of the subject/object split.

This problem was crystallized by Kant. The objective world exists apart from the knowing subject, and it is impossible to know the thing-in-itself. In Platonic thought, the concern is with the difference between the particular chair and the form "chair"; now the question is whether the particular chair can be, in some sense, known by the thinking subject (man). Kant concludes that it cannot. All that it is possible to know is the ethical principle proceeding from the self.

Durkheim is usually viewed as reacting against this idealist tradition. He certainly rejected the emphasis on the subject or the ideal realm as being in some sense "truer," or

more real, or on a higher level than the objective world. However, the static dualism of idealist thought is fundamental to his approach. The social fact is a thing-in-itself. It cannot be known in terms of the subject; it can only be known in its own terms. It is impossible to know a chair in the sense of knowing "how it feels to be a chair;" it is possible to know its length, breadth, color, etc. For Durkheim as well as for Kant, there can be no real interaction between subject and object. The interesting thing about Durkheim is that he considers the social world in the same light as a chair: both are objects.

Some of the implications of Durkheim's assumptions become clearer when we compare them with what Weber has to say. He does not treat social reality as a thing-in-itself. He disagrees with Durkheim's view that it would be possible (although perhaps not probable) to someday know all about social reality. Because Durkheim sees social facts as real in themselves, he tends to think of them as unchanging. You can go away and study something else for a while and when you come back, they'll still be there, and you can pile up the new facts on the old ones until the crystal palace of reason is complete. Change does occasionally occur, but the periods of transition which he discusses fall under the "morbid" rather than the "normal" state of things. Weber, on the other hand, argues that

...there are sciences to which eternal youth is granted, and the historical disciplines are among them--all those

to which the eternally onward flowing stream of culture perpetually brings new problems.⁹

Social reality, then, is not seen in the form of a series of static, measurable, objects. Change is the expected, the norm.

Another of Durkheim's assumptions which Weber would not accept is the belief that there is a kind of "truth" inherent in social facts which lies beyond value and interpretation. Although Weber does agree that there is a reality in the social realm, he sees it as infinite; and "there is nothing in the things themselves to set some of them apart as alone meriting attention."¹⁰ In other words, the observer of even the smallest fragment of society is confronted, not with an obvious social fact, but with an infinity of perceptions:

Order is brought into this chaos only on the condition that in every case only a part of concrete reality is interesting and significant to us, because only it is related to the cultural values with which we approach reality.¹¹

Thus, the very selection of which facts are to be studied constitutes an interpretation in itself.

Weber is a complex thinker, more difficult to categorize than Durkheim; there is a certain dual nature to his thought which may be seen reflected in the inner conflicts he experienced in the course of his life. Yet in significant aspects he remains in the idealist tradition. Concrete reality is not described as a reflection of ideas, but only those parts of it which relate to the ideal world of thoughts, interpretations, and values can claim significance. An analysis of his concept of "ideal type" will help to clarify this.

Although its function is different, the "ideal type" is essentially a reincarnation of the Platonic form. Unlike the form, the ideal type is seen as a mental construct rather than a pre-existing entity. This is related to the shift described above: as man comes to be viewed as part of the ideal realm, so ideas come to be viewed as creations of man. The ideal type is an abstraction composed of the essence of all particular examples. Thus, the ideal type "chair" is unlike any particular chair, yet something of each chair can be found within it. An important point is that the "true" meaning of chair lies in the ideal type and not in the particular example, just as the Platonic form is seen as the "true" reality. For example, in discussing the usefulness of the ideal type "handicraft society" for an understanding of the particular example, medieval society, Weber writes:

If the ideal type were "correctly" constructed and the actual course of events did not correspond to that predicted by the ideal type, the hypothesis that medieval society was not in certain respects a strictly "handicraft" type of society would be proved.¹²

In other words, in case of a contradiction between a (correct) ideal type and a particular example, the ideal type retains its validity. To Durkheim, this would be a clear example of ignoring the social fact in favor of values and interpretations.

Durkheim, as indicated above, accepts the basic duality of subject and object, but unlike most of those who preceded him, sees "reality" as lying in the object rather than the subject. Weber seems to fall more clearly in the idealist tradition. Kant argued that although we cannot know the thing-in-itself, we

can know the ethical principle which proceeds from the self, even if it does not occur in "reality." Weber's ideal type is in no sense an ethical imperative; indeed, he specifically argues against its use as such. Yet he basically accepts Kant's premise that it is possible to know a "correct" idea which does not exist in objective reality. Hegel had changed Kant's "ought" to an "is;" since, for him, the world is a reflection of the Idea, "true" thought is the same as the world; reality which does not conform to the idea is mere appearance. Weber's "ideal type" reflects many of these same assumptions. Weber, of course, does not claim that the particular example is less real than the ideal type; but in seeing it as less meaningful, he reveals a fundamental similarity to Hegel.

Durkheim and Weber, then, have very different conceptions of the meaning of social reality and, consequently, very different methods of arriving at an understanding of it. For Durkheim, the meaning of social reality is inherent in the reality itself. In this sense, it is useless to discuss "meaning": one might just as well say that social reality is social reality. For Weber, however, the meaning of social reality resides in the presuppositions, values, and interpretations with which we view it. It is useless to discuss the "social fact-in-itself": although it may exist, it is not meaningful in itself. What gives it meaning is the ideal type, the mental construct, the idea. Weber sees the meaning of social reality in the subject; Durkheim, in the object. How this affects their methodologies

is clear. Weber views theory, for example the construction of ideal types, as essential. The ideal type can only be constructed after a consideration of the particular examples; yet it has a validity in itself. The way to understand the social world is to compare it with the ideal. In itself, the social world is infinite chaos which can never be known. Durkheim, on the other hand, views theory as an unnecessary mediator which is more of a hindrance than anything else. There can be no conflict between ideal and real for him. Reality lies in the facts themselves, and the only way to understand social reality is by examining the social world itself. The goal of Weber's approach is theory; that of Durkheim's, law.

Currents of both these approaches are present in contemporary sociology. The essential basis for agreement between Durkheim and Weber, that is, the acceptance of a dichotomy between subject and object, between the idea and objective reality, has been preserved. In Hegel's dialectic we find an attempt to overcome this dualism which was to have deep significance for the social sciences.

Of fundamental importance to Hegel's approach is the refusal to view the ideal and the real as self-contained, pre-existing, and non-interacting entities. The Idea, it is true, exists before all else--but even at this point it contains within itself the potential for otherness. It steps outside of itself to realize this potential and so becomes at one and the same time both itself and its opposite:

...In this stepping over to one side (in order to be object of reflection) the Idea sets the other side as formal actuality...and as infinite negativity (antithesis).¹³

In stepping outside of itself to become Nature, the Idea has thus actualized its own antithesis. Unlike the Platonic view, the Hegelian one does not stop at this duality. Nature, the real world, is not a stagnant reflection of the ideal form for Hegel; instead, it is constantly interacting with it, in the form of conflict. Indeed, this conflict is essential if the Idea is to realize itself, since.

...as the opposite of itself in itself, (it) is its own antithesis, which on the one hand exists, but, on the other, is annulled and resolved. It is the urge, the impulse of spiritual life in itself, to break through the hull of nature, of sensuousness, of its own self-alienation, and to attain the light of consciousness, namely, its own self.¹⁴

The opposition of the ideal and the real is not, then, an unfortunate accident. Spirit, in itself, is mere potential. It is only through activity--that is, through conflict with its alienated self, Nature--that it can "attain...its own self." As Lobkowitz puts it,

...what Hegel as well as Marx have in mind whenever they speak of alienation is not an aberration but rather a phase in the process of man's self-development which, on the one hand, is essential to the achievement of full "humanity," and, on the other hand, is experienced by man as a radical frustration of his aspirations for self-completion.¹⁵

For both Hegel and Marx, man's "essence" is not a former state which has been lost, nor a pre-determined goal, but self-creating process. Hegel describes this process in the

highly abstract terms of Spirit and Nature, of the Absolute; Marx describes it, as indeed he describes anything, in terms of the real, everyday life activity of men.

What does it mean in terms of real activity to say that the Idea proceeds from itself and then stands opposed to itself? It means that the chair is not just the reflection of an ideal form, nor is it a thing-in-itself confronting man as a given. Each chair was made by a particular man who sawed, joined, sanded, hammered, and fondled it. The chair proceeds from the worker: he has put himself into it. Yet, "the worker is related to the product of his labor as to an alien object."¹⁶

To Hegel, such a statement is tautological. Alienation is inherent in the production of objects, in labor. To Marx, however, the alienation of labor is a historical occurrence, brought on by specific social conditions. To understand why Marx viewed this in such a different context from that of Hegel, it is necessary to understand Marx's historical materialism, father of the sociology of knowledge.

Hegel saw the Idea as preceding the real; for Marx, "on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought."¹⁷ Ideas do not exist of themselves; it is socially conditioned reality which determines them. "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life."¹⁸ What exists, first of all, is living people, not the abstraction of the Idea.

Marx had a great deal of respect for the dialectic, and made good use of Hegel's insight that everything contains within itself the potential for otherness, indeed for its opposite. He felt, however, that "with (Hegel) it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell."¹⁹ He resented, especially, the mystification of reality which occurred in his time at the hands of the Young Hegelians. By using this "upside-down" dialectic, that is, by starting from ideas instead of from the real world, they could transform whatever they felt like into its opposite; and if their logic seemed contradictory and their arguments reached an impasse, they would invoke the dialectic as a magical formula. Shouting "Synthesis!" when reality conflicts with theory is like shouting "Home free!" in the middle of a battle and expecting not to be shot. The Young Hegelians see the world in terms of

...the yes becoming no, the no becoming yes, the yes becoming both yes and no, the no becoming both no and yes, the contraries balance, neutralize, paralyze each other...How does reason manage to affirm itself, to pose itself in a definite category? That is the business of reason itself and of its apologists.²⁰

This would not be so bad if it could be seen as merely amusing. But Marx fully understood the consequences of viewing reality in such terms. For Hegel, it had meant accepting the status quo of the German state as the most advanced (if not the final) form of the Idea unfolding itself in history. The Young Hegelians, on the other hand, saw much of existing reality as unsatisfactory. However, since they saw social reality as

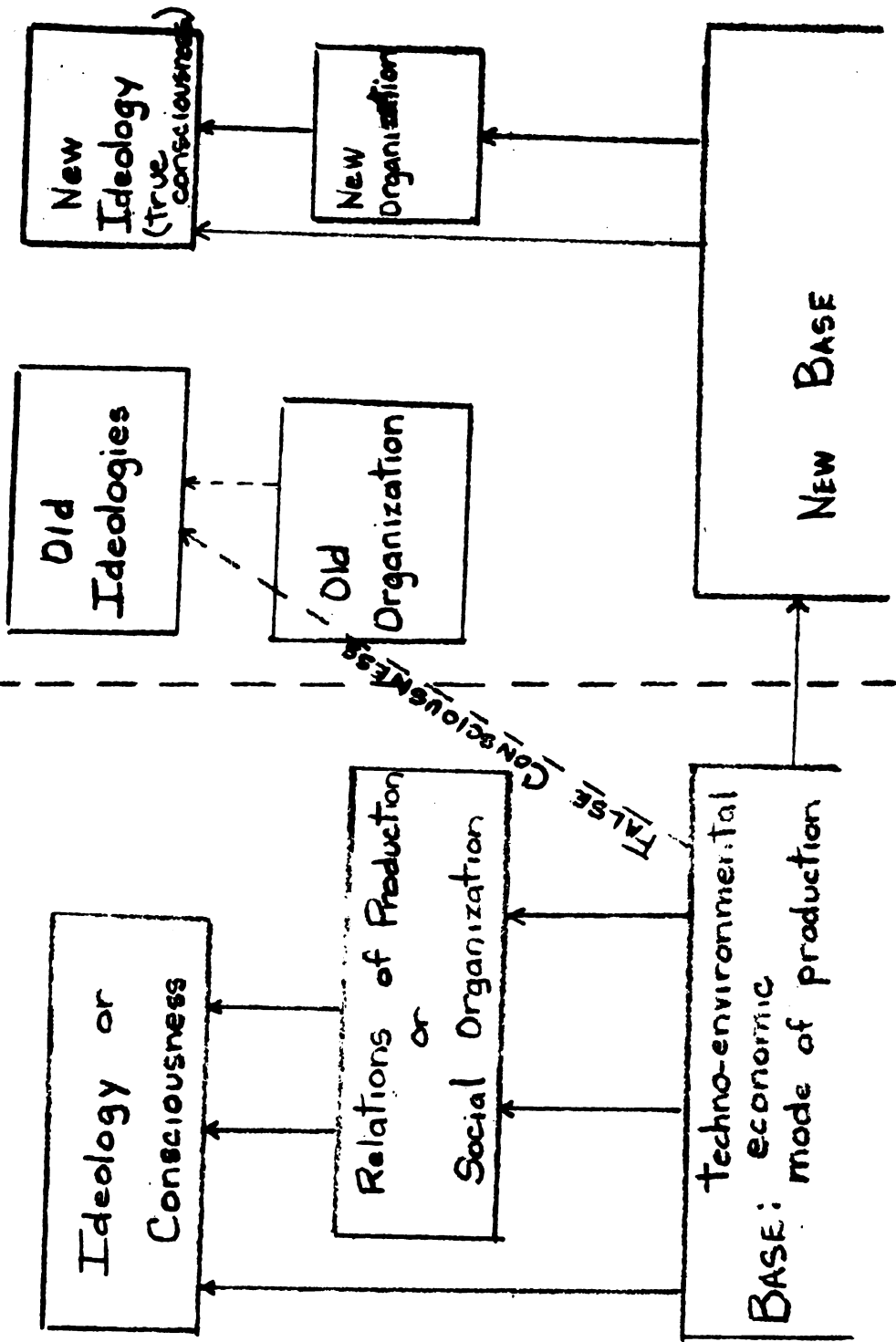
springing from ideas, they believed that the way to change social reality was to change people's conceptions of it. Trying to understand the category "freedom" as idea was seen as the only way of becoming free. Marx argued that this amounted to an acceptance of the status quo, since it left everyday life unchanged. "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."²¹ How it can be changed will become clearer as we proceed.

Marx, then, sees ideas as emerging from material and social conditions, rather than vice versa. As can be seen in the chart on the following page, at the base of all social reality lies the mode of production, or level of technology, as it is often referred to today. This base determines the relations of production and the general social organization of the society. Obviously, capitalism does not occur in a society which has hunting and gathering as its economic base. Finally, ideology emerges directly from the economic base and indirectly from the organization of society. Presumably, in a static society the ideology would more or less directly coincide with social reality. However, there is no such thing as a static society for Marx. Change is always occurring. Even in a society in which the technology seems to remain relatively stable, changes in the environment--flood, famine, pestilence, for example--have the effect of changing the economic base of the society. A technological change in this base, such as the shift from feudal to industrial society, can have an even more profound

²²
MARXIAN MATERIALISM

TIME I

TIME II



effect on society as a whole. New forms of organization and new ideologies spring from this new base. However, the old forms do not die, and it may happen that the dominant relations of production and the dominant ideology are old forms, inconsistent with the new base.²³

An important point to keep in mind is that "false consciousness" is not false in the sense of being merely illusion, or a lie. As Lefebvre points out,

Unlike philosophy, the Marxian theory of ideology tries to get back to the origin of representations. It retains one essential philosophical contribution: emergent truth is always mixed up with illusion and error. The theory discards the view that error, illusion, falsity, stand off in sharp and obvious distinction from knowledge, truth, certainty. There is a continual two-way dialectical movement between the true and the false, which transcends the historical situation that gave rise to these representations.²⁴

There is no such thing as a universally true ideology. An ideology is "more true" than another if it is more consistent with the social reality of its historical situation. Thus, in the 18th century struggle between feudalism and capitalism, bourgeois ideology may be described as "truer" than that of feudalism. (Consider Don Quixote.) All ideologies truly reflect some aspects of social reality at the same time that they obscure others. For example, the American bourgeois philosophy of individualism truly reflects such things as geographical mobility, emergence of the isolated nuclear family, specialization of labor, etc. At the same time, its "Horatio Alger" system of values serves to mask such social realities

as racism and sexism. "If you work hard, you can be president"-- even a black woman raised in a ghetto?

Of fundamental importance to Marx is the fact that this masking of certain aspects of reality serves someone's interests. "The ruling ideas of each age have always been the ideas of its ruling class."²⁵ This in no way means that these ideas are conscious creations of a manipulative elite; on the contrary, the ruling classes are just as much products of social conditions as the ruled. What it does mean is that those who benefit from old ideologies and old relations of production will not willingly give them up. Thus it would be utopian to think that merely because of a new mode of production, change in the dominant form of organization and ideology will automatically and immediately occur, without the actions of men to make it occur. Always bringing things back to everyday reality, Marx argues against the notion that social organization is something apart from men which exists in and of itself and can change in and of itself. He is opposed to the kind of reification of society which occurs in Durkheim. Change occurs through the real actions of living human beings:

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men that change circumstances....²⁶

On the other hand, activity can succeed in changing social reality only if the economic base allows for such change:

If the material elements of a total revolution...are not given, it is absolutely irrelevant to the practical

development whether the idea of this revolution has been expressed a hundred times already--as the history of communism proves.²⁷

Marx, then, rejects the Hegelian view that the real world proceeds from the Idea. Instead, he sees ideas as reflections of material reality. This is not, however, a simple matter of "given reality=A, then idea=A'"; the relationship is more complex than that. At any given point in time, ideologies are present which reflect a number of past realities, as well as the present, and perhaps some which reflect future conditions. In Marx's analyses of real situations (Class Struggles in France, for instance), this is demonstrated very well. Involved in the events are the peasantry, the petit bourgeoisie, the army, the proletariat, the industrial bourgeoisie, the landed aristocracy, etc. It is not a simple question of a struggle between capital and the proletariat. Each idea only partially reflects reality.

From this, it is clear why Marx views alienation in a different light from that of Hegel. For Marx, alienation is a concept and, like any other, springs from real social conditions. Furthermore, like any other concept, it may be changed, negated, or overcome if there are fundamental changes in the social conditions which brought it about. It is not, then, an eternal category for Marx. To understand it, it is necessary to go beyond philosophical speculation to an examination of the conditions on which it is based.

Marx first approaches the problem of alienated labor in

the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844. Here he examines it from the standpoint of the worker's relationship to his labor. "The worker is related to the product of his labor as to an alien object"¹⁵ because this object does not belong to him. Secondly, his labor itself feels unnatural: "The worker...feels himself at home only during his leisure time, whereas at work he feels homeless."²⁸ This is of major significance to Marx, who sees labor not as a forced necessity, but as the natural activity of men. "It is just in his work upon the objective world that man really proves himself as a species-being."²⁹ Man's species-life, that is, his activity as a human being (his work) is turned into a means for his animal existence. In other words, instead of eating and sleeping in order to "work upon the objective world," he must work upon the objective world in order to get money for food. The consequence of all of this is that man is alienated from other men.

Marx sees these alienated relationships as stemming from the particular techno-economic system of industrial capitalism. In Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations, he looks at these same relationships as they exist in pre-capitalist³⁰ societies in order to show that labor is not, as Hegel thought, inherently alienated. In pre-capitalist economies, the use of the means of production (land, for the most part) was taken for granted. Whether as part of the community (asiatic and ancient forms) or as an individual (Germanic form), men felt themselves to be proprietors of the land and their own labor. Man was seen as

the end of production, and society's major interest was not maximum wealth, but the good citizen.

All of this changed with industrialization. The prerequisite for this was the exchange system, the money economy. Prior to this, the main form of "possession" was appropriation. A man appropriated the soil by tilling it, appropriated food by eating it. In a money economy, a man can buy land by exchanging money for it, even though he lets it lie fallow. He can buy more food than he can eat, though he lets it rot. It is through the money economy that alienation and individualization (historical occurrences, he reminds us) come about.

What requires explanation is not the unity of living and active human beings with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolism with nature, and therefore their appropriation of nature; nor is this the result of a historic process. What we must explain is the separation of these inorganic conditions of human existence from this active existence, a separation which is only fully completed in the relationship between wage-labour and capital.⁵¹

This occurs as man begins to produce for exchange, not use. At first, he sells the object of his labor, thus becoming alienated from it. As time passes, moreover, he sells the labor itself. Land, tools, and now even labor are no longer givens, as in pre-capitalist modes of production, but are all the property--the very private property--of another, the capitalist. Man (as worker) is no longer the end of production, but the means of it.

Seeing the world in terms of a self-object split, then, is not a given for Marx: it is a specific historical occurrence.

In pre-capitalist economies, a chair is not seen as a thing-in-itself. It is related to in one of two ways: the worker who makes it interacts with it in a very basic way; and once it is made, anyone may appropriate it by sitting on it. The chair is seen in terms of its use value--a chair is for sitting. Once a chair begins to be produced as a commodity, that is, in terms of its exchange value instead of its use value, its nature is radically transformed. When we define a chair as "something which costs \$5," we begin to see it as an object existing in itself, since we lost sight of its real essence as "something with which we interact by sitting." This is the "fetishism of commodities"³² through which the product of man's labor comes to be seen, not in terms of its relationship to man, but as an alien object.

The end result of this is the alienation of man from other men, or the reification of social relationships. With the development of the division of labor, the worker no longer interacts solely with the chair; he interacts with other men to make the chair. However, the worker does not see himself as having a social relationship with the man next to him on the assembly line. As this relationship is always mediated by a commodity--the chair, which they both see as object, or the money which they will receive as wages--they come to see their relationship as a relationship between objects.

The relations connecting the labor of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are,

material relations between persons and social relations between things.³³

In the same way, the exchange relationship comes to be seen as a relationship between money and commodity, rather than as a human, social relationship between buyer and seller.

If Weber sees the meaning of social reality as residing in the subject, and Durkheim in the object, Marx sees it as lying in the relationship between the two. It is clear that by attempting to treat social relationships as "things", Durkheim has accepted the reification of social relationships which occurred during the particular historical context of which he was a part, as reality. For Marx, this reification was a mystification, a fetish, not the reality itself. To him, it is inconceivable that a subject or object could exist apart from their relationship. Nothing is a chair unless it is sat upon; no one is a sitter unless he has something to sit upon. Reality is not the confrontation of two nouns. It is a verb. This is especially true of social relationships. To treat human beings and their relationships as things (objects) is by definition alienation. To Marx, this is an ideology which has arisen from the particular historical conditions just described.

Social reality, for Marx, comes down to the experience of relationships. To talk of "institutions" without talking about what men do in their everyday life is to mystify reality through the reification of social relations. One can never really understand what is going on in the world by discussing abstractions like "the State." This does not mean that there is no

reality lying behind the concept, as some anarchists argue, and that if we refuse to recognize it it will cease to exist. Like any idea, it reflects a partial truth, in this case certain power relationships which do exist. However, and this is why we call an idea an ideology, it also serves to conceal a great deal more of existing social reality. Marx would agree with Durkheim that we cannot understand the social world merely by examining concepts; we must go to the reality itself. But he argues decisively against the treatment of social relations as things existing apart from us. The general method of social science is to be "objective," that is, to refrain from interacting with the object of one's study, society; to keep the subjective views of the observer from entering into the study; and to try to understand the reality-in-itself through the use of a readily verifiable measure. This is somewhat akin to studying a chair by standing (to remain uninvolved) next to it and measuring its height. The way to understand a chair, Marx would argue, is to sit in it. If we ask if a chair is sturdy and comfortable, we must cease to treat the chair as an object apart from us; we must interact with it and allow our subjective views to enter into the determination of the answer. This is not being "objective." Yet can we understand a chair by knowing its height and weight? As Mannheim says, we have come to the point

where one no longer asks what one would like to know and what will be of decisive significance for the next step in social development, but attempts only to deal with those complexes of facts which are measurable according to a certain already existent method....one tends to be content to attribute importance to what is measurable merely because it happens to be measurable.⁵⁴

It seems that we have reached a stage at which thought itself is alienated. The social sciences not only accept this situation, but prize it. Positivist objectivity, which is basically the alienation of thought, is seen as a highly-desired goal. The social scientist is not concerned with thinking, understand, or appropriating, insofar as they involve interacting with the world; he is concerned with possessing knowledge. "Thus all the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple alienation of all these senses; the sense of having."³⁵ Knowledge is no longer a process, but an object which can be owned, bought, and sold. This attitude is epitomized in the cry of a sociologist of my acquaintance: "It's my data, and I'll do what I want with it." It is no longer a question of social relations, it is a question of "social facts." Treating sociology as a "body of knowledge" which may be possessed, treating society as an object to be studied, and treating knowing as collection of data involve the implicit assumption of the subject-object split. This assumption, and the positivist objectivity which is based in it, constitute an ideology which reflects the alienated situation of modern industrial society. A methodology rooted in alienation accepts alienation as innate in man, and can no more understand it than a doctor who believed smallpox to be man's fate could find a cure for it. Marx argues that just as it is only possible to understand a painting in a truly human way by appropriating it (interacting with it) rather than merely buying it (treating it

as object/commodity), so it is only possible to understand social reality by interacting with it rather than treating it as a thing. The essence of social reality lies in the relations between human beings, and so can only be understood through praxis, the union of thinking and acting and of theory and practice which is his method.

If we accept, then, that ideas are not separate from social reality nor the determinants of it but that they themselves emerge from social reality and interact with it; and that, in particular, the subject-object split is an idea which becomes strongest in the historical situation of industrialism, we must conclude that the science of sociology, whose approach is based in the acceptance of the subject-object split as true, is an ideology rooted in a particular historical context. This does not mean it is false, although it probably does mean that it is not universally "true." As ideology, the science of sociology can be seen as masking certain aspects of social reality at the same time that it truly reflects certain other aspects. Lukács argues that "the ideological history of the bourgeoisie is nothing but a desperate struggle to avoid seeing the true essence of the society it has created..."³⁶ This essence, or the basic antimony of bourgeois society, is that it sees men as isolates at the same time as it is socializing the means of production. That is, under industrialism, people are economically much more interdependent than in pre-capitalist societies; particularly under the conditions of (centralized) monopoly

capital, production is geared to the society as a whole. Yet production is not for society as a whole, but for the capitalist. The inherent contradiction of capitalism is its embracing of individualism while constantly increasing the potential for socialism.

"Bourgeois science" obscures this by describing it in terms of the individual, as subject, being confronted by society, as self-contained object, rather than examining the interaction between the two. This is true whether the emphasis is placed on the subject, as in Weber, or on the object, as in Durkheim. Weber sees the meaning of social reality as lying in the mental construct, the idea proceeding from the knowing subject; but

The grandiose idea that thought can only understand what it has produced, hurls itself...in its effort to dominate the whole world as self-produced, at the insurmountable barrier of the given, the thing-in-itself.³⁷

In the same way that the effect of the object (society) on social relations may be lost sight of, so also may the effect of the subject (the individual) be forgotten--as in Durkheim. The consequence of both methods is the same: continuation of the status quo. For Durkheim, change is not a problem; the individual at birth is confronted by a pre-existing society; social reality is. For Lukács, on the other hand, "reality is not (something which) is; it is becoming."³⁸ Weber's image of change is quite interesting, especially because it is so prevalent today. The "stream of culture" is constantly changing as it flows by the observer standing on the bank. The individual

is not a swimmer, swimming with the current or against it, trying to understand the conditions under which he will be held up by the stream or drowned by it--oh no, he is not even wading in it. He is separate from it, on the bank. Herein lies the inherent contradiction of sociology: it sees the individual as shaped by social forces over which he has no control and which he cannot change; at the same time, it believes that the individual as observer can stand "on the bank," unaffected by these same social forces. Through accepting the isolation of the individual (as observer) from society as the basis of its method, sociology obscures the basic contradiction of capitalist society.

Mannheim, following Marx, has made a cogent argument that it is impossible for the scientific observer to be uninfluenced by social considerations (class, etc.). By claiming "objectivity," he is merely ignoring his biases. It is only by being aware of our biases, Mannheim says, that we can overcome them. More than this, however; just as one denies the essence of a chair by defining it in terms of its height or price, so one denies the essence of the social world by attempting to refrain from interacting with it.

...participation in the living context of social life is a presupposition of the understanding of the inner nature of this living context. The type of participation which the thinker enjoys determines how he shall formulate his problems. The disregard of qualitative elements and the complete restraint of the will does not constitute objectivity, but is instead the negation of the essential quality of the object.³⁹

Mannheim sees the observer, indeed as Weber did before him, as coming into a situation with his own values, presuppositions, and biases. For example, a middle class observer will view industrial society from the standpoint of the middle class. Rather than attempt to erase or ignore this, Mannheim argues, the observer should attempt to add on to it by taking on the perspectives of the other classes as well. The whole, for Mannheim, is the sum total of its parts; so industrial society might be understood by putting together the perspectives of the petit bourgeoisie, the industrial bourgeoisie, labor, the unemployed, the landowner, etc.

Marx, although seeing all of these as existing side by side within the whole, does not consider them a unity. The individual parts are related to each other and to the whole in a dialectical manner; many contradictions are involved. Adding contradictions does not necessarily give us a true picture of reality. Mannheim starts from Marx's insight into the nature of ideology and goes on to conclude that by adding together the partial truths reflected in each ideology, it would be possible to arrive at the truth of the whole. Marx, on the other hand, does not believe that it is possible to understand the whole through an understanding of its parts as separate entities. It is only possible to understand the whole as whole. This is not something which is possible under any and all conditions, however. Under most conditions, it is impossible to interact with and hence understand the whole; but

Revolutions and comparable mutations disclose societies as totalities...consequently it is correct to say that revolutionary praxis is what introduces concrete (dialectical) intelligibility into social relations.⁴⁰

During a revolutionary situation, contradictions become obvious. It becomes clear which ideologies are based in previous modes of production, which in the present. Only in a revolutionary period does ideology more or less truly reflect the social reality in which it is based.

It is clear that Mannheim, unlike Marx, is still attempting to interpret the world, rather than change it. He sees the importance of participating in something in order to understand it, but for him knowing is primarily a matter of thought-experience rather than of thought-action. Mannheim speaks in terms of synthesis, Marx in terms of supercession. This stems from their differing conceptions of the whole: a synthesis involves the adding together of partial truths, and the mutual cancellation of partial untruths. Supercession involves going beyond both thesis and antithesis by means of radical transformation. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Both Marx and Mannheim place their emphasis on the relationship between subject and object, rather than seeing them as separate entities. Their conclusions differ, however. For Mannheim, understanding the importance of this relationship leads to

Increasing awareness of previously uncontrolled factors and the tendency to suspend immediate judgments until they are seen in a broader context...⁴¹

Thus man (as "unattached intellectual"), because he has greater understanding of the elements involved in making a choice, is enabled to make freer (more rational) decisions. Yet this same understanding can lead to a postponement of decisions. For Marx, who defines man not as intellectual but as worker (through "his work upon the objective world"), this relationship can and should lead to action. It is impossible to "make philosophy (Hegelianism) a reality without abolishing it."⁴² That is, if we accept the meaning of social reality as lying in the dialectical process rather than in the subject or object seen in isolation, we are trying to "make philosophy a reality." If this attempt amounts to nothing more than understanding reality in a different way--seeing social reality as arising from the interaction between subject and object as opposed to the previous view of social reality as arising from ideas--it has not succeeded in "abolishing philosophy." The Hegelian tendency to see the Idea, and with it the self as locus of the Idea, as primary, cannot be overcome by means of mental processes such as thinking and understanding; it can only be overcome through action. It is obvious from Marx's own life that he saw thought in the form of critical analysis as an essential part of praxis. Yet this is not a goal in itself, but a preliminary to the making of decisions and acting on them. We cannot "suspend judgments until they are seen in a broader context" because we can only understand that broader context by interacting with it.

Method is fundamental with Marx, because it is the height

of truly human activity. It is only through real interaction with the world that we can know/act. We cannot think apart from reality, because ideas emerge from a particular social context. If we passively accept whatever exists in the social realm, on the other hand, we become objects and are no longer truly human. We must interact, then, in the way he has demonstrated, constantly striving to get at the real causes of things by uniting theory and practice, qualifying ideas through comparison with what is, developing thoughts by analysis of reality. This is more than a methodology; it is his way of knowing, his way of living, his way of being human.

It is clear that Marx's methodology of praxis is based on very different assumptions from that of most western sociology. The main difference is that sociology assumes a subject-object split, an assumption which affects both its methodology and its conclusion. Subject and object are seen as separate and to a degree self-contained entities; little attention is given to the relationship between the two. For Durkheim and the school of positivism which espouses his views, the meaning of the social world is to be found in "objective" reality, in society. Society is a given, a thing-in-itself, which can only be understood in its own terms. For Weber and the theorists who follow in his footsteps, the meaning of social reality lies in the subjective interpretations which we place

on it. "Society" exists, but in unintelligible form; it can only be understood in terms of the mental constructs of the subject.

For Marx, on the other hand, it is unthinkable to attempt to understand either subject or object "in its own terms," i.e., apart from their inter-relationship. The conception of subject and object as separate is, for him, an idea which arises out of the alienating circumstances of the particular historical situation of capitalist industrialism and the reification of social relations which occurs in that situation. A method which attempts to understand society through the analysis of concepts is insufficient, since all ideas emerge from a particular historical context. A method which attempts to understand the social world as object, on the other hand, is denying its fundamental essence. Social reality is composed of social relations, and is not something which exists apart from the individual who observes it. It is only possible to understand social reality by interacting with it through a combination of thinking and acting; through praxis.

The questions which arise from the comparison of praxis with the traditional methods of sociology are obvious. The choice of method is inextricably bound up with one's view of the ontological nature of social reality. If sociology accepts the conclusion which the sociology of knowledge is leading it to, that the nature of social reality is relation and process, it must go beyond methodologies rooted in the assumption that

social reality is something which exists in itself, apart from the knowing subject. Having reached this point, it must face the basic question posed by Marx: If it is possible to know only through interaction, does it follow that one may interact merely for the sake of knowing, or are knowing and acting a joint process which cannot be separated except through a return to previous assumptions? If the meaning of social reality lies in relations, we must seek it through our relation to society. If we arrive at some level of understanding by interacting with and relating to different aspects of society, can we consistently say, "Aha! Now the process stops. Now that I possess this knowledge, I no longer need to interact with society; I do not need to unite this knowledge with action, because I am a professional"? It is impossible to understand social reality through praxis and at the same time treat knowledge as a noun which can be a goal or an object; it must be seen as process and interaction.

These are some of the most basic problems facing sociology today. I will not say "problems which must be faced or..." because they are not problems which must be faced; they can be ignored today as easily as they have been ignored for the last several decades. Ignoring them, of course, requires the maintenance of an ideology which masks their existence. So far, the ideology of "objectivity" and the "scientific method" has been successful. Insofar as sociologists are more concerned

with sociology as a profession than as a way of understanding social reality, it is likely to enjoy continued success--in the journals and lecture halls, if nowhere else.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Karl Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1936), p. 24.
- ²It should be kept in mind that the main concern of this paper is sociology and not Durkheim and Weber per se. The emphasis is on those of their views which most clearly reflect the state of the discipline today; other aspects of their work have been left aside, although the resulting simplification seems sufficient to the present purpose.
- ³Emile Durkheim, The Rules of Sociological Method (New York: The Free Press, 1938), p. 3.
- ⁴ibid., p. 14.
- ⁵Emile Durkheim, Suicide (New York: The Free Press, 1951), p. 106.
- ⁶Emile Durkheim, The Rules of Sociological Method (New York: Free Press, 1938), p. 49.
- ⁷ibid., p. 46.
- ⁸ibid., p. 141.
- ⁹Max Weber, Methodology and the Social Sciences (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1945), p. 104.
- ¹⁰ibid., p. 78.
- ¹¹idem
- ¹²ibid., p. 102.
- ¹³G.W.F. Hegel, Reason in History, trans. by Robert S. Hartman (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, Inc., 1953), p. 32.
- ¹⁴ibid., p. 71.
- ¹⁵Nicholas Lobkowitz, Theory and Practice: History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), p. 319.
- ¹⁶Karl Marx, Early Writings, trans. by T.B. Bottomore (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1963), p. 122.
- ¹⁷Karl Marx, Capital, Vol. I (New York: The Modern Library, 1906), p. 25.
- ¹⁸Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The German Ideology (New York: International Publishers, 1947), p. 15.

FOOTNOTES (cont.)

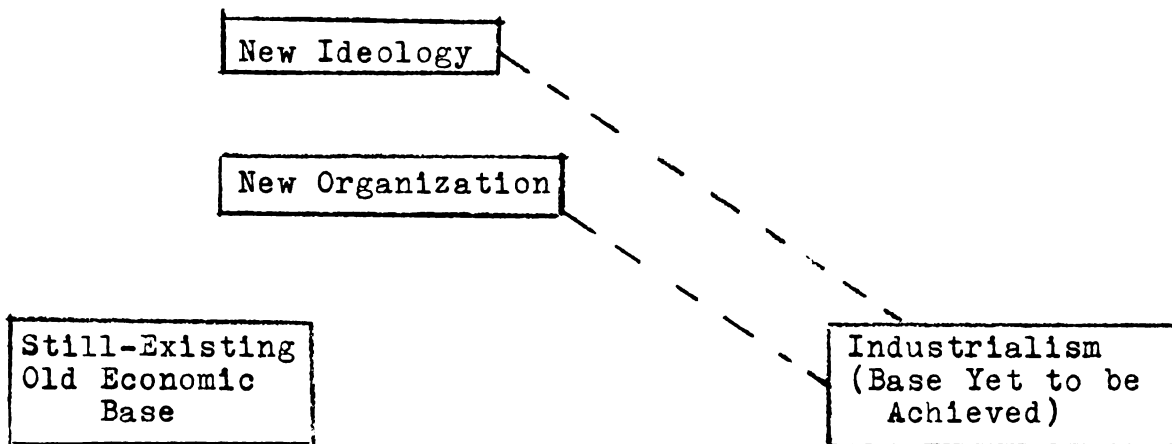
¹⁹Marx, Capital, Vol. I, loc. cit.

²⁰Karl Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy (New York: International Publishers, 1969), p. 107.

²¹Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach", Socialist Thought, ed. Albert Fried and Ronald Sanders (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1964), p. 294.

²²courtesy of Christopher P. Pilotti.

²³It is interesting to look at developing nations from the standpoint of this scheme. In a developing nation, the new forms of organization, whether capitalist or socialist, and the new ideology of modernization, are based in the techno-economic system of advanced nations, so that the chart is reversed:



Marx himself saw this in his own Germany: "You demand that real life embryos be made the starting-point but you forget that the real life embryo of the German nation has grown so far only inside its cranium." ("Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", Marx & Engels On Religion (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), p. 48. Today all societies are inter-related and industrialism, to Marx, is the future of all societies. Thus the ideology of industrialism is not, in one sense, false, since it is a real embryo, that is, a reflection of the future. However, as is clear from the cases of Russia and China, creating new social relations before achieving a new economic base is problematic if not impossible.

²⁴Henri Lefebvre, The Sociology of Marx, trans. by Norbert Guterman (New York: Random House, Inc., 1968), p. 85.

²⁵Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "The Communist Manifesto", Essential Works of Marxism, ed. by Arthur P. Mendel (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), p. 31.

FOOTNOTES (cont.)

²⁶Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach", op. cit., p. 293.

²⁷Karl Marx, quoted in Lobkowitz, op. cit., p. 617.

²⁸Karl Marx, Early Writings, ed. T.B. Bottomore (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1963), p. 125.

²⁹ibid., p. 128.

³⁰It must be remembered that in Marx's day capitalism and industrialism were nearly synonymous

³¹Karl Marx, Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations, trans. by Jack Cohen (New York: International Publishers, 1965), pp. 86-87.

³²Karl Marx, Capital, Vol. I (New York: The Modern Library, 1906), esp. pp. 81-96.

³³ibid., p. 84.

³⁴Karl Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia, trans. by Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1936), pp. 51-52.

³⁵Karl Marx, Early Writings, trans. by T.B. Bottomore (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1963), pp. 159-60.

³⁶George Lukács, Histoire et Conscience de Classe, my translation (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1960), p. 91.

³⁷ibid., p. 155.

³⁸ibid., p. 250.

³⁹Mannheim, op. cit., p. 46.

⁴⁰Lefebvre, op. cit., p. 53.

⁴¹Mannheim, op. cit., p. 190.

⁴²Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", loc. cit., p. 49.

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