"Bourgeois" Sociology and the Dialectics of Liberation

DURING ONE OF THE DEBATES at the 22nd Congress of the CPA (March 1970) Pat Clancy, a leading member of the opposition, referred to the currency in the party of the "bourgeois sociologists' false theory of social mobility" (or words to that effect). He was answered (perhaps unnecessarily, except to show that he, like most pro-Russian communists, is a poor "marxist") by a quotation from Marx which showed that Marx himself had recognised the existence of social mobility.

However, Clancy's accusation raises far more important questions than whether he "knows his Marx" or not; in my opinion it bears on the crucial questions of What is Marxism? and what is its future?¹ For implicit in his statement is a simplistic and dogmatic version of marxism and its relation to other bodies of social thought. In particular, it raises the need for a genuine marxist critique of the existing social sciences, freed from all dogmas, preconceptions and, most importantly, the abysmal ignorance displayed by many "marxists" of developments in social science.

I would argue that in the century since Marx's work, and particularly in the half century since Lenin, developments in the social sciences have occurred which are of crucial importance to marxism: these developments on the one hand have opened up entirely new areas of enquiry and knowledge, some of which imply the need for a modification of marxism, and on the other hand have filled out many areas looked at sketchily by Marx, reinforcing many of his theories and ideas. Further, I would

¹ I do not wish to attempt to answer these questions here, although the article itself may suggest some parts of such an answer. For the article itself, I will assume roughly that "marxism" refers to a particular way of looking at the world, especially society, which is different from other ways and which can meaningfully debate with these other views.

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This is the first half of a two part article examining briefly issues associated with the relationship between modern social science and radical revolutionary theory by way of an extended review of The Dialectics of Liberation, edited by D. Cooper, published by Penguin in 1968.
The first article concerns itself with some general questions the second will examine the book in more depth with reference to the issues posed here.
argue that the failure of marxists to be aware of these developments has led to marxism lagging behind, to a low theoretical level of marxist movements and consequently to an inability to provide a theoretical framework for much of the radical and revolutionary activity now taking place in all areas of society.

It would be impossible to list all the areas in which advances relevant to marxism have been made (in a sense, any advance in our understanding of man and society is relevant to revolutionaries) but it seems to me that one very important area, which has been almost entirely neglected by marxists, is the understanding of the individual and his relation to society — i.e. the psychology of the individual, the sociology of collections of individuals and the interrelations between these two. Important advances in the scientific understanding of these areas have generally supported Marx's theory that "It is not the consciousness of man which determines his being, rather it is his social being which determines his consciousness". Moreover, they have explicitly delineated the ways in which this occurs and the sorts of behaviour which individuals and groups exhibit under certain conditions. The implications of these and other studies for revolutionary theory have largely been ignored, at least in Australia.

The main failing which all the "bourgeois" social sciences exhibit is not their particular findings and theories but their almost universal failure to link their discoveries with social practice, which is in turn related to the refusal of many social scientists to take a stand on social issues. This "neutrality" (which of course is not neutrality, as Norm Chomsky, amongst others, has very well demonstrated) is justified on the basis of having a "value-free" social science — i.e. one which starts with no values (such as a humanitarian outlook, or an endeavour to use the findings of social science to improve the human condition) but attempts only to find out "the facts".

Quite apart from the fact that it is impossible for anyone to approach a given subject completely "value-free" (as most social scientists now realise) it is becoming increasingly obvious that values themselves are part of any "scientific" study and moreover,

2 Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy. In a sense, of course, both things are true. However, modern psychology and sociology show decisively that, up till this point in history, individuals' ideas are determined far more by their social environment than by any attempt at rational understanding.

3 In particular, there is a large and interesting literature on the behaviour of small groups of people, a sub-section of which deals with the way individuals will conform or deviate from the social norms of the group. See, for instance, T. Mills The Sociology of Small Groups Prentice Books (1967).

that values will determine what is or is not done with the results of scientific endeavour, which in turn reacts back on the social reality being studied. In other words, values are inextricably bound up with both society and the understanding of society.

What, then, is wrong with the academic ("bourgeois") social sciences is not so much what they do, but rather what they do not do. A fact of itself is neither "bourgeois" nor "proletarian" nor anything else; the way it is used, and the way social scientists see it in relation to other facts and their own world outlook can be labelled "bourgeois"—but only by a careful critique which links the same facts, and others usually ignored by conventional social scientists, into a different world view.

Such a radical critique in the area of psychology and psychiatry has been made by R. D. Laing amongst others. Fighting the conventional psychiatrists in the areas of both "facts" and "values" he has contested the hegemony of much current psychological theory and related this to society as a whole. In another instance, a number of social scientists, philosophers and revolutionary activists met at the "Dialectics of Liberation" conference and the results are produced in the Penguin book of that name. The papers presented here contain by implication a radical critique of social science and more importantly, provide the basis for an alternative world view and a new kind of social science.

It is a function of the cretinism of much social science that a book like The Dialectics of Liberation is not at the top of university reading lists. Those who fail to put it there do so usually out of ignorance and a refusal to even consider the issues it raises, rather than from vindictiveness. Nevertheless, there are significant departments in Australian universities where such books are read and highly thought of. Here and overseas there are radicals in Academia and elsewhere who are providing an alternative to the "Bourgeois" sociologists, psychologists and political scientists. Like Marx, before them, they do not reject the findings

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5 It is of course, no accident that the exponents of "value-free" science usually end up in projects such as those concerned with "psychological warfare" in Vietnam. It is almost as if the term "value-free" was thought up as a rationale for the debased values of such scientists.


7 The Dialectics of Liberation, D. Cooper (ed.) Pelican (1968).

8 Significant departments do consider books such as this. There are radical/conservative differences in most social sciences, which makes labels such as "bourgeois" particularly stupid unless used carefully. For instance, there are big differences in SAANZ (Sociology Association of Australia and New Zealand) between those who want to churn out endless trivia in the shape of surveys, and those who want a more meaningful sociology.
and theories of their more conservative colleagues, rather they use them in developing a revolutionary social science.

This is not to deny that there are actions of individual social scientists which one might label bourgeois. The psychologist who works out ways to manipulate Vietnamese peasants is actively aiding the worst crimes of imperialism; if he works out ways to manipulate western consumers of his employer's goods, he is objectively adopting bourgeois values (the pursuit of profit above the welfare of the people) and if he cold-bloodedly puts people in asylums who are more the victims of their social environment than of actual mental illness, he is caught within the framework of bourgeois values, unable to see beyond them. To balance this, it must also be said that the researches of social scientists often reveal to them facts which radically alter their outlook, thus transforming them from liberals or even conservatives, into opponents of the social system. In this sense, the social sciences are "subversive": the rantings of some of the establishment and its supporters against sociology (see for instance Professor Armstrong's recent categorisation of sociology as a "bullshit" subject) although irrational are not without their own logic.

To give an illustration of the type of critique which is necessary if a revolutionary theory is to be developed out of the findings of social science, I will examine an important concept of contemporary sociology, looking at a typical article by a typical sociologist on this concept, with some criticisms showing its limitations. The concept examined is what the sociologists call SOCIALISATION. This term refers to the process by which the individual acquires the values, outlook and rules of the society around him so that he "fits in" as a functioning member of that society.

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9 For instance, the studies of the American sociologist, Ely Chinoy, on the automobile workers provide interesting material for revolutionaries who want to understand the outlook and motivation of the various sectors of the modern working class. Only studies such as these can provide us with the detailed understanding of social forces which is necessary in a complex society. In particular, such studies can provide information on whether, and to what extent, the working class is integrated into the capitalist system. (Many arguments in the left on this subject tend to go on in a vacuum — contrary assertions are made with very little factual proof). Chinoy's studies suggest that, at best, in the case of the automobile workers, the modern industrial worker is dissatisfied and resentful — hardly a revolutionary state of mind, but nor is it symptomatic of the complete integration ("having a stake in the system") which Marcuse suggests. (Sec. for instance, an article in The Study of Society. P. Rose (ed.), Random House 1967, p. 393).

10 The way in which the term socialisation is used by sociologists should be carefully distinguished from its meaning in socialist writings: "Socialisation of the means of production" etc. As used by sociologists it is somewhat akin to the term "integration" — referring to the process by which the individual internalises all the rules and norms of his social environment, and comes to accept them as his own.
Peter Berger has described society as "the walls of our imprisonment in history"\(^\text{11}\). This short definition, though perhaps over-deterministic, describes the process whereby society moulds the individual in its own historically determined image, producing men who are both of the society and for the society's needs — in short, how the individual is to a large extent determined by the environment in which he is born, grows up and lives.

The description and elaboration of this process — socialisation — in all its ramifications, is essential to an understanding of the dynamics of both society and the individual. However, mere description, no matter how good, of the process is not enough — sociologists should also examine why the process works, whether it needs to work, and to understand the historical role which socialisation plays in the ongoing social process. I will suggest in this essay that not only is such an examination scientifically interesting, but is also becoming a critical need for present day society if we are to avoid some of the very real dangers inherent in the contemporary human condition. These dangers are intensified by the lack of recognition of the need for such a study amongst large numbers of sociologists, who are content to observe and describe the world rather than interact with it in a meaningful way.

An article by Talcott Parsons illustrates the problem well\(^\text{12}\). This article is an excellent account of the socialisation of the child in its educational phase — as a purely descriptive account of this process it would be hard to improve. It makes frighteningly clear just how efficiently the school system moulds the individual into the existing social system, selecting out those needed for various roles and inculcating society's values. What the article lacks, however, is an evaluation of whether this process is in the best interests of the individual and hence the whole (or the majority of the whole) society.

Within a purely "empiricist" framework Parsons might claim that he need not be concerned with such questions, but he would be wrong even on empirical grounds. For as Laing has pointed out in the case of the UK, a child born today "stands a 10 times greater chance of being admitted to a mental hospital than to a university"\(^\text{13}\) — a statistic which is surely relevant to even the most "value-free" account of socialisation in our society.

Unlike Parsons, Laing adopts an historical approach to the

socialisation process, asking what function it serves at any given moment and judging whether this function is harmful or beneficial. From the social fact that "we are driving our children mad more effectively than we are genuinely educating them"14 he is not afraid to make the social judgment "perhaps it is our very way of educating them that is driving them mad"15.

Too many sociological works have in common with Parsons' article the feature that although they may provide an excellent description of the socialisation process, none of them examines the wider implication in terms of a dynamic theory of society. In particular, there is no questioning as to whether or not socialisation is producing truly human beings who express the full potentiality of our present level of social development, rather than a distorted form of it. As the old saying goes, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, so let us examine the products of the process.

Laing puts it succinctly: "normal men have killed perhaps 100 million of their fellow normal men in the last 50 years"16. These normal men were the products of the patterns of socialisation in our society. Surely this would indicate a need for something more than descriptions of how it works — we should question whether it should even work at all. As Laing says: "our behaviour is a function of our experience... if our experience is destroyed, our behaviour will be destructive"17.

Parsons refers to the "selective function of the school class"18 but Laing actually analyses the effect of this on the individual. He points out the trauma which Boris19 experiences when he cannot answer a question which Peggy can. "Boris's failure made it possible for Peggy to succeed; his misery is the occasion of her rejoicing". Parsons refers to the internalisation of society's values, Laing shows the destructive nature of that process: "Boris was learning the essential nightmare also. To be successful in our culture one must learn to dream of failure"20.

Obviously there is a need for a theory of socialisation as part of a wider social context — a theory which will look at the social role which socialisation plays and explain the interaction of socialisation with other social processes and link this to social needs.

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid. p.24.
17 Ibid.
19 In an "account" of an everyday school class taken by Laing from Jules Henry's Culture Against Man, which is too long to reproduce here.
20 The Politics of Experience, p. 59.
I would now like to suggest the outlines of such a theory, and elaborate what I see as some of its main areas of concern.

The first need is to understand why socialisation occurs in human society. There can be a fairly clear answer here: the process serves to preserve society against any centrifugal forces within it which may lead to the destruction of society, and hence of the human species. In this sense it plays a socially and biologically functional role, and to that extent it is necessary. However, it is equally conceivable that it may serve to perpetuate an outmoded social system, which itself may come to threaten social and biological survival — i.e. it can at certain times be socially and biologically dysfunctional. Hence at different historical stages it can play a "progressive" or a "reactionary" role, which can be judged as occurring to greater or lesser degrees as society develops. At the tribal stage of human society, the process served to secure the tribe against a return to primitive, biological nature, and helped in the development of social institutions and human consciousness. But as society developed its role imperceptibly changed, until it came to serve as one of the main props of authoritarian structures which may once have been useful but had more and more become outmoded. Often enormous social "explosions" were necessary to blow away these structures and the myths (propagated via socialisation) which perpetuated them.

In the stage before such changes socialisation was producing individuals incapable of coping with the realities of the day — hence the need for extensive social change. It is fairly certain that present-day world society has reached a stage where outmoded structures are being preserved by the socialisation of society's members to values and ideas which are not only morally wrong, but are also becoming increasingly dangerous for the future existence of mankind.

One of the most outstanding examples of this are the values of obedience and conformity which permeate the consciousness of most people. A frightening example of the sort of people produced by the internalisation of these values was given in a series of experiments conducted by Milgram on obedience. He found that a majority of "normal" people were prepared to administer fatal electric shocks to a "learner-subject" who did not respond correctly to questions, merely on the say-so of the experimenter\(^2\). The terrifying implications of this in the era of sophisticated weapons of mass destruction should be only too apparent, yet it

is only too apparent that to most it is not apparent. As Laing points out, our present society generates ignorance of itself, and ignorance of that ignorance.

The above experiment is merely one part of what I believe to be fairly good evidence which suggests that in the last few decades our scientific-technological development has reached such a point that blind obedience to authority, social conformity and the bureaucratic structures which express these are now technically inefficient. Bureaucracies are becoming increasingly obsolete on their own "value-free" grounds (efficiency, production, "getting the goods", etc.) alone, quite apart from any moral considerations. They are, and are increasingly becoming, a brake on social development, even to the point of threatening human existence. For as Laing points out, we "seem to glimpse a total system that appears to be dangerously out of the control of the subsystems or sub-contexts which comprise it" — i.e. the system rolls on in ways that nobody quite intended, and unless changed may get dangerously out of control.

What now has to be understood is that it is not just a question of individuals internalising society's values, it is a question of what those values are, and whether they are socially useful or not. The process of socialisation, and the values which it inculcates, are themselves socially determined, are not inevitable and are certainly not beyond the control of man.

Conformity and obedience are not innate properties of man, but (admittedly very strong and long-lasting) features of all hitherto existing society. Laing cites a remark by Julian Huxley: "He said he thought the most dangerous link in the chain was obedience. That we have been trained, and we train our children so that we and they are prepared to do practically anything if told to do it by a sufficient authority". Huxley recognised the threat implicit in the inculcation of such a value.

One of the outstanding features of present day society is that it socialises people to be socialised, and socialises them to be socialised to be socialised — that is, one of the prime values

22 A very good example of the attempt by conservative social scientists to remain "value-free" occurred in a psychology seminar I attended. When we discussed Milgram's experiment such a one refused to allow a discussion of its political implication (e.g. as it might apply to the My Lai massacre) ostensibly on the grounds that he didn't want to upset people with different political views. It should have been obvious that Milgram's experiment had most important implications in the political and military sphere: to him it hasn't.

23 R. D. Laing "The Obvious" in The Dialectics of Liberation, p. 25.

24 Ibid., p. 16.

25 Ibid., p.29.
which is inculcated in people is the value that it is right and necessary to conform and obey, and that it is right that it is right.

The present day possibilities are otherwise, and it is even the case that rational non-conformity is becoming a necessity. At the present level of social complexity, blind conformists cannot operate in useful ways, and this fact is leading to failures and the build-up of social tensions, not to say outright crimes committed by “conformists” on all sides. Naturally, people have to internalise some set of values. I would suggest that a set of values, relevant and necessary to present social needs, should include the values of rationality, not irrational obedience to authority, and humanism and respect for one’s fellow man.

Berger asserts that “every social structure selects those persons that it needs for its functioning and eliminates in one way or another those that do not fit”26. Quite apart from the frightening implications of the last part of the statement, it should also be pointed out that in one sense the first statement is not complete. For there can be a contradiction between the perceived and the actual needs of society and if this is so then the men produced may be more dangerous than those eliminated: “the perfectly adjusted bomber pilot may be a greater threat to species survival than the hospitalised schizophrenic deluded that the bomb is inside him”27.

Hence in examining many theories of socialisation we should bear in mind that they do no more than interpret a world which may be in drastic need of change (to paraphrase Marx). Socialisation in our society may be the “clamping of a straitjacket of conformity on every child that’s born” which would prove Laing’s contention that “the specifically human feature of human groupings can be used to turn them into the semblance of non-human systems”28. Marx said that the dominant values of any society are those of its dominant class; such values may in the end threaten society itself.

Bensman and Rosenberg have written a theoretical article entitled “Socialisation: Fitting Man to his Society”29. The title brilliantly summarises the process. Perhaps the need for an historical understanding of this process should lead to a new sociological study, and a future sociologist might write an article entitled “Humanisation: Fitting Society to Man”. Its theme might well be the liberation of man from the “walls of his imprisonment”.

28 Ibid., p. 80.