
REVIEWS

Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness. Volume II: The Dialectic of Structure and History, by István Mészáros. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011. Paper, \$29.95. Pp. 509.

This is a work of major importance, by a major Marxist philosopher, dealing with some of the most basic issues of Marxist philosophy. The title suggests that it is the second part of a larger project, but there is no mention of this in the text itself. To all intents and purposes, it is a free-standing presentation of a dialectical and materialist interpretation of historical materialism. Many fundamental topics are discussed in detail, including the relation of base and superstructure, the categories of historical necessity and freedom, the concepts of ideology, needs and abundance. Among Mészáros' main concerns is to give an account of Marx's theory of historical development. This is often accused of being a mechanical form of economic or historical determinism. Mészáros rejects this view and argues instead that history is characterized by a "historically created radical openness" (71, 253f). Borrowing the words of the first of Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach," he insists that Marx's theory of history emphasizes the "active side" (35). However, this must not be taken to imply a transcendent freedom, a pure indeterminism.

All historical theories . . . must operate within the framework of some coherent set of determinations through which they can locate and identify the relative weight and significance of particular events, linking them to one another. . . . Thus the real question is not "determinations or indeterminacy," but what *kind* of historical explanation one adopts: a mechanical-determinist or a *dialectical* overall framework. (35.)

To explain this, Mészáros embarks on an extended and detailed discussion of the concepts of base and superstructure. Unlike many other recent writers,

Mészáros does not reject these concepts. Rather, he stresses that Marxism insists on the interaction of base and superstructure and rejects only a one-sided, mechanistic account of their relation. Importantly, he also emphasizes the historical and changing nature of this relation, which differs in the “ascending” and “descending” stages of the development of a mode of production. He also criticizes the view that history has a teleological form which closes off future possibilities — another position with which Marx’s theory of history is often charged.

There is a particularly good account of Marx’s understanding of historical necessity, which illuminates its originality and importance in this context. “No thinker in all history has formulated a more liberating view of the complex issues concerned with the assessment of necessity than Marx” (155). Marx’s predecessors, such as Adam Smith, Kant and Hegel, all adopt the “standpoint of civil society,” regarding capitalism as natural and necessary. They thus “conflate historical and natural necessity” (282). For capitalism, as Marx shows, is only a particular, albeit historically necessary, stage. And, as Mészáros demonstrates, Marx shows how freedom arises through the development of material conditions, and on the basis of them. For the growth of material conditions leads to the development of human capacities and of human needs and human nature. “The creation of new needs . . . starts to push back the boundaries that originally mark the absolute tyranny of natural *necessity*. . . . The historical subject *begins* to set out on the immensely long and contradictory road towards its *potential self-emancipation*” (159). Historical necessity — “a new form of causality” — develops, and this initially assumes an alien form. “Paradoxically . . . [it] is also capable of imposing *its own kind of tyranny* on the social individuals, threatening them even with collective self-annihilation,” since throughout most of this development, they are unable to bring “their contradictory . . . *self-imposed necessity* under their *conscious control*” (*ibid.*).

This is an illuminating and important line of argument which shows how Marxism involves a historical account that steers a philosophical course between the Scylla of determinism and the Charybdis of indeterminism. And Mészáros usefully sets it in the context of the philosophical ideas of Marx’s predecessors, including earlier and cruder enlightenment forms of materialism and the economic theories of Adam Smith, as well as the ideas of Rousseau, Kant and Hegel.

He thus spells out a very well conceived and sophisticated position that benefits enormously from his real grasp of the Hegelian dialectical approach which traces its ancestry back to Lukács (one of Mészáros’ teachers). However, this may not be immediately apparent, since Mészáros is all too prone to present the differences between Marx and his predecessors as a contrast between the pure truth of Marxism and the sheer errors of other thinkers,

including Hegel. Indeed, Mészáros goes out of his way to stress the differences between Marx’s approach and Hegel’s. Marx, he says, with characteristic exaggeration, “set out from a position diametrically opposed to that of Hegel on every key issue” (35).

A less polemical style would be preferable. For what is needed is a properly historical account, which more clearly acknowledges the ways in which these earlier writers develop the ideas that contribute to Marx’s view, and how Marx draws on them and develops them. This is particularly important in the present context as an antidote to the anti-Hegelian and anti-dialectical accounts that have dominated Marxist philosophy, whether in the form of analytical or structural Marxism.

Unfortunately, however, Mészáros makes no serious attempt to locate his interpretation in the context of these recent debates. Few contemporary writers are mentioned, and for the most part these date from the early 1970s or before. Indeed, there is no mention either of structural or analytical Marxism. Instead, the dialectical approach that Mészáros is defending is contrasted with caricature opponents: unnamed “mechanical materialists” of the crudest sort, and equally simplistic versions of contemporary economic thought: von Hayek and Margaret Thatcher are trotted out as examples. Specific opponents apart from these are seldom mentioned.

All this gives the impression that Mészáros is preaching to the converted — or, rather, haranguing them. For another problem with the book is its tone and style. It is difficult to convey this in the space of a short review. The book’s language is extraordinarily abstract, and yet one is constantly being shouted at with italicized words and phrases. There is scarcely a paragraph in the whole long work without them. And there is a great deal of unnecessary hyperbole. Structures are “bewilderingly complex,” capitalism has an “unimaginable dynamism,” developments are “inevitable,” and so on.

But despite these problems, this is an important and necessary work of Marxist philosophy which reasserts and develops the dialectical and Hegelian approach that is at the core of Marx’s theory of history.

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