

Commodity production and the 'subject'

Marxism radically refutes subjectivism

Overview

- What is meant by subjectivism
- How is it historically generated
- Evidence for this
- Criticism of Althusser's partial materialism

What is meant by subjectivism

Refer to Great Soviet Encyclopedia

It defines it as:

A world view that ignores the objective approach to reality and denies the existence of objective laws of nature and society. Subjectivism is one of the main epistemological sources of idealism. In essence, it grants primacy to the role played by the subject in various spheres of activity and in the cognitive process above all.

This is all fine

It goes on to say:

Subjectivism has been expounded by such philosophers as G. Berkeley, D. Hume, and J. G. Fichte; the philosophy of I. Kant is also marked by subjectivist concepts. In the bourgeois philosophy of the 19th and 20th centuries, subjectivism has been a basic principle of such idealist schools of thought as neo-Kan-tianism, empiriocriticism, philosophy of life, pragmatism, neopositivism, and existentialism...

Various distortions of Marxism-Leninism have their foundations in subjectivism. Right-wing revisionism, proceeding from a subjectivist understanding of practice, eclectically attempts to combine the principles of Marxist philosophy with subjectivist philosophical conceptions, such as existentialism and pragmatism.

Again, this is great.

But then it says ...

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Why?

Because the highlighted passage uncritically accepts the categories of bourgeois idealist philosophy.

Philosophical retreat

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This involved taking the legal superstructure and suggesting that the categories of bourgeois law were the fundamental categories of existence.

Early 19th century German bourgeois law assumed legal subjects and legal objects.

The philosophers then abstract these legal supports of bourgeois individualism as unquestioned premises of their philosophical system.

Critique of 'The German Ideology'

In their criticism of the German Ideology, Marx and Engels never stoop to using its categories. They nowhere mention 'subject and object', far less their 'dialectical interaction'.

The premise of materialism

Since we are dealing with the Germans, who are devoid of premises, we must begin by stating the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, the premise, namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to "make history". But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life

Production comes first

1. Production of human life
2. Production of food, clothing, housing..
3. Production relations
 - a. Division of labour
 - b. Commodity exchange
4. Ideological reflection of these relations - including law
 - a. Legal subject (Rechtssubjekt)
 - b. Object of private property
5. Philosophical reflection of the legal relations
 - a. Philosophical 'subject'

Historical nature of categories

- Production relations change
- With that comes a change in the legal superstructure
- That results in changes in the unquestioned premises of the philosophers.

History of the 'subject'

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We can see using this that the modern category 'subject' is a specific product of bourgeois society and only occurs in texts with the final overthrow of feudal relations.

Origin of the word

Middle English (in the sense '(person) owing obedience'): from Old French suget, from Latin subjectus 'brought under', past participle of subicere, from sub- 'under' + jacere 'throw'

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First English occurrence in Google Books

*6 July 1579 John Squeane alias Shoes, born a **subject of the duke** of Cleves : 6s 8d*

(Calendar of Patent Rolls, Preserved in the Public Record Office)

le record of a payment to the state by a subject of the duke of Cleves

Similarly in French

First french record:

*le capitaine Salvadour d'Aguerres capitaine pour ledit Marquis François de la place forte & chafteau d'Vrezeul, luy remonstrant qu'estant nay **subject du Roy** & mis à la garde d'icelle place par ledit Marquis François estant **subject** & ferviteur*

Les mémoires de Mess. Martin du Bellay 1571

Similarly encodes relation of personal dependence and servitude

Subjection or subordination

In feudal ideology a subject is a subject of a sovereign

Polarity is not : subject > Object

It is Sovereign > his subject

Basic social relation of feudalism

Feudal social relations are based on personal subordination

A person is only conceived, both biologically and metaphorically, in relations of subordination and domination.

The Royal dictionary, english and french, and french and english, Volume 2 1752

SUBJECT *tied, obliged to any dependence, one that is under the domination of a sovereign Prince*

Notes that in french it was equivalent to the people of state. Gives example:

- *'It is impossible to raise great taxes without grieving the subject', translates as*
- *'Il est impossible de lever des gros impots, sans fouler le peuple'*

Note that English usage 'the subject', already means all people subject to the king.

From Subject of the King to subject of Right

So at this point there is in French a slide from specific subjection by the state to just translating the term as equivalent to the people since all people other than the king were subjects.

19th century French and English continue to use the word in the senses of subject of the King, subject matter, or subject of a sentence

In German it starts to be used in the specific bourgeois sense in the early 19th century for example in *Lehrbuch der natürlichen Rechtswissenschaft*, Thomas, 1803

(This is the earliest use of the term *rechtssubjekt* in Google Books.)

Modern capitalist terminology

English

- Legal Person

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All these refer to the same thing:
the abstract property owner,
abstract buyer and seller of
commodities.

Value and the legal subject

Commodity production makes all concrete labours appear in the abstract form of exchange value.

Commodity producing society gives all buyers and sellers of commodities the abstract form of legal persons or subjects of right.

Legal person is not a human being!

Companies are 'legal persons'. Collections of people can be legal persons. Not all humans are persons. This was clear by the mid 19th century:

A human being, or aggregate body of human beings, in this exact and limited use of the expression, is a legal "person," — a term which, like other legal terms, on some sides covers more than is covered by the popular word, ... not all human beings are legal persons ... Under a condition of absolute slavery... the unhappy human beings who are slaves are not persons in this legal sense (Science of Law, Sheldon Amos, 1877)

US textbook written shortly after the abolition of slavery

Why

Ford Motor Company is a legal person because it buys and sells.

An individual capitalist likewise - they are in Marx's terms 'personifications' of capital.

But a slave, who could not buy and sell, but was bought and sold, could not be a subject of right. They were an object of property.

Summary

Legal categories are reflections of production relations.

Generalised commodity production creates the abstract category of legal person.

All such persons are formally equal in law, able to enter into contract etc, though in practice that 'equal right' is a right to inequality.

Bourgeois philosophy mystifies this. It takes the elementary legal form under which the capitalist is personified, and turns it into a reified abstraction, apparently divorced from the real economic relations that historically created it.

Implications

Subjects have a purely formal legal existence.

They have no causal effect.

You can not give a material explanation of human behaviour if your explanation depends on there being a 'subject' inside the human body.

Legal categories like *subject* only exist at the level of property relations, their projection into the working of the human brain is entirely ideological and unscientific.

Brains are biological systems, they are not bourgeois legal categories.

Criticise latent idealism!

The philosopher Althusser, made many useful contributions to defending Marxist ideas.

But his theory of ideology is ambiguous. He purports to provide a materialist theory of the subject. But his theory still concedes to idealism in that he partially accepts that subjects really exist and have causal effect in explaining the psychology of human behaviour.

He fails to take the Marxist approach that such philosophical categories are just the ideological reflection of relations of production.

I hope to come back to this in another talk.