CHAPTER 5

The Principle of Criticism

The description of existing bourgeois conditions as specific conditions of a transitory phase in a historical process assumes a further importance as a theoretical basis for a critical examination of the structure of present society as a particular historical type of socio-economic formation.

Just as in actual history every revolutionary movement of the bourgeoisie bred, as an undercurrent, independent stirrings of that class which was more or less the undeveloped predecessor of the modern proletariat, there have been even in the infancy of bourgeois thought some isolated thinkers who anticipated the criticism of the bourgeois principles which had not as yet been put into practice. Apart from these exceptional cases, a real theoretical understanding of the historical process and the self-criticism bound up with it did not arise in bourgeois thought until the very end of its classical epoch, when the revolutionary fight of the bourgeoisie against feudal society had come to its end and a new divergence of classes had begun to manifest itself within the hitherto united industrial society.

It was not a criticism, but in fact a glorification when, in the middle of the seventeenth century, Hobbes described the existing state of bourgeois society (or, as he imagined in conformity with the prevailing delusion of contemporary thinkers, of 'society' in general) as a 'bellum omnium contra omnes' or 'a war of every man against every man', which is only effectively and finally brought to a close by 'a common Power to keep them all in awe', i.e., by the iron dictatorship of the state. Again, it was a glorification of bourgeois society when, 50 years later, Mandeville spoke of its peculiar construction, purposely devised by an 'all-cunning' providence, in his paradoxical equation 'Private vices – public benefits'. Once more, it was a glorification when, at the close of the eighteenth century, Kant discovered the 'antagonism of unsocial sociality' by which eventually 'the first true steps from uncouthness to culture, and the agreement to live in a society, are pathologically thrust upon man'. 'All culture and art which adorn mankind, the most beautiful social order, are fruits of that unsociality which by its own nature is compelled to discipline itself and thus fully to develop the germs of nature through an art forced upon it from without'.

While the Darwinian formula of a 'struggle for existence' along with the older formula of Thomas Hobbes, had been misapplied by the eulogists of

1 See Hobbes 1651; Mandeville 1962 [1706]; Kant 1784.
capitalism as a cosmic substructure of a so-called universal law of ‘free competition’, Darwin himself had conversely borrowed his general concept from contemporary bourgeois economics. In the Introduction to the second edition of his famous work he said: ‘This is the doctrine of Malthus as applied to the whole realm of animal and plant life’.2 Indeed, the specific historical form of the division of labour which results from the competition of the isolated commodity-producers within present bourgeois society is so far from being an unchangeable law of human nature that it can be best understood as a brute unconscious form of social self-preservation in contrast to the conscious organisation of the division of labour within a really co-operative society. In that sense ‘civil society’ had already been characteristically described by Hegel as a ‘geistiges Tierreich’ (‘the animal world reproduced in the world of the mind’).3 The analogy was further developed by Marx in Capital when he described the division of labour prevailing within present capitalist society, as an organisation which ‘confronts independent commodity producers one with another, who recognize no authority other than that of competition, that is, the coercion exercised upon them by the pressure of their reciprocal interests, just as in the animal kingdom the “war of all against all” maintains, more or less, the conditions of existence of all species’.4 It would be preferable, perhaps, in strictly socio-economic research, to avoid altogether such parallels which never quite fit. However, the manner in which Darwin projects into nature, as an absolute law, the competitive struggle waged in bourgeois society, and in which Kropotkin equally unwarrantably transforms the opposite principle of co-operation prevailing in communist society into an absolute Law of Mutual Help in the Animal and Human World, are both quite different in calibre from the recent attempt by a former orthodox Marxist to project a self-invented pacifistic and evolutionary principle of a so-called Natural Equilibrium from present-day society, where it does not apply, to the whole animal and plant world, where it likewise does not apply.5

The fundamental weakness of all the more significant interpretations of society in this epoch (including Rousseau’s teaching, the bourgeois novel Robinson Crusoe, and the whole of the new bourgeois science of political economy) consists in the unhistorical manner in which they deal with the specific conditions of bourgeois society, its mode of production, its state, and its law, as

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2 See Darwin 1860. See also Marx 1905b, i, p. 315.
4 See Marx 1932, p. 321.
5 See Engels’s letter to Friedrich Albert Lange, 11 March 1865 (Engels 1927–30e), and Marx’s letter to Ludwig Kugelmann, 27 June 1870 (Marx 1927–30d); see also the author’s critical examination of the work of Karl Kautsky (Korsch 1929, pp. 40 et seq).