CHAPTER 8

The ‘Social Contract’

Marx’s criticism of the fetish-character of commodity-production inaugurates a new epoch in the development of social science. First and foremost, the concept of ‘civil society’, that is, of the sum and aggregate of the material conditions prevailing in the new commodity-producing society, could not be worked out in its full social significance by the ideological protagonists of the revolutionary bourgeoisie as long as the fundamental economic relations of the new form of society were disguised as mere relations of things. Moreover, the concept of ‘civil society’ which had been initiated at an earlier time by such forerunners as Ibn Khaldoun, the Arab,\(^1\) in the fourteenth century, and after a temporary eclipse was revived by Vico, the Italian,\(^2\) and the ‘English and French of the eighteenth century’, had suffered from a considerable vagueness and ambiguity as to the limits between the newly discovered sphere of ‘civil society’ on the one hand, and the traditional sphere of ‘political society’ or the state on the other. While the bourgeois theorists were quite able to distinguish their ‘civil society’ from the old feudal form of the state, they confused and identified it with the new political institutions and ideas of the bourgeois state. Instead of limiting the term civil society to the basic relations springing immediately from the (old or new) economic conditions,\(^3\) they used both terms rather indiscriminately as one comprehensive name for the whole of the new social relationships which had now at last been agreed upon by the human individuals through the conclusion of the ‘social contract’, be it that this contract was reached in full harmony and complete freedom (as the more superficial exponents of the new theory had it) or that, according to the more realistic concepts of Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Hegel, it was forced upon an unwilling opposite party after a mortal struggle according to the right of the strongest.

Marx’s materialistic description of the social nature of the relations which are ‘reversely’ expressed in the categories of political economy as relations

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1 See Khaldoun 1862, p. 86.
2 See Vico 1725.
3 See Marx and Engels 1931–2b, p. 26: ‘Civil society as such develops with the bourgeoisie; however, the social organization springing directly from production and commerce which formed in all times the basis of the State and of other phenomena of the idealistic superstructure, has been continually called by the same name’.
between things, has a similar significance for the proletarian movement of the present epoch as Rousseau’s theory of the ‘social contract’ had for the bourgeois revolution of the preceding historical epoch. The unmasking of the fetish-character of the commodity contains the rational and empirical solution to a problem which the social theorists of the eighteenth century had not even set themselves and which such later bourgeois schools as the Romanticists, the Historical School, the adepts of the ‘organic’ theory of the state and Hegel had approached in a more or less mystical way. At first sight, there seems to be no great difference between Marx’s demonstration of the ‘secret’ contained in the ‘form of commodity’ and the manner in which Hegel had dealt with the apparent mystery of the fact that history, made by men, follows a plan not conceived by men. Just as Hegel said that ‘in world history out of the actions of men comes something quite different from what they intend and directly know and will; they realize their interests, but something further is achieved thereby which is internally comprised in it, but of which they were not conscious nor did they aim at it’;4 so Marx dwells on the contradiction that men in exchanging the products of their labour as commodities, and in ultimately producing them for no other purpose than that of such exchange, just thereby achieve that qualitative and quantitative social division of labour which afterwards appears to them as an external thing in the definite value-relations of the commodities exchanged or in the value-form of the commodity. ‘They don’t know it, but they do it’.5 He emphasises the paradox still more by the often repeated statement that the utter absurdity pertaining to the fetish-categories of political economy is only an unavoidable outward appearance of an equally fundamental absurdity underlying the real capitalist mode of production and that thus, in the economic value-relations of the commodities, the social relations of isolated commodity-producers appear to them as ‘what they really are’.6

However, all these paradoxes are for Marx, otherwise than for Hegel, only a means by which he compels the reader, who is still under the spell of the traditional bourgeois concepts, to look at such a palpable and everyday thing as a commodity as containing anything like a ‘secret’ at all. The uncovering of this ‘secret’ is not reached by Hegelian wizardry but by a rational and empirical analysis of a historically existing phenomenon and of the real social facts underlying its appearance. For the prophets of the eighteenth century, Quesnay, Smith, and Ricardo, the ‘natural’ starting point of all social life was the free individual as he just emerged from the feudal bonds of the Middle

4 See Hegel 1817–30, I, ii, under the heading ‘Individuality’.
5 See Marx 1932, p. 40.
6 Marx 1932, p. 39.