Chapter 17

The Theory of Increasing Misery and the Critique of Capitalism

One of Lohmann's main ideas, as discussed earlier, was that, inherent in Marx's presentation, there are elements of critique which can be called transcending. These elements can be localised in the discussions of the fate of the working class and of the forces and struggles of opposition in capitalism. The normative standards of the participants present another form of critique of capitalism different from that of immanent critique. In *Die Revolution in der Theorie von Karl Marx* [The Revolution in the Theory of Karl Marx], Sieferle interpreted Marx's discussion of the general law of accumulation in a rather similar sense. To him, there is inherent, and partly hidden, in Marx's presentation a phenomenological level, a description of the experience of the wage workers of the exploitation and repression of capitalism which justifies Marx's expectations of the increasing revolutionary consciousness of the working class.

Sieferle's starting point was a problem connected with the revolutionary perspective in Marx's *Capital*. According to Sieferle, Marx was – at his best – able to determine the foundations of the objective reified thought forms produced by the capitalist mode of production and to show how the consciousness of the owners of different revenue sources (capital, land, labour) is system affirmative. On the other hand, Marx was forced to argue the necessity of the development of the revolutionary consciousness of the working class because of his historico-philosophical preconceptions. His expectations of the development of revolutionary consciousness were based on the analysis of capital accumulation. The theories of collapse and immiseration, as formulated at the end of the first volume of *Capital*, can be understood to determine both the objective and subjective limits of capitalism. The subjective experience of the growing misery of the wage workers is the basis of experience [Erfahrungsbasis] necessary for the development of a non-affirmative consciousness. This made it reasonable and justifiable for Marx to cherish his revolutionary hopes and expectations despite the seemingly iron-cage character of capitalism.

Sieferle's interpretation is interesting because it problematised some of the central themes of the theory of the capitalist collapse. According to Sieferle, in

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1 Sieferle 1979.
Capital Marx was only developing the inner contradictions of capitalism. The presentation did not seem to include any phenomenological level on which the analysis of the development of a revolutionary consciousness could be based. The secret or mystery of surplus production and exploitation can be revealed only through scientific analysis of the essence of capitalism; they always remain hidden from the everyday consciousness.\(^2\) The everyday experience of a wage worker does not include any such experience that could directly reveal the exploitative nature of capitalism. The problem could be formulated even more generally: is the exploitative nature of capitalism something that is revealed only to a scientist who is able and willing to follow the categorical exposition of the critique of political economy?\(^3\) What, then, is the revolutionary perspective in Capital?

Marx’s Capital did, however, according to Sieferle, include such a phenomenological level after all. It did analyse the fate of the working class under capital accumulation. Marx was, indeed, describing the purpose of his further presentation at the beginning of the chapter on the general law of capital accumulation as follows:

In this chapter we consider the influence of the growth of capital on the lot of the labouring class. The most important factor in this inquiry is the composition of capital and the changes it undergoes in the course of the process of accumulation.\(^4\)

In Sieferle’s opinion, such considerations were unnecessary in Marx’s earlier studies because the proletarian situation was characterised as one of total negativity:

The negativity of the proletarian situation as determined in the early concept of the materialistic theory of bourgeois society [i.e. in The German Ideology – J.G.] excluded the possibility of the continuous survival of

\(^2\) Cf. Marx’s formulation in Capital: ‘For the rest, in respect to the phenomenal form, “value and price of labour”, or “wages”, as contrasted with the essential relation manifested therein, viz., the value and price of labour-power, the same difference holds that holds in respect to all phenomena and their hidden substratum. The former appear directly and spontaneously as current modes of thought; the latter must first be discovered by science. Classical Political Economy nearly touches the true relation of things, without, however, consciously formulating it. This it cannot, so long as it sticks in its bourgeois skin’ (Marx 1974–2004l, p. 542).

\(^3\) See Lange 1980, p. 214.