CHAPTER 3

Left Thatcherism: Recent Critical Theory and Post-Marxism(s) in the Light of Marxian Social Ontology

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As Marxists, we believe that politics, in the end is derivative of the material reality of economic and class relations. That’s a very, very profound statement by Karl Marx, so long as it is understood properly, so long as it’s not mechanical. The bottom line is this statement means that not everything is possible through politics.

Introduction

By now it has become the central aim of French post-Marxist thought and critical theorists of the Frankfurt School alike to develop critical theory further towards overcoming central features of Marxian theory, especially his critique of political economy. What is at stake in post-structuralist inspired philosophy and post-Adornian Frankfurt School theorizing is the rejection of a dialectical conception of society that operates with strong assumptions about both the reconstruction of the totality of society as well as the foundations of social ontology in social-economic terms. Arguing against these assumptions two other foundations of the social have been put forward, namely, on the one hand, the claim found in post-structuralist inspired thought (Badiou, Ranciere, Laclau) that the social is founded on the political, and, on the other hand, the claim advanced in recent Frankfurt School inspired thought (Habermas, Honneth, Jaeggi, Forst) that the social is founded on the ethical. Both philosophical schools advance a position that ultimately leads to the rejection of any dialectical conception of society and to the idea, even if not always explicitly stated, that the social is constituted by something external to the social. This, in turn, leads to the consequence that Marx’s conception of the capitalist world as a specific world constituted by the value form gets lost and is replaced by universal and, at least tendentiously, a-historical concepts. As a consequence, the critique and analysis of capitalism is no longer the central task of recent philosophies in the critical tradition(s), since the principle of valorized labor gets
replaced by other concepts, such as recognition, communication, and rhetoric. It is the concept of capital, accordingly, that is lacking from current social and political philosophy, which leads to an idealization of the political itself by pushing either power and discourse or identity into the center of Marxist theory. The dividing line, accordingly, is the question of whether we can philosophically defend dialectics over ontology and ethics. This dividing line especially applies to Badiou’s currently very popular attempt to present a militant politics beyond capitalism. As Badiou argues, the question of the political is not a question about classes, movements and other agents; rather, as he especially argues against Negri, it is a question of how to organize a mass under the heading of an idea to which each militant political individual subjects herself. This idea, according to Badiou, is the communist idea. This position, as I will argue, falls back onto an empty and abstract determination of a political subject (and capitalism) that is stripped of her social position, and, we might say, is the sad expression of what could be called left Thatcherism.

Against this move, in the following I will try to recover some of the basics of a Marx-inspired social ontology by arguing that only the principle of labor and its social form can help us see the finitude of this social form. Only if we operate with a dialectical concept of society, are we able to come to a concept of society that is in its very form finite. Any other position, I submit, remains ultimately positivistic. Following Adorno, I also argue that a theory of society necessarily needs to assume a principle under which the totality of society, i.e. “society,” can be thought (i.e., exchange, capital, money, etc.). With this position I am in sharp disagreement with philosophers such as Laclau. According to Laclau, who primarily understands by “society” the political antagonisms contained in it, the plurality of contemporary struggles and social antagonisms always transcend social totality, and, hence, society becomes “an ultimate impossibility” (Laclau 2014, 165). The deconstructivist idea of the impossibility of society, has, by now, become something like a mantra for almost an entire generation of post-Marxist philosophers, with, perhaps, the exception of Negri and Zizek. Almost all contemporary “post-Marxist” philosophers reject the primacy of the relations of production, and the “standpoint of reproduction” (Althusser). Post-Marxist philosophers like to argue that there are principles that are independent from social reproduction, such as the “constituent passion of the multitudes,” “agonistic action,” “direct action,” the “people,” or other speculative roots of social reality. As a consequence, these speculations about the political make the social a secondary principle, and it is precisely this thesis that is in conflict with the standpoint of reproduction. In my view, the major problem is that most post-Marxists no longer ask for the condition of the possibility for thinking about political agents within a society unified by a specific