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Marx and the Sociology of Change

JOHN F. DOHERTY

THOUGH change is a continuing process in all societies, the rate and radicalness of change vary with different societies and at different times within the same society. In the Philippines today the winds of change are blowing strong. Industrialization has started; land reform legislation is about to be implemented; radio, television, and the spread of advertising are producing new needs and a rising level of expectations in even the most remote and isolated areas. There is evidence, too, that traditional patterns are beginning to give way before the gathering momentum of the winds of change. Where will it all lead? What will be the effect of industrialization, of land reform, of increased prosperity on family life, on religion? These are important questions to which Philippine sociologists will be asked with increasing frequency to provide answers. Can they do so? Are there limits to what sociology can tell us about change? In this and subsequent articles, we hope to discuss these questions in some detail with reference to the Philippine scene.

Actually, the problem of change is one of the most controversial issues in contemporary social theory. The lines between the advocates of structural-functional theory in the Parsonian tradition and conflict theory in the Marxian tradition are being very clearly drawn, with the result that some very basic questions are being asked which are demanding a second look at

the sources on which these contemporary theories are based.¹ One such source is the work of Karl Marx. Marx's sociological theory of change, however, is embedded in his philosophy of history. This makes it rather difficult to isolate. The attempt, despite the difficulties, can be very rewarding since it can provide some basic insights into the limitations of any sociological theory of change. In the present paper, we shall first present Marx's philosophy of history, then try to separate out his social theory of change and finally, in the light of Marx's work, discuss the limitations of any sociological theory of change.²

Like Hegel and most nineteenth-century thinkers, Marx was concerned with the meaning of history and with man's place in history. The latter he found in the birth of man through his own labor until he reached full self-realization and development. This birth took place in three stages.

The first stage Marx called "original society." In this stage man was free but his capacities were as yet undeveloped. There was no private property, no division of labor, no social classes, no state, no religion—in short, none of the forms of human alienation necessary for man's progress. Because of the need for self-realization and development man could not have remained long in this stage; he was driven by historical necessity into the second stage which Marx called pre-history.

The stage of pre-history includes everything we know as history. Marx, however, refused to admit that anything prior to the advent of the classless society was historical; consequently, he used the term "pre-history" to characterize this stage.

Stage Two is the stage in which man develops his capacities to the full. This development, however, is achieved at the ex-

¹ For the most recent development of the Parsonian theory of change, see Talcott Parsons, "An Outline of the Social System" *Theories of Society*, ed. Parsons, Shils *et al.* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1961), Part 1, p. 30 ff. For a presentation of the conflict theory of change, see Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), and Barrington Moore, *Political Power and Social Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958).

² I am indebted to Dahrendorf's work cited above for a number of the insights into Marx developed in the course of this paper.

pense of freedom. For to develop his potentialities man had to create private property, from which followed all the other forms of human alienation mentioned above. As man's development progresses, the various institutions he creates to aid his progress gain more and more power over him until eventually they deprive him of his freedom. Development in this stage, therefore, is achieved at the expense of freedom, since man becomes a slave to the very institutions he creates to further his development.

At the point where human development reaches completion and alienation reaches its peak, man approaches the third stage in the process of self-realization. This stage is ushered in by the proletarian revolution and marks the point where the first two stages synthesize in the communist society. In this stage all forms of human alienation are abolished so that the freedom of the first stage re-emerges, but on a higher plane, since it is now combined with the development of the second stage.³

This in broad outline is Marx's philosophy of history. Most of his work, however, was devoted to specifying the conditions necessary for the overthrow of capitalist society. As a result of this preoccupation, he devoted very little time in his writings to a consideration of the first and third stages mentioned above. The first stage Marx himself considered to be a construction, though Engels, influenced no doubt by the evolutionary thought of the times, felt that this stage could be observed in many primitive communities. The third stage, likewise, Marx never seems to have felt the need of describing in any great detail beyond indicating that it would be ushered in by the proletarian revolution and would represent the ultimate synthesis of all that was good in the first two stages. It is to the second stage, therefore, of his philosophy of history that we must look for Marx's sociological analysis of change.

Marx discussed change as a series of isolable and closed epochs or periods within the stage which he called pre-history.⁴

³ A more detailed explanation of Marx's use of the Hegelian dialectic is given in an earlier article by the present author: "Karl Marx: Seed of the Prophets", *Philippine Studies* Vol. 9 October, 1961, p. 611 ff.

⁴ We shall refer to this stage in future as "history."

He mentions three such epochs: antiquity, feudalism, and capitalism. Each of these epochs inevitably follows the law of development which Marx expressed in terms of the double dialectic, namely, the dialectic of the class war and the dialectic of production.

Each historical epoch is characterized by a definite class constellation.⁵ This class constellation is in turn determined by private property. In the beginning of each epoch, one class has access to all the property and is the ruling class of the epoch. It is confronted by an unorganized mass, possessing no private property and unconscious of its common plight. The history of the epoch is synonymous with the development of this mass from a "class in itself" to a "class in and for itself," that is, from an unorganized mass conscious of no common bond to a tightly organized group conscious of its common misery. In the course of the epoch, as this class develops solidarity, it becomes increasingly aware of its opposition to the ruling class. Solidarity, however, is won at a price. For as the oppressed class becomes more homogeneous, the economic conditions under which it must operate become more extreme. The rich become richer while the poor become poorer until finally a stage is reached when, fully conscious of its unity and of its opposition to the ruling class, this class "in and for itself" begins to engage in deliberate political action.

At this point the ruling class begins to doubt the legitimacy of its own position and to lose control. This leads to more intense and violent conflicts between the two classes as the rich, in an effort to hold on to the power which they sense to be slowly slipping away, become more ruthless and repressive. Finally, a point of extreme need is reached characterized by the absolute poverty of the proletariat. It is at this stage that the revolution occurs, the ruling class is overthrown and the deprived class assumes power and becomes in turn the ruling class of the succeeding epoch. This conflict pattern again repeats itself and will continue to do so till the advent of communist society in which there will be no more class antagonisms,

⁵ By class, Marx meant a conflict group.

for private property, the root of conflict, will have been abolished.

The second dialectic of the law of historical stages discussed by Marx is the dialectic of production. This dialectic is between "the relations of production" prevailing at the beginning of each epoch and "the forces of production." By the "relations of production," Marx meant quite simply the social structure of a given society. This social structure is based primarily on property relations. The "forces of production," on the other hand, are the total economic potential of a society. They would include technology, the division and state of labor, organization into large and small enterprises and the legal status of these enterprises. As with the dialectic of class, each epoch is characterized by a definite social structure which remains stationary throughout the epoch. This structure is, in the beginning, adequate to the economic potential of the society. The potential, however, does not remain stable. New technology develops. There is a progressive division of labor, a differentiation of organizations and of the legal status of these organizations, all serving the development of the economic potential of the society in a linear direction.

As the epoch progresses the social structure ceases to be well adapted to the rising potential and eventually acts as a barrier to further development so that there is a complete incompatibility between what the society actually does and can do. Eventually the increased potential breaks through the barriers of the social structure and gives rise to a new structure adequate to the new production forces. This marks the beginning of a new epoch in which the same process starts all over again till eventually the barriers of the capitalist social structure are broken through and the communist society emerges. In this final stage, the social structure will, presumably, be adequate to the economic potential which will then have achieved its full development.

These two dialectics do not appear separately in Marx, nor did he intend them to be considered separately. In the dialectic of class personal forces promote change, while in the dialectic of production impersonal forces are the catalyst. The

brilliance of Marx appears in the combination. In each dialectic there was a stable element and a moving element progressing onward in a linear direction. In each there is an interplay between the factors involved and in each the explosion ushering in the new epoch is of a revolutionary nature. Marx saw the two dialectics as different aspects of the same process. In each epoch the ruling class represents the existing social structure. Both the structure and the class composing it are stable throughout the epoch. The suppressed class, on the other hand, represents the economic potential of society and in the course of the epoch the potential embodied in this class develops until ultimately a point of total incompatibility is reached and the explosion occurs.

Marx formulated his dialectic in the light of two great historical experiences, namely, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. The former was for him the classic example of how group struggle could lead to change while the latter indicated how the economic potential of a developing society could break through the social structure and also produce change. Marx's work is a brilliant combination of both experiences in one theory. Yet, for all its brilliance, it is false. For the French Revolution cannot be explained by the dialectic of class nor the Industrial Revolution by the dialectic of production.⁶ There are, however, revolutions—of which the Russian Revolution is an outstanding example—which can be described, though not explained, in terms of this theory. As a general theory of revolutions, however, it is false, for there are many revolutions which can neither be described nor explained in these terms.

The second step in our analysis of Marx is to try to separate the sociological from the philosophical elements in his work. The terms "sociological" and "philosophical" here refer to differences in the logical status of propositions. The former can be subjected to empirical test, i.e., they can be falsified by empirical observation or allow of derivations that can be falsified. The latter appeal to motives of assent other than empirical ob-

⁶ Dahrendorf, *op. cit.* pp. 135 ff.; also Crane Brinton, *A Decade of Revolution 1789-1799* (New York: Harper Bros., 1934), pp. 133 ff.

servation. In discussing change, Marx continually jumps back and forth between the two types of proposition. Thus we can find statements implying that private property is the structural prerequisite for class formation as well as statements to the effect that private property will be superseded and that it is the root of all alienation. These are three logically different types of statement. The first is a justified scientific assumption. It is useful inasmuch as testable propositions can be drawn from it. The second statement, about the supersession of private property, though not well formulated, is a testable hypothesis which can be subjected to controlled observation. The third statement, however, that private property is the root of alienation, is utterly removed from any possibility of empirical verification. It appeals to belief and not to observation in any systematic sense.

Why did Marx the "scientific communist" fail to distinguish between sociological and philosophical statements in his theory of change? This brings us to the third of the statements posed earlier in this paper, namely, the limitations of a sociological theory of change. First, however, it might be well to see what Marx's sociology tells us about social change.

First, it tells us *why* societies change, namely property relations give rise to antagonistic class groupings while at the same time the social structure becomes a barrier to the growing economic potential of society. Secondly, it tells us *how* societies change, namely, by revolutionary class struggle. Finally, it tells us *when* societies change, namely, at the point of extreme need of the suppressed classes, which need coincides with the point at which the social structure can no longer contain the developing potential of the society. One question the Marxian sociology does not answer is the question of the *direction* of change. Not that Marx overlooked this question in his work. He tells us, for example, that the proletariat will establish the classless society and that private property will be superseded. But whenever he discusses the direction of change, he leaves the realm of sociology and enters that of philosophy. The function of Marx's philosophy, therefore, was to go beyond the why, how, and when of change and indicate the direction

of change. The fact that Marx had to resort to philosophy to indicate the direction of change is no accident, for sociology can tell us little, if anything, about the direction of change.

If one is interested, as Marx was, in discovering the law of development of capitalist societies, he can be searching for either of two things. First, he can be looking for general statements concerning the factors that accelerate or retard change or, second, he can be attempting to formulate general statements of what actually will happen. A general statement of the first type would be, "The working class is the main agent of change." A statement of the second type would be "Capitalist society tends towards its own abolition." The first type of statement is formal. It leaves out substantive elements in particular societies. The second is about a particular type of society at a given period of time. The first type of statement can be tested empirically, the second cannot be realistically so tested. Questions concerning both types of statement, i.e., concerning the factors in change as well as the direction of change, are asked of the sociologist; and questions about the second kind of statement, though for all practical purposes incapable of empirical verification, are by far the more interesting. Though it is useful to identify the factors making for change in the Philippines today, it would be much more interesting to be able to say what the Philippines will be like forty years from now.

An example can help clarify what is meant by saying that a scientific theory of change is not realistically possible. Consider the following statement on the direction of change: before the year 2,000 representative government in the Philippines will be replaced by one-man rule. What would be the empirical basis for such a statement? It is conceivable that this statement could be derived from theory in the following manner. If factors A, B, C, and D, which are associated with one-man rule, occur in the Philippines, representative government will be replaced by one-man rule. If, on the other hand, factors a, b, c, and d occur, then, factors A, B, C, and D will occur in the Philippines in 40 years. This is a theory on the direction of change but it is extremely difficult to develop, so difficult

in fact, that we have termed it realistically impossible. Perhaps a concrete example from the science of meteorology will demonstrate further why this is so. Consider the following questions: What must happen for the weather to change in Manila, and secondly, what will the weather be like in Manila one month from today? The answer to the first question requires only an assessment of a small number of fairly crude factors and the more striking the change indicated, the easier becomes the assessment of these factors. The answer to the second question, on the other hand, requires the much more precise assessment of a large number of intricately related factors and the interpolation of these factors in great detail.

The problem faced by the meteorologist in predicting the weather in Manila in one month's time is comparable to our present one. As long as the sociologist is concerned with identifying the mechanisms of change, he can limit himself to very crude factors such as social mobility. But, as soon as he is faced with the problem of making specific predictions about the direction of change in specific societies, in specific situations at a definite point in time, he has to consider such a large number of factors and their interrelationships that such predictions become realistically impossible within the strict confines of social theory.

Does the fact that a realistic social theory on the direction of change is impossible mean that the sociologist can make no significant contribution to some of the more important questions of the day? No, provided he is not a confirmed empiricist. Sociologists have to make and do make predictions regarding the direction of change. Such predictions have four possible sources.

The first source is pure prophecy. Statements based on pure prophecy have no logical basis though they may have a psychological source, in as much as the "prophet" is a member of society and therefore knows something about it. Though statements founded on pure prophecy are highly individualistic and the method cannot be taught, its use is not infrequent in

social thought. Some of de Tocqueville's statements about the United States were of this nature and they were correct.⁷

The second source of statements on the direction of change is *Verstand*, or an understanding by empathy of a social situation on the basis of some of the trends in the society within which the situation occurs. This understanding is based on a thorough knowledge of the social situation, i.e. "on the ability of the observer to project himself emotionally and intellectually into the same situation."⁸ Again the method is personal but it can help one predict what is happening in the present and predict what will take place in the future. Many of Max Weber's more significant contributions to the field of sociology have been based on this type of analysis.⁹

The third source of statements on the direction of change is historical extrapolation. There are two types of extrapolation, each based on different assumptions. The first type is the empirical generalization. This is a statement made on the basis of similarities in different situations without being able to make any general statements about the similarities themselves. An example would be Brinton's statement in *The Anatomy of Revolution*, that the radicals always take control of the revolution.¹⁰ There is no theoretical explanation of why this is so. It has simply been observed to happen that way in revolutions.

⁷ One such statement of particular interest today is the following: "There are at the present time two great nations in the world. . . I allude to the Russians and the Americans. . . Their starting point is different, and their courses are not the same; yet each of them seems to be marked out by the will of Heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe." This statement was made in 1835 long before either nation became a great world power and actually began to sway the destinies of half the globe. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (London and New York: The Oxford University Press, Galaxy edition, 1947), pp. 242 ff.

⁸ Max Weber, *Basic Concepts in Sociology*, trans. H. P. Secher (New York: The Citadel Press, 1962), p. 16.

⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 15-17.

¹⁰ Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1952), Chapter 6 and p. 281 ff.

The second type of historical extrapolation is the "tendency" statement. An example would be that achievement is the basis of social position in the United States. This statement merely records something that has been observed and which, it is assumed, will continue to be observed. There is no theory to enable one to say this has to go on. It is merely a generalization of observations with very strong "*ceteris paribus*" or "other things being equal" clauses which make it impossible to falsify such statements. Though not strictly scientific, the predictive value of such statements in policy-making has been considerable.

The fourth source of prediction concerning the direction of change is philosophy of history. By this is meant more or less systematic inferences about the progress of events. Since a philosophy of history embraces the broad perspective of history from beginning to end, it is probably the most predictable long-term view. One accepts or rejects it on a feeling for the evidence that this is right or wrong. Methodologically it assigns a given place to a given society in a larger universe as well as meaning and value to given historical situations. The statements made on the basis of a philosophy of history, however, cannot be subjected to empirical test. Perhaps the best modern example of this approach is Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*¹¹ in which he traces the growth and decline of civilizations. Among the sociologists, Comte and Spencer as well as Marx have made frequent use of this source in their writings.

The four source listed above offers the sociologist what his discipline cannot provide, namely, a basis for predicting the direction of change. As long as the sociologist confines himself to the strictly empirical level, i.e. the level of testable hypotheses, some very important questions on change will disappear into the area of factors promoting change. If, however, he takes a broader view and sees sociology as a humanistic and social discipline, ready to come to grips with some of the more important problems facing the modern world, he will not hesitate to appeal to the four sources described above. Perhaps

¹¹ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 1 vol. abridgement by D. C. Somervell (New York and London: Oxford University Press), 1947.

the most important contribution of Marx to present day discussions of social change is that he has forced us to define the limits of a strictly sociological theory of change. Though he made the unpardonable mistake of allowing his philosophy of history to obscure his strictly scientific contribution by relentlessly mingling empirical and non-empirical statements, the intrusion of the Marxian philosophy on the Marxian sociology was no accident. For sociology as a narrowly exact, scientific discipline could not provide him with answers to the all important questions on the direction of change.