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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade a number of important contributions have been made to Marxian methodology. Many of these have interrogated the form which Marxian explanation should take. This period yielded progress to be sure, but it by no means produced consensus. Indeed, there is perhaps more divergence among the various approaches on offer today than at any time during this century.

In what follows I intend to focus on a difficult (and largely ignored) methodological problem which has emerged within the Marxian crisis theory debate. My goals are twofold: to draw attention to this problem and the need to address it, and to suggest that what has come to be called an "anti-essentialist" framework provides one means for resolving this problem.

The problem I speak of concerns the status of the categories of "necessity" and "contingency" in Marxian economic discourses. Following Laclau and Mouffe, I would contend that most crisis theorists have assigned these terms an *ontological* status. These terms are taken to refer to the nature of existence of the objects to which they are applied, to their underlying or essential attributes. Much of the passion which has attended the debate over crisis theory derives in large part from this ontological attribution. Yet, it may be past due that we take a deep breath and pose for ourselves the question, what might Marxian crisis theory be like if we demote these terms from their privileged status? This is precisely the step that self-described anti-essentialist contributors to Marxian theory have taken in recent years. For instance, while this move is explicit in the work of Laclau and Mouffe themselves and other *post-Marxists*, it is implicit in the work of many theorists associated with the journal *Rethinking Marxism* and other Marxists.

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I will begin, then, by explaining what will be called the necessity/contingency dualism (NCD) in Marxian theory, and by pointing to the difficult logical problems that are associated with it. To concretize the argument, I will indicate how this dualism affects one important branch of Marxian crisis theory, Mandel's long-wave theory. Finally, I will conclude by suggesting why we might do well to look beyond the dualism as we continue to investigate the concept of crisis.

MARXIAN CRISIS THEORY AND THE NCD

If there has been a unifying strand running through the crisis debate, it is its unique set of founding presumptions. First, capitalism is understood to be inherently crisis-prone. Contributors accept that a properly specified crisis theory must generate a narrative in which crisis is shown to be inevitable. Nevertheless, the view has emerged over the course of this century that Marxian crisis theory must also achieve two related goals: 1) it must be able to explain non-crisis periods, and to somehow prove that these do not contradict the "inevitability" thesis; and 2) it must secure theoretical space for meaningful human agency, despite the presumption of the powerful laws of motion which impel crisis in the first place.

These several challenges have been jointly met through the introduction of the NCD into Marxian crisis theory. The dualism entails the inaugural presumption that there exists an ontological fissure which partitions the elements and relations of the world into two distinct spheres. The dualist presumes that, of the innumerable elements, relations and forces that structure our world, there exists a subset of these that are the principal determinants of human affairs. It is the job of the dualist to identify these elements, and to specify the set of relations that bind them. We may call this exercise the "mapping of the terrain of necessity." This mapping is permitted by the ontological premise that these elements are invariant and timeless, and that the relations that bind them are exceedingly stable.¹

By the same stroke, this exercise entails the ontological demotion of all other elements and relations to a subordinate sphere, the terrain of contingency. The contingent elements are precisely those that lack the force and stability of necessity; they are those whose evolution is not dictated by an internal logic of their own. They impact on affairs, to be sure, but their effects are unstable and fleeting; moreover, their effects on human affairs are determined not by their *own* inherent natures, but by the inherent nature of those elements and relations deemed necessary. As Hegel would say, the ground of their effect lies not in themselves, but in another.

The task of theorizing based on this dualism, then, is to explain historical events via reference to these terms. It is not enough to specify events as the unmediated result of the play of necessity; this would entail a strict monism. Rather, the theorist must trace the event to be explained to the interplay of contingency and necessity. But this means establishing theoretically a whole host of new relations: the theorist must specify just how contingent forces impact upon those of necessity.

From this perspective we can understand the disputes that have emerged in Marxian crisis theory over the years as disagreements about, first, which elements and relations qualify for inclusion in the field of necessity, that is, about where one draws the border separating necessity from contingency; second, about the structure binding these necessary elements; and third, about how the contingent elements are to be seen to interrupt the functioning of necessity. Marxian crisis theorists criticize each other for having imported into the core of necessity factors which should really be seen as contingent, with the effect, say the critics, of vitiating the theory's ability to secure the necessary result of crisis. Rosa Luxemburg set the standard for this form of argument, and she has been imitated by countless disputants ever since, often in almost identical terms.

The Logical Problem Presented by the NCD

The NCD solves certain difficult methodological problems, and I will discuss these in a moment. But it introduces new ones that are by no means trivial. One problem concerns the difficulty of sustaining the terms of the dualism in the course of explanations that rely on it. Those who rely on the NCD must devise strategies for ensuring that neither of its terms expands with the effect of devouring its opposite, and with it, the dualism itself. In short, one must work hard to prevent the decomposition of the dualism into either a monism of necessity and strict determinism, on the one hand, or a monism of contingency and indeterminacy, on the other.²

By way of illustration, let us consider Mandel's long-wave theory. Here, this dilemma is handled by way of what might be called the "temporal bifurcation" resolution, in which historical periods are seen to be *sequentially* driven by the forces of necessity and contingency. That is, necessity and contingency are seen to alternate in their effects. Within this framework necessity drives the system to periodic crisis. The rapid accumulation of capital that is unleashed during the long expansionary phase of the wave ultimately devours its own conditions of existence, in part by raising the organic composition of capital, such that the rate of profit ultimately falls. As a consequence, a long contractionary wave ensues, culminating in a crisis. But if necessity has driven the capitalist

system to this point, it loses its sway over events in the crisis. That is, *the flow of events during the crisis itself is a contingent affair*. In the crisis period, the laws of accumulation lose their grip on history, and human agency in the form of class struggle is vested with the power to shape decisively the course of events. In this way, theoretical space for human agency is preserved despite recognition of determinant laws of motion. The crisis serves as the pivotal moment for revolutionary politics; it is the periodic opportunity that capitalism delivers to the working class to dismantle the system and replace it with a more humane and rational economic order.

The logical problem referenced earlier appears in this resolution with particular force. To see it, we need to focus on the transition from contingency to necessity. Mandel argues that, if events during the crisis conspire in a way that restores a robust rate of profit, then a new era of vigorous accumulation of capital is inaugurated, contingency is displaced from center stage, and the laws of necessity are restored to their pivotal role. In reviewing the past 150 years of capitalist history, Mandel finds that this is precisely what has recurred about every 50 years. But Mandel cannot deduce the inevitability of this transition without in the same stroke ascribing a necessitous logic to contingency itself. This ascription, after all, would represent the colonization of contingency by necessity, and so would mark the collapse of the dualism into a monism of necessity. Mandel cannot countenance this because it would expunge the ontological space he has carefully carved out for meaningful human practice. But, on the other hand, Mandel cannot see his way to fully embrace a true contingency, either. To do so would be to risk the possibility that once contingency has taken center stage, it might never again yield to necessity. This, for him, would mark the rejection of Marxism:

If one believes that not just once every fifty or sixty years, but continuously, external noneconomic forces determine the development of the capitalist economy, then one rejects out of hand Marx's entire economic analysis (Mandel 1980: 29).

This remarkable, isolated passage indicates that Mandel is painfully aware of what is at stake in the project to *deploy and yet contain* contingency. Only if interstitial seams are discovered within the laws of capitalist development — in fact, only if these laws are taken to necessitate such free spaces — can we be assured that our merely mortal practices *matter*, that our political and theoretical interventions make sense, that we can change history. But, as Mandel warns here, the contingent must be *deployed* in a contained space, *never unleashed*.

Unrestrained, the logic of the contingent would act as a corrosive, devouring the foundation of the very theory within which it is discovered. Unleashed, the contingent calls into question the force of the laws, tendencies, etc., that had been attributed with the ontological status of necessity; unbridled, it calls into question not only Marxian crisis theory, but indeed, *economic science* as it has come to be defined (see Parker 1985). Mandel is correct in this regard; he errs only in assuming that the insight must propel all true Marxists to contain contingency by necessity for the sake of the science; and, more fundamentally, *in assuming that having identified the ontological conundrum of the contingent, he has through the same act resolved it.*

In fact, Mandel has merely resolved the problem by theoretical fiat. In his haste to preserve the science, Mandel subverts the dualism. His determination to contain contingency for fear of its corrosive power leads him to banish the element of indecisiveness which is fundamental to contingency. Contingency is precisely that which does not follow or subscribe to any law or logic (dialectical or otherwise), and about which theory can *a priori* say little and predict nothing. Hence, despite his discussion of the contingency of triggering factors, the unpredictability of class struggle and the centrality of subjectivity, Mandel ultimately retreats to a determinist model of social development anchored in the pivotal relations among the primary economic variables. Necessity has overtaken and devoured contingency.

WHY FORGO THE NCD?

But then we must ask, what is at stake in the decision whether to preserve or to abandon the NCD as a basis for Marxian theory? To appreciate this, we must consider the problem which it is intended to solve. This is an epistemological problem, and it concerns the presumed inability of the human thinker to handle the unfathomable complexity of the natural and social world. If we believe, in principle, that everything affects everything else, then we may be tempted to throw up our hands in despair at the futility of it all. The NCD comforts us because it assures us that only some subset of forces and elements really matter in a fundamental way. And so we are licensed to go out and try to ascertain this subset and capture it in our theoretical accounts.

But, of course, this requires that we agree to assume that the terrain of necessity, itself a part of the whole, is of less complexity than the whole by many, many orders of magnitude. Otherwise, this partitioning would yield no particular intellectual benefit. It is therefore not surprising that the terrain of necessity as presented by even the most ambitious Marxian crisis theorists is exceedingly simple. As with

orthodox economists, we understand this to be a virtue in theoretical work: we call it elegance. This contributes to our conceit that our capacity as human thinkers is up to the task — in principle at least — of theorizing the primary determinants of human affairs. In the process, we are encouraged to relegate all manner of elements, sites and relations to the status of contingency.

For the sake of honesty and humility, it is time to admit that this presumption of the partitioning of the social totality into two incommensurate terrains, and the consequent discrimination between necessary and contingent elements, is grounded merely in our inability to imagine how we might construct theoretical narratives in its absence. There is surely not now, nor ever likely to be, an empirical test or a logical deduction by which we could confirm or disconfirm the NCD; nor is there likely to come a time when we can at last satisfy ourselves that we have even approximately mapped these two terrains and correctly drawn the border that separates them, let alone the manner in which they affect each other in the course of human affairs. It is, after all, a metaphysical presumption, one that allows for the testing of other propositions. And yet, when crisis theorists engage in critique, they freely invoke their own rendering of the NCD as a secure arbiter by which to judge and dismiss the theoretical efforts of others.

This maneuver, which is fully warranted by the NCD, has harmful theoretical and political effects. We should recall in this context that not so long ago gender oppression was universally shunted off to the category of contingency in Marxian theoretical accounts and political struggles. Not so long ago, also, most Marxists would surely have subscribed to the view that matters of geographic location and spatial movement and change have no place among the core of necessary relations and elements. Perhaps even more recently, many would have argued reflexively that natural and ecological matters surely fall beyond the border that surrounds necessity. Today, there are a growing number of Marxists (and others) whose work is dedicated to the task of convincing us that each of these presumptions is unwarranted and misguided.

Each of these theoretical advances presents us with a challenge. We can continue to treat these new interventions and those that lie in our future as mere border disputes over which elements and relations deserve to be included, and which, lacking such qualifications, should be expelled to the region of contingency. This is the path that Marxian crisis theory debate has followed since its inception. If we choose this path, then these interventions will not have altered the methodological course of crisis theory one whit.

Or, we can be encouraged to see that these demands provide us with cause to put that game behind us entirely: to displace the NCD as a guiding first principle, to abandon the ontological status of necessity and contingency, and to begin to explore anew the relations that bind the diverse elements that constitute the social totality. This would entail a refusal of the claims of exclusion that emanate from among us, and it would force us to pose the exceedingly difficult questions, what kinds of explanatory narrative might we tell — and what kinds of oppositional politics might we craft — once we forgo the security and restrictions of the NCD. This is the methodological avenue of anti-essentialist Marxism. It is an avenue well worth serious consideration.

NOTES

1. In this presumption and procedure, Marxian theory parallels orthodox economic theory. For those who believe that Marxian method should resemble orthodox economics, this insight should be comforting, for in their ontological presumptions the alternative paradigms are already deeply consonant (see DeMartino (1993)). An alternative, distinctly Marxian method is presented in Amariglio (1987).
2. The following discussion of Mandel and the broader arguments of the paper are deeply indebted to Norton (1988a, 1988b).

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