

## COMMENTARY

### ONTOLOGY AND THE "CIVILIZING MOMENT" OF CAPITAL

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I have been pestering my good friend Alkis Kontos for some time to offer a statement of his position on the distinction between true and false needs, including instruction on how I had erred in finding that distinction wanting. The paper before us is not unexpectedly difficult to respond to, falling as it does somewhere between the cryptic utterances of the Delphic oracle and the riddles of the Sphinx. Moreover, Kontos has wrapped himself in the mantles of not one but two great thinkers, here present, to whom I am much indebted, thus tending to insure in advance that I would appear not only unreasonable but ungrateful should I persist in the error of my ways.

Yet persist I must. I shall take up three points: (1) the relation between an ontological assumption and a theory (and practice) of social change; (2) the application of Kontos's ontological postulate to the Marxist theory of capitalist development; (3) the implications of the appearance-reality distinction for social inquiry.

1. Kontos claims that "ontological assumptions are inevitable in relation to the question of human needs." The assumption to which he is inclined is that the human essence is reflected in "free, creative activity"; he warns us that we cannot expect to demonstrate the correctness of our ontological assumptions in any apodictic sense, and he suggests we adopt one as an "orientation". I can accept all this, at least for the sake of argument. Yet I still do not think we should build a theory of social change on such foundations.

Kontos himself reminds us of "the problem of competing ontologies". I take this to mean that reasonable men and women can disagree about ontological questions and that no final resolution of such questions should be expected. Thus, among such reasonable persons, some will accept the above-mentioned representation of the human essence, and some will not. More importantly, however, there can be strong disagreements, among those who do accept it, over what conclusions in social analysis can be drawn from it. In my

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view one cannot, for example, *demonstrate* the superiority of a liberal approach (incrementalist reform of capitalism) over a radical one (democratic socialism or revolutionary communism), or vice versa. In a purely theoretical sense both can be made internally consistent with the same ontological postulate, given certain assumptions. There is no way to leap from the postulate to any specific practical recommendations for social change. I am prepared to state quite flatly that we must be content to live with the divorce of theory and practice.

More specifically, Kontos makes no attempt to show how his own judgments on social activity follow from his ontological postulate. In what sense are we "dehumanized in our market relations"? Does this mean we must abolish them? Is such a thing possible? "Man as infinite appropriator contradicts man the exorter, enjoyer, and developer of his ethical powers." Why "contradicts"? Totally or partially contradicts? What are the implications of this alleged contradiction?

2. In elaborating his ontological postulate Kontos says: "Free, creative activity becomes the measure of history's humanly appropriate development." Again, I can accept this for the sake of argument; but I do not see that very much follows therefrom. Does it give us *any* guidance for choosing among social change options in contemporary society, for example?

Let us stay within the orbit of Marx's critique of capitalist society and ask how this "measure" could be applied in that context. Recall Marx's repeated statements about the progressive character of capitalism, *e.g.*, the passages in the *Grundrisse* about the "civilizing moment" of capital which frees us from the "limited" spheres of needs in earlier societies. It is perfectly plausible to suggest, quite within Marx's frame of reference here, that capital has not yet completed its liberating work and thus that the expanded reproduction of capital is, in the range of actual social options, the best promoter of "free, creative activity" or the realisation of the human essence today. This may be regarded as an extremely dubious position, but it is not — granted Marx's assumptions — *prima facie* erroneous or inconsistent with those assumptions.

The ontological postulate recommended by Kontos is too general to provide a basis for a critical theory of capitalist development or for a theory of the distortion of needs in capitalist society.

3. Kontos claims that in *The Limits to Satisfaction* I have grasped only the appearance, and not the reality, of contemporary society and that the "character of the intensified needs-commodities interplay itself ... cannot disclose anything meaningful." He urges me instead to "revitalize the truth of ancient theorems and modern legends."

I accept Hegel's notion that appearance is the appearance of essence. It is meaningful, although it is not the whole truth. More important is the implication in Kontos's criticism that we already know (since Marx wrote) the "essence" of the social relations in capitalist society. Apparently all we have to

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do is to polish these theorems assiduously, until they shine so brilliantly that all who now reject them are dazzled into submission. I do not think we know this essence, and therefore we must continually call into question our theoretical apparatus even as we employ it. For example, I think that there is a fetishism of commodities in today's society, but it is not the kind of fetishism described in chapter I of *Capital*.

To conclude: Despite Kontos's attempt to widen the gap between our positions, I believe that at bottom it is not so great a disagreement. I look forward with pleasure to narrowing it in future work.

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