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RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR WOLFENSTEIN'S REVIEW OF *THE PRODUCTION OF DESIRE*

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As Professor Wolfenstein notes in his very generous review, my purpose in *The Production of Desire* was to preserve what is of lasting value in psychoanalysis by re-situating its tenable claims within a Marxist anthropology. Toward this end I follow Marx in emphasizing the self-productive character of human nature and treat the basic constituents of Freud's view of human nature and treat the basic constituents of Freud's view of human nature as socially derived. Professor Wolfenstein seems quite sympathetic to much of my thesis but significant differences remain. Either I do not make myself sufficiently clear or Professor Wolfenstein's greater attachment to psychoanalytic theory has led him to misconstrue my meaning. In either case I offer the following clarification.

I purportedly commit two basic errors: first, maintaining that "society exists in advance of the individual"; and second, viewing individuals as "determined from the outside in." These are both important criticisms, for they go to the heart of the relationship between the individual and society. And yet, neither seems sufficiently clear to be capable of affirmation or denial. Let us begin with the first point and Professor Wolfenstein's contention that dialectically "society = a collectivity of individuals."

It is true that *society* and *individuals* are dialectically related (though what I in fact argue, as Professor Wolfenstein himself notes at one point, is that "society and *human nature* cannot be treated as if they were independent variables.") What I regard as "mistaken at its root" is the notion that an identical human nature receives different channels of expression in different societies. There is no identical human nature because, as Marx correctly noted, human nature, including its needs, drives and defenses, is formed through a social order in the process of appropriating socially constituted objects which are, of necessity, variable.

But is not the social order constituted out of individuals and is not Professor Wolfenstein therefore correct in insisting that neither society nor the individual can be granted priority; that they are, in fact, dialectically related? I asserted much the same proposition myself a number of times in *The Production of Desire*. However, reflecting on Professor's Wolfenstein's thoughtful review has forced me to the conclusion that as it stands, the dialectical assertion of social-individual identity is formally true, but substantively either false or seriously misleading. Without further clarification the assertion leads to the following difficulty: if individuals and society are "mutually determining and mutually

exclusive" (note the shift from equivalence to reciprocal determination) we must be able to define them independently of each other. For only separably definable entities can interact. But if we can so distinguish them, the individual must be definable independently of society; yet this is precisely the position Professor Wolfenstein credits me with avoiding. How are we to escape this dilemma? We must reflect more carefully on the assertion that society and individuals constitute a dialectic.

While human nature (the nature of individual human beings) and society are dialectically related, it is not true that each contributes equivalently to the constitution of the dialectic. Their modes of being and the order of their priority are distinct. In terms of the potentiality of being, individual human nature is prior. However, in terms of concrete actuality, society is prior. Human nature is "privileged" as the abstract possibility always precedes its realization. Nothing can be found in society which in some sense does not exist as a human potentiality. But for this privilege the abstract possibility pays a heavy price in being; it cannot determine its own realization, for which it remains dependent on the concrete social order through which it is concretized.

Actuality is logically prior to potentiality because the notion of "being in condition A" is logically prior to the *possibility* of "being in condition A." But actuality is also prior in the important sense that potentiality cannot actualize itself, a consideration which Marx, following Aristotle, utilized to demystify Hegel. Finally, as Aristotle noted and Marx reiterated, since the nature of a being is its realization, it is the concrete goal or end which is normatively prior. As human beings are only fully human as concretely social, their realized nature precedes their potentiality. Nothing in these reflections denies the relevance of "human nature" or "human potentiality" as such. However, potentiality is a transit of being; at some point it must alight. It is in the terrain of reality that it comes to rest.

When these universal relations are viewed in the light of human nature their significance becomes even clearer. The manner in which an acorn becomes an oak is essentially different from the manner in which an infant becomes an adult. For while an infant has a nature at birth, it has no properly human nature. And it cannot acquire one without the continuous participation of other fully formed human beings. This situation does not hold for the acorn's passage to an oak. The difference liest in the very fact of human potentiality — the fact of the abstractness of human beings at birth. We become human as we become concrete, specific and determinate. That is precisely why a given human infant can become any of an indefinitely large number of possible human beings.

What distinguishes us from the remainder of nature, as Marx insisted, is that we construct our nature out of material which has been bequeathed us. We reconstruct ourselves through our capacity to engage in a second-order, meta-praxis. Of course, this reflective praxis of the adult is determinate in relation to the infant's unformed potentiality. And that is again why among all the characteristics of human beings we wish to ascribe to human nature, we can find no concrete instances which are universal. There are no specific instances of eating, dreaming, dying, speaking, loving or thinking which can be universally

designated as human. Rooted in nature, for instance, all human beings decay and "die". But there is no universal meaning to death; only the specific meaning which has been so variously ascribed to it in the enormous range of human cultures. Or, to take one of Professor Wolfenstein's examples, it is of course true that pain is universal, and "not all pain is the product of social determination".But it is also true that the *meaning* of pain is the product of "social determination", as cross-cultural, ethnic and class differentiated studies have indicated. No matter how brute any fact of the human condition, no matter how "demanding" or "intrusive", it has no human significance until it has been humanly signified, a status it can only acquire in the concrete community of human agents.

But, if "drives are socially constituted" how do they "resist social determination"? There is no abstract, universal answer to this question. In some societies there is no resistance. In other societies the social order is itself conflictual or self-contradictory, and in educating the individual to its needs, it is forced to inculcate and deny simultaneously, with the result that the individual is able to use the social order again itself. We learn that to succeed we must look out for ourselves and compete ruthlessly for advantage. But we also learn simultaneously that human dignity consists in compassion and concern, and that the realm of the spirit is superior to the laying up of material treasures on earth. We can resist resentment with affection or love with hatred. But this is not because it is *our nature* to be divided or to be so constituted that something in us at birth is necessarily antagonistic to society: the persistent Freudian paradigm.

This point leads to the second criticism which Professor Wolfenstein has directed against me: that I treat individuals as "determined from the outside in" ("the defenses of individuals = the individual expression of social demands"). To begin with, I reject the notions of "inward" and "outward" as mystifying reflections of Cartesian dualism. In fact, it is only with a highly privatized society that such a metaphor could gain ascendency. But the basic difficulty lies in the rather Lockean impressionism which is attributed to me and which I totally reject. Holding that individuals are "determined from the outside" conjures up archaic images of blank slates and signet rings pressed upon wax. It is theoretically meaningless to regard anything as "determined from the outside", least of all human beings. For if a being had no nature of its own, a kind of being which distinguished it from other beings, it would have no way of accepting, reflecting or deflecting the influences which were brought to bear upon it. Steel cannot be determined from the outside in the manner of glass precisely because of its nature "in itself". If individuals had no unique way of receiving social influence they would have no mode of being in the world, and no way of being influenced or determined. It is only when we speak to humans that we receive speech in return. If only humans can so respond it is because of their "inner" capacity to engage in symbolic communication. But this capacity itself cannot be specified independently of the specific community of speakers in which the individual is engaged. For even if theories of innate human speech competence were true and the sheer form of language could be separated from its particular

meanings, it would remain equally true that 1) such competence would consist in the meta-capacity to order specific utterances, 2) whose particular meaning would depend upon the variable social intentions of determinate communicative communities. If one cannot live by bread alone, how little can one live by the sustenance of pure transformational grammar.

And yet, Professor Wolfenstein notes that I accept that "all human beings have certain things in common." I hope my response is predictable. "Things," no; general dispositions, meta-capacities and forms of self-reconstitution, yes. We all require material sustenance, but there is no universal material "thing" which supplies it. We require human recognition, but again there is no universality in its appropriate modes of engagement. Professor Wolfenstein charges that while I accept conflict, drive and defense, I eliminate "pain, love, hate, and the "Oedipus Complex." I leave it to the reader to determine whether *The Production of Desire* is devoid of an awareness of human suffering. I believe that the real difference between Professor Wolfenstein and myself is suggested by his reference to the Oedipus Complex, which I do in fact deny as a universal occurrence. It is in my view derived from Freud's particular, substantive theories of sexuality and aggression, itself a reification of bourgeois family life, which was deeply rooted in a hypostatized vision of individual-social conflict. For psychoanalysis to be integrated into Marxism it must be conspicuously devoid of Freud's concrete view of human nature. What needs to be preserved is Freud's view of unconscious transformation (i.e. the defense mechanisms which he several times referred to as the cornerstone of psychoanalysis): a human capacity which "precedes" society as a potentiality, but which is only engaged under specific conditions of social conflict.

Professor Wolfenstein contends that in eliminating the defects in Freud's instinctual theory of human nature, I have simultaneously eliminated the sensuous, practical and desiring substance of that nature. Those who emphasize the social construction of human nature and point to the possibility of its radical transformation are often criticized along these lines. We supposedly forget the brute facticity, the very naturalness of our nature. I have no doubt that individuals would "suffer" under socialism. I cannot gauge whether they would suffer more or less; I am reasonably sure they would suffer differently. The feeling of solidarity with one's class to which Professor Wolfenstein cogently refers is a complex derivative whose extension to an entire society would transform it in ways I cannot envision. Perhaps under these conditions we would suffer with the distress of a far greater number of our fellow human beings. Perhaps, on the other hand, as lives were more fully lived, even their eventual end would bear less the imprint of futile rage. One thing is reasonably clear to me: the language of psychoanalysis, whether it be the 'aim-inhibited sexuality' Professor Wolfenstein is decorously forced to bracket, or the Hobbesean individualism that underlies even *Freud's Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*[1] is one of the profound strands of bourgeois ideology which elevates individualism above communal passion.

This brings me to the last point, the political significance of the differences between us. Professor Wolfenstein is concerned that as I empty out the individual I

remove the grounds of rebellion against current injustice. The corrective to a debilitating one-dimensionality purportedly lies in the natural responses, cultured to be sure, of the "fight-flight" reaction to pain. I am not sure what this phrase intends. it would seem that revolutionary movements must be a response to some order of inhumanity which has no "natural" basis in our given nature and which far transcends anything inherent in the notion of native pain. The suffering against which we rebel is a suffering which has itself been created in society. And such rebellion is possible because: 1) we are not, I have insisted, *tabula rasa*, but being with our own tendencies, laws, forms and constitution. However, all these potentialities are articulated through concrete social formations. When once we come to recognize our human self-creation in the form of a more profoundly gratifying existence we can, under specific conditions, resist the threat to its continuation or further development. We can, in short, struggle against those social forces that would dehumanize us.

But there is 2) another factor at work which moves the possibility of rebellion in the direction of a necessity, morally considered. Capitalism cannot "succeed in gratifying the needs it has itself brought into existence," because capitalism is inherently a contradiction between its prevailing structure of power (capitalism, in fact) and the legitimizing ideology of bourgeois rights and expectations (liberalism) which cannot but condemn the source and possibility of its own promise. The desire for communal recognition is necessary to human nature in the sense that it is only through community that we can become human. It is immanent in capitalism because the particular form in which capitalism elicits this recognition — through the necessary contradiction between reality and ideology — is inseparable from capitalist power. We can only fulfill the promise of this society by transcending it and we can only transcend it because our nature is constituted by powers which are of necessity self-transformative and forever retain the potentiality of humane self-determination. So long as we continue to look to something basically resistant in human nature to protect us from one-dimensionality we shall continue to mire in despondency. Nothing in our native constitution impels us toward resistance or revolution. A brief look at human history bears tragic witness to this anguished absence. Once having caught some sight of our fuller humanity, however, no matter how vaguely adumbrated, it is unlikely we will wholly relinguish our pursuit. What is most compelling is not what drives us from an ancient past of previous suffering, but what draws us toward a future still ours to make in the process of self-transformation.

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Notes

1. I refer to such comments as these: "If the individuals in the group are combined into a unity, there must be something to unite them." This is Hobbes, again, who also could not understand that individuality is a social creation rather than the brute starting point of social amalgamation. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* translated by John Strachey, Liveright Publishing Company, New York, 1951, p. 7.