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Civilisations and Social Theory

Volume 1 of Social Dialectics

Anouar Abdel-Malek

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To Antonio Gramsci

Great intelligence embraces,
Small intelligence discriminates.
Great talk is sparkling,
Small talk is verbose.

Tchuang-Tseu

Time is the field of human development.

Karl Marx

Dialectics, in effect, is a method of thinking, or rather a coherent sequence of intelligible methods, which help to melt certain rigid conceptions and to bring practice to dominant ideologies.

Bertold Brecht

Contents

<i>Sources</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
Part I Positions	
1 The Historical Moment of Theoretical Work	3
2 The Future of Social Theory	25
3 Meaningful Social Theory: the Cross-civilisational Perspective	43
4 Sociology and Economic History: an Essay on Mediation	54
Part II Dialectics of Civilisations	
5 Orientalism in Crisis	73
6 Marxism and the Sociology of Civilisations	97
7 Charles de Gaulle and the Dialectics of Civilisations	118
8 Joseph Needham: Encyclopedist of Civilisations	123
9 The Third World and the Orient	130
10 The Civilisational Project	139
Part III The Concept of Specificity	
11 The Notion of 'Depth of Historical Field'	151
12 The Concept of Specificity	160
13 On the Dialectics of Time	175
<i>Notes and References</i>	187
<i>Index</i>	207

Sources

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Part I Positions

- 1 'Le moment historique du travail théorique', *L'Homme et la Société*, no. 23 (janvier-mars 1972), pp. 111–31.
- 2 'L'Avenir de la théorie sociale', *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, no. 50 (juin 1971), pp. 23–40.
- 3 'Meaningful Social Theory: the Cross-civilizational Perspective', *Alternatives*, vol. II (1976), pp. 165–75.
- 4 'Sociology and Economic History: an Essay on Mediation', in M.A. Cook (ed.), *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 268–82.

Part II Dialectics of Civilisations

- 5 'L'Orientalisme en crise', *Diogène*, no. 44 (1963), pp. 109–42.
- 6 'Marxisme et sociologie des civilisations', *Diogène*, no. 64 (1968), pp. 105–33.
- 7 'Charles de Gaulle et la dialectique des civilisations', *Espoir*, no. 6 (juin 1974), pp. 15–17.
- 8 'Joseph Needham, Encyclopédiste des Civilisations', *Le Monde Diplomatique* (août 1974), p. 19.
- 9 'Le Tiers-Monde et l'Orient', *Civilisations*, vol. XXVI, no. 3–4 (Bruxelles: Incidi, 1976), pp. 273–82.
- 10 'Le Projet de civilisation – Positions', *Les Conditions de l'Indépendance nationale dans le Monde Moderne*. Actes du Colloque

International, Institut Charles de Gaulle (21–23 décembre 1975), ed. Cujas (Paris: 1977), pp. 499–509.

Part III The Concept of Specificity

- 11 'La notion de "profondeur du champ historique en sociologie"', *Sociologie des Mutations*, ed. G. Balandier (Paris: Anthropos, 1970), pp. 51–62.
- 12 *The Concept of Specificity – Positions*, paper presented to Working Group 14 'Civilizations: One or Many?' at the 9th World Congress of Sociology, Uppsala (1978) roneo 17 pp.
- 13 *On the Dialectics of Time – Positions*, paper presented to the First Symposium organised by the Iranian Centre for the Dialogue of Civilizations on the theme 'Can the Planetary Impact of Western Thought Render Possible a Real Dialogue between Civilizations?', Tehran (20–23 October 1977), 13 pp.

Preface

The initial inspiration of the two-volume *Social Dialectics* – from its inception in the early 1950s to its publication in the original French edition in 1972 – lies and remains deeply rooted in the transformation of the world in our time, in the rise to contemporaneity of the Orient – Asia and Africa, together with Latin America. And this at a time when the division of the world into two systems and the emergence of science and technology are the twin driving forces behind the second stage of the Industrial Revolution.

The central difficulty facing social theory at the time of Yalta, the climax of Western hegemony, was how to generate ways and means of tackling the hitherto marginalised societies and cultures belonging within the non-Western civilisational moulds. Prepostulated universalism, as a recipe, simply would not do. It was neither able to interpret, from the inside, the specificities at work, nor was it acceptable to the major formative tendencies within the national schools of thought and action, deeply attached as they were to authenticity, efficacy and the primacy of self-reliance, to the sovereignty of the national power of decision. Thus it became necessary to engage in a critical examination and reassessment of the notions, concepts, categories, theories and systems of thought in which the Western world expresses its historic hegemony in intellectual terms. If it were to be effective, such a critical reassessment must necessarily be coupled with the restructuring of political and social theory through the presentation of a set of theses and concepts whose aim would be to organise a theoretical workshop where the necessary and inevitable dialectical contradictions and confrontations might forge a path to mediation and towards complementarity.

Such an endeavour could not but be strenuous and extremely complex. It was rendered still more difficult and urgent by the rising tide of the

negative idea, deeply at work within the leading cultural centres of Europe and North America, and aiming at the erosion of the structuring forces of Western civilisation. Yet it refused to offer a viable and convincing alternative civilisational project, while throughout rejecting and reducing to marginality the Orient, the Three Continents.

Hence the nature and the tone of the present work.

The cultural, ideological, theoretical and political battles of the 1945–70 generation find their echo in these pages, as the problems are posed anew, taking as their starting point the Orient, the Three Continents, and the transformation of the world that results from the rising historical initiative of the hitherto marginalised nations, cultures and civilisations. It was necessary to give primacy to the constructive side, so to speak, of this task – to its historically positive character. Hence the presentation of a series of alternatives in the form of positions, in opposition to the negations of the prevailing negative idea and its epigones.

It was necessary, we felt, to clarify succinctly the historical and intellectual tone of this work, to underline that it is centrally a work concerned with the elaboration of a general conception of the interrelations between power and cultures at a time when the world is being transformed for the first time since the rise of Europe to hegemony in the fifteenth century.

One cannot fail to recognise at this point that the introduction of the dimension of cultures and civilisations into social theory requires a word of explanation – so far have we departed from the traditions and the tonality prevailing in the West until two generations ago. The functional, operational, quantitative approach to social reality, at the expense of the dialectical *Weltanschauungs*, has led to the prevalence of reductionism, the negation of specificity, the mechanistic belief in the predominance of the economic infrastructure and the cult of technology which leads to the control of minds and souls through the cosmopolitan mass media.

Yet the world is changing for all to see. *Volens nolens*, this transformation has to be accounted for from the inside: it must of necessity create the requisite conditions for a restructuration of social theory in our time. It was that which made this long journey necessary, always bearing in mind and drawing together a dialectical dialogue in depth between the central Western and Oriental traditions, in the hope of opening a path through nihilism and despair, the sterilisation of intellectual creativity, the impotence of the will, and above all the abdication of creative thought in the conflicting fraternity of mankind.

It is not a book of social theory, a theoretical book, a new stage in ideological epistemology, but rather a work in which the attempt to elaborate a more relevant, valid and significant body of social theory is constantly related, at each step and stage, to the real concrete world of our times, to its historically constituted specificities in their rich diversity and across their powerful contradictions. The work is largely based upon the marginalised specificities and contributions of the Orient, essentially within the Three Continents, though naturally enough with particular emphasis on the processes deeply at work within the Arab-Islamic, Afro-Asian civilisational circle. After all, how else could we approach it? That was the position of Max Weber in reflecting upon the feasibility of ensuring to the German Establishment its distinct, prominent place within the expanding European totality in the first quarter of this century; of Talcott Parsons, the late ideologist of the 'Great Society'; of C. Wright Mills, who attempted to voice an alternative model for the Western civilisational project; before them, of Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim's desire to reflect the established ethos of the French bourgeoisie at the end of the nineteenth century; not to mention the work of Ibn Khaldoun and Machiavelli, Vico and Marx.

A non-temporal social theory can only obtain in the subjectivist epistemological productions of professional ideologists, divorced from the real concrete world, from the objective dialectics of human societies in given historical periods and places, and from the geo-historical formative influences deeply at work in the hidden part of the iceberg. This work originates from influences to which I have already referred; this will help to indicate its terms of reference, and its credentials, and at the same time I hope it will encourage the acceptance of its possible relevance to the many-splendoured array of formative influences that go to make up the cultural, intellectual, scientific and theoretical workshop best able to account for our human condition and prospective, and thus help all those concerned with the future of human rationality in this world to take meaningful action.

It seems superfluous to draw attention to the notions, categories and concepts around which most of the positions presented here are structured. Most of them are identified in the titles of chapters or sections. While it may now be premature, it would seem proper, at a later stage of this work, to provide a systematic presentation of both concepts and formative theoretical elements. It has been felt necessary, however, to draw attention to the historical framework from which the very position on the problematic of political and social theory and philosophy

emanates, so that renewal, when it does occur, can be understood against its objective background, rather than as a mere manifestation of exceptionalism and non-conventionality.

Since the publication of the original volume in 1972, many works have appeared, and much work has been done, especially around the turning point of 1973. The inclusion of new essays at the expense of more specialised or regional pieces has become necessary, as the Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Japanese editions of this book have shown. In the present English edition – which we are honoured to see published by our friends at Macmillan Press, thanks to the clear-sighted support of Robert Shreeve, Steven Kennedy and Mike Gonzalez – the following chapters have been added to the original text of the first, 1972, edition: Chapters 3, 7, 8, 10, 12 and 13 of Volume One; and Chapters 3, 5, 8, 9 and 10 of Volume Two. At the same time little more than half the original text is now being retained within the framework of these two books, for various scientific and technical reasons.

It is hoped that these two volumes will be followed by two other parts, fulfilling the tasks set out in the original Introduction.