

Hollingsworth  
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### General Overview

Last week, our discussion of pre-capitalist social forms raised numerous questions related to history and teleology. How should we understand the past in relation to the present (and vice versa)? Why should a theory like Marx's, which seeks to grasp the constitutive elements of the present society, be concerned at all with pre-capitalist societies? Does the history of capitalism repeat itself (e.g. accumulation by dispossession)? Does capitalist society mark a radical break from previous societies, or do we find continuities? What exactly are we looking for when we look into the past? How is Marx's reconstruction of the past different from what a historian does? Here's what we came up with in regard to some of these questions.

### Teleology

In the course of our discussion, it soon became clear that Marx rejects a teleological view of history. However, we quickly discovered how easy it is to lapse into teleological thinking, and even Marx appears to slip up in some places. Dr. Lotz came up with a helpful *reductio ad absurdum* to demonstrate why the teleological position is untenable. If we accept a teleological explanation of history, then we have to regard everything that happened before capitalism as a condition of its becoming. But this leads to absurdities. For example, we would have to conclude that the "purpose" of Roman law was to give us modern property relations.

### The Method of Historical Reconstruction

The teleological position is not only philosophically untenable, it has little practical value even as a heuristic. If we treat everything that happened before capitalism as a condition of its becoming, then we are left with no way to determine which conditions were more decisive than others, and without a clear idea of what to look for, we quickly become buried under a mountain of historical data. But Marx is very clear that the conditions of capitalism's becoming do not reach back infinitely into the past. This is why the historical specificity of Marx's categories are so important. As Dr. Lotz pointed out, if we understand that capital is unique to modern society, then we are less likely to go looking for it in the past. At the same time, understanding capital as a historically-specific category clues us in to the fact that there had to be historically-specific conditions in place for the possibility of capital to arise.

### Marx's Categories and Social Ontology

So, Marx does give us some "rules" about how to approach an historical reconstruction. At this point in the discussion, however, we raised a more fundamental question about the adequacy of Marx's categories. As we learned from the Introduction, the presentation of Marx's system involves a categorial reconstruction of the constitutive elements of social reality. The key

question is: how do we know that Marx's categorial reconstruction *of* social reality is adequate *to* social reality? To someone like Foucault this question would make no sense, since for him a given set of historical data can be reconstructed in any number of different ways, and no single reconstruction is better or more authoritative than any other. How we choose to reconstruct history is ultimately arbitrary. However, Marx appears to take a different view. Dr. Lotz explained that Marx develops the categorial basis of his reconstructions as a social ontology. What I took this to mean is that Marx's categories are not like tools that help us sift through heaps of data (like Max Weber's ideal types are supposed to do), but instead are expressions of "social being," however we want to define that. Marx's categories have ontological import because they seek to grasp constitute elements of capitalist society that are not reducible to mental or natural phenomena. So, a Marxist might claim that a categorial reconstruction (of present society and of the forms preceding it) which grounds itself in a social ontology is more authoritative than a reconstruction which lacks a social-ontological basis.

### Social Hierarchies

Finally, we talked about how we should think of sexual hierarchies and other oppressive systems that pre-date capitalist societies. What we determined is that, while we can certainly point to continuities between the feudalist form of patriarchy and the capitalist form, we also have to appreciate the way in which capitalism dissolves and reconstitutes pre-capitalist forms. (Chase made a similar point with respect to forms of subjectivity.) Capitalism "frees" various hierarchies from their pre-capitalist forms (without abolishing them) by reconfiguring or recombining their elements under a new form.

Questions:

1. What is social ontology?
2. Why are categories better suited than concepts to grasp social reality?
3. On what grounds can we claim that social reality is a third ontological realm distinct from mind and nature?