

## Is Marxism Different in Principle from Bourgeois Social Science?

Anthony Thomson (1975)

While it is possible to construct models of both Marxism and bourgeois social science and then analyze the difference in terms of principles, the diversity of views that can be found under the rubric of Marxism make this approach impractical. The alternative method that is employed in this paper is to assess several forms of Marxism separately and attempt to determine those aspects which distinguish each in principle from bourgeois social science. For the sake of convenience, to be 'bourgeois' will be defined simply as being consciously non-Marxian. To be different in principle, an aspect of Marxism will have to be absent in all manifestations of bourgeois social science and moreover incapable of being assimilated.

We can approach each form of Marxism from the point of view of its conscious differentiation from bourgeois social science. As a generalization, however, the authors of the forms of Marxism in question here are more concerned with distinguishing themselves from other varieties of Marxism. Their treatment of bourgeois social science, therefore, is specific and ungeneralizable. While self-conscious arguments cannot be neglected, it is necessary to go beyond and take into consideration some major themes and concepts in their work, and thereby attempt to distinguish their practice from bourgeois social science. Three varieties of Marxism are discussed below, represented by Baran and Sweezy in the United States, by Jean-Paul Sartre in France, and Jurgen Habermas in Germany.

### I

Baran and Sweezy, in *Monopoly Capital*, charge that because of "the inherent limitations of their outlook and methodology,"<sup>1</sup> bourgeois social scientists have been unable to perceive the fundamental truths of their society. Compartmentalized and specialized, social science is unable to grasp the social whole and thereby omits and distorts factual processes. Only Marxism is oriented consistently towards the whole and is thereby able to discover the larger and presumably more important truths about social processes. The implications which follow from Baran and Sweezy's discussion, however, suggest that bourgeois social science in the past was less compartmentalized; in fact they recognize that "in the past society as a whole has been the chief preoccupation of the great social thinkers."<sup>2</sup> Habermas sees the unity of Marxism within a totality as a vital feature necessary for comprehension of the dialectic. But he recognizes that, while Marx was able to unify what later became separate social sciences, in "the days of Lorenz von Stein the general political sciences ... still retained this totality in view."<sup>3</sup> Even structural functionalism in the hands of Talcott Parsons, which builds from Spencerian evolution, is far from a non-holistic view.

The central concept of *Monopoly Capital* is the generation and utilization of the economic surplus, a concept that differentiates Baran and Sweezy from bourgeois social science. Althusser had noted that whereas the classical economists tended to discuss profit, rent and interest as separate categorizations, Marx compounded them conceptually into aspects of one

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<sup>1</sup> Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Jurgen Habermas, "Between Philosophy and Science: Marxism as Critique", in *Theory and Practice*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p.206.

concept: surplus value. This new conceptualization allowed him to ask what previously were inconceivable questions, and opened up entirely new fields for investigation. Similarly, Baran and Sweezy's concept of economic surplus is comprised of numerous categories most of which currently exist within bourgeois social science and others that are simply not calculated or measured. This argument is supported by the appendix in which Phillips estimates the magnitude of the 'economic surplus' on the basis of bourgeois statistics. While the new concept of 'surplus' is useful as an analytical tool and clearly implies a different methodology, the question remains: is it different in principle? Even given that no bourgeois social scientist uses the concept, it may be interpreted as a case of omission -- not utilizing to the fullest possible extent the information that is readily available. The concept is a re-combination of existing elements, which undermines some of its claim to being different principle.

Another significant component of the work of Baran and Sweezy is their critique of monopoly capitalism, based on a perspective outside the system itself: that of socialism. Baran claimed that the bourgeois social scientist is "Irrevocably committed to taking the existing economic and social order for granted."<sup>4</sup> He is caught between the bounds of "thinking exclusively in categories reflecting capitalist relations of production."<sup>5</sup> The result of this myopia is that understanding, theories, and 'solutions' are all presented within the confines of bourgeois society, and thereby can never be resolved because they do not transcend the contradictions inherent to it.

Baran devised a model of socialist conditions and used this model as a gauge with which to condemn irrationality and waste. This is the specific use for the concept of 'potential economic surplus': "the difference between the output that could be produced in a given natural and technological environment with the help of employable productive resources, and what might be regarded as essential consumption."<sup>6</sup> While this is a significant difference, it is not primarily a matter of principle.

Bourgeois social philosophy arose during the eighteenth century when institutions inherited from the feudal era were subjected to rigorous criticism from the point of view of a pure rationalism within which they were unable to justify their existence -- a process similar to Baran's, and in some ways resembling Habermas' critical theory. More significantly, the nineteenth century witnessed a critical reaction to the tendencies of concentration and centralization of capital, which were inherent to unregulated capitalism. There seems to be no reason to assume that bourgeois social science is incapable of analyzing capitalism from a perspective outside the system itself. In fact part of the current ecological criticism is in this tradition. However distinct from the perspective of any bourgeois social science, the choice of a socialist perspective as a critical referent is not in principle a difference. What is more, bourgeois economists study the optimal allocation of resources and factors of production to meet specific targets, a process of measuring current output by the yardstick of possible output given certain social or technological presuppositions, a process that has some similarities with Baran's.

Baran and Sweezy come to conclusions that are different in significant ways from ordinary bourgeois social science, in terms of both their own consciousness of what they are

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<sup>4</sup> Paul A. Baran, *The Political Economy of Growth*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1957), p.xi.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xii. Marx expressed the same idea: speaking of bourgeois social scientists, he wrote "none of them understands that the bourgeois form of production is historic and transitory.... This mistake arises from the fact that the bourgeois man is to them the only possible basis of any society; they cannot imagine a society in which men have ceased to be bourgeois." Karl Marx, quoted in *Monthly Review*, Vol. 25, No.6, November, 1973, p. 11n

<sup>6</sup> Baran, *Political Economy*, p.25.

doing and their theory itself, but they do nothing that differs in principle from bourgeois social science. Trained as bourgeois economists they freely integrate the work of other social scientists into their Marxian usually only re-interpreting it - nothing a bourgeois social scientist could not have done given Baran and Sweezy's assumptions.

## II

In *Search for a Method*, Jean-Paul Sartre provides both a critique of contemporary Marxism, and a view of Marxist social science that is compatible with some of the basic tenets of his earlier existentialism. To differentiate this method from bourgeois social science, it will be necessary to explicate parts of Sartre's doctrine.

For Sartre, Marx's method involved the initial assumption that facts, rather than being isolated appearances, are unified and bound to each other within the whole.<sup>7</sup> Marx approached reality from the abstract to the concrete: every unique historical process was first situated in its generality and then comprehended in its originality. Beginning after Marx's death with some of the works of Engels, a process of atrophy set in that was rigidified during the Stalinist consolidation. Twentieth century Marxists merely situated facts in their abstraction, liquidating particularity. Marxism became aprioristic as the originality of the theory was subsumed under generalizations derived from earlier experiences that no longer fit the new particularities. While it might be argued that, in being aprioristic, non-Sartrean Marxism differs from bourgeois social science, this is not necessarily so. For example, W. W. Rostow's study of British industrialization yielded a theory of 'stages' that was then unsuccessfully applied to underdeveloped countries.

Sartre's method involves both a return to Marx's early humanism and its infusion with existentialism in a process which appears most promisingly to be different in principle from bourgeois social science, a difference that could have the existentialist element as its basis. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre had explicitly denied that externalities 'cause' human action; on the contrary, each free agent created himself through self-directed choice and activity. A social science "which presumed to discover behavioral determinations" was not possible – Sartre's metaphysical view is different in principle from bourgeois social science.

If this differentiated Sartrean existentialism from bourgeois social science, however, it may also differentiated it from Marxism. The axiom of Marxism that provides the cornerstone for the construction of Sartre's synthesis is Marx's recognition that "men make their own history on the basis of prior conditions."<sup>8</sup> Man is not identical to his situation but exists in relation to it and makes history by consciously surpassing the given, but not out of 'whole cloth'.

It is these 'prior conditions' as limitations placed on the activity of men in-the-world with which Sartre is primarily concerned. In earlier writings, Sartre had demonstrated how, in oppressive societies, rulers can successfully deny the freedom of their subjects.<sup>9</sup> For Sartre, man

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Hazel E. Barnes, "Introduction" to *Search for a Method*, p. xviii.

<sup>9</sup> The people of Argus in "The Flies" are denied their freedom by their sadistic ruler and gods. Consider the following dialogue:

Zeus: The bane of gods and kings. The bitterness of knowing men are free. Yes, Agistheus, they are free. But your subjects do not know it, and you do.

Agistheus : Why, yes. If they knew it, they'd send my palace up in flames. For fifteen years I've been playing a part to mask their power from them (p.103).

On the other hand, Orestes knows that he is free: "I - ! I'm free as air ... (p.62). Yet even in this early play (1943) there is a tension between 'freedom' and 'causality' in that Orestes had a peculiar upbringing that contributed

exists within the practico-inert, which includes, besides materiality, the *praxis* of others and institutions which are the congealed edifices of past *praxis*: "Every man is defined negatively by the sum total of possibles which are impossible for him; that is, by a future more or less blocked off."<sup>10</sup> This does not negate for Sartre, however, the essential psychological freedom; the field of possibles always exists.<sup>11</sup>

To some extent Sartre's existential-Marxism has meant the incorporation of the determinism of social sciences into existentialism -- not in the sense of causal efficacy, but in terms of limitations to the field of possibles. While bourgeois social science can determine these limitations, it cannot eliminate the free choice within the restricted horizons. It is in the realm of indeterminacy that a difference in principle might exist between Sartre's Marxism and bourgeois social science (and Marxism). Sartre would claim that indeterminacy is in principle necessary because humans are in essence free. Bourgeois social science, on the contrary, might claim that in principle everything can be causally explained in the sense of it being 'determined' -- the problem hitherto being that we have insufficient knowledge of all the determinations. This difference in principle is necessarily negligible in practice; bourgeois social science will always have a realm of unpredictability -- it could simply define it as 'freedom' and reconcile itself with Sartre. If Sartre had argued that humans were free even in the face of the practico-inert, then he would establish a difference in principle with bourgeois social science, but also with Marxism.

Other differentiations are clear in Sartre's mind. Marx had claimed that we must not judge a revolutionary age by its own consciousness. In agreement, Sartre gave an historical example to show that the results of practice might be the unintended outcome of the original aims. Individuals act to realize their projects in the world. Subjectivity transcends the given objectivity and in its place creates a new objectivity. But no project is ever put into practice in a vacuum. This complex process passes through a series of mediations, which deflect the project, such that the 'end' is not as it was originally conceived. Baran and Sweezy made a similar argument.<sup>12</sup> The insight about unintended consequences is by no means excluded from the perceptions of bourgeois social scientists, as Weber's demonstration of the unintended consequences of the ideational system of Calvinism shows.

Sartre's point is that we must not only judge an age by its own consciousness. But we would lose its originality if we looked at it only from the point of view of its ultimate meaning.<sup>13</sup> The 'real' process can be understood only in terms of both projects and results. Sartre argues that his method is simultaneously regressive and progressive. The regressive method will provide the outline of the dialectical movement; the progressive method will incorporate the project. Consequently, Marxism must be both vertical and horizontal. By vertical Sartre means totalization in depth -- the 'is' in the dialectical process of becoming. By horizontal he refers to the characterization of the practico-inerte at a given point in time and specifically located. As

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somehow to his recognition of his own freedom. 'Freedom' was problematic in its relationships from the beginning of Sartre's existentialist writings. See Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Flies", in *"No Exit" and Three Other Plays*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1955):49-128.

<sup>10</sup> Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p.95.

<sup>11</sup> "The material conditions of his existence circumscribe the field of his possible... Yet the field of possibles, however reduced it may be, always exists.... It is by transcending the given toward the field of possibles and by realizing one possibility from among all the others that the individual objectifies himself and contributes to making history" *Ibid.*, p.93.

<sup>12</sup> "The way the system works is still the unintended outcome of the self-regarding actions of the numerous units that compose it." Baran and Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital*, p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p.80.

practiced, sociology is horizontal and within that framework is totalizing, albeit in a static rather than dialectical sense. It seems clear, however, that much bourgeois social science is historical; and when Sartre adds that the “dialectical totalization must include acts, passions, work and need as well as economic categories,”<sup>14</sup> that it must be a continual ‘cross-reference’ between attitudes and events, he adds no more than has already been added to sociology since the subjectivist turn.

What is crucial, however, is the incorporation of mediations, the most important of which is psychoanalysis, which as part of the regressive method, illuminates the individual's life history. As this example shows, however, Sartre wants to include into Marxism basic principles of bourgeois social science (unintended consequences, subjectivity, psychoanalysis) that are separate from the practice of bourgeois social science. This incorporation, then, is hardly a difference in principle.

Sartre accepts from Hegel that “the events of history may be interpreted as a dialectical process wherein existing contradictions give rise to a new synthesis which surpasses them.”<sup>15</sup> In accordance with his belief that history cannot be reduced to the ‘mechanistic functioning of immanent laws’, Sartre rejects Hegel's concept of Absolute Mind.<sup>16</sup> He himself, however, falls into something of an Hegelian idealist position when he claims that there is a ‘truth of man’, which as yet has not been discovered. We encounter an example of this argument in Sartre’s contention that the ‘whole’ is reflected in all of our acts. If the ‘whole’ is everything that came before and, dialectically, everything that is to come, Sartre’s argument reintroduces a seemingly metaphysical idea. Again, this argument amounts to a difference in principle from bourgeois social science, but results from adopting a metaphysical posture that is equally distinct from Marxism.

Sartre's rejection of Absolute Mind re-opens the possibility that what is significantly distinctive about Marxism involves precisely what Sartre rejects. The materialist tradition within Marxism seems to posit natural laws to which human activity is subject.<sup>17</sup> A direction that some Marxists have taken away from Sartre's position has reduced the historical movement to the level of the individual. Unlike some bourgeois social scientists (and this use is echoed in Engels’ use of the concept ‘mean’ or ‘average’, to which both Sartre and Althusser object, although for different reasons), Sartre does not consider the practice of a collectivity to be the aggregate of the practices of the individuals that compose it. It is difficult to see how any activity could be conducted if each practice cancelled out that of another. For Sartre, the collectivity is a dynamic interaction of ‘surpassings’ in which each individual *praxis* transcends that of others. Each individual *praxis* is itself dialectical and becomes the source of the dialectical movement of the whole. Althusser, consistent with his mechanistic conception of overdetermination, which seems to negate the role of human consciousness, claims that social relations cannot be reduced to relations between ‘individuals’ but only ‘categories’. The point is, however, that neither of these views, neither Althusser’s nor Sartre's, is distinct in principle from some applications in bourgeois social science. Role analysis concerns aggregates and remains at the level of abstract categorization; ethno-methodological studies remain only at the level of individual

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>15</sup> Barnes, “Introduction”, p. X.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. xi.?

<sup>17</sup> This aspect of Marxism has been recently criticized. Martin Nicolaus distinguished between three aspects of the Hegelian dialectic: content, context, and choreography (lawfully directed movement), and declared that Marx remained under the spell of the last named leading him to make the predictions concerning polarization and the final negation. See Martin Nicolaus, “Proletariat and Middle Class in Marx”, *Studies on the Left*, Vol. 7, No.1, January-February 1967, p. 23.

consciousness.

Finally, Sebastiano Timpanaro, in reaction to Sartre and what he perceives as a dangerous tendency towards 'voluntarism', claims that Marxism must become more materialistic -- even Engels and Lenin were insufficiently materialistic. "By materialism we understand above all acknowledgement of the priority of nature over 'mind', ... of the physical level over the biological level, and the biological level over the socio-economic and cultural level."<sup>18</sup> While Timpanaro distinguishes himself from Sartre (and from Lukacs, whose writing takes an Hegelian form that may possibly result in a difference in principle, although one resting on metaphysical assumptions), Timpanero clearly does not distinguish himself from the vulgar bourgeois materialists, the most obvious example being the school of biosocial anthropology. It seems, then, that outside of metaphysical assumptions, Sartre's reorientation of Marxism is not in principle different from bourgeois social science.

### III

While recognizing an inherent organizational logic involved in proceeding from Baran and Sweezy's 'positivistic' Marxism, through Althusser's 'structuralism' and ultimately to Sartre's phenomenology, I have left discussion of Habermas' 'critical theory' to the final section because of the significance I feel it has in relation to the question. Again, I feel it necessary to go into some detail explicating the doctrine under study in an attempt to comprehend it and thereby assess its degree of differentiation from bourgeois social science.

Habermas presents simultaneously a critique of Marxism, a critique of bourgeois social science, and an alternative, critical theory, which he claims to be implicit in Marx's own works despite an explicit identification with the natural sciences. The subject-object dichotomy is a central aspect of Habermas' theory. The natural scientific model postulates a necessary separation of subject from object, which results in a technical and manipulative approach to science based on norms of value neutrality and objectivity. This model was adopted by the social sciences with the result that technological rationality came to prevail in the social as well as the natural sciences. The latter, however, can more easily separate theory from practice: the social scientist, unlike the natural scientist, cannot rigidly compartmentalize theory because he is internal to his object as it is internalized by him. Marxism may differ from bourgeois social science in relation to its stand on values; however, the value neutrality of bourgeois social science is an act of 'bad faith' since values are implicit to the research. This may be a difference in principle: Marxism claims not only that value-neutrality is impossible but that it is principle undesirable; bourgeois social science claims that, while never perfectly attainable, value neutrality is not only desirable but the best road to truth. Moreover, bourgeois social science does not deny that it puts a value on the scientific method. In practice this fact/value distinction disappears in that it is not possible to achieve neutrality. Both Habermas and Apel note that the social scientist in reality operates within a whole complex of values, involving the body of scientific concepts, the value of science as an activity, and even the language used. At this point it comes down to what values are incorporated -- a matter of content rather than principle. Marxism states values specifically; by pretending to be value free, in reality, bourgeois social science abdicates to the ruling ideas.

For Habermas, Marx was equally guilty of the conscious subordination of the social to the natural sciences. In Marx's writing there was a contradiction between his search for 'natural

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<sup>18</sup> Sebastiano Timpanaro, "Considerations on Materialism", *New Left Review*, No. 85, May-June, 1974, p.7.

laws' and his belief that emancipation would require conscious intervention. While over-emphasizing production, he had clearly noted that, since the bourgeois revolutions, people had become more enlightened and rational. It was this emancipatory aspect that distinguished Marx from bourgeois social science. It is this aspect, united with the specific relationship between theory and practice within a more reciprocal subject-object framework, that provides the basis for Habermas' 'critical theory'.

Critical theory is primarily distinguished from 'traditional' theory in that, in the former, the knowing subject is interpreted not only in terms of his position within the process of social labour, but in terms of "the process of enlightening the political forces about their goals."<sup>19</sup> The manipulative character of technical rationality "can only be altered by a change in the state of consciousness itself, by the practical effect of a theory which does not improve the manipulation of things ... but which instead advances the interest of reason."<sup>20</sup> With critical theory there is not a one-way flow of knowledge from the object to the subject, but on the contrary, a reverse flow to the conscious 'object' which is itself a subject, with the aim of promoting self-liberation. Critical theory will bring about the convergence of reason and commitment; science will be suffused with emancipatory reason. Unlike the positivist sciences, which have explicitly disavowed any philosophical underpinnings (making them simply blind to the philosophy they contain by default), critical theory, as the 'self-reflection; of the knowing subject, preserves philosophy as critique, a transcendent ideology that is much more than a moral condemnation, but demands intervention and conscious *praxis*.

Like Apel, Habermas seems to believe that two kinds of science are important and basic: empirically grounded science, which is more closely based on the natural science model, and 'hermeneutical science', which interprets events discovering meanings which are only implicit. However, a third is necessary, working on the basis of the other two -- a critique of ideology which mediates between 'explanation' and 'understanding'. 'The critique would "constitute a challenge to everyone to transform his causally explainable behavior through self reflection into understandable action."<sup>21</sup> The question of 'self-reflection' which is the key concept relates to the reciprocity of knowledge flow and will allow humans to *consciously* make their own history.

Critical theory, as a variety of Marxism, does not differ in principle from bourgeois social science in several ways. In the first place it is partly based on the explanations produced by the social sciences; beginning from this basis it then asks self-conscious questions about the knowledge itself and its conditions of existence. Secondly the other aspect of the triad, 'hermeneutics', is well within the tradition of bourgeois social science. It is closely related to the question of unintended outcomes, and it can be claimed that Max Weber integrated both empirical and hermeneutical aspects into his economic history.

The chief difference relates to the third feature: critique of ideology, which opens up communication between subject and object. Traditionally social science is carried on by groups of experts who communicate primarily among themselves and keep the 'objects' of their research ignorant of the process to avoid the Hawthorne effect. Any popularization of their findings is not part of the process of obtaining knowledge itself. Critical theory will not only unite the subject and object by reciprocal communication, but encourage self-reflection and

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<sup>19</sup> Jurgen Habermas, "Dogmatism, Reason and Decision: On Theory and Praxis in our Scientific Civilization", in *Theory and Practice*, pp. 210-211.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>21</sup> K. O. Apel, "Scientism, Hermeneutics and Critique of Ideology", translated by F. Bail from: *Wiener Jahrbuch für Philosophie*, Bd. 1, 1968, p.27.

conscious intervention. It breaks down the dichotomy between theory and practice; critical theory is a guide to action. This is a significant difference: bourgeois social science claims in principle that it is necessary to remain as aloof as possible from the social situation so as to minimize the effect on the events of the study itself. Critical theory states in principle the opposite -- that theory must be communicated to the 'object' to liberate and guide action. That is, disagreement arises precisely over the issue of the mode of utilization of knowledge. However, this is insufficient to distinguish critical theory from some branches of ethnomethodology, which claim that one must experience everything about one's participant observation, including actually guiding the social situation in order to understand it. And while it can be claimed that the significant aspect is to liberate the 'objects', reform in bourgeois education has traditionally been aimed (in theory) at such self-liberation through knowledge.

Both Habermas and Apel recognize the manipulative character of bourgeois social science. The aim of critical theory is to liberate individual consciousness through open communication, thereby presumably negating the possibility of manipulation. While there will never be absolute knowledge since, given dialectics, everything is in the process of becoming, it would seem that there would always be the possibility of conscious or unconscious manipulation. In fact the passage of knowledge from subject to object-subject can itself be manipulative, for example in the case of a party attempting to direct the revolutionary potential of the proletariat in unpropitious circumstances.

#### IV

There are numerous other dimensions that could have been brought into the discussion, such as whether bourgeois social science, being empirical, will be unable to differentiate between appearances and essences; or whether or not social science will continue under socialism. It has also been argued that, since there are two fundamental social classes, there are also two world outlooks, with Marxism being the world outlook of the proletariat, providing calls to action. Prediction and prescription seem common to bourgeois sociology as well, however, making this not a difference in principle.

Within the limitations of the conceptualization of 'difference in principle' and the examples isolated for discussion, it was suggested that in certain cases an Hegelianized Marxism, containing elements of idealism, could be interpreted as different in principle from bourgeois social science. Three aspects of Marxism were isolated for particular examination: Marxism in principle demands that a realm of indeterminate freedom exists for human choices. (I am assuming that Sartre represents a form of Marxism; I am not suggesting that other Marxists would or would not subscribe to this concept.) Marxism claims that social science not only cannot be but ought not to be value free, and that social science ought not to separate itself from its object-subject but, communicate the knowledge obtained to aid the process of self-liberation. As in other differences, however, these either seemed to be primarily based on differences of content rather than principle, or be based on metaphysical modes of analysis, or be contradicted in the actual practice of some example of bourgeois social science. In consequence it seems necessary to conclude that, at least insofar as the discussion is carried in this paper, while Marxism is significantly different from most brands of contemporary social science, the differences are in areas other than basic principles.

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