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The Hegemony of Growth in the Critique of Political Economy and Bourdieusian Sociology

- Growth paradigm: Universally accepted as ‘good, imperative, essentially limitless, and the principal remedy for a litany of social problems’ (Dale 2012)
- If everybody does his/her share – e.g. as employer or employee – the common good will benefit. One’s position in society is seen as just and based on merit – and likely to improve in a context of growth
- Do Marx and Bourdieu help understanding the popularity of the growth paradigm?



Marx's critique of political economy

- Enfolds by 'rising from the abstract to the concrete' with the commodity as the 'most abstract concrete'
- Its analysis allows access into further economic categories, social relations and modes of consciousness
- Along this journey, the focus is always on three aspects at the same time: economic categories, corresponding social relationships and the ways these are reflected in the actors' minds



The sphere of circulation

- Exchange of commodities and money presupposes the civil and legal independence and political equality of the actors involved
- Since it abstracts from the production process, current possessions of commodities, money, wealth and privilege appear to be results of previous own work, achievement and merit



The sphere of production

- Profits (and therefore growth) can be made because a commodity is available for sale that has the use value of creating exchange value and can be used longer than the time period that represents its own reproduction: labour power
- Social relations: based on social inequality/exploitation due to transfer/appropriation of surplus labour



Accumulation (reinvestment of surplus)

- Result: the worker has retained the labour power, the product (including surplus) belongs to the employer
- In time: Present property and wealth turns out to be the result of the previous appropriation of other people's work – not own work
- Exploitation and inequality (production sphere) are achieved and reproduced in 'complete accordance with the law of exchange' (circulation sphere)
- How are the two spheres held together and how is this reflected in the actors' minds?



Specifically social relations present themselves as natural features of ‘the’ economy: A ‘stepladder of mystifications’

- *Commodity/money fetish*: the commodity’s characteristic of embodying societal value appears just as natural as its concrete use value
- *Capital fetish*: Increasing productivity seems to be a natural feature of capital and not a product of the socialized form of work
- *Wage fetish*: In the money form all work seems to be compensated and the difference between necessary and surplus labour disappears



Wage fetish as ‘basis for all further mystifications’

- Once this difference is lost, industrial profit and its sub-categories (rents and interests) appear to have other sources than labour
- In the ‘trinitary formula’ – capital generates profit, land generates rent and labour generates wage – all economic agents contribute in their ways to GDP
- It seems to be worth it to work hard and long hours, since one’s social position appears to reflect one’s investments in ‘human capital’ and merits: people get their just desert



Bourdieu: Conversion of social characteristics into natural features continues in the sphere of leisure and lifestyles and through 'distinction'

- Shares with Marx the starting point that social structures such as money, classes or the state are unintended results of purposeful action
- In the sphere of lifestyles everything we do (the way we eat, walk, speak ...) is subject to social classification as a result of which the original social hierarchy (especially the class structure) is reproduced
- Though the social genesis of the variants of 'taste' are empirically identifiable, these seem to follow merely natural differences



Conclusion

- Specifically social features of the growth imperative such as the work ethic, the motivation towards upward mobility and individual distinction are rarely questioned because they seem to be natural elements of 'economics' and human existence
- Social inequality seems to be the result of own achievements and merits, while individuals are most likely to strive in a growth context. Difference in socio-cultural practices appear to be down to natural differences in taste
- 'Habitus' creates a great deal of agreement between one's objective position and one's subjective expectations and patterns of practice



Further research: Bourdieu on social change

- The submission of the dominated goes much further than the ideological distortions of ‘consciousness’ emphasised in the Marxian tradition: the social structure is inscribed not only in our ‘ideas’ but also in our bodies and beliefs
- ‘Consciousness raising’ alone will not do: The precondition of alternative practices such as *degrowth* to become hegemonial is a crisis of the ‘objective’ economic, political and cultural structures of society – and of the corresponding symbolic systems and forms of habitus
- Academics can assist activists in identifying such cracks – for example in the regulatory structure of the finance system

