CRITICAL POLITICAL THEORY AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT

On Kohlberg, Hampden-Turner, and Habermas

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Despite the eclipse of the New Left as an active and visible political force on the American political scene during the transition from the 1960s to the '70s, the concern with subjectivity, self-development, and personal awareness has remained a conspicuous feature of the undertow of mainstream society. Indeed, the period during which radical activity was virtually extinguished on American campuses was simultaneously marked, not simply by the continuing presence of the human growth and human potential movement, but by its efflorescence and expansion. In part, the growth of this "fetish of subjectivity" can be accounted for by the continuing operation of the "dialectic of scientism and subjectivism" in American culture. But it must also be traced to the failure of the American New Left to, on the one hand, keep itself from being caught in this dialectic and, on the other, to politicize and redirect the deeper foundations of this search for a new selfhood.¹ Thus, even as much of the "remnant" remains skeptical of the radical potential of the new subjectivity (seeing in it the familiar tendencies in American political culture toward inner escapism and subjectivism), it must maintain an openness toward the possibility, as Marcuse has recently suggested,² that even in its present distorted forms the new subjectivity may take on new expressions and unfold new needs which cannot be satisfied within the liberal-capitalist and increasingly technocratic-corporate totality of contemporary America.

While the more apparent and sensational forms of the new subjectivism associated with the counterculture (hard drugs, esoteric religions, biofeedback, etc.) have been exhaustively examined and critiqued, a new and disguised form of the new subjectivism infecting middle-class society has gone virtually unnoticed: the developing preoccupation with ethics and morality in

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politics and economics. Over the past decade or so, one expression of this concern has been the interest in emergent theories of moral development. Drawing heavily upon the work and inspiration of the French child psychologist Jean Piaget, American psychologists like Lawrence Kohlberg and others have sought to explore the character and structure of moral reasoning in Western and non-Western cultures. Contemporary political events—such as the moral bankruptcy of the United States' Vietnam adventure and the failure of key policy makers to choose the options of "exit" and "voice" in responding to that bankruptcy, the discovery of the moral obtuseness of the arguments of the conspirators in the Watergate scandal, and the recent revelations of payoffs to foreign leaders by American-based corporations—have added impetus to this public concern with the moral condition of liberal America.

In an almost thoroughly reified society, a reform movement based on an ethical renewal of liberal principles and procedures is hardly surprising. What Lukács said for Bernstein's effort to reform socialism applies equally well to this latest campaign to reform American capitalism and its liberal politics. This ethical reformation, Lukács argued, "is the subjective side of the missing category of totality which can alone provide an overall view." In a reified world, "action is directed wholly inward... [and] the attempt [is made] to change the world at its only remaining free point, namely man himself (ethics)."

This essay in critical political theory argues a critical phenomenology of moral development, one which simultaneously (1) reformulates the notion of moral development outside the Kantian tradition of ethics and autonomous rationality and beyond the Lockean-liberal framework of American political thought, and (2) draws the sources of this reformulation from the lifeworld foundations of the embodied ego intentionally grounded in a socio-historical praxis oriented toward the rationality of dialectical sociality. The critique of the works of Lawrence Kohlberg on moral development and Charles Hampden-Turner on psycho-social development has been inspired by a depth reconstruction of the perspectives offered by the Frankfurt School and the native critique of American political culture and society (including the Berkeley School, Hartz, et al.). Habermas' formulation of the relationship between moral development and ego-identity is explored and criticized from the perspectives of the founders of the Frankfurt Institute and the views of latter-day critical phenomenologists (Merleau-Ponty, Rovatti, and Paci). Finally, we hope to outline the key sources and main lines of a more adequate critical phenomenological outlook on moral development resting on post-modern foundations.