This first volume of *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness* considers influences of institutions. This volume’s central thesis is that in order for capitalism to continue, a constant set of cultural variables exist, symbiotically reproducing within a stabilized institutional framework. The inherent continuity of our capitalistic world also runs parallel to constraining processes. In short, both method and theory must conform or “accommodate” to established dictums. Throughout this volume, the author examines the effects of this accommodation with examples, and critical interpretations of Adam Smith, GWF Hegel, Immanuel Kant, and Edmund Husserl. The author endeavors to present the intellectual contributions of these theorists as empty and fruitless pursuits.

Born in Hungary in 1930, István Mészáros remains marked by the depression years, horrors unleashed during the Second World War, and the Soviet liberation/conquest of Hungary in 1945. As a promising intellectual, Mészáros came into close contact with György Lukács. In 1956, Mészáros abandoned his post as a professor at the University of Budapest, and fled to Italy. After a teaching stint at York University in Toronto, he later settled in England. Currently, Mészáros is Professor Emeritus at the University of Sussex. In several respects, one could interpret this volume under review as a culmination of his life’s work, building upon earlier contributions such as Marx’s *Theory of Alienation* (1970), *Beyond Capital* (1994), *Socialism and Barbarism* (2001), and *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time* (2008).

Mészáros’s volume commences with a critique of a conventional wisdom that science and related technology prove sufficient for solving society’s challenges while leaving the established institutions intact. Mészáros offers the insight that this conventional wisdom dominates because the immediate appearance of capitalism’s productivity formalizes and rationalizes the capitalist institution. In reference to Hegel, Mészáros explains that under capitalism the “rational is actual” whereby the “actual is rational.” Capitalism is rendered “eternal” and “natural,” while the quantification of human beings and human activity under capitalism becomes “human nature.” Contributions to political economy are thereby prone to rationalized alienation and thus reify social beings. This generates a deficiency in historical perspective, for perverse individualism restricts the emergence of “negation,” and restrains qualitative criticism of the established order. This contradiction in the historical perspective emerges after the use of negation for delegitimizing feudal institutions. Eventually, the implementation of capitalistic policies had an antithetical effect, whereby the “Rights of Man” became devoid of emancipatory content.

Mészáros stresses that “immediacy of appearance” also serves as the “rational” basis for the accepted historical and social outlook. Mészáros seeks to convince that such a perversion of historicity depends upon use of dichotomies, cloaking tensions between the established social structure and historical imperatives for emancipation. The author suggests that immediate reality leads to the dominance of metaphysical abstraction. The social structure constrains conflict to the realm of pure thought whereby our physical reality remains unaltered. Thus, the social structure perceives (and protects) the “[r]eason of Capital” as a universal variable that provides an illusionary “unity/reconciliation.” This presents the thrust of chapters 1 through 5. The last chapter focuses upon Karl Marx’s methodology, for his contribution contains solutions to institutional constraints inherently built into the social structure of capitalism.

For Mészáros, the elimination of historical understanding functions as the most powerful, methodological device housed in the arsenal of capitalistic institutions. If an isolated individual were to realize his or her situation as historical then an active consciousness could arise and thus address the problematic contradictions found in society. A consciousness of historical temporality provides a basis for qualitative conflict that could be both real and physical, between the reality and the formalism of the social structure. Mészáros holds that the bourgeoisie obtained their historical consciousness. Capital’s ascendancy led them to “invert” their historicity, thereby ending the emancipatory content of their revolutions. The cultural imperative of the commodity form restricts historical temporality, allowing only for a romanticized insight into the past, for so long as bourgeois revolutions are heralded as pinnacles of human progress. In practice, due to the eternalizing of capitalism the present limits our perspective of the future. This Hegelian “end of history” restricts the emergence of social demands for qualitative, institutional change.

Mészáros analyzes Hegel, focusing upon what he views as a primary deficiency. Hegel had justified and institutionalized the bourgeois epoch as the “end of history.” With this theme, we can clearly understand disconnections between Hegel and Marx. For those familiar with selected forms of Marxist rhetoric, Marx is curiously associated with “the end of history.” This position erroneously connects essential elements of Hegel’s philosophy of history with Marx’s historical methodology. Mészáros’s correction of this philosophical misnomer opens up possibilities for Institutional Economics, as Marx’s historical method becomes evolutionary, rather than as vulgarized...
and deterministic. Mészáros seeks to convince that the determinism found in Marx’s thinking does not limit us to a “closed history.” Marx sought to advance a reliance on history, social productivity, and human activity. Marx’s determinism relies upon historical reality and empirically related variables, rather than a determined historical outcome. What Mészáros seeks to establish as especially problematic is that those thinkers engaged in a vulgarization of Marx’s determinism fail to understand his emphasis on human agents as historical actors: human beings create their historical circumstances.

Although I would recommend this book as required reading for all institutional economists who have an interest in Marx’s thinking, my recommendation, however involves a word of caution. The rich intellectual content found in this first volume might turn away most lightweights. For grasping Mészáros’s profound insights requires not only a familiarity with key writings of Marx and contributors to Classical Economics, but also with Kant, Hegel, and twentieth century philosophy. A substantial background in the thinking and contributions of György Lukács, Mészáros’s deserving mentor, would certainly assist the reader in comprehending the contents of this volume. In the classroom, Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness could serve as a source for a highbrow, engaging, and most intriguing graduate seminar.

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