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3. Brentano never did write the review for Weber, and when he finally composed one it was in 1916. However, Brentano did have an exchange with Sombart in the journal *Die Nation* in 1905.
4. Weber eventually did take on the role of editor and the first volumes appeared in 1914 as part of the *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik*.

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## **Marx, Parsons and the quicksands of history: Harold J. Bershady's intellectual and personal life journey**

**When Marx Mattered: An Intellectual Odyssey** by Harold J. Bershady, New Brunswick and London, Transaction Publishers, 2014, 260 pp., \$49.95, £43.50 (hbk), ISBN 978-1412853699

**Ideology and Social Knowledge** by Harold J. Bershady, with a new introduction by the author, New Brunswick and London, Transaction Publishers, 2014 (originally published in 1973 by Halsted Press, a division of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.), 180 pp., \$29.95 (hbk), ISBN 978-1412853682

Jean-Paul Sartre once wrote he had been attracted to Marxism like moths to the light. But after having dissolved all categories of bourgeois thinking, Sartre continued, he felt that Marxism suddenly had left him stranded in a new situation of which it could not make sense because it had come to a standstill. The glimmer of enlightenment, as it were, radiated by Marx and the social movements in his wake indeed had attracted a large part of twentieth-century intellectuals and, as Sartre's allegory implies, at some point gave them the feeling of being burned by the reality of events that developed with the label of Marxism attached. I was reminded of the image drawn by Sartre when I first read Harold J. Bershady's recently published memoir of his intellectual development and the eventful life out of which it advanced. There is another striking analogy to Sartre. They both attempted a synthesis of two apparently incompatible lines of thinking; in Sartre's case existentialism and Marxism and in Bershady's case his early evolving devotion to Marxism and his later encounter with the work of Talcott Parsons.

*Gnothi sauton* – know thyself – the famous inscription at the Apollo temple in Delphi – seems the guiding postulate of Bershady's autobiography, which is conducted, in modern terms, as a personal and sociological approach to knowledge. It

is quite easy to reach a consensus that we *ought* to get knowledge of ourselves, a knowledge that is inextricably linked with matters of knowledge of our society and culture. The enigma of the postulate, however, lies in the question how this can be accomplished and, if at all, how we can differentiate valid knowledge from deceptions or, put somewhat differently, right from false consciousness. In *Ideology and Social Knowledge*, Bershadly deals with this very issue in a purely theoretical sense, *When Marx Mattered* places the question in the context of his personal history. The two books are in a way twins that belong together and complement each other. Both books are now made available due to a second edition of *Ideology and Social Knowledge*, which is enhanced by an introduction that summarizes theoretical developments since it first appeared in 1973.

But let us start at the beginning. The antecedents of his intellectual odyssey, as Bershadly calls it in the subtitle, leads back to some remote shtetls – villages – in the Ukraine where his Jewish parents and other relatives had lived and, due to growing anti-Semitism, finally left in 1921. His mother had first made it to the New World, his father, after a few stages in Europe followed, and the family united and settled in Toronto in a neighbourhood of Jewish immigrants. This was the place where Harold was born in 1929. Six years later, the family moved, much to Harold's dismay at the time, to Buffalo, New York. For the first years, he grew up bilingual, Yiddish and English. The mixture of high culture and sensitivity towards social and political issues which derived from the status of being Jewish is vividly described even for the first years of his life, in moving autobiographical stories and anecdotes – the difficulties in dealing with economic constraints, in getting a piano and a piano education that almost led to a professional career, the love of literature and the very early start of a sort of philosophical self-reflection motivated by desires to making sense of difficult situations, of questions of religious faith, of political issues related to anti-Semitism and more generally of a socio-economic environment experienced as unjust. Out of this early quasi-philosophical germ grew the later interest in Marxism, which was furthered by relatives who at some point openly declared their commitment to Marxist thought.

The story of the early years makes the three core questions of the autobiography that Bershadly attempts to answer comprehensible: Why were many Marxists and Socialists Jewish Americans, as he himself was when he became a Marxist in his teens? What were the influences that redirected him and many of his fellow Marxists to a more general liberal outlook or – as in some cases – even a 'Gestalt-switch' (p. xv) from left to conservative? What experiences contributed to his becoming a sociological theorist? To approach these questions, the reader is guided through the 'puzzling social storms' (p. xviii) and how the author was trying to come to terms with them.

In 1946, the year after the war had ended, Bershadly applied for college and was accepted by the University of Buffalo. There he soon participated in an organization called American Youth for Democracy, initially organised by veterans and attracting younger students. A discussion group on Marxism, later called the John

Reed Club, consolidated his political orientation. A discussion of Marx's *The German Ideology*, a text basic for what later became the sociology of knowledge, eventually brought him to choose this topic as his master's thesis in graduate school. The club also set up networks that brought him in contact with the communist party, which he joined shortly before his 18th birthday. After telling his father about this step, he learned about an episode of symbolic character for later experiences. As a young man, his father had joined the Bolshevik army. He had not been a communist but had hopes for a better future society and life. Besides some minor anti-Semitic incidences encountered in the Red Army, he had a terribly humiliating experience involving a number of officers, from which he concluded that their 'leaders were as unjust and prejudiced now as they had been before the revolution', an experience that eventually prompted Bershady's father to leave the country. As in the case of his father, the gap between theory, hope and reality soon disillusioned the young communist. The observable events in the Soviet Union were far from the ideal of a peaceful, open and equal society. Instead, Bershady concludes, it 'was a nightmare of blood and destruction' (p. 65). He resigned his membership in the communist party before turning 19. And if proof was needed for the accuracy of this step, it was given by the person in the communist headquarters, who reacted with threats to inform the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) about his former membership.

The process of disillusionment by these experiences deepened Bershady's interest in philosophical studies of the possibility of 'real' knowledge as opposed to deception and ideology. Is all knowledge essentially bound to subjective perspectives or would it be possible to overcome 'the specter of relativism' (p. 87)? One first outcome was a thesis on Max Scheler's social phenomenology. Scheler would remain of interest in Bershady's later work, where he translated and edited the volume Max Scheler *On Feeling, Knowing, and Valuing*.

After completing a master's thesis on Karl Mannheim's theory of knowledge, Bershady chose the University of Madison, Wisconsin for his Ph.D. studies starting in 1959. The main reason for this decision was the sociology professor Hans H. Gerth, an immigrant from Germany who had been a student of Karl Mannheim and later published some of Weber's essays in English together with his student C. Wright Mills. And, as a side note, Gerth had been a fellow student of Talcott Parsons in a Karl Jaspers seminar at Heidelberg University. Bershady at first came in contact with the work of Talcott Parsons in a theory course where the assignments included parts of *The Structure of Social Action*. This turned out to be a momentous encounter. Much against the prevailing judgements of fellow intellectuals from the left, he perceived Parsons' action theory as an ambitious 'synthesizing scheme' (p. 126) akin to Marx's endeavours. In Bershady's view, Parsons was intellectually at eye level with Marx and was able to make theoretical progress by including a century of scholarly developments. The outcome was an unprejudiced account of Parsons' theory while its author still remained interested in issues of Marxist debates. Together with his teacher Hans Gerth, he attempted to translate Georg Lukacs' Marxist sociology of knowledge, namely his theory of

class consciousness. His main intellectual concern, however, became Talcott Parsons, on whom he chose to write a dissertation entitled *The a priori in Talcott Parsons' social theory*, which, after major revisions, was published as *Ideology and social knowledge*.

In 1962, Bershady opened a new biographical chapter when he moved with his wife and their newborn son to Philadelphia to work as an instructor at the University of Pennsylvania, which was 'widely reputed to be a "Jewish school"' (p. 143). In an intellectually stimulating department, he would develop important relationships with colleagues, first with E. Digby Baltzell, Renée C. Fox and later with Victor M. Lidz, among others. It was, as Bershady calls it, the Age of Aquarius, of counter-culture with the emergence of new life-styles and of the New Left with a new approach to Marxism. The civil rights movement with Martin Luther King Jr reached a peak in the 1960s and Bershady was there in Washington, DC, on 28 August 1963, when the famous speech 'I have a dream ...' was delivered.

A sabbatical in Europe in the early 1970s allowed the completion of *Ideology and social knowledge*. Bershady was promoted to associate professor. In 1974, he had his first personal encounter with Talcott Parsons. Parsons had retired from Harvard in 1973 and was invited by Renée Fox, who at the time chaired the sociology department, for a guest-professorship at the University of Pennsylvania to begin in the fall semester 1974. Work sessions soon followed on the human condition paradigm with Willy De Craemer, Renée Fox and Victor Lidz. The group was occasionally joined by Robert Bellah, A. Hunter Dupree and Clifford Geertz. Bershady's first meeting with Parsons started with a notable little incident. In a crowded office milling with students, secretaries and other faculty coming and going, Bershady stood waiting for the arrival of Parsons. He asked Victor Lidz who had just walked in, whether Parsons had come yet.

He laughed and said, yes, he's right over there behind you ... pointing to a man ... looking at one of the course outlines. The man was quite a bit older, bald, rotund, short ... His multi-tweed jacket was wrinkled, and his tie was nondescript and crooked ... This was Talcott Parsons? (p. 208)

Given Parsons' significance and fame, Bershady had expected a more commanding figure and discovered a 'quite shy' (p. 208) person who, during many professional and private meetings, would become a sort of 'intellectual father' (p. 214) to him. Their relationship came to a much too early end. In spring 1979, Parsons went to Germany to celebrate the 50th anniversary of receiving his doctorate at the University of Heidelberg. He became ill and died on 8 May in Munich. 'We heard within hours. It was shattering' (p. 215) Bershady remembers.

For Bershady, there was no 'gestalt-switch' necessary to proceed from his early commitment to Marxist ideas to Parsons' general theory of action. An approach to both allowed for a differentiated judgement about their theoretical substance and what he perceived as shortcomings. Marx, at the time of the

counter-culture and the student movement, Bershady observed, was unread, more associated with protest than with intellectual effort. One could easily reverse the observation with regard to Parsons. As with Marx, Parsons remained unread, and without good reason was more associated with conservatism than with what he had theoretically accomplished. He ‘had become the black beast of the radicals’ (p. 183) as Bershady aptly formulates it. Far distant from such clichés, Bershady interwove theoretical questions and answers of both traditions for a new synthesis.

*Ideology and social knowledge* is an excellent example thereof, the task of which was to define the great achievements of Parsons and at the same time show its limits. ‘... [T]he book was a kind of long letter to Parsons’ (pp. 182–183) Bershady remembers. And Parsons answered politely, but was also somewhat puzzled, with an extended reply ‘letter’ – a review originally published in what was then the ‘Parsonian journal’, *Sociological Inquiry*. Bershady responded and Parsons published both his review and Bershady’s response in his volume *Social systems and the evolution of action theory*.

Bershady takes the reader on a journey through Parsons’ theory development and the varying versions of his highly complex theoretical structures, which he interprets, contrary to many other commentators, as following a coherent logic. The complexity of the action frame of reference is necessary to avoid naïve empiricism and reductionism of all sorts. There is a passage in *When Marx mattered* that captures the spirit of the Parsonian endeavours in a simple yet most apt way:

... [H]uman life is ... made up of many things, each one distinct yet actively influencing and providing vital energies to all the others, and to ignore the contributions of any one is to warp our understanding of them all. (p. 59)

Parsons’ conceptual differentiations, necessary to acknowledge the many things of which human life is made up, form a great achievement. Scientific knowledge, however, attempts an answer to causal questions. It is the very question of causal analysis, of necessity and sufficiency, where Bershady diagnoses the shortcomings of Parsons’ theory. This starts with the question of the causal interpretation of the relationship between subsystems of action. What is the meaning of the supposed necessity of our bodily condition for patterns of social interaction? These types of relationships are not adequately elaborated. Bershady regards with suspicion the adoption of either the Hempel or the Newtonian model of causal explanation; neither is adequate for action analysis. Instead of attempting to formulate causal laws based on abstract qualities of objects, an adequate explanatory structure consistent with the categorical scheme of the action frame of reference would need to rely on interpretational methodologies. Bershady argues for the enhancement of the Parsonian convergence method by confronting action theory with phenomenology, the works of Alfred Schütz, Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Simmel and Max Scheler. In short, Bershady perceives a sort of positivistic leftover in Parsons’ action frame of reference, which he suggests might be

overcome by a stronger orientation to the phenomenological tradition in the social and cultural sciences.

Parsons, in his reply, was not fully convinced; he obviously felt somewhat misunderstood and reacted by locating himself in the traditions of evolutionary theory (the Mendelian model, as he called it) and of Whitehead's process philosophy, distancing himself from traditions of mechanistic methodologies. There might have been misunderstandings on both sides on particular issues; the accomplishments of Bershady's book, however, are to call attention to methodologically core aspects of action theory that are not yet fully resolved, and to open a direction for further work. The theory of action is, as Bershady affirms, far from being completed. It will remain an open theory; open for further progress in the spirit of what at the beginning was called the convergence thesis.

Sociology and other disciplines of the human sciences after Parsons have, by and large, dismissed work on a unified conceptual scheme. Sociological inquiry has, since Parsons, become a sort of patchwork, as Bershady observes in both of his books. A few concepts here and there are held to be sufficient to deal with social problems or to gain public attention. 'Who remains troubled by the so-called "quicksands of history"?' Bershady asks, referring to the discourse of the nineteenth century. I fear that the shifting back and forth of intellectual quicksands that we can observe to have been occurring for some decades past might cover up the great attempts – be they Marx's or Parsons' – to provide the human sciences with a solid conceptual and methodological basis. Bershady's two books, the one with its charming prose and moving stories, the other with its analytical brilliance, clearly remind us of the alternative at hand.

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**Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe**, by Piotr Piotrowski, translated by Anna Brzyski, London, Reaktion Books, 2012, 312 pp., £19.95, \$32.00 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-861-8951

*Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* is one of the rare books on East European art, originally written in an East European language and published by an East European publishing house. Originally published in 2010 by Poznan-based Rebis, it elegantly demonstrated that Eastern Europe is not just an intellectual invention of eighteenth century West European elites, but also a historical and political phenomenon of the twentieth century that developed a shared artistic