

**Cornel West, Review of Louis Dupré, *Marx's Social Critique of Culture*.
Journal of Religion, 66 (1) (1986), 85-86.**

Despite the proliferation of fine works on Marx, Dupré's learned text deserves attention. This is so because it provides a superb critical exposition of the complex development of Marx's social vision and theory as well as a provocative organicist critique of cultural disintegration in the modern West. In his close readings of Marx's works—from the doctoral dissertation to the third volume of *Capital*—Dupré displays an intellectual patience, historical sensitivity, and philosophical acumen rarely found in scholarly treatments of Marx. By refusing to succumb to either uncritical presentation or tendentious dismissal, he provides one of the most reliable, succinct, and engaging interpretations we have of Marx's own writings.

Yet Dupré's ambitions go far beyond mere critical exposition of Marx. He also intends to treat Marx as the first major social critic of modern European cultural disintegration. For Dupré, Marx's notions of social coherence, organic wholeness, and mutual determination-- though often misunderstood by his followers- provided the sources for a profound understanding and critique of modern society and culture. Marx stands above other nineteenth- century critics and theorists in that he shuns "the subjectivism of the modern epoch and reintroduces an ideal of integral harmony" (p. 278).

This ideal is neither a naive return to nature nor an idealist flight into a fanciful future. Rather, it is a recognition of the social relatedness at the center of consciousness, an acknowledgment of the dialectical interaction between human beings and nature, and the projection of individuality in light of technological possibilities, and, most important, of democracy and freedom. Marx's

attempt to recover the sense of social holism of the Greek polis under modern conditions gains Dupré's tempered, though genuine, praise.

Dupré's own critique of Marx is put forward in the name of a more wholesale organicism. Marx's subtle quest for a new social totality puts him above his peers, yet he remains "partly within the ideological horizons of the modern age" (p. 13) in respect to one fundamental assumption: the priority of economic production. Following the pioneering work of R. H. Tawney, Hannah Arendt, and Jürgen Habermas, Dupré accuses Marx of ultimately subscribing to two modern tendencies: the instrumentalization of the world and the economization of the political realm. This does not mean, as Dupré rightly points out, that Marx promoted a crude economic determinism or a vulgar social productivism. Rather, it means that Marx's vision of "a dialectical, all-integrating view of man's social existence" (p. 278) conflicts with his stress on the primacy of economic activity. And as Jean Baudrillard, Marshall Sahlins, and Anthony Giddens have pointed out, this stress not only valorizes productivity, it also "naturalizes" earlier societies by reading back into them the mode of production as the essential form that distinguishes them. This Marxist version of essentialism flies in the face of the Marxist principle of historical specificity, which highlights "the radical historicity of all social structures" (p. 103).

A plausible objection to Dupré's treatment of Marx is that it accents the richness of Marx's social vision at the expense of Marx's social theory. We are left with a Marx who provides a profound perspective regarding the need for social reintegration alongside poverty-ridden social explanations regarding the role of power, wealth, and status in modern capitalist societies. And, to put it bluntly, Dupré's reiteration of the various critiques of Marx's explanatory concepts, such as the dialectic,

surplus value, and ideology, leaves Marxist social theory in shambles. Marx's insights remain powerful, but the theoretical framework is found wanting.

Are we to think of Marx in company with Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, and William Morris rather than with Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel? Is Marx more a visionary and cultural critic than a theorist and social scientist? Dupré's picture of Marx implicitly answers these queries in the affirmative. I believe that Marx belongs in both camps: that of cultural critics as well as social scientists. Therefore, Marx's social critique of culture is, as Dupré's interpretation implies, a greater achievement than most others and an intellectual blinder for those caught within it. Unfortunately, Dupré does not end his excellent book pointing to those organicist thinkers who have worked through the Marxist critique yet are not blinded by it— as enacted in the cultural Marxist writings of the distinguished British critic, Raymond Williams. Nonetheless, this book is a good read.