

dominant bourgeois intelligentsia. By its very nature, irreducibility is constantly at pains to resist revolutionary Marxist theory because the latter is a worldview that reflects the inevitable “reduction” of capitalism to the trashbin of history and its transformation, through the class struggle of the masses and the dictatorship of the proletariat, into socialist and ultimately communist society. In the irreducible thoughts and feelings of the bourgeois intelligentsia, therefore, revolutionary Marxism and all of its theories, practices and innovative, creative developments and applications are “reductive.”

Objectively this is quite correct because reduction *means* explanation and transformation; subjectively, however, bourgeois intellectuals regard reduction as “bad” and irreducibility as “good” or otherwise simply “the way it is.” And again, in the ideology of capitalism and its representatives in the bourgeoisie, this is correct because irreducibility reflects the perpetuation of their dominance while reduction reflects their doom. What this means is that genuine revolutionary Marxism represents, as Marx said, the *changing* of the world, not just its endless interpretation and reinterpretation. This is the revolutionary Marxist theory of irreducibility – that is, a critique of irreducibility.

The concept of irreducibility as discussed here derives from observations of its use and functions in contemporary bourgeois intellectual practices, particularly its appearance in the work of Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak³ and in that of her popularizer, Professor Sangeeta Ray. The word is most repetitively evident in Spivak; in Sangeeta Ray’s Spivak book, however, the irreducible mentality reveals itself as an

37); “if the itch claims to be ‘theory’ it is intolerable”; “the company of wordy buffoons” (37); and “with a ‘lordly’ and learned mien” (38). A classically “contemporary” case in which this itch crops up, for example, is to be found in Professor Ellen Rooney’s interview with Spivak in 1988. See “In a Word: *Interview*,” in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Routledge: NY, 1993, 1-23; since 2008 Spivak’s *Machine* has been published in the “Routledge Classics” series. Rooney: “I’d like to talk about . . . how we can signal the difference between a strategic and a substantive or a real [!] essentialism; about the possibility of mobilizing people to do political work without invoking some irreducible essentialism” (3). Note carefully – *without* some irreducible essentialism. And Spivak replies: “Strategy works through a persistent (de)constructive critique of the theoretical. . . . and unlike ‘theory,’ its [i.e., strategy’s] antecedents are not disinterested and universal. . . . A strategy suits a situation; a strategy is not a theory” (3-4). What’s what? We say that this instance of the exchange, recirculation, spreading

ideological style or “spirit” clearly extrapolated from the Master. Thus, while a basic conception of irreducible thinking (or non-thinking, or bourgeois thinking) is necessary, a better way to develop and grasp the concept is to examine it in action, in its processes of development and unfolding.

Without exceeding the bounds of our nutshell, we raise the question only in passing: where exactly do we find the theoretical task of “reduction” articulated in its positive and necessary role? Nowhere else than in the so-called “bible” of the revolutionary working class, Marx’s *Capital*.⁴ In Volume I, Chapter I, on commodities, this most complex and demanding area, Marx writes,

It is the expression of equivalence between different sorts of commodities that *alone* brings into relief the specific character of value-creating labour, and this it does by actually *reducing* the different varieties of labour embodied in the different kinds of commodities to their common quality of human labour in the abstract. (57, emphasis added)

Some eight pages on, by reference to Aristotle, we find precisely the same mode of “expression,” only without the explicit use of the word “reduction.” “What is that equal something,” Marx asks, “that common substance, which admits of the value of the beds being expressed by a house? . . . Compared with the beds, the house does represent something equal to them, in so far as it represents what is really equal, both in the beds and the house. And that is – human labour” (65). In spite of all the complexity of Marx, the wordiness, the tiring example after example (e.g., bushels of corn, yards of linen, pounds of coffee, coats, iron, watches, diamonds, wheat, silk, gold and silver, rectilinear figures and triangles, cattle, tea, sugar, butyric acid and propyl formate, air, natural meadows, pearls, peasants, weavers, spinners, tailors, masons, the experiences of Robinson Crusoe, and our very own Dogberry and Seacoal, etc.), all with one side and then the other – in a word, despite the greatest difficulty, Spivak and company have never failed to discern Marx’s leading role in “reductive” thinking and its superordinate task of illuminating what lies “at the bottom” (66) of things. In turn we find in Spivak and company the “expression” and

⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. I, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, ed. Frederick Engels, International Publishers: NY, 1967/87. Marx himself says in his original preface of 1867 that the section on commodities presents “the greatest difficulty” (page 18).

valorization of the very opposite of Marx. And that is? – *irreducibility*, that characteristically *unequal* “something” regulating the whateveristic shop floor of the Spivakian teaching machine.

The idea of the “irreducible” is given in three similar and related expressions in the Chinese language.⁵ “*Bu neng zai fen*” refers to that which can’t be divided. “*Wu fa jian hua*” refers to that which can’t be made simple, or something which can in no way be made simpler. And “*bu neng gai bian*” means that which can’t change or can’t be changed anymore.

But how exactly do you determine what can’t be divided, what can’t be made simpler for purposes of understanding as well as labor, and what can’t be changed? The problem is that while these meanings are useful to some extent, they are completely “abstract” in the sense of being divorced from practice and the social conditions of real people facing real contradictions. Abstractions of irreducibility, in short, are disconnected from class struggle and class analysis.⁶ In other words, such abstractions attempt to deny and negate what Mao called “the wall of bronze,” that is, the aroused masses:

Comrades, what is the real wall of bronze? It is the people, the hundreds of millions who genuinely and sincerely cherish the revolution. They are the real wall of bronze.”⁷

In this sense it becomes especially interesting that the notion of irreducibility enjoys such prestige in the post-postmodern⁸ “humanities.” The quasi-theory of irreducibility denies the decisive and transformative role of the masses in the struggle

⁵ This summary is based on a small group discussion with Xie Yingjun, an English teacher and graduate of Anhui Normal University, and other students at Lanzhou Jiaotong University, Dec. 2, 2011.

⁶ See “Abstraction,” in *Dictionary of Revolutionary Marxism*, Massline.org website, <<http://www.massline.org/Dictionary/AA.htm>>, accessed 07/11/2012. See also “Revolutionary Theory of Reflection,” *Peking Review*, No. 46, Nov. 17, 1972,

