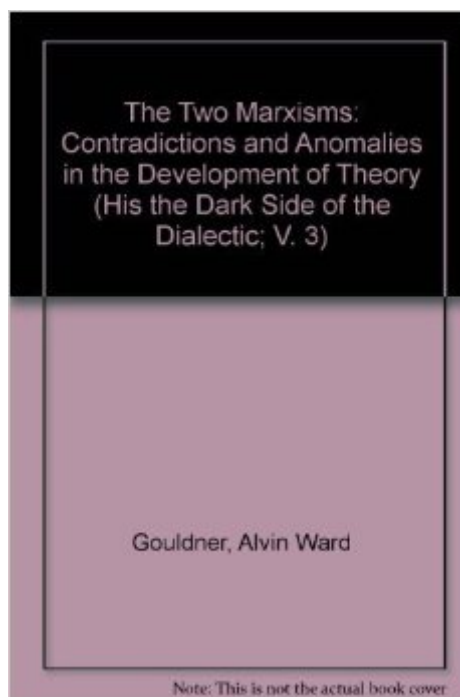


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The Two Marxisms: Contradictions And Anomalies In The Development Of Theory (The Dark Side Of The Dialectic; V. 3) (His The Dark Side Of The Dialectic; V. 3)



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Customer Reviews

The influential 20th century sociologist Alvin Gouldner divided contemporary Marxists into two camps, humanistic and scientific. Gouldner's dichotomy is certainly not the only way to clarify distinctions among Marxist thinkers, activists, and revolutionaries, but it corresponds closely to the better known classification scheme that characterizes Marxists as either humanists or determinists. Consistent with Gouldner's categories, the humanists are interested in philosophical issues such as alienation, the perversion of human beings' near-infinite capacity for development and self-actualization by an alien context fraught with oppression and self-defeating ideology. The humanists take great interest in Marx's early writings, especially the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. This document provided an important point of departure for the critical philosopher Herbert Marcuse, author of the oft-cited classic *One Dimensional Man*. Though a humanist, Marcuse's focus was on a social system that was structured to trick people into believing they were free by providing a seemingly endless list of choices in the form of opportunities for consumption. Rather than enabling people to realize their near-infinite potential for development, for self-realization, for transcending the status quo, technology-intensive productivity and readily available credit created a kind of person who was incapable of going beyond things as they were. Freedom, in this view, was nothing more than freedom to participate in a pre-determined way

that maintains late capitalism. The trap of repressive desublimation -- undisciplined material and sexual consumption in the guise of freedom -- provides a conceptual link between freedom and determinism. Individuals make choices, but once again, the choices are contextually determined. During the relatively prosperous period from 1946 through 1972, Marcuse's interpretation seemed especially compelling. That's one reason why he was an iconic figure during the 1960's. The turn to Gouldner's scientific Marxism can best be construed as a shift in emphasis. Scientific Marxists are little concerned with any concrete individual, focusing instead on a rigidly deterministic contextual framework wherein the notion of free will makes no sense except as a plausible and convenient fraud. In this latter view, people exist only as manifestations of relationships, and in capitalist society these relationships are, first and foremost, exploitative relations of production, with capital extracting surplus value from labor. For scientific Marxists, efforts at piecemeal reform are hopelessly misguided. Transforming an entire social system is the only way to make life better. Moreover, they are convinced that they know how to do it. For them, after all, Marxism is an established science that has produced demonstrably useful knowledge, not merely a philosophical perspective or conceptual framework for further research. For scientific Marxists, it would have been better if Marx's early work had never been written. Nevertheless, it still seems that theoretical differences between humanistic and scientific Marxists have been greatly exaggerated, often as not by the two conflicting schools. The really interesting and enduring aspects of Marx's work are common to both. Is it really necessary, after all, to explicitly emphasize that human beings who serve only as props or supports are alienated? Similarly, is it necessary to conspicuously acknowledge that human-being-as-props are denied the chance to become fully developed and self-aware? Even if humanists such as the British Marxist historian E.P Thompson insist on the existence of free will, if social circumstances are exploitative, oppressive, and restrict the development of human potential, what is the point? Given this set of circumstances, how much difference is there really between those who hold that human beings' consciousness is not determined entirely by their circumstances, and those who hold that it is?

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