

Commentary 23 on
Karl Jaspers Forum, Target Article 22, 2 November 1999

MENTAL ACTIVITY AND CONSCIOUSNES...

By Timo Jarvilehto

CONSCIOUSNESS STUDIES AND MARXISM

by Paul Jones

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I definitely do not consider the Organism-Environment Theory as a Marxist one – the word has long since become abusive in the literature, and I would not do T. Jarvilehto an ill turn by calling him a Marxist. I would not say I am a Marxist neither, since my views differ from orthodox Marxism in many respects. However, I consider Marxism as a huge source of powerful ideas that, along with what the other thinkers have produced, could bring the humanity closer to understanding many quite different things, including consciousness.

Unfortunately, the development of Marxism in the XX century was significantly hindered by the political circumstances of the time, when one group of powers denied Marxism in a heap, while some other countries considered it as a political tool that did not imply any serious enhancement. As a result, many ideas brought forth by early Marxist writers have been left in an under-developed state, and their further vulgarization has substituted the original Marxist views with something far from Marxism, and even opposite to it.

Thus, Jarvilehto writes:

“Twenty years ago I regarded the solution of mind-body problem in dialectical materialism (psyche not identical with, but a function of the brain) as well-formulated, in contrast to the simple identity hypothesis.”

But it is absolutely alien to dialectical materialism to suppose that psyche is a function of the brain! Phrases that seem to support that vulgar view can be extracted from the context of some works by Marx and Engels, with a strained interpretation, but this reminds me our student game, when we “proved” that Marx denied the very idea of communism compiling fragments selected from the Communist Manifesto! Marx, Engels, and later Lenin, wrote that *human* consciousness is impossible without the brain – but they never overestimated its role; for instance, Engels wrote that the brain developed *along with* the development of the hand, and it is the praxis of material production that induced the changes in the both. The “functional” definition of consciousness has appeared on the edge of the XIX and XX centuries within the positivist line of thought, and it was strongly criticized by V. Lenin, who qualified such writings “on Marxism” as writings against Marxism. Lenin wrote: “Thought is an attribute of highly organized matter” – this is an exact formula, which does not imply that it is matter in the form of the brain that thinks; on the contrary, the rest of book insists that it is the social form of motion that can only be considered the carrier of the ability of thought. Using the philosophical category “attribute” rather than the terms like “property”, “function” etc. popular in that time was not accidental: it stressed that the way of “implementing” consciousness in matter is not important in the issue of the very inevitability of the formation of consciousness on a certain stage of material development.

Unfortunately, people were not prepared enough for dialectical thought in those times and the positivist and mechanistic trends have taken over with time, so that many textbooks on Marxist philosophy confined consciousness to the brain, in an entirely anti-Marxist manner. Nevertheless, there were scientists and philosophers who felt the incompatibility of the statements like that with

dialectical materialism, and the Marx' theory of the "non-organic body" of a conscious person has received significant development in a number of works. Due to political reasons, these works have never been widely known neither in the countries of their origin, nor in the rest of the world.

T. Jarvilehto is quite right that the "functional" definition of consciousness is nothing better than the "identity hypothesis" of primitive materialism. It is a pity that he had to re-invent what has been invented 150 years ago, instead of spending that time and effort on further developing it.

The erroneous projection of the anti-dialectical principle that consciousness is a function of the brain onto the classical works by Leontiev and Rubinstein lead T.J. to a distorted view ascribing them what they hardly ever meant. Thus, it would be absolutely inconsistent with Leontiev's fundamental statement that consciousness must be attributed to activity rather than simple operations, and that the motives of any activity lie outside the individual, remaining a part of his/her personality. In neuropsychology, A. Luria, one of Leontiev's collaborators, clearly demonstrated that conscious acts are only *accompanied* by certain cerebral patterns, never being reducible to them; his works also proved that there is no such thing as a neural image of the outer world, but rather internal activities serving to support definite patterns of social behavior. Likewise, all the seven propositions ascribed by Jarvilehto to Marxist psychology have nothing to do with it, rather characterising its opposite, the psychology of *metaphysical materialism*. Therefore, opposing those seven propositions, Jarvilehto struggles against positivism and vulgar materialism, shoulder to shoulder with dialectical materialism.

There is no need to assess Jarvilehto's particular objections to the primitive mechanistic approach to consciousness, since they largely reproduce what has been written in the Marxist literature long ago. I would only indicate that T. Jarvilehto has regretfully been captured by the same lack of dialectical thinking that he is trying to criticize. His attempt to oppose his "one-system" approach to the "two-system" approach of metaphysical materialism (which, I stress it once again, has nothing to do with Marxism) suffers of the same disease: why should one prefer one-, two-, three- or infinitely many-system approach instead of applying the appropriate formalism where needed? Some problems require dichotic thinking, some other problems may demand triads or tetrads, while keeping the fundamental principle of the integrity of the world in the background as a necessary implication. Dialectical materialism states exactly that: any formal scheme is applicable for the description of specific forms of material motion, since these schemes are nothing but reflection of the world's regularities in certain social processes that are called consciousness.

As for Jarvilehto's opposition to hierarchical ideas, I could only explain it by insufficient understanding of that a hierarchy is not identical to mere hierarchical structure, and the same hierarchy can unfold itself into different hierarchical structures in different context, depending on where the boundary between it and its environment is placed; the dialectical approach demands that such boundaries have to objectively appear from time to time, albeit in a relative rather than absolute way. While Jarvilehto gets eventually stuck in the unproductive abstraction of one organism-environment system without any further development (which would imply evolving distinctions), dialectical materialism helps to attribute the diversity of approaches in consciousness studies to the socio-economic situation of the time and the level of the development of the humanity as a carrier of reason.

As for the political considerations about violence and self-violence, I could recall the well-known Marx' phrase that, digging the grave for the bourgeoisie, the proletariat digs the grave for itself. This is a trivial dialectical scheme, and I can add to Jarvilehto's discourse that the same reasons contributed to preventing dialectical ideas from ever becoming an official ideology, in reality rather in public declarations. Yes, violence to another person (and, in general, any product of human activity, including future thinking "machines") means violence to one's self; however this does not imply anything about the admissibility of violence as such, since, in many cases, violence is the only path to the world with much less violence, and refusal from violence in such a situation would be much worse. If I kill a killer it makes me less a conscious being and more an animal; however, this would give a chance to become more conscious to those who have not been killed by that killer since I have

killed him. This is a remarkable aspect of the *universality* as the determinative principle of consciousness: it is universal to the extent of possible self-restriction and self-sacrifice to the well-being of the humanity.

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