

*Marxism and the Theory
of Praxis*

A critique of some new versions
of old fallacies

by

John Hoffman

1975

LAWRENCE & WISHART

LONDON

Darwin has interested us in the history of Nature's technology, i.e. in the formation of the organs of plants and animals, which organs serve as instruments of production for sustaining life. Does not the history of the productive organs of man, of organs that are the material basis of all social organisation, deserve equal attention?⁷²

The production processes of nature and human technology are intimately linked, not because, as praxis writers imagine, human history is somehow able to endow nature with a dialectical character, but rather because the dialectics of nature are the sole source of the dialectics of man. Dialectics do not require the helping hand of consciousness before they can become a reality: on the contrary, nature is dialectically prior to man as being is to thinking. And in making this assertion, Marxism has broken decisively from the exploitative traditions of thousands of years of abstract philosophical thought. It has not only replaced metaphysics with dialectics, but has freed dialectics from Hegelian mysticism: it has presented for the first time to the world a critical and revolutionary concept which, as Marx puts it, "lets nothing impose upon it"⁷³—the dialectic in its consistently rational form. A dialectic which can only exist *in* human society because it existed before it.

But how does the one form of dialectics relate to the other? This will become clearer as we turn to consider what praxis theorists have to say about the theory of reflection—cornerstone of Marxist epistemology—and the role it plays in understanding the real world.

⁷² Ibid., p. 342.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 20.

5

CONSCIOUSNESS AS THE REFLECTION OF REALITY

Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* must be one of the most controversial books ever written in defence of Marxist philosophy, and it has certainly scandalised the praxis school. The work, we are told, is mechanistic and dogmatic, metaphysical and "naïvely realist", deterministic and, it goes without saying (in the words of Petrovic),

incompatible with Marx's conception of man as a creative being of praxis.¹

What is it about *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* which the praxis writers find so unacceptable? It is undoubtedly Lenin's fierce defence of the theory of reflection—his militant and repeated assertions that reflection theory constitutes the philosophical *heart* of Marxist materialism and is crucial to its inner theoretical consistency. For basically Lenin's argument is this: in order to be a materialist one must acknowledge the existence of a material world *beyond* the mind. Being is necessarily prior to consciousness since it is from the world of material being that human consciousness has historically evolved. But how is this provable? How do we in fact *know* that the objective world exists independently of what we think it is, that reality is not itself a mere concocted tissue of our own ideas? Only because we understand the fact that human ideas and sensations are themselves *reflections* of this objective world, a series of "images", pictures or representations which enable us to understand the ultimate primacy of the material world and its historical role as the creator of man.

To regard our sensations as images of the external world, to recognise objective truth, to hold the materialist theory of knowledge—these are all one and the same thing.²

Indeed, says Lenin, the question of whether there is an objective reality which is independent of mankind, and yet which corresponds to the perceptions and conceptions of mankind—this is "the only philosophical question",³ and it is a question which places the theory of reflection at the centre of the Marxist conception of truth and the universe.

¹ Petrovic, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 116.

³ Ibid., p. 171.

Interestingly enough, this point is all but conceded by some of the praxis theorists. Petrovic, for example, argues that *if* one holds to the primacy of matter over mind, nature over spirit, then the theory of reflection does indeed seem “to be the most adequate complement to the materialist thesis”.⁴ Of course, he hastily adds, “creative praxis” wants nothing to do with this kind of “materialist thesis”. But whether Marx is considered a materialist or not—and the praxis writers are divided on this point—all agree that the theory of reflection as defended by Lenin in his classic work is crude and indefensible. Alfred Schmidt, for example, who *claims* to endorse a materialist view of the universe, vigorously rejects, nevertheless, any suggestion that human ideas reflect this world of matter, and refers angrily to the dogmatic theory of “image realism” which, he complains, Lenin “codified” in a book more relevant to the history of the party than to philosophy.⁵

The battle-lines are sharply drawn and the polemics are to be conducted in fighting spirit! As far as Lenin is concerned, the professors of philosophy who specialise in trying to refute materialism are nothing more than “learned salesmen of the theologians”,⁶ and their muddled idealism, though abstract in form, is political *poison*: it must be fought in the most uncompromising manner. Since many of the positions held by the praxis writers are identical to arguments dealt with Lenin “for the thousand and first time”, it is hardly surprising that his polemic infuriates them and they are determined to give as good as they get. Sartre in a lengthy footnote all but dismisses Lenin as a philosophical charlatan, arguing that when Lenin speaks of consciousness as the reflection of being he removes, “by a single stroke”, “the right to write what he is writing”.⁷ So unpraxical is Lenin’s philosophical demeanour that he is thereby disqualified! For the very idea of reflection in epistemology is thoroughly anti-dialectical: “a useless and misleading intermediary” which could be profitably “suppressed”.

How was Lenin led into embracing such a position? The culprit predictably is Engels, for it was Engels after all who pointed to the indissoluble unity that exists between materialism, on the one hand, and reflection theory, on the other. For if it is true, said Engels, that man is ultimately a natural being who has evolved from the animal world, then his brain must be an organ of matter—“matter which

⁴ Petrovic, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁵ *Beiträge zur marxistischen Erkenntnistheorie*, ed. Schmidt (Suhkampff, 1971), p. 8.

⁶ *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

⁷ *Search for a Method*, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

thinks”—and his thoughts part and parcel of the material world. It must, after all, be

self-evident that the products of the human brain, being in the last analysis also products of nature, do not contradict the rest of nature’s interconnections but are in correspondence with them.⁸

But how do we *know* that they are “in correspondence” with the rest of nature? There can only be one answer: there exists a relation of *reflection*. Unless it is understood that consciousness reflects reality, there would be no way of understanding that there is any correspondence between mind and matter: the relation between them would remain simply *unintelligible*, a mere mystery. The theory of reflection, it should be added, does not originate with Engels: it was used by Hegel in an idealist manner to demonstrate that the world of matter was a *reflection* or representation of the Idea; and indeed, without reflection theory, how could Hegel have possibly demonstrated that there is a *knowable* relationship (let alone a creative relationship) between ideas and reality? For if it is asserted that a Divine Spirit creates the material world and yet bears no intelligible resemblance to it (i.e. is not *reflected* by it), then what we argue on the one hand we simply mystify on the other. Of course, in Hegel, the capacity of consciousness to reflect is nowhere historically explained, but this is not the fault of reflection theory: it is the fault of Hegelian idealism. Engels (along with Marx) sought, as we have already seen, to preserve what was genuinely *rational* in the theory of Hegel, and to preserve it in the only way which is possible, by reconstructing it on the premises of materialism. It is not reality which reflects ideas, but ideas which reflect reality. And without this reflection, how could we assert with any confidence that consciousness is intrinsically linked to the real world?

But praxis is convinced, these arguments notwithstanding, that the theory of reflection leads to philosophical positivism, political conservatism and a radical departure from the praxis of the real Marx. Avineri is prepared to refer to Marx’s “materialist epistemology”,⁹ but insists that this has nothing to do with Engels’ “mechanistic invention” which simply leads to absurdity:

if man is a product of material conditions, he can never emancipate himself from their impact. If the world is not of man’s own making, how can he change it? That such a reflectionist view of consciousness was adopted by the German SPD under Engels’ influence may perhaps explain, on at least

⁸ *Anti-Dühring*, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

⁹ Avineri, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

one level, the ultimate conservatism and quietism of German social democracy despite its overt radicalism.¹⁰

Lukacs, for his part, remains convinced that the normal concomitant of reflection theory is “mechanistic fatalism”—a “deeply abhorrent” passivity in the face of external events.

Against this my messianic utopianism, the predominance of praxis in my thought rebelled in passionate protest.¹¹

The view that ideas reflect reality must, argued Lukacs in 1919, undermine the dialectical unity of thought and being upon which Marxist theory is based; the priority of being to consciousness which reflection theory presupposes robs man of that creative, activist role which is surely the essence of Marxism.

But before I answer these criticisms of reflection theory or consider the now familiar claim that it was invented by Engels, it is necessary to return to the position of Lenin, for it appears that the praxis theorists have, in the course of their attacks on the philosophy of Lenin, brought to light a most extraordinary fact. The fact that Lenin, despite the stubborn persistence with which he defends the theory of reflection in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, came to see, just a few years later, the error of his ways. In his famous *Philosophical Notebooks*—after a careful reading of Hegel—he turned his back on “reflectionism” and threw out the mechanistic and undialectical theory of knowledge which he had unthinkingly borrowed from Engels. Like Marx before him, even Lenin, it seems, was unable to resist the charms of praxis thinking.

This contention is so remarkable, and so utterly uncharacteristic of what we would expect of Lenin, that it merits at least some investigation.

(i) *Reflection Theory and Lenin's Philosophical Notebooks*

There can be no doubt that if a thinker of Lenin's stature was indeed forced after a closer reading of Hegel to drastically reformulate the entire thesis of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*—“the only question in philosophy”—this would at least add some fuel to the praxis protest against the mechanistic ways of “orthodox Marxism”. What precisely is the argument? Petrovic asserts that

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 67.

¹¹ Preface to *History and Class Consciousness*, op. cit., p. xxv.

in the “young” Lenin we . . . find a nondialectical theory of reflection according to which our consciousness is only a reflection of the external world, which exists outside and independently of it. The “old” Lenin, in his *Philosophical Notebooks*, also corrected this sin of the “young” one. “Man's consciousness not only reflects the objective world, it also creates it.”¹²

The notebook concerned is Lenin's “Conspectus on Hegel's *Science of Logic*”, written after Lenin had “discovered” Hegelian philosophy in 1914–15¹³ and its contents point to a major intellectual transformation of Lenin's work, and of course his hitherto “mechanistic” theory of knowledge in particular. In Avineri's view,

Lenin himself ultimately gave up the mechanistic approach initially developed in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* of 1914–16 include extensive excerpts of Hegel's *Logic* and point strongly to the conclusion that under the impact of this confrontation with Hegel, whom he hardly ever studied before, Lenin came to appreciate the non-mechanistic character of Marx's epistemology and its indebtedness to the German idealist tradition.¹⁴

What is the truth of these arguments? Certainly Lenin intensively studied Hegel's philosophy between 1914–16, but it is quite misleading to suggest that he became aware for the first time of Marxism's “indebtedness to the German idealist tradition”. He is perfectly aware of the importance of Hegel's contribution to the development of Marxism in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, and stresses, for example in his section on the philosophical idealists, that the basic truths of the materialist position should not lead to

forgetfulness of the *valuable* fruit of the idealist systems, Hegelian dialectics—that pearl which those farm-yard cocks, the Buchners, Dührings and Co . . . could not pick out from the dung heap of absolute idealism.¹⁵

These are hardly the words of one who has yet to appreciate the true importance of Hegel or make his theoretical acquaintance. Of course it is correct to say that in 1914–16 Lenin certainly continued to *deepen* his understanding of Hegel, but can it be said that the *Philosophical Notebooks* “point strongly to the conclusion”, as Avineri urges, that Lenin actually abandoned the theory of reflection as a result?

Let me look briefly at Lenin's notes on Hegel in the “Conspectus” and see what in fact Lenin had to say about reflection theory.

¹² Petrovic, op. cit., pp. 28–29.

¹³ Lucien Goldmann, “Reflections on history and class consciousness”, op. cit., p. 67.

¹⁴ Avineri, op. cit., p. 70.

¹⁵ Op. cit., p. 225.

According to some of the praxis theorists, after closely reading Hegel, Lenin rid himself of this mechanistic invention of Engels. Here is the truth:

- on p. 171: *Essentially*, Hegel is completely right as opposed to Kant . . . *all* scientific (correct, serious, not absurd) abstractions REFLECT nature more deeply, truly and completely.
- on p. 180: Hegel actually proved that logical forms and laws are not an empty shell, but the REFLECTION of the objective world.
- on p. 182: Logic is the science of cognition. It is the theory of knowledge. Knowledge is the REFLECTION of nature by man. . . . [But] man cannot comprehend=reflect=mirror nature as a whole . . . he can only *eternally* come closer to this, creating abstractions, concepts, laws, a scientific PICTURE of the world, etc., etc.
- on p. 183: Very profound and clever! The laws of logic are the REFLECTIONS of the objective in the subjective consciousness of man.
- on p. 195: Cognition is the eternal, endless approximation of thought to the object. The REFLECTION of nature in man's thought must be understood not "lifelessly", not "abstractly", not devoid of movement. . . .
- on p. 201: Life gives rise to the brain. Nature is REFLECTED in the human brain. By checking and applying the correctness of these REFLECTIONS in his practice and technique, man arrives at objective truth.
- on p. 202: The idea of including *Life* in logic is comprehensible—and brilliant—from the standpoint of the *process* of the REFLECTION of the objective world in the (at first individual) consciousness of man and of the testing of the consciousness (REFLECTION) through practice.¹⁶

(Capitals throughout are mine.)

Now the praxis theorists are certainly correct to stress the fact that Lenin is impressed by his close reading of the *Science of Logic*, and finds fresh and deeper insight into the essentially dialectical, militantly "non-mechanistic character of Marx's epistemology". But *how* does Lenin deepen his knowledge of dialectics? By an ever greater understanding than before that at the heart of the dialectical theory of knowledge—a theory pioneered by Hegel—lies . . . the theory of reflection! Now one may wish to argue that in fact the theory of reflection is incorrect or (more problematically) that it was not endorsed by Marx: but to claim that Lenin rejected it after reading Hegel is simply a lie. And the

¹⁶ "Conspectus of Hegel's *Science of Logic*", *Collected Works*, vol. 38 (Lawrence and Wishart, 1961).

quotations prove it.¹⁷ Nor is it surprising that a thorough reading of Hegel should in fact have confirmed the correctness of reflection theory: for the theory derives from a "materialist reading" of Hegel himself. The truth is that the praxis theorists, despite the extravagant lip-service they sometimes pay to Hegel, do in fact reject the rational core of the Hegelian dialectic—its objectivity—and the *reflective* relationship which this necessarily presupposes between consciousness and the material world. All that is taken from Hegel are his idealist and subjectivist weaknesses.

And yet, if praxis misrepresentations on the subject of Lenin and reflection theory are basically without foundation, this is not through any lack of trying. Avineri, for example, cites one of Lenin's comments in the *Notebooks* (already quoted above) where Lenin says that

cognition is the eternal, endless approximation of thought to the object. The reflection of nature in man's thoughts must be understood not "lifelessly", not "abstractly", not devoid of movement, *not without contradictions*, but in the eternal *process* of movement, the arising of contradictions and their solution.¹⁸

And he prefaces this quotation with the comment:

orthodox Leninism may find it slightly embarrassing to be confronted with the following conclusions. . . .

But with respect, it is not "orthodox Leninists" who need worry here, it is Shlomo Avineri. For it is Avineri who has boldly asserted that the theory of reflection is conservative and mechanistic, and who then proceeds to quote a statement of Lenin's *in explicit defence* of the same theory, declaring that for orthodox Leninists the revelation can only be a fearful embarrassment.¹⁹

¹⁷ We should also note that in other philosophical writing of the "later" Lenin, e.g. *Karl Marx, The Question of Dialectics*, the theory of reflection is also explicitly upheld.

¹⁸ *Notebooks*, p. 195, cited by Avineri, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

¹⁹ Avineri is determined to make the *Notebooks* into some kind of startling find. "These notebooks," he writes, "were virtually unknown under Stalinism where *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* reigned supreme" (p. 70). Is he wholly unaware of the existence of the famous *Textbook of Marxist Philosophy* (Gollancz, n.d.) prepared by the Leningrad Institute of Philosophy under M. Shirokov for all Soviet institutions of higher education? The book (written some time in the 30's) quotes *extensively* from the "virtually unknown" *Notebooks* including, I might add, the precise quotation which Avineri finds so "embarrassing" (see pp. 148–149). The reader should remember, however, that S. Avineri is a critic who abhors all "partisanship"!

Of course, it is true, as I have already pointed out, that many of Lenin's formulations are sharpened and strengthened by his intensive reading of Hegel, but there is nothing new in the *substance* of what he has to say in the *Notebooks* on the theory of reflection which had not been already stated in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Indeed, in this earlier work, Lenin quotes the words of Marx which the praxis writers are so fond of misinterpreting, that the dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question, and proceeds to emphasise (in a specific sub-section devoted to the question) that the correspondence between our ideas and the objective nature of things we perceive can only be proven through the "success" of human practice. There is no hint here that cognition can be anything other than a *practical* activity, nor is there any suggestion that reflection is some sort of static reproduction of the universal truth. On the contrary, asks Lenin,

if the world is eternally moving and developing matter (as the Marxists think), reflected by the developing human consciousness, what is there "static" here?²⁰ . . . the sole conclusion to be drawn from the opinion held by Marxists that Marx's theory is an objective truth is that by following the path of Marxian theory we shall draw closer and closer to objective truth (without ever exhausting it); but by following *any other path* we shall arrive at nothing but confusion and lies.²¹

No one denies the value of the *Notebooks* with their renewed emphasis upon the "activity" of thinking, but it is quite wrong to suppose that "the criterion of practice" had not been stressed before. But what of Lenin's assertion which Petrovic cites as proof that his "non-dialectical theory of reflection" had been superseded? After all, does not Lenin actually say in the *Notebooks* that "man's consciousness not only reflects the objective world but creates it"?²² Is this not, as Petrovic contends, a significant "correction" to an earlier formulation? Petrovic has managed to overlook all the other comments on the theory of reflection (cited above) which are made by Lenin in the "Conspectus" and has found one which presents a slightly different formulation (so it seems) of the epistemological problem. How significant is the finding? If we look at Lenin's comment on the page in which it was penned, we find next to it, the statement (printed in boldface): "practice in the theory of knowledge", and just above it, the remark that

²⁰ *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, op. cit., p. 123.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

²² *Notebooks*, op. cit., p. 212.

Marx . . . clearly sides with Hegel in introducing the criterion of practice into the theory of knowledge: see the Theses on Feuerbach.²³

Now although this is an important comment, it is a comment which *reinforces* what Lenin (as we have seen) had already said in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*: namely, that it was vital to rescue Hegelian dialectics, crucial to understand the role of *practice* in the process of cognition, and thus important to bear in mind Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* which establish this point. There is absolutely nothing in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* to suggest that reflection is anything other than an *active* process, or that contemplation in a purely passive sense is either desirable or indeed humanly possible.

It is true that some of the formulations of Lenin in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* can be misconstrued by those who fail to really understand materialism. Consider, for example, Lenin's statement²⁴ that

the objective reality is copied, photographed . . . by our sensations, while existing independently of them.²⁵

Does not the imagery of the "photograph" or the "copy" imply a measure of passivity in the process of thought and sensation, so that the later statement in the *Notebooks* plays an important role in *correcting* an earlier contemplative bias? Knowledge not only reflects reality, it creates it. This argument, though plausible, still seems to me to overlook two important points. Firstly, Lenin in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* is not *primarily* concerned with distinguishing between mechanical and dialectical materialism: the work is an attack on subjective idealism and thus a defence of materialism in general. Thus while Lenin is aware of the weaknesses and inconsistencies in Feuerbach, he can still make use of a number of Feuerbach's statements because they are of a *broadly* materialist character. They do acknowledge an objective reality beyond the mind. As Lenin makes it clear,

one can be a materialist and still differ on what constitutes the criterion of the correctness of the images presented by our senses²⁶

and there is a section of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* which does

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ "Lenin and Philosophy", *Marxism Today*, June 1970, p. 182.

²⁵ *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, op. cit., p. 116.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

discuss the role of practice as the *Marxist* criterion “of the correctness of the images presented by our senses”, and hence the way that the criterion of practice differentiates dialectical materialism from the less consistent (and thus ultimately metaphysical) materialism of the Enlightenment. But if the role of practice is stressed, the key emphasis of the work is on the fundamental point (which *all* materialists accept), namely that matter exists as an objective reality beyond the mind. If Lenin emphasises the strengths of Feuerbach’s materialism (in contrast to the glaring subjective idealism of the Machists), there is nothing to suggest in the work that he endorses his weaknesses: on the contrary, it is explicitly stated that materialism can only be ultimately defended on a dialectical basis, and this means *not* rejecting the notion of reflection, but understanding its *practical* character. Thus when Lenin later says (in the passage Petrovic cites) that we not merely reflect reality (i.e. reflect it in some kind of contemplative, passivist way), we *create* it (i.e. *reflect* it in practical, active fashion), he merely re-emphasises a point already made in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* in that section where he *does* discuss the “internal” differences between consistent, dialectical materialism and the inconsistent, metaphysical materialism of the mechanist school. What is at stake therefore is *not* reflection theory as such (as Petrovic contends), but reflection theory construed in a consistent, dialectical (and thus ultimately materialist) manner. For what we have in dialectics, as Lenin puts it elsewhere, is

an immeasurably rich content as compared with “metaphysical” materialism, the fundamental *misfortune* of which is its inability to apply dialectics to the *Bildertheorie* [theory of reflection], to the process and development of knowledge.²⁷

The “*Bildertheorie*” remains.

But even if we accept that Lenin does stress the role of practice in cognition in his “earlier” work, is it not true that certain formulations in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* are misleading? Is not the imagery of the “photograph” and the “copy” liable to a passivist misconception? The problem, however, is this: unless we follow Plekhanov’s position²⁸ and question the very premise that ideas do resemble reality in some intelligible way, how can we possibly *avoid* imagery which is liable to be misconstrued by those who cannot understand the practical nature of the reflection process? After all, even

²⁷ “On the Question of Dialectics”, *Philosophical Notebooks*, p. 362.

²⁸ See Lenin’s discussion on Plekhanov’s “theory of symbols” in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, op. cit., p. 221.

in the *Notebooks* Lenin refers to ideas as a *picture* of the world²⁹ and speaks of how we “comprehend=reflect=mirror” nature, and these terms, like of course the very term reflection itself, can be misconstrued by those who reject the basic epistemological point at stake—that ideas are, when all is said and done, *subordinate* to the world of reality. To one who thinks that praxical ideas breathe order into chaos and make life itself, the materialist position sounds very passivist indeed! “Copying”, “photographing” and “reflecting” are all practical and creative activities in human cognition, and only by emphasising and re-emphasising this point, can we avoid the misunderstanding which may otherwise arise from individual words.

What the so called discovery of the “two Lenins” clearly indicates is that the praxis theorists are not concerned with producing a serious critique of Lenin’s epistemological standpoint, they are simply concerned with seizing any “evidence”, however flimsy, which they feel may help to discredit the reflection theory which of course is irreconcilable with all subjectivist notions of “praxis”. Because Lenin deepens his knowledge of Hegel between 1914–16 this fact is twisted to mean that he has become a belated convert to the praxis school. And yet, as we have seen, there is no serious evidence at all to support this argument.

Nor, unfortunately, is that the end of the matter. For the praxis writers also claim that, like the dialectic in nature, the theory of reflection is the misleading contribution of Engels and cannot justifiably be ascribed to Marx. Although I shall try to avoid covering the same ground twice, for I have already said a good deal about the agreement between Marx and Engels, it is still necessary to devote at least some attention to

(ii) *The Epistemological Question in Karl Marx*

The issue at stake here is a simple one: what is Marx’s standpoint on the relationship of consciousness to being? As everybody knows, Marx’s earlier writings were influenced by idealism, so that this question, whether being reflects consciousness or consciousness reflects being, is not, at any rate before 1845, satisfactorily cleared up. For example, in a famous passage in Marx’s *Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Law*, we read that “philosophy cannot be made a reality without the abolition of the proletariat”, but what is yet to be explained is the *source* of this philosophy and how its ideas actually come into people’s heads.

²⁹ *Collected Works*, vol. 38, p. 182.

Likewise in the *Paris Manuscripts* of 1844, although Marx tackles many social problems, the question of the priority of being to consciousness is not consistently stated. Consider, for example, Marx's comment that

it is just in the working up of the objective world, therefore, that man first really proves himself to be a *species being*. . . . Through and because of this production, nature appears as *his work and his reality*. The object of labour is therefore the *objectification of man's species life*: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore contemplates himself in a world which he himself has created.³⁰

Clearly in this passage the *ultimate* priority of nature over man—is of being over consciousness—is not really evident and man the creator still bears traces of the Hegelian *Weltgeist*. And yet what is clear about this passage, is that although the priority of being to consciousness has yet to be properly sorted out, the relation between ideas and reality remains a *reflective* one: man's ideas and the external world in which they objectify themselves in fact *mirror* one another, because without this reflective relationship how could Marx possibly say that man “contemplates himself in a world which he himself has created”? Even while traces of idealism remain, Marx still embraces the theory of reflection, and like Hegel (who thus differs in this respect from the praxis theorists), Marx is a rationalist and never held the view—in either his early or his scientific writings—that, as Petrovic contends, a reflective relation between ideas and reality is simply unprovable.³¹

Moreover, if the theory of reflection as expounded in the *Manuscripts* still has an idealist hue, the position is very different in *The Holy Family* where Marx and Engels explicitly defend and develop a materialist stance. It is true that they can still say (1845) that Feuerbach represents their position “theoretically”: but in “practical” terms, they are now, they proclaim, for socialism and communism, so that even “theoretically” we find materialism expounded with a dialectical rigour which Feuerbach's position lacks.

The comments by Marx and Engels in *The Holy Family* are worth noting carefully—for there have been Marxists, including for example Antonio Gramsci, who have argued that

Marx never called his conception “materialist” and when speaking of French materialism, criticised it. . . .³²

³⁰ *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, op. cit., p. 72.

³¹ Petrovic, op. cit., p. 195.

³² *The Modern Prince* (International Publishers, New York, 1957), p. 103.

and just a glance at *The Holy Family* shows that assertions like these are simply not true. Marx and Engels never rejected the materialism of the Enlightenment: even when they criticised it, they built nevertheless upon its foundations, and at no time did they ever have occasion to revise the judgment of 1845 that materialism is *necessarily* “connected with socialism and communism”: that in fact it provides its *logical* basis.³³ The philosophical viewpoint which Gramsci describes as “reactionary”, “common-sensical”, and “of religious origin”—the view that “the external world is objectively real”³⁴—was for Marx and Engels the cornerstone of real science. It is true (and this is what Gramsci seems to be getting at) that objective idealism, like materialism, also asserts that the world is objectively real; but for Marx, the *difference* between dialectical materialism and objective idealism is far weightier than this (rather trivial) similarity. After all, an objective idealist like Hegel, as Marx and Engels complain, “stands the world *on its head*”³⁵ and denies what is scientifically irrefutable: the absolute priority of nature to man. The simple truth is that

man has not created matter itself. And he cannot even create any productive capacity if matter does not exist beforehand.³⁶

The clear-cut assertion of the materialist standpoint represents an important philosophical break-through, and it is a break-through which has been brought about by a growing concern with not simply the conditions of the working class but the problems of practical politics. For the question of whether being creates consciousness or consciousness being is a question of pressing social and political import and demands a consistent answer to the very question which the praxis theory of Young Hegelians continued to dodge—the question of *priority*. In a number of highly significant passages, Marx and Engels stress the fact that it is crucial to be able to distinguish between the *material reality* of the proletariat and its ideological “appearances”. The workers are not gods—abstract “makers of the world” who can be used by philosophers as the practical vehicle of the Hegelian world-spirit—they are active members of society “who suffer, feel, think and act as human beings”. And what compels them to act is not philosophical ideas but “practical necessity”—“the stern but steeling

³³ *The Holy Family* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1957), p. 254.

³⁴ *The Modern Prince*, op. cit., p. 106.

³⁵ *The Holy Family*, op. cit., p. 254.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

school of labour".³⁷ It is this "massy" fact which makes the *distinction* between consciousness and being—a distinction which idealism naturally smother—so vital if the social and political importance of the proletariat is to be understood. For

the question is not what this or that proletarian, or even the whole of the proletariat at the moment *considers* as its aim. The question is *what the proletariat is*, and what, consequent on that *being*, it will be compelled to do.³⁸

It is crucial, in other words, to make the distinction between what workers may *think* they are, and what in fact they are. But how can this distinction be made if one questions the very existence of a real world which exists in its own right independently of consciousness? Materialism and communism are, as Marx and Engels stress, closely interlinked, and "mere philosophy" which smudges the truth about an objective world thus leads to impotence, to what Marx and Engels aptly describe as a "practice in abstracto",³⁹ a practice dangerously inclined to mistake its own illusions about life for the real world. Subjective idealism, that is to say, and this of course is where the praxis rendering of Hegel leads, is not merely philosophically absurd: it is an intellectual luxury which no practical worker can possibly afford:

these *massy*, communist workers, employed for instance in the Manchester or Lyons workshops, do not believe that "pure thinking" will be able to argue away their industrial masters and their own practical debasement. They are most painfully aware of the *difference* between *being* and *thinking*, between *consciousness* and *life*. They know that property, capital, money, wage labour and the like are no ideal figments of the brain but very practical, very objective sources of their self-estrangement and that they must be abolished in a practical, objective way for man to become man not only in *thinking*, in *consciousness*, but in *massy being* in life.⁴⁰

Marx was a materialist, and those who assert to the contrary simply have not read (or at least digested) what Marx wrote on the subject, *The Holy Family* (like *The German Ideology* which soon followed it) shows beyond all shadow of a doubt that for Marx as for Engels, "the great basic question of all philosophy" was the relation between thinking and being, and that Marx both posed this question and answered this question in an unequivocally materialist manner. If this means that the question of the *primacy* of matter to mind, of being to consciousness, is only possible, as Petrovic argues, "given certain

³⁷ Ibid., p. 205.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 53.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 73.

dualistic assumptions which Marx's naturalism-humanism excludes",⁴¹ then this so called "dualism" is as evident in Marx (I shall say something about "naturalism-humanism" later) as it is in Engels and Lenin. *The Holy Family* itself proves it.

Now Alfred Schmidt (as we have already seen in the question on the dialectics of nature) accepts the view that Marx is a materialist. Indeed, he shows how *The Holy Family* alone irrefutably establishes this point. And yet, having made this point, he argues quite as firmly as his other praxis colleagues that Marx rejected the theory of reflection. Although Marx was a materialist,

we must insist that Marx did not see in concepts naïvely realistic impressions of the objects themselves, but rather reflections of the historically mediated relations of men to these objects.⁴²

Ideas, in other words, do not actually reflect the *real world itself*. But what do Marx and Engels say on the subject in the work which Schmidt himself acknowledges clearly establishes their materialism, *The Holy Family*? They make it absolutely clear that it is impossible to be a consistent materialist and yet not embrace the theory of reflection. For consider their scathing criticisms of the speculative method of thought which every idealist employs—the belief that reality takes its substance from the "principles" of the universe. Hegel, for example, in his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* argues that the "idea" of fruit is more basic than the empirical fruits we find in the real world, so that he imagines

that my abstract idea "Fruit", *derived from real fruit*, is an entity existing outside me (stress mine).

The idea abstracted from the reality comes to imagine that it is the reality which has been abstracted from the idea. As far as the speculative thinker is concerned,

what is essential to these things is not their real being, perceptible to the senses, but the essence that I have extracted from them and then foisted on them.⁴³

Marx then is in no doubt that the idealists have got hold of the opposite of the truth. They forget that their "essential ideas" which supposedly create reality, can only in fact have been drawn from this same reality in the first place. Ideas are abstractions from reality, but

⁴¹ Petrovic, op. cit., p. 62.

⁴² Schmidt, op. cit., p. 111.

⁴³ *The Holy Family*, op. cit., p. 78.

this assertion is itself only provable (as we have already seen) if ideas are seen to actually *reflect* the reality from which they have been abstracted. That is to say,

the apples, pears, almonds and raisins that we get in the speculative world are nothing but *semblances* of apples, *semblances* of pears, *semblances* of almonds, and *semblances* of raisins.⁴⁴

And it goes without saying, of course, that it would be quite impossible for Marx and Engels to say that the ideas were “semblances” of reality unless they actually *reflected* the real world. The one exists independently of the other.

But what of Schmidt’s argument that ideas do not in fact reflect objects themselves, but rather the “historically mediated relations of man to those objects”? After all, is it not true that fruit, for example, are not “purely” natural objects themselves, but have in many cases been cultivated by man who has thereby “historically mediated” them? The fact of the matter is that whether objects are “purely natural” or have already been cultivated or created by man, the proposition still stands: the material world exists independently of ideas which reflect it. This material world may be “purely natural”, i.e. untouched by human activity or, through agriculture and industry, display the marks of man’s expanding productive capacities, but the epistemological point still remains the same: the real world whether natural or social is still a *material* world, and it is *this* which is reflected in the mind. Schmidt’s argument is simply a red herring, for the truth is that something does not cease to be an object-in-itself merely because it has human labour mixed in with it: there is all the difference in the world between what a particular economic system in fact is and what people may *think* it is. It does not cease to be an object-in-itself reflected by the mind, simply because human energies have gone into making it. Indeed, even conscious activity itself is objectively material, and we can make no scientific progress in philosophy until we are able to distinguish between what the activity of consciousness *really* is as “matter which thinks”, and what idealists may imagine it is. The distinction between appearance and reality—a distinction which cannot be logically sustained *without* a theory of reflection—remains whether the reality is “wholly natural” or partially man-made, and it is no exaggeration to say that this distinction which praxis theory blurs and smudges, forms the philosophical kernel of scientific socialism.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

No wonder Marx stresses it throughout his work. In *The German Ideology*, we find Marx and Engels arguing that one cannot explain “practice from the idea”, one must explain “ideas from material practice”. It follows that in any historical epoch

the ruling ideas are nothing more than *the ideal expression* of the dominant material relationships:⁴⁵ (stress mine)

and it can only be said that ideas *express* material relationships because they in fact *reflect* them. Naturally, the fact that ideas reflect reality does not mean that they need reflect reality accurately or objectively: as *The German Ideology* points out (and as we have already noted), because the division of labour in society divides the thinker from the actor, these reflections may well be warped and distorted, presenting an *illusory* picture of the real world. But even illusions are reflections, and indeed, if they were not, how would be able to actually *distinguish* them from truths?

The point then which Marx and Engels have stressed repeatedly in the writings of 1845 that

there is a world in which *consciousness* and *being* are distinct; a world which continues to exist when I do away with its existence in thought . . .⁴⁶

proves of crucial relevance as Marx begins to extend and develop his critique of bourgeois political economy. If the idealist historians have confused concrete reality with abstract illusion, the economists, acting according to their own analytical “theory of praxis”, have blithely imagined that categories and principles rule the world. Denying a materialist theory of reflection, they necessarily turn the world on its head, overlooking the basic fact that

economic categories are only the theoretical expressions, the abstractions of the social relations of production. . . .⁴⁷

the same men who establish their social relations in conformity with their material productivity, produce also principles, ideas, and categories, in conformity with their social relations.⁴⁸

And what would our praxis writers say to that? That when Marx speaks of “principles, ideas and categories” *conforming* to social relations, he does not also mean that these categories necessarily *reflect*

⁴⁵ *The German Ideology*, op. cit., p. 60.

⁴⁶ *The Holy Family*, p. 255.

⁴⁷ *Poverty of Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 92.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

them? Over and over again, Marx shows that he takes the reflection theory for granted, and it is not surprising why. As the *Communist Manifesto* stresses,

the theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes.⁴⁹

Marxism itself, that is to say, stands or falls as a scientific, truthful reflection of the real world.

Nor is it accidental that Marx persistently refers to all reality whether natural or man-made as *material*, for it is material reality which is distinct from consciousness, which determines consciousness, and which is therefore the realm which consciousness reflects. This position receives of course its most celebrated formulation in the Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* where it is stated that "definite forms of social consciousness" correspond to the economic structure of society. This economic structure Marx calls society's *real* foundation, and it is a structure whose transformation we can determine with the precision of a natural science, because we are, after all, talking not about categories and principles, but about material reality. We cannot understand reality from principles, we can only understand principles from reality: "consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life", and this is only possible because material contradictions are reflected in the conscious mind.

Reflection theory, that is to say, is an intrinsic part of both historical and dialectical materialism, and hence, not surprisingly, the most compelling evidence of its crucial significance is to be found in the crowning work of Marx's life-long studies, *Capital* itself. At the heart of *Capital* lies the assertion that commodity production (from which capitalism itself emerges) is a deeply deceptive social formation: its appearances belie its reality. To elaborate this point, let me briefly retrace some of the steps which Marx's argument in fact follows.

The commodity, as everybody knows, is a good produced for exchange. But in order for goods to exchange, the labour which makes them—concrete, particular labour—has to be stripped of its historical qualities so that it is rendered "abstract", and exhibits a measure of value which enables products as far removed from one another as tins of boot polish and crystal palaces to "change places" in the equalising

⁴⁹ *Communist Manifesto*, op. cit., p. 62.

exchange process. Now this process of abstraction, as mysterious as it sounds, is nevertheless perfectly *real*—indeed, as Marx puts it, as real as "the resolution of all organic bodies into air".⁵⁰ After all, without the existence of abstract labour, all sorts of different objects simply could not exchange. But here is the rub. Because in the course of the exchange process, concrete labour loses its social and particularistic qualities, it *appears* that when objects exchange they merely exchange as *things* and that social relationships have got nothing to do with it. In other words, as Marx puts it, as the result of commodity production a definite social relationship between men "assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things".⁵¹ To imagine that "things" can somehow just exchange as disembodied entities is of course absurd, it is an *illusion* but it is at the same time an illusion created by the practical character of commodity production which strips human labour of its social character and therefore makes it *appear* as though men were not actually involved. In other words, like the illusion that "ideas create the world", it is an illusion which has been created by the "topsy turvy" character of the real world. The commodity, says Marx, displays a variety of "theological whimsies" and is, of necessity, surrounded by "magic and necromancy", because unless we can scientifically get to its social and concrete roots which the exchange process essentially mystifies, we will imagine that "the fantastic form of a relation between things" is not simply an illusion, but the reality itself.

At first glance, Marx tells us,

a commodity seems a commonplace sort of thing, one easily understood. Analysis shows however that it is a very queer thing indeed, full of metaphysical subtleties and theological whimsies.⁵²

Analysis shows us that the commodity of necessity veils itself with what are illusions, but at the same time illusions which have their roots in reality. And how is this remarkable analysis, with its irony and wit, its profundity and penetration, possible? Because Marx proceeds as a materialist scientist who is able the whole time to firmly grasp the essential distinction between appearance and reality: universal labour is an abstraction but it is an abstraction which is at the same time a concrete, social reality. In this way, Marx is able to achieve two things: he is able to show what the commodity *in fact* is and yet at the same

⁵⁰ *Critique of Political Economy*, op. cit., p. 30.

⁵¹ *Capital*, I, op. cit., p. 72.

⁵² *Capital*, I, p. 71.

time can demonstrate why the commodity has the squid-like capacity to veil in illusion the truth of this reality. But this entire analysis only makes sense because it assumes that our ideas are a *reflection* of reality. Initially these reflections are superficial and misleading:

man's reflections on the forms of social life, and consequently also his scientific analysis of those forms, take a course directly opposite to their actual historical development,⁵³

because, of course, we begin with social life as it *currently* is: we assume, as the bourgeois economists do, that the exchange process is simply something natural, and that commodity relations have always taken the form they display under capitalism. In other words, it is only through protracted *scientific* analysis that we begin to work towards the historical truths which lie beneath contemporary appearances, so that we can explain the illusions in terms of a deeper reality. We can show that in fact, appearances notwithstanding, it is people who are socially involved when objects exchange. But these truths are not obvious, and their discovery is only possible because of a dogged materialist resolve not to accept "metaphysical subtleties and theological whimsies" at their face value. For it is no coincidence that Marx, in a celebrated chapter in *Capital*, likens the *fetishism* which surrounds the commodity to the world of religious illusions which is itself "a reflex of the real world". Indeed, he argues that the character of the religious illusion, whether it is tribal or medieval or bourgeois, depends upon how men actually relate to nature in the material world: Christianity, he comments, and especially Protestantism, with its stress upon abstract equality and atomistic individualism, is ideologically appropriate to express the needs of commodity production under capitalism because, as we have seen, it is precisely commodity production which *abstracts* labour into an "individualised" thing. But what of the forms of religion in communities where commodity production (as in medieval societies) exists only on the fringes, so that relations between people are correspondingly narrow? This narrowness, says Marx,

is *reflected* in the ancient worship of nature, and in the other elements of the popular religions⁵⁴ (stress mine).

And as for religious reflections as such? The religious reflex of the real world can only

⁵³ Ibid., p. 75.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 79.

finally vanish when the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowmen and to nature.⁵⁵

It is surely plain from what I have said that in order to understand Marx's analysis of the commodity and of commodity fetishism, the theory of reflection is absolutely crucial: for without it, the scientific distinction between appearance and reality smudges and blurs and the *entire* analysis falls to the ground.

Consider for a moment how Marx's analysis of commodity production continues to develop. The creation of money, for example, arises directly out of the need which commodity production has for abstract labour: to facilitate commerce a commodity must be set aside whose *sole* purpose is to act as the medium in terms of which all other commodities can exchange. This means that "metaphysical subtleties and theological whimsies" further compound, for now we have a commodity which only exists to express abstract labour in concrete form. Its use-value is to *exchange*; its particularity arises solely from its *universal* function, for money of course, as a "doubly abstract", "universally universal" commodity

reads all prices backwards, and thus, so to say, depicts itself in the bodies of all other commodities.⁵⁶

It is therefore the *social* role of money to ensure that social relations do in fact assume the fetishistic appearance of *things*: money, more than any other commodity, is dedicated to turning things upside down and confounding illusion with reality. No wonder a materialist science is needed to sort it all out! For now, it can be shown in down-to-earth, matter of fact terms wherein the secret of money lies: a "visible god" that "speak'st with every tongue to every purpose", "that solder'st close impossibilities/and makes them kiss"⁵⁷ can be thoroughly demystified once and for all. But not if we reject reflection theory, not if we cannot understand that illusory appearances are simply the *semblances* of a material world.

But having shown that money is in fact simply the "commodity of commodities" and hence "doubly abstract", how is Marx to explain that exploitation itself and production of profit take place? For here

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 110.

⁵⁷ These words, cited by Marx with some relish, come from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* (Act IV, sc. iii).

yet another paradox is involved: having stressed the *equalising* character of commodity production (which makes for abstract labour in the first place), now we have to show that *despite* the fact that commodity exchanges under capitalism are (in theory) equal, exploitation takes place and the capitalist makes a profit. Here Marx extends his analysis of the commodity to embrace not merely money but the worker himself, and explains that the worker's labour power is a commodity in the precise scientific sense (it is worth the value of its production), but a commodity with a difference. Labour power is a special commodity whose value is always less than the value of the commodities which the worker's exertion of labour power is able to produce, and this difference supplies the surplus-value from which capital derives its profit.⁵⁸ In the discovery of surplus value we find "the secret of profit making": that secret upon which the entire edifice of capitalist exploitation rests. A discovery, as Engels rightly stressed, to rival Darwin's evolutionary theory, but how was it made? To discover surplus value, Marx tells his reader, we must leave the "noisy sphere"

where everything takes place on the surface and in the view of men, and follow them both into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there stares us in the face "No admittance except on business". Here we shall see not only how capital produces, but how capital is produced.⁵⁹

Instead of the fairy tale appearance of the goose which lays the golden eggs, we find the grim reality: the exploited labourer, the human commodity whose fate it is to produce something "out of nothing". Philosophers who specialise in translating practical misery into transcendental bliss, have spoken lyrically about the universal spirit which creates itself . . .

the substance of my being, my universal activity, and actuality, my personality, . . .⁶⁰

but here we find what this "self-creativity" actually looks like in material terms.

When Alexander Herzen demanded to know from the idealists why "under this absolute scheme of existence workmen starve in Birmingham and Manchester",⁶¹ he had a real point. Puncture the

⁵⁸ Technically profit is really a *part* of surplus value, if we separate it from what the capitalist must pay out in rent and interest.

⁵⁹ *Capital*, I, p. 176.

⁶⁰ Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right* (Oxford, 1967), p. 54: but the quotation of course appears in *Capital* itself, p. 168.

⁶¹ Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works* (Moscow, 1956), p. 88.

mystery and the bombastic ecstasies which surround the "self-creating spirit" and what do we find? The exploited worker from the sale of whose labour-power values worth two or three times its own value are produced—a miracle indeed! Commodity fetishism assumes even more monstrous disguises when the worker himself is involved.

The philosophical weapon which enables Marx so effectively to combat this dense fog of illusions is, as we have seen, the materialist distinction between reality and appearances, and it is the essence of my argument that this distinction can only be based on the theory of reflection. It is not merely that Marx implies a need to sort out things as they appear from things as they really are: he *explicitly* and repeatedly stresses that without this distinction no science is possible. All science, he says in the third volume of *Capital*,

would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided,⁶²

for the truth is that phenomena like the commodity are deceptively simple "on the surface of things". It is always easier to be "vulgar" (i.e. superficial) than to be scientific and record "the estranged outward appearances of economic relations" while ignoring "the internal relationships" upon which these are based. The truth is often seemingly paradoxical: profit is made under capitalism and yet goods exchange under perfect competition *at their values*. This undeniably happens and yet it is "contrary to everyday observation".

It is also paradox that the earth moves round the sun, and that water consists of two highly inflammable gases. Scientific truth is always paradox, if judged by everyday experience which catches only the delusive appearance of things.⁶³

But how can we distinguish truth from appearances unless we say that one is a misleading *reflection* of the other? And how can we fight for the truth *in place of* appearances (a relative journey towards absolute truth), unless we understand science as a truthful reflection of what is really going on? Marx not only emphasises the need to distinguish reality from appearances,⁶⁴ he explicitly links this point with his basic theory of reflection. In a passage dealing with Ricardo's "great

⁶² *Capital*, III (Lawrence and Wishart, 1966), p. 817.

⁶³ *Wages, Price and Profit* (Moscow, 1947), pp. 31–32.

⁶⁴ There is further discussion on this in N. Geras, "Essence and Appearance: Aspects of Fetishism in Marx's *Capital*", *New Left Review* 65, and David Goldway, "Appearance and Reality in Marx's *Capital*", *Science and Society*, 1967.

historical significance for science", in his *Theories of Surplus Value*, Marx explains how Ricardo's stress on the determination of value by labour time creates the means for understanding the very basis, the "internal organic coherence and life process" of the bourgeois system: it enables him

to elucidate how far a science which in fact only *reflects* and reproduces the manifest forms of the process, and therefore also how far these manifestations themselves, correspond to the basis on which the inner coherence, the actual physiology of bourgeois society rests; and in general, to examine how matters stand with the contradiction between the apparent and actual movement of the system⁶⁵ (stress mine).

I shall return again to this extremely significant passage, but for the moment it is stressed in order to emphasise how, for Marx, the distinction between the apparent and the real, the inner and the outer—distinctions crucial to living science—necessarily *presume* the theory of reflection. Unless ideas reflect reality, then talk about reflecting the manifest forms as opposed to reflecting the inner structure would make no sense at all. The Marxian concept of science hinges pivotally on this crucial point.

It is therefore no exaggeration to say that the famous words in Marx's preface to the second (German) edition of *Capital* actually summarise the philosophical importance of the theory of reflection to his *entire* thesis. For Hegel, Marx says, the real world is "only the external, phenomenal form of 'the Idea'", while

with me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind and translated into forms of thought.⁶⁶

We have seen from just a glance at some of the ideas in *Capital* why this remark is profoundly significant: but what is the praxis response to black-and-white testimony to the fact that Marx *himself* endorsed reflection theory? Coulter quotes these words and says bravely: this

will not suffice, of course, for the imputation to Marx of a mechanistic representationism,⁶⁷

but what evidence do we need? Of course, this comment of Marx's is no isolated, "chance remark" which can be seized upon in abstraction from the rest of his work. On the contrary, it is because Marx's *explicit*

⁶⁵ *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part II (Lawrence and Wishart, 1969), p. 166.

⁶⁶ *Capital* I, op. cit., p. 19.

⁶⁷ Coulter, op. cit., p. 131.

endorsement of the theory of reflection in this well-known preface admirably captures the philosophical tone and substance of what is to follow, that the comment stands as irrefutable evidence that praxis inventions about Engels' "deviations" from Marx's "true" theory of knowledge are completely without foundation.

The division between Marx and Engels on the theory of reflection, like the division between Marx and Engels on the dialectics of nature, is simply another praxis fiction. Praxis theory is at loggerheads not simply with Lenin or Engels: it is at loggerheads with Marx himself.

Marx not only expressly embraced the theory of reflection, but he and Engels expressly repudiated the opposing formulations of the praxis theorists of their own day—the Young Hegelians. When Korsch insists that Marx and Engels have been misunderstood because

the *coincidence of consciousness and reality* characterises every dialectic, including Marx's dialectical materialism,⁶⁸

he produces the precise argument which Marx and Engels had as early as 1845 categorically rejected as sheer mysticism. *The Holy Family* states explicitly that being and consciousness are of necessity *distinct*, and this means of course that theory and practice cannot, philosophically speaking, form a "mystic identity" which expresses unity at the expense of differentiation.

The speculative *mystic identity of being and thinking* is repeated in *Criticism* as the equally mystic identity of *practice and theory*,⁶⁹

a "practice *in abstracto*". And yet what is modern "praxis" if it is not an updated version of this old "practice *in abstracto*"?

Lukacs, in a work which he later admits was an attempt to out-Hegel Hegel, argues for the same "mystic identity" which the polemic against the Young Hegelians already rejected: no separation of subject and object is theoretically possible, "the Hegelian-dialectical identification of thought and existence . . . is also in essence the philosophy of historical materialism";⁷⁰ he does so again in the most notorious formulation of *History and Class Consciousness*—

the proletariat is at one and the same time the subject and object of its own knowledge . . .⁷¹

—a sentiment which might have emanated from the very mouths of the "critically critical" Bauer brothers over seventy years before.

⁶⁸ Korsch, op. cit., pp. 77–78. ⁶⁹ Op. cit., p. 255. ⁷⁰ Lukacs, op. cit., p. 34.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

But if it is now clear that praxis theory prefers to overlook the polemic fate of its (somewhat obscure) predecessors and persists in ascribing its own position to Marx, it does not necessarily follow that, because the target of their attack is Karl Marx, all their criticisms must be wrong. What are we to say, for example, of the argument that the distinction stressed by Marx between consciousness on the one hand, and being on the other, leads to dualism, or that the theory of reflection implies an inherent passivity.

It is essential therefore, before leaving this subject, to say something on

(iii) *Dualism, Passivity and the Theory of Reflection*

According to Korsch, any attempt to distinguish between objective reality and the world of ideas must lead to a metaphysical dualism which can only undermine the dialectical unity which exists between theory and practice, consciousness and being. Lukacs, likewise, was adamant on this point:

in the theory of "reflection" we find the theoretical embodiment of the duality of thought and existence, consciousness and reality, that is so intractable to the reified consciousness. And from *that point of view* it is immaterial whether things are to be regarded as reflections of concepts or whether concepts are reflections of things. In both cases the duality is firmly established.⁷²

And a similar stance is taken by Lefebvre and Petrovic.

What is the validity of the criticism? Is it not unsatisfactory, indeed even positivistic, to imply that consciousness, on the one hand, and objective reality on the other, inhabit separate worlds? Clearly it is if it is not *also* pointed out—as of course every Marxist does—that the *difference* between consciousness and being in no way excludes their ultimate and absolute *unity*. In other words, Marxism is *dialectical* materialism, and emphatically stresses that the same world of matter exists of necessity in an infinity of *qualitatively* different forms.

Marx and Engels, and Lenin after them, explicitly repudiated the view that materialism could make no progress beyond the mechanical conceptions of Holbach or Hobbes: on the contrary, Engels for example, in *Dialectics of Nature*, pointed out that motion, the intrinsic mode of existence of all matter,

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 200.

is not merely crude mechanical motion, mere change of place, it is heat and light, electric and magnetic tension, chemical combination and dissociation, life and finally consciousness.⁷³

Now each of these forms is related in the sense that they are all ultimately material: but if they are united, they are also *qualitatively* distinct, for each constitutes matter at a different stage in its process of evolution. The activity of consciousness, in other words, is material, but it is "matter which thinks", and hence has quite distinct properties all of its own. There can be no absolute dualism between thought and being because conscious beings are 100 per cent material from top to toe!

We have then something which is linked with the rest of the material world and at the same time, as a *specific* form of matter, has peculiarities of its own. What is the problem? The problem is this: that praxis theory for all its dialectical gestures and Hegelian phraseology has yet to grasp the basic point that nothing in the world is *either* endowed with particular properties *or* simply undifferentiated from everything else, *either* something particular *or* something universal: it is of necessity *both*. Each form of matter is quite specific: but each form of matter is also *related* to every other form, and it is in this relationship that we find its *universal* content. In other words, something which is *purely* unique (is "only" a particular) can no more exist than something which is *purely* universal (i.e. has no specific form). As Lenin puts it,

matter is primary. Sensation, thought, consciousness are the *supreme* product of matter organised in a *particular* way.⁷⁴

The fact that thinking is a specific form of activity does not make it any the less material on that account.

But if we say that consciousness is ultimately part and parcel of the material world as a whole, why do we constantly contrast consciousness and being, mind and matter, as though they were something different? In order to *explain* that consciousness, unlike other forms of matter, has the *specific* capacity to *reflect* the real world. The contrast, in other words, between the two is, as Lenin correctly shows, an epistemological one: it is not intended to suggest that because the mind reflects matter, it cannot at the same time be matter "which reflects". In fact, precisely the opposite is true: it is *because* thinking is a material activity with properties of its own that we are able to explain how it takes place. If consciousness lacked its *distinct* material mode of

⁷³ *Dialectics of Nature*, op. cit., p. 37.

⁷⁴ *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, op. cit., p. 44.

existence, then its reflective capacity would be a mystery: and if consciousness had *no* material mode of existence, then its capacity to reflect would be a miracle. Neither the mechanistic position nor the "spiritualist" position makes any sense at all.

To insist then with Karl Korsch that Lenin "goes back to the absolute polarities of 'thought' and 'being', 'spirit' and 'matter'" when these were dualistic polarities which Hegel had "already surpassed",⁷⁵ is wrong on both counts. *Firstly* because Lenin explicitly asserts the absolute unity of mind and matter, theory and practice, and *secondly* because Hegel, contrary to Korsch's uncritical comment, *fails* to overcome dualism because in the last analysis (as I have already tried to show) he is unable to explain the origin of consciousness and therefore is obliged to render the contrast between mind and matter not merely epistemologically relative but substantively *absolute*. His dialectic between thought and being dissolves of necessity into mysticism.

The charge then that the theory of reflection is dualistic is both incorrect and ironic. It is incorrect because neither Marx, Engels nor Lenin ever asserted that human consciousness was anything other than a *form* of matter and hence a part of the material world, and ironic because the charge levelled against Marxism can with real justification be put at the door of praxis instead.

Petrovic argues, for example, that it is not possible to establish primacy within Marx's "naturalism-humanism" because thinking is as much a part of activity as all other aspects of a human being whose praxis is indissolubly whole. How "dialectical"! Everything is related to everything else and no element is prior to any other! But merely to *assert* as Lefebvre does that thinking and being are always dialectically related through praxis, does not answer the question, what precisely is this relationship? For here two problems immediately arise. The first is that of the practical impossibility of arguing that it is undialectical to separate (even epistemologically) consciousness and being. If as is alleged, thinking is identical to being in *all* respects, how then can we give it a separate form of its own, for it is not merely "dualistic" Marxists who separate thought from being, it is the theorists of praxis. Petrovic tells us, for instance, that

in his spiritual activity, man is perhaps more creative than anywhere else,⁷⁶

but if it were really true that thinking is even relatively indistinguishable from other forms of being, how could we argue in

⁷⁵ *Marxism and Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 116.

⁷⁶ Petrovic, op. cit., p. 197.

this way? After all, praxis theorists repeatedly refer to the *unity* of theory and practice, spirit and being, but things which are identical to one another in every particular are not *united* with each other, for they have no *separate* identity to begin with.

One can no more metaphysically separate the universal from the particular than one can tear apart unity and difference. If two things are united together that can only be because they are *also* different. Praxis theory, in arguing that theory and practice, consciousness and being form a unity, thereby acknowledges that "matter" and mind, epistemologically contrasted, are not identical in every respect. Like the "dualistic" Marxists, the theorists of unified praxis are also obliged to "separate" thinking and being.

This is the first problem which their critique on this score runs into. The second problem arises from their argument that because theory and practice form a unity, then no assertion of the primacy of one over the other need follow. As Schmidt puts it, "reality reflects men's practice, as much as their practice reflects reality".⁷⁷ No dogmatic "monism" is needed, for what we have is a mechanical see-saw, and all in the name of the Praxical Dialectic. And this means of course that in rejecting the *materialist* distinction between consciousness and being, dualism in its most obvious form emerges; for out of the entanglement of relationships, all we can point to is theory on the one hand, and praxis on the other. Neither is "reducible" to the other: they are united to each other and yet are apart.

In practice, of course, this position is not only superficial: it is quite untenable. For as Lenin rightly observes in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, it is quite impossible to define *two* ultimate concepts of epistemology, both mind and matter, except by means of a definition which brings the one within the more comprehensive scope of the other.⁷⁸ And there have been Marxists like Antonio Gramsci who have mistakenly argued that Marxism rejects the materialist outlook because "the nature of man is spirit" . . . as he puts it,

the concept of "objective" in metaphysical materialism appears to mean an objectivity which exists even outside man, but to assert that reality would exist even if man did not exist is either to state a metaphor or to fall into a form of mysticism. We know reality only in its relations with man, and just as man is an historical process of becoming, so also knowledge and reality are a becoming, and objectivity is a becoming etc.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Schmidt, op. cit., p. 224.

⁷⁸ *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, op. cit., p. 107.

⁷⁹ *The Modern Prince*, op. cit., p. 107.

Now this is subjective idealism pure and simple, but it is expressed with a *monistic* consistency—the primacy of thought over reality—which is rarely found in praxis theory where a dualism of “interrelationships” is blandly asserted as the solution to those absolute polarities of thought and being in which Marxism is supposed to indulge.

Of course, even *consistent* idealism lands up in the trough of absurdity—as we have seen with Marx’s critique of the Hegelian dialectic, where in order to explain the *origin* of Thought, one encounters the paradox of consciousness really being something without being something real: consciousness has to be given an independent objectivity in order to deny that there is one. In the last analysis, the nonsense of an abstract thought unable to think concretely erodes all idealist epistemology, whatever its consistency: but the shallow dualism in praxis philosophy makes its accusations against Marxism seem especially ironic.

If then the charge that reflection theory leads to dualism backfires, what of the second accusation, that this theory implies a relationship of man to the world around him which is *essentially passive*? By presenting knowledge as a reflection of objective being in subjective consciousness, Lenin and his followers, says Korsch, “present knowledge merely as a passive mirror”.⁸⁰ This claim is made similarly by Sartre. Coulter refers scathingly to reflection theory as depicting cognition in terms of static isomorphism, a mere photographic image,⁸¹ while Schmidt protests that if all consciousness can do is to mirror the world of facts, how is it possible for men to change it?⁸² Lukacs for his part considers the “objectivism” of reflection theory more appropriate to the “reified” thinking which is characteristic of false consciousness under capitalism: it is an attitude which passively accepts the external world as “readymade and unchangeable”. Of course we judge thought by reality, but what is reality? It is a process of *becoming*—“and to become, the participation of thought is needed”. Once this is realised, “the question of whether thought is a reflection appears quite senseless”.⁸³

Now clearly if this charge stands—that reflection theory implies passivity—then indeed Marx’s theory is in serious trouble, for this would mean that it asserts that men must *change* their world and are themselves productive, creative beings who increasingly mould nature

⁸⁰ Korsch, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

⁸¹ Coulter, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

⁸² Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁸³ *History and Class Consciousness*, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

in their own image, and yet would appear to be embracing a theory of knowledge which condemns them to the role of spectators who look on helplessly at the world around them. At the heart of Marxism there would gnaw a dreadful inconsistency, and in fact it is just such an inconsistency which is alleged by Alfred Sohn-Rethel (a thinker of the “critical” Frankfurt school), in a reference he makes to

a certain incompatibility between two materialist ways of thinking, one tracing the basic principles of knowledge to a root in “social existence”, the other deriving them from the “external world” by way of “abstraction” and “reflection”.⁸⁴

To get to the roots of this problem, the real question to be answered is this: if Marx, Engels and Lenin consider Marxism to be a reflective process—a process of abstraction—how do they see this process of thinking actually taking place? And despite all the sound and fury about the passivity which reflection theory “of necessity” implies, nowhere can one find a *single* reference in the classic works of Marxism to thinking as a *passive* process. On the contrary, in all the texts, the position is made crystal clear: men are beings who distinguish themselves from other animals through *producing* their means of subsistence, but they cannot produce the material means of life without at the same time producing their conceptions about this life. Consciousness, that is to say, is an *activity*, a *practical* process, for it is, when all is said and done, the conscious dimension of the production process itself. As Marx puts it in the famous passage in *Capital*:

what distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in his imagination before he erects it in reality.⁸⁵

It is quite impossible to humanly produce without the aid of human thinking. No form of human practice is possible without the presence of theory, so that when Marxism calls for the unity of theory and practice it is simply demanding the *conscious* recognition of what in fact has always been the case. The distinction between theory and being, is a *relative* one: it is not and cannot be absolute, for men cannot act at all unless they also think.

“Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence”: the assertion that consciousness is a practical activity is

⁸⁴ “Historical materialist theory of knowledge”, *Marxism Today* (April 1965), p. 118.

⁸⁵ *Capital*, I, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

made throughout Marx and Engels' writing—in the *German Ideology*, the *Theses on Feuerbach*, etc., and of course in the particular works of Engels including *Anti-Dühring* and the *Dialectics of Nature*.⁸⁶

Indeed, not only is there no evidence that Marx and Engels conceived of thinking as a passive process, but it is precisely because they understood consciousness to be a practical activity that they also insisted that it was a process of reflection. Those who reject the theory of reflection have not really understood the production process itself. And why? Because production is only possible because the world has a material reality independent of human production. Unless the subjects of labour—earth, water, timber, mineral ores, etc.—as “spontaneously provided by nature” exist “independently” of man,⁸⁷ production cannot take place.

If we take away the useful labour expended upon . . . [commodities] a material substratum is always left which is furnished by Nature *without the help of man*. The latter can only work as Nature does, that is by changing the form of matter⁸⁸ (stress mine).

The objective independence of the external world is an essential precondition for all human activity and it is the very production process itself which gives the lie to the praxis view that somehow or other the knowable world is the production of man. Now once we establish the necessity of an objective reality, there is only one way in which man can successfully act upon this objective reality, and that is by reproducing in his head the objects which he needs to transform in the outside world. The earth, the rocks, the fish, the animals, the fruit—man's “original larder” and his tool house—these objects and implements of human production can only be evident to man if, as objective realities, they are reflected in his mind. Otherwise we may well ask: how could he discover them? Human practice would have been stifled at birth if men were unable to reflect with some measure of accuracy the world external to them, for without reflection it is impossible to identify, distinguish, recognise and thus change. When men produce, they do in fact practically *abstract* objects, sticks and stones, plants and animals, from their natural surroundings, and it is only this practical abstraction in material reality which enables theoretical images of the “abstracted objects” to develop in the

⁸⁶ See for example, Engels' explicit critique of the “empiricism of observation”, in *Dialectics of Nature*, p. 233.

⁸⁷ *Capital*, I, op. cit., p. 178.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

mind—ideal abstractions which reflect in one way or another this activity in the real world.

There is nothing passive, in other words, about reflection at all. Were men simply to gaze “contemplatively” at material reality—although to an exploiter this “appearance” seems to fit the facts—they would not only starve their bodies, they would starve their minds, for they would give themselves no reason to think at all. A “contemplative” mind would be universally blank. Anyone who doubts this ought simply to look at the way in which a child learns to speak and think, for there is assuredly nothing passive or static about this process. Reflecting reality is a protracted practical process with even the simplest of abstractions—our everyday words—involving a veritable infinity of practical moments, of active experience. Indeed, it is precisely the failure of mechanical materialism to understand reflection as a practical, creative process that causes it to lurch into subjective idealism, and it is little wonder that Berkeley could turn Lockean empiricism upside down with such brilliant ease. After all, it is only because reflection is in fact an essentially active process, that we can *prove* the existence of that external reality our minds reflect.

And so yet again the tables are turned on the arguments of the praxis school. Not only is the theory of reflection consistent with an understanding of knowledge as conscious *practice*, but it is only because ideas do in fact reflect the real world that human practice is possible. Lukacs himself, despite his fierce attacks on Marxism in *History and Class Consciousness*, was to later realise just how childishy nihilistic the praxis critique of reflection theory in fact is. In view of the persistent obsession with the errors of a Lukacs who is now only of “historical interest”, I quote his recent repudiation of earlier praxis follies:

the most primitive kind of work, such as the quarrying of stones by primeval man, implies a correct reflection of the reality he is concerned with. For no purposive activity can be carried out in the absence of an image, however crude, of the practical reality involved. Practice can only be a fulfilment and a criterion of theory when it is based on what is held to be a correct reflection of reality.⁸⁹

All reflective images are formed through practice, and their truth content can thus only be ascertained in the same way that the images themselves were formed—through practice, for how else can we set about finding out whether the images in people's heads correspond to the reality of the external world?

⁸⁹ Lukacs, op. cit., p. xxv.

Of course, this reality comes to be increasingly man-made with the advance of agriculture and industry, but this does not alter the reflection theory one iota, for even reality which is man-made does not automatically correspond accurately to the idea thrown up in people's minds. It still remains a material "thing-in-itself" even though human activity has played a part in its creation: a stratum outside the mind. Men's tools, their social relations, are still *material* realities because, although human consciousness has played a direct part in their formation, what the mind does in practice is a very different kettle of fish from what the mind may actually think it is doing in theory. This is why the fetishism of the commodity itself (as discussed earlier) arises: men by producing in an exploitative and one-sided fashion necessarily mystify themselves in the process. Indeed, it is precisely because theory and practice themselves are objective realities only partially and imperfectly reflected by the mind, that our debate arises in the first place.

It is clear, then, that the praxis critique of the theory of reflection is ironic and mistaken: it is not only that praxis theory is guilty of the charges it levels against Marxism in the matter of dualism, it is not difficult to show that its own rival epistemology (if such it can be called) leads inevitably to the very passivity of which Marxism is accused. One need only look at the theory of Sartre to see the dismal recipe for despair, impotence and confusion which it offers as its "critical critique". Consider, for example, Sartre's argument that the revelation of a situation is effected in and through the praxis which changes it. "The action", Sartre tells us, "*in the course of its accomplishment, provides its own clarification*",⁹⁰ but what does this mean? Supposing we have two contrary courses of action, each providing its own variety of self-clarification in the course of its accomplishment, which would we see as correct? After all, we cannot choose the course which corresponds to the needs of the situation, because then we would be guilty of "mechanistically" viewing active thought as a *reflection* of reality, whereas what we need to do is to find the truth through praxis itself. But how? By some sort of adventurous leap into the dark? It is not too difficult to see that what Sartre's theory boils down to is the belief that there are as many "truths" as there are praxical actors to make them—a paralysing philosophical *relativism* which would make considered and rational action quite impossible. For whenever we acted, we would be trapped in the confines of our own activity, having no external world by which to measure the

⁹⁰ *Search for a Method*, op. cit., p. 32.

extent of our failure or success. Slithering towards a suffocating subjectivism, our "praxis", following occasional outbursts of irrational "activism", would simply relapse into that very state of contemplative passivity of which our critics so thoughtlessly accuse Marxism.

Indeed, without the theory of reflection, praxis can only degenerate into some kind of mystical "creativity" (that most beloved of words!) which makes no impact on any world other than that of its own fiery ego. Certainly it seems increasingly far removed from the practice of the every-day world. Engels, for example, is accused of making a "monumental error" when he presumes that by "practice" we mean that human activity which makes things. Not at all, not at all! Praxis is not practice, snaps an outraged Lukacs, fulminating against Engels for asserting in a well-known passage,

if we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of a natural process by making it ourselves, bringing it into being out of its conditions and making it serve our own purposes, then there is an end to the ungraspable Kantian "thing-in-itself".⁹¹

Guilty! cries Lukacs of "an almost incomprehensible terminological confusion", for Engels as a materialist seems to think that there is a reality outside of us—"in-itself", which we understand as we transform it, making it into a thing "for-us". Not so! Everything is "for us" since *we* are the creators of the world whether we realise it or not, and since there is no objectivity outside the mind, nothing real "in-itself", there appears to be no need for any practical investigation to find anything out. After all, Engels' "deepest misunderstanding", says Lukacs, consists of his belief that "the behaviour of industry and scientific experiment constitutes praxis in the dialectical, philosophical sense",⁹² whereas "in fact scientific experiment is contemplation at its purest". It is not natural science or material production which is "creative": it is only "dialectical praxis" itself. But if praxis is not technology or production, what then is it? Lukacs, an authentic member of that "Holy Family" whom Marx and Engels had ridiculed so many years before, answers: it is that mysterious and purely speculative identity of theory and practice which emerges in our conscious acts of self-creation, for since consciousness is itself "self-consciousness of the object", "*the act of consciousness overthrows the objective form of the object*",⁹³ and the spirit of "free activity" reigns supreme. For praxis, man is the Secular Creator, and he provides in the

⁹¹ *Ludwig Feuerbach*; cited by Lukacs, p. 131.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

course of his creativity all the criteria and the justification his activity needs. Everything is swallowed in the Solipsistic Whole.

The truth is that praxis theory is neither rational, critical nor "activist". By rejecting the existence of an objective world which the mind reflects, it surrenders reason to arbitrariness and subjectivism; by converting human practice into a mystical "divinity", it makes science impossible, and in place of the distinction between appearance and reality (which Marx so frequently stresses) we have only "the illusions of the epoch"—"self-clarifying" and self-vindicating courses of action. Indeed, to search for the truth about praxis behind the mystifying fog of its menacing appearances is to present its theoretical endeavours in a most unflattering practical light. For everything against which the praxis theorists contend turns back against them: the philosophy they deny continues to haunt them, the assumptions about nature they would exclude stubbornly remain, while the theory of reflection which the praxis writers abuse and attack with redoubled fury emerges all the stronger as a result. For what does the praxis theory of knowledge itself prove? It proves beyond doubt that *without* a theory of reflection no theory can extricate itself from mysticism and crippling subjectivity. Even praxis theory, in order to make itself *intelligible*, must employ the weapons of the enemy in its own defence, for it can only make its case on the presumption that its own ideas *reflect* the truth, *correspond* to reality, *copy* things as they actually are, whereas the ideas of "orthodox", "dogmatic" Marxism do not. Without conceding at the start the correctness of the theory of reflection, the theorists of praxis cannot even *begin* to refute it. Indeed, there are times when they acknowledge this unhappy paradox with disarming bluntness.

Karl Korsch, for example, is quite certain: the theory of reflection is not dialectical—it is "naïve realism". But if this is so, how are we to explain the rise of Marxism? There is only one answer: through this self-same "naïve realism"! The development of Marxist theory, writes Korsch,

was never just the production of "purely theoretical" study; it was always a theoretical *reflection* of the latest practical experiences of the class struggle (stress mine),⁹⁴

and he is of course, his "naïveté" notwithstanding, quite correct, for how else could it be explained? Schmidt who rests his case upon the purely sophistical argument that there is somehow an epistemological distinction to be made between material reality which men have

⁹⁴ Korsch, op. cit., p. 104.

helped to mould and material reality which they have not—anything else is "naïve realism"—comments with happy oblivion:

in modern times extra-human natural existence has been reduced more and more to a function of human social organisation. The philosophical *reflection* of this is that the determinations of objectivity have entered in greater and greater measure into the Subject . . .⁹⁵ (stress mine).

And Avineri, who unequivocally condemns the theory of reflection as "conservative" and "quietist", etc., does not hesitate to fall back upon it whenever he finds himself in a tight corner. He tells the reader, for example, that although Marx's categories are the product of a given socio-historical context, this does not mean they have a purely relativist significance, and why?

Precisely because the categories reflect a historical reality; the more developed and more complex the reflected reality, the more truthful and adequate the categories relating to it.⁹⁶

We can, it seems, all be "naïve" when it suits us. "Naïveté" of course has its strengths as well as weaknesses, and "naïve realism"—it is really *mechanical* materialism to which praxis writers allude—rests upon a dogged conviction born of practice that there is of necessity something "out there". The real problem with "naïve realism" is not that it is materialist, but that it is inadequately or *inconsistently* materialist and, for all its materialist "hunches", it has yet to break free from that exploitative world outlook which poses everything metaphysically, a world where everything is fixed and rigid: the communication is

"yea, yea; nay, nay"; for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil". . . . Positive and negative absolutely exclude one another; cause and effect stand in a rigid antithesis one to the other.⁹⁷

As Engels points out in this memorable passage, the apparently luminous method of so-called sound common sense, happy within his own four walls, is catastrophically unable to cope in the outside world. For how do we prove the reality of the outside world if we are unable to think in opposites? The "naïveté" of mechanistic realism brings it (as I have already argued) to the absurdity of imprisoning the thinker in his own sense-data, precisely because it sees in matter only unity and identity: it fails to see movement and differentiation. If everything is

⁹⁵ Schmidt, op. cit., p. 28.

⁹⁶ Avineri, op. cit., p. 64.

⁹⁷ *Anti-Dühring*, op. cit., pp. 34–35.

matter, then, argues common-sensical realism, it must be all the same: between the musician and nightingale there is only "a difference in organisation". But it is precisely this *difference* in organisation which gives consciousness its own distinct, qualitative identity: which makes consciousness the consciousness of distinctively human practice, endowed with a property which no other mode of existence of matter possesses: the material ability to rationally reflect matter. Common sense thinks mechanically: because the brain is material, it concludes that it responds to its environment as "passively" and purposelessly as appears the case with all other forms. If consciousness is the "same" as matter, how then can it be different?

It is characteristic of the entire crudeness of "common sense" . . . that where it succeeds in seeing a distinction it fails to see a unity, and where it sees a unity it fails to see a distinction,⁹⁸

and this of course is brilliantly said. *Either* thinking is absolutely identical with all other forms of material activity, or it is a self-explaining miracle. Praxis theory naturally enough is too "adventurous" to accept the first: so that in place of the first, it puts the second. Turning common sense inside out, it throws out the realism, but adheres to the naïveté, so that the implicit one-sidedness and subjectivism of mechanical materialism is brought proudly to the fore. It is the theoretical creativity of praxis which rules the world!

"Naïve realism" is not transcended by accepting its assumptions and then standing them on their head. If it is naïve to think that consciousness is "simply" being (without its own properties), so too is it naïve to imagine that being is simply consciousness (i.e. without any material properties at all). Praxis theory, in rejecting the theory of reflection, rejects the strengths of mechanical materialism with its *attempt*, inconsistent as it was, to understand matter, and instead inherits, builds upon and unthinkingly glorifies all its most pivotal weaknesses.

It does not even stand up to the criticisms of common sense.

⁹⁸ Marx's review, *Die moralisierende Kritik und die kritische Moral*, cited by Schmidt, op. cit., p. 50.

6

BASIS AND SUPERSTRUCTURE

The well-known Marxist analysis of base and superstructure follows on directly from the question discussed in the last chapter, namely the primacy of material being to the human consciousness which reflects it. This link between epistemology and social theory is forged quite explicitly in Marx's famous Preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, where, elaborating upon a position already expounded in *The German Ideology*, Marx explains how men as social producers enter into productive relations which correspond to a given stage in the development of their productive forces; these relations form a social basis to which correspond legal and political superstructures, and are reflected in definite forms of social consciousness. Being determines consciousness, so that consciousness "must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production".¹ It is clear then that the Marxist theory of history rests foursquare upon the premises of dialectical materialism, and that unless one accepts the materialist theory of reflection the entire thesis of historical materialism, so admirably expounded in the Preface, simply falls to the ground.

Lenin makes this clear in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* when he stresses that reflection theory holds *both* for dialectical materialism and historical materialism, and adds—a famous comment—that

from this Marxist philosophy, which is cast from a single piece of steel, you cannot eliminate one basic premise, one essential part, without departing from objective truth, without falling prey to bourgeois-reactionary falsehood.²

The notion that when we come to explaining social history the materialist theory of reflection no longer holds is self-evidently absurd, because of course it is precisely in the context of society that the dialectical materialist concept of consciousness becomes relevant. The fact that Marx in the Preface above expounds reflection theory in terms of human society does not mean that the primacy of being to

¹ Preface to the *Critique*, op. cit., p. 21.

² Lenin, op. cit., p. 306.