

*Marxism and the Theory
of Praxis*

A critique of some new versions
of old fallacies

by

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1975

LAWRENCE & WISHART

LONDON

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THE PROMISE OF PRAXIS—AN END TO POSITIVISM?

(i) "Non-Practical Thinking" in Contemporary Positivism

Theory and practice: the two must unite! This cry of protest is to be heard everywhere today by those who find their interest in philosophy and society sabotaged and sidetracked by the scholasticism and "academicism" of much of official philosophical thought and by many of the attitudes and postures adopted in the social sciences.

Some even regard the term "science" as a dirty word, for "science" today is often taken to mean theory without practice, facts without values, technical knowledge without human consideration. Science, we are told, can only be concerned with "means": what actually happens to knowledge is somebody else's concern. Indeed so extreme has this "agnosticism" become, that Marx's famous dictum has been explicitly turned on to its head so that one social scientist has written that "the function of science is to understand and interpret the world, not to change it".¹ It is scarcely surprising, then, that much academic social science seems pointless and trivial—a body of work more concerned with methodological technique than with serious social criticism.

A leading U.S. sociologist once described his "conceptual framework" as "non-practical theory" and, ironically, he had a point: for learned works on "pure theory" are unlikely to assist in solving social problems, while the professional desire to be "value-free" often means in practice robbing work of its *value* for society. The attempt to keep value judgments out of social science is simply a back-handed way of supporting the *status quo*.

Fewer and fewer people today take seriously the claim that it is possible to be "impartial" (i.e. *indifferent*) towards the class-divided society in which we live. Indeed, it was precisely this cloak of "neutrality" which thousands of natural and social scientists in the U.S. used to try to conceal their complicity in the slaughter, bombing and defoliation which the Americans and their South Vietnamese puppets practised in Vietnam. Radicals like Noam Chomsky have courageously

¹ Heinz Eulau, *The Behavioral Persuasion in Politics* (New York, 1963), p. 9.

dialectical—a Marx who can serve as textual justification for the theory of praxis.

It cannot be done: for the *Manuscripts* or the *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* do not, in the last analysis, really strengthen the praxis case: they *weaken* it. For the Marx they claim to have found is so obviously developing “beyond himself”, is so patently *dissatisfied* with the idealist heritage in which he himself has been schooled, that his own rapid movement beyond praxis thinking and the scathing critique to which he and Engels proceed to subject it adds still further evidence against the praxis case. For if Marx *himself* has sampled the shallow mysteries of a practice *in abstracto* and thrown them out, is it surprising that his followers should do the same?

Engels for his part followed a very similar road to that of Marx, while Lenin was certainly familiar with much of the earlier writing, if not the 1844 *Manuscripts*. If he was interested, he was not overwhelmed, for he writes in *State and Revolution* that Marx's *mature* writing only really begins in 1847, when with the polemic against Proudhon Marx goes beyond a repudiation of mere ideas about “theory” and “practice” and gets to grips with an analysis of capitalism itself. If there are no mysterious “breaks” in Marx's work, of which some writers speak, there is certainly historical development, and it is this simple point which the ideology of praxis is determined to ignore.

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PRACTICE AND POSITIVISM

In the first chapter of this book, I briefly sketched in some of the background to the praxis debate, arguing that the cultural climate of our society is being poisoned by a reactionary cynicism and scholastic passivity, whose philosophical basis stems from positivism. For positivism, as Marx pointed out in his doctoral thesis, represents a “turning inward of philosophy”,¹ so that in place of a *critical* role for thought which relates itself to the problems of reality, there is a growing mysticism about thought for its own sake. This “turning inward”, adds Marx, leads to perversity, indeed, “insanity as such”,² and I have already touched on some of the reasons why a doctrine which denies reality and rejects reason is a menace to the future of mankind.

Of course, positivism assumes a multiplicity of faces, but my concern here is not with what differentiates one positivist from another, but rather with what differentiates positivism in general from that rationalism and materialism which Marxism alone can consistently defend. Many of the nihilistic theories which are currently fashionable blithely imagine that they have transcended positivism simply because they have outstripped one variety of subjective idealism by another even *more* reactionary, mystical kind. Scepticism has escalated into a veritable *cult* of superficiality, so that the “old fashioned” empiricists, often “instinctively” rational and humane, have become alarmed at the growing subjectivism of the self-styled *avant garde*, and are disagreeably struck by the thought that in continuing to embrace the same philosophy of empiricism they may well be witnessing a future image of themselves.

In this postwar climate of triviality and obscurantism, the growing concern among radicals with the practical consequences of thought and the social ends which it serves is surely welcome, particularly as it is often accompanied by an interest in Marxist theory. But if this concern is *welcome*, its expression through the theory of praxis is not, for the concept of praxis represents an *attack* on Marxism and can do nothing to improve the present climate of thought, for it continues to express many of its worst features.

¹ *Writings of the Young Marx*, op. cit., p. 63.

² *Ibid.*

Indeed, nowhere do the critical pretensions of the praxis school appear more transparent than in its *real* attitudes towards positivism. Of course, in appearance the theory of praxis poses as an uncompromising adversary to the positivist outlook, its resolute antithesis, and in fact adopts "positivism" as one of its chosen words of abuse. There is scarcely a single aspect of the Marxist "orthodoxy", from dialectics to reflection theory, from philosophy to determinism, which is not denounced as "positivist", "empiricist", "mechanistic" and so on; but as Marxists we cannot rest content with the frothy surface-appearance of this struggle, but should pause a moment, and then ask: how *real* is the praxis opposition to its apparent *bête noire*? How effectively does praxis theory *in fact* go beyond the foundations of positivist thought?

To answer this question, the simplest thing to do is to return to the themes which I have already explored, and see whether there is any real difference between the position of positivism and the theories of those who consider themselves the deadly enemies of empiricist thought.

(i) *Marxism as a Philosophy*

The basic premise of all positivism is its belief that not merely is knowledge derived through the senses, which of course is true, but that knowledge is derived through the senses in such a way as to cause us to actually *doubt* the objective reality of the outside world. For the process of knowing is seen as something *passive*, a mere act of observation, so that the meaning of the universe and its objective movement are blocked out by a wall of subjectively conceived "experience". David Hume was the most brilliant (and perceptive) exponent of this viewpoint.

Hume asserts the view that "all the laws of nature and all the operations of bodies without exception are known only by experience",³ and this assertion is an important antidote to the metaphysical belief in *innate* reason. It is, however, more than this. For it not only rejects the idea of innate thinking, it also rejects the idea of reason. For Hume, as a bourgeois thinker, does not challenge thinking as *contemplation*, so that in the place of God's universe (whose metaphysical creation is unprovable), we have a universe beyond the ken of man.

³ *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1966), p. 29.

The scenes of the universe are continually shifting and one object follows another in an uninterrupted succession, but the power of force, which actuates the whole machine is entirely concealed from us, and never discovers itself in any of the sensible qualities of the body.⁴

To know is merely to *gaze*, so that because our experience is not able to know *everything*, this means that it can know nothing at all. The objects which impress themselves upon our senses remain permanently beyond our ken, and a frightening solipsism is the logical consequence.⁵ A promising doctrine of experience, unable to free itself from a passivist theory of knowledge, has therefore disastrous results.

What happens to philosophy? It is no longer a comprehensive world outlook or a universal theory—it is reduced to a set of formal or logical statements, feeding increasingly off its own definitions and premises. "The sciences of quantity and number," declares Hume, "may safely, I think, be pronounced the only proper objects of knowledge and demonstration,"⁶ for knowledge and demonstration, contemplatively conceived, can be certain of nothing else.

Now the praxis theorists certainly reject the *formal* limitations which positivism comes increasingly to place upon our knowledge, for man is after all "maker of the world". But what of the *content* of positivist thought? We find Korsch arguing that because Marxism rejects idealism, it therefore rejects all philosophy and

being a strictly empirical investigation into definite historical forms of society, does not need a philosophical support.⁷

As far as Lefebvre is concerned, philosophising is a thing of the past, for Marxism is about praxis! But if this position *appears* hostile to positivism, in practice its premises are identical. For positivism's treatment of philosophy is itself basically nihilist: experience does not confirm the external reality of the universe, it simply mystifies it, thus showering the poor "observer" with increasingly absurd and self-defeating doubts. Knowable truth *shrinks* to the confines of the doubting mind, so that philosophy as an objective world outlook is done for. In Hume's famous words,

when we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics,

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵ It "has disturbed followers of the empiricist tradition ever since", M. Cornforth, *Marxism and the Linguistic Philosophy* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1965), pp. 47-48.

⁶ *Enquiries*, op. cit., p. 163.

⁷ Korsch, op. cit., p. 20.

for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.⁸

The idea, then, that philosophy as a universal theory is dead is neither new nor revolutionary: it goes back well over two hundred years. The individual may be conceived of as the sceptical analyst whose categories represent his cosmos or as the fiery activist who moulds the world in his own image; but the net result is the same. Objective philosophy withers at the roots and the real world, whether "made", "analysed", "categorised" or "methodologically verified", dissolves into some sort of mystical entity which exists only in the mind. Positivism is catastrophically unable to *build upon* or creatively transform traditional metaphysics: indeed, it is quite uncritical towards its own metaphysical past, for it *accepts* the time-honoured division between an absolute truth and relativist experience, outlined for example in Plato, but instead of embracing the absolute at the expense of the relative, reverses the sequence, and embraces experience at the expense of truth. It simply replaces the metaphysics of the theologian with the metaphysics of the sceptic. And the praxis writers follow positivism along its self-destructive path.

What links the philosophical "specialist", who says more and more about less and less, and Jean-Paul Sartre's praxical notion of man as "the privileged existent" is that both reject the possibility of understanding the world as a whole and therefore neither can understand it in any one of its constituent particulars. For unless we can understand the universal in the particular and the particular in the universal, we can understand nothing at all. The world simply confronts us as a chaos of fragments. "The unsurpassable singularity of the human adventure"⁹ may appear revolutionary and exciting, but the truth is that it does not represent the slightest improvement over empiricism's dreary assertions about reality as a series of unrelated "events". It is simply positivism with a "left" face.

Of course the fact that Marxism is a world outlook and thus a philosophy of the universe does not and cannot mean that it asserts an absolute truth *outside* of the historical world. For the truth about the universe, like the universe itself, can only deepen, develop and grow from one historical period to another. Such truth is absolute, for it is perfectly real, but it is also necessarily *relative* for it can only express

⁸ *Enquiries*, op. cit., p. 165.

⁹ Sartre, op. cit., p. 176.

itself in a partial and historically conditioned fashion. Truth is absolute *and* relative, and unless it is both it is neither. In this, dialectical materialism has at once decisively broken with (and yet creatively built upon) the metaphysics of over two thousand years.

(ii) *Dialectics and Nature*

The attack on materialism launched by the praxis school is not new. George Berkeley in the early 18th century dismissed the idea of matter as a thing-in-itself as simply absurd, for who does not know that the categories of thought, of causality, necessity, time and space, dwell only in the mind? To postulate a logic in nature: this is a categorical outrage!

Jeff Coulter in his critique of Engels fully supports (from a "revolutionary" standpoint of course) the often repeated empiricist attack on the dialectics of nature. The concept of a dialectical logic, Coulter complains,

confuses propositions in their *relations* to each other with their *subject matter* as such,¹⁰

but this of course is Kantian idealism, for if *relations* are not intrinsic to their "subject matter" whose objective reality we reflect in our minds, then they can only be introspectively induced, metaphysical postulates applicable *a priori*. The old story . . . poor matter is the damsel in distress until Logic, with its shining armour of Categories, comes to the rescue! On this ruling class absurdity, "revolutionary" praxis and conservative positivism speak with one voice.

What appals Coulter, as a good empiricist, is the thought that if nature is dialectical then we will have on our hands the ideological fungus of a "new teleology" and that is unthinkable absurd.

If contradiction is alleged to exist within some natural phenomena, wherein contradiction has been loosely defined as "conflicting force(s)", a species of teleology underpins it, even animistic assumptions.¹¹

Now if by "teleology" is simply meant the intelligible (as opposed to the intelligent) movement of the universe, then Marxism can no more do without "a species of teleology" than any other philosophy, including, as we shall see, praxis itself. Engels made this clear when he stressed that it was the "*old teleology*" (my stress) which had gone to the devil, but he at the same time concluded:

¹⁰ "Marxism and the Engels Paradox", *Socialist Register*, 1971, p. 139. ¹¹ *Ibid.*

it is now firmly established that matter in its eternal cycle moves according to laws which at a definite stage—now here, now there—necessarily give rise to the thinking mind in organic beings.¹²

Marx agreed: it was not enough to simply throw out the teleological tale about “purpose” in the universe: it was necessary to replace a metaphysical with a *scientific* explanation of the movement of things. Hence Marx praises Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* not simply because it deals a death-blow for the first time to teleology, but because it also “empirically explains” its “rational meaning”.¹³ A comment which is extremely important, for note that Marx does not dismiss teleology as mere *nonsense*; it has a *rational* meaning and this must be explained. The often brilliant speculations of the old teleologists can be placed on a much firmer, scientific footing by a dialectical understanding which strips “purpose” of its idealist overtones and can thus get to grips with the *material* development of organic and inorganic life. If Marxism remains “teleological”, then that is only because it regards nature as an objective world which develops.

And as we have already seen, it is one thing to snipe at a theory of nature, quite another to actually keep it out. Philosophy, like nature, abhors a vacuum: what is expelled in one form, must return in another, and lurking behind the brave, “anti-metaphysical” front of praxis is a theory which states that nature is not in fact dialectical because it merely goes round in circles. Lenin quotes Mach: “the acceptance of a divine original being is not contradictory to experience”,¹⁴ for the point about scepticism is that anything goes. “Teleology” will not disappear from the theoretical scene simply because it encounters one or two implausible empiricist scarecrows. On the contrary, empiricism aids and abets all kinds of mysticism, and the attack on reason and history implicit in the rejection of dialectics in nature simply brings in through the back-door a *metaphysical* “teleology” which postulates a nature whose sole “purpose” is, it seems, to mechanistically chase after its own tail.

The praxis theorists have made absolutely no *substantive* advances in understanding the world since the early empiricists first developed their problematic theory of experience. Coulter complains that a “teleological” conception of historical development denies “the activist-voluntarist notion of revolutionary change”,¹⁵ and if by

¹² *Dialectics of Nature*, op. cit., p. 198.

¹³ Marx to Lassalle (16.1.1861), *Selected Correspondence*, op. cit., p. 151.

¹⁴ *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, op. cit., p. 135.

¹⁵ Coulter, op. cit., p. 140.

voluntarist is meant subjectivist, then of course, it does. But it is worth stressing that only the form of this “activist-voluntarist” notion is new: its content is as old as empiricism itself. The same belief in man’s “practico-intellectual appropriation” of the universe, as Schmidt puts it, can be found in Karl Pearson’s lucid assertion that “man is the maker of natural law”,¹⁶ and it is a subjectivism which is as revolutionary as the scepticism of David Hume himself.

Indeed, just how critical the praxis theorists really are of that positivism which they claim to detest, can be seen in their comments on natural science. Schmidt, for example, declares that Engels’ “abstract metaphysical theses”

have absolutely no connection with the method of natural science itself, which is oriented towards formal logic and is undialectical in the sense that it does not reflect the historical mediation of its objects.¹⁷

This view of the natural sciences is essentially positivist, and it is one which Marx and Engels explicitly rejected. How absurd it is to say that natural science in its methodology does not reflect the historical mediation of its objects is indicated in the *Manuscripts of 1844*, where Marx stresses the fact (which the Young Hegelians failed to grasp) that

natural science has invaded and transformed human life all the more *practically* through the medium of industry. . . . *Industry* is the *actual*, historical relation of nature, and therefore of natural science, to man.¹⁸

Natural science “invades and transforms” human life, and yet has nothing to do with the theory of dialectics! Marx could not have disagreed more. Once we dispel the formalist and positivist illusions about natural science, he argued, then

in consequence, natural science will lose its abstractly material—or rather its idealistic—tendency and will become the basis of *human* science as it has already become the basis of actual life, albeit in an estranged form. *One* basis for life and another for *science* is *a priori* a lie¹⁹ (stress in original).

And yet it is precisely this harmful and abstract division between “one basis for science and another for life” which positivism upholds, and the praxis writers accept. Lukacs in his *History and Class Consciousness* rejects “the methodology of the natural sciences” because

¹⁶ Cited by Lenin, *Materialism*, op. cit., p. 146.

¹⁷ Schmidt, op. cit., p. 55.

¹⁸ *Manuscripts*, op. cit., p. 103.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

they have, he says, no place for contradiction in their subject matter.²⁰ But this means that Lukacs quite uncritically assumes that there can only be one methodology of the natural sciences, and that must be positivist. The basis of Revisionism, says Lukacs, is "the methodology of the natural sciences", and this is irony indeed, for it is Lukacs himself who continues to endorse the standpoint of this methodology, namely that nature is something passive, wholly external to man, and without its own dialectical movement. Nature, for the positivist, is the unchanging chaos which we simply contemplate: if there are contradictions between theories, then these arise from formal questions of "logic" and "testing"; they have nothing to do with the actual transformation of nature by man. And praxis, despite its harsh words about "positivist methodology", follows empiricism in its anti-humanist and exploitative illusion that the scientist stands outside nature and feeds parasitically off its fragmented "data". In fact, of course, as Marx makes admirably clear, progress in the *natural sciences* is no more a product of "contemplation" than it is in the social sciences, and this point is firmly underlined by Lenin who shows in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* that the "crisis of methodology", which he discusses and debates, has come about because dramatic developments in physics and chemistry, themselves the products of technological change, have thrown traditional materialism into question, and created the pressing need to place the natural sciences on to a dialectical foundation.

The abuse of positivism by the praxis writers is therefore only theoretical: in practice, they follow empiricist critics of Marxism in rejecting the dialectic of nature and supporting the idealist view that the methodology of the natural sciences has nothing to do with the dialectical truth. They continue to separate in a metaphysical way the world of nature and the world of man.

(iii) *The Theory of Reflection*

The theory of reflection receives an early mention in Locke's famous *Essay on Understanding* where Locke asserts that experience is the source of all knowledge and this can only be so because our mind reflects "external sensible objects". But the materialist aspect of Locke's thought was neither sustained nor developed by his empiricist successors; for if, as it was argued, experience is basically an *intellectual*

²⁰ Lukacs, op. cit., p. 10.

activity, then instead of changing reality it simply dissolves it into a mere mental construct, and the theory of reflection peters out. As a result of "experience" the objective world which our minds are supposed to reflect becomes unknowable. Berkeley had no difficulty in transforming Lockean empiricism into outright idealism, and Hume could show with ease that if ideas were simply data of the senses, then even Berkeley's "objective" God was yet another unknowable thing-in-itself.

In his essay on "Truth and Reflection", Petrovic defends his vision of "free, creative beings of praxis" who create rather than reflect reality, on the basis of a philosophy which is, in practice, pure empiricism. It is, he believes, self-evidently absurd that emotions and the will reflect reality:

are love, hatred, envy, malice only different forms of the reflection of the external objects toward which they are directed?²¹

The proposition strikes Petrovic as foolish precisely because he shares with the empiricists the belief that reflection can only be a *passive* process and is not an activity in its own right, an activity of *conscious* production which necessarily changes the objective world which it reflects. In other words, he assumes a purely mechanistic version of reflection, a version which is neither Marxist nor defensible, and then foists it on to dialectical materialism. The will, by its nature, reflects objective reality because it must *respond* to its pressures. Reflection theory does not eliminate the active nature of the will and emotions, but rather *explains* in rational, material terms the forces which are responsible for their formation. For if, as Petrovic argues, the will and the emotions do not, in fact, reflect reality, then are we to suppose that they form themselves out of absolutely nothing? That they are the timeless impulses of an unchanging Human Nature?

Petrovic, however, remains convinced that when we look to the character of abstract thought, the absurdity of reflection theory becomes even more evident still. For what can abstract or logical propositions be said to reflect?

A negative existential proposition, for instance, is true if what it denies does not exist. How can such a proposition be interpreted as the reflection of objective reality? The whole system of mathematical propositions is a system of true propositions, which it is difficult to maintain reflect something. And what is reflected by propositions about the past, the future, about possibilities or impossibilities?²²

²¹ *Marx in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, op. cit., p. 195.

²² *Ibid.*

The problem arises precisely because, as before, Petrovic accepts a purely empiricist conception of consciousness as something mechanically detached from external reality—a passive contemplation which gazes upon life from the *outside*. As Engels stresses in *Anti-Dühring*, agnosticism is inevitable if we insist on accepting consciousness “quite naturalistically”, as “something opposed from the outset to being, to nature”;²³ for if we accept this metaphysical dualism, it is not surprising that the theory of reflection becomes impossible to understand. Mathematical propositions are said to inhabit the world of consciousness, and concrete objects the world of the real, as though they had always been eternally apart. Abstract appearances are uncritically swallowed as the truth.

The real question which should be posed, but which of course the empiricist, who is ultimately a theologian at heart, simply ignores, is the *historical* question: how does consciousness arise as a part of human activity, how is the transition from non-knowledge brought about? Once *this* question is posed and answered, then it is comparatively easy to see how the ability to distinguish positive from negative, good from evil, the figure 1 from the figure 100, in short, the ability to *reason*, arises not as a reflection of this or that specific object, but as the result of an *infinity* of reflections on a wide-ranging slice of life’s experiences, so that thinking in terms of universal principles becomes possible as a conscious process. Developments in science, mathematics and morals do not spring from *contemplation*; they arise out of man’s increasingly creative relations with nature which impress upon him, as the result of rich and varied contact with particulars, growing insight at the level of the general. Mathematics is an extremely practical and concretely based art, as is obvious to anyone who studies its origins: it is only its mystification at the hands of idealist philosophy (itself the product of a perfectly *concrete* exploitation) that endows it with a transcendental appearance, and obscures reality generally with metaphysical juxtapositions between the universal and the particular, the eternal and the transitory, the abstract and the concrete, the ideal and reality. Petrovic’s childish objections to the theory of reflection arise, not from the reservations of a practical revolutionary, but merely from this thousand-year-old idealism which, nurtured in an exploitative division of labour, feeds the illusion that consciousness can really be something without being something real.

How tenacious this grip of the past remains on contemporary

²³ *Anti-Dühring*, op. cit., p. 55.

thought may be seen in the work of another “revolutionary” positivist, Lesek Kolakowski, whose own “critical” reading of Marx also inclines him to the concept of praxis.

According to Kolakowski in his *Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of the Truth*, traditional empiricism presents cognition as a process of creating concepts which are themselves abstracted from individual observations of the properties of species. The idea, however, that abstract thought can simply derive from the perception of particulars fails to take account of “the basic fact of consciousness”,²⁴ namely the indispensability of general knowledge to the perception of the concrete. And this of course is true. Traditional empiricism with its belief that anything more than the appearances, sense data, must be metaphysical, is notoriously one-sided in its attempts to separate out what in practice form an active unity, induction and deduction, perception and conception, etc. As Hegel understood so well, all objects are “concrete universals”, they are *both* similar and different, and they acquire their specific identity only from the particular way they are related to the *universe*, from the way they exist as parts within a wider whole.

But for Kolakowski, the indispensability of general knowledge to the process of cognition points, not to the possibility which opens up of rationally understanding the concrete world, but to the fact that if we need general knowledge in order to think, the objective world is not actually there. Traditional empiricism is to be improved by making its subjective idealism even more explicit, so that even the perceived sense data can be pronounced mere fantasies of the mind. A naïve and fragmented world outlook “advances” into wholesale solipsism. Whereas Hegel tries to transcend empiricism by arguing that “concrete universals” are perfectly real—as real as the unity of identity and difference which exists between parent and child—Kolakowski reaches the opposite conclusion: because thought is universal, this means that it manufactures at its own convenience the fragmented particulars which it is suppose to perceive. Some dialectics! The “indispensability” of the general points to the fact, says Kolakowski, that reality in itself, i.e. outside the mind, must be unknowable. We have no right, he insists, to suppose that “pre-existent reality” bears the qualities of human reality nor do we have the tools to “plumb nature and the kind of distortions it undergoes when it abandons its transcendency to display itself to us”.²⁵ We do not actually deny the existence of this “pre-existent” reality nor do we say that it is unknowable: we merely “reject it as a

²⁴ *Marxism and Beyond* (Paladin, 1971), p. 66.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

possible object of research". It is not *unknowable*, it is just that we have no possible way of finding out what it is! Not only does this revolutionary credo wipe out of existence the sciences of geology, zoology, palaeontology, to name but a few which continue to display a backward concern with a "pre-existent reality", but it invites us to imagine man's social world as his own arbitrary creation.

The world presented in the writings of the young Marx, says Kolakowski, is an artificial world in which linguistic and scientific divisions arise from man's practical needs. Does this mean that because man can only satisfy his practical needs through material production, that these linguistic and scientific divisions are reflections of the objective world? Alas, no. Kolakowski still shares the belief of the exploiter that if someone is "creative", that means that he can do as he likes. Linguistic and scientific divisions are not artificial simply in the sense that they are man-made: they are artificial in the sense that they have no relationship with objective reality. They are mere expressions of arbitrariness. In *this* world, we treat the "sun" and the "moon" as particular sorts of objects not because that is how they are, but simply because that is how it happens to suit us. The point is, however, that any other sort of "arrangement" might equally do:

in abstract, nothing prevents us from dissecting surrounding material into fragments constructed in a manner completely different from what we are used to. (Thus, speaking more simply, we could build a world where there would be no such objects as "horse", "leaf", "star" and others allegedly devised by nature. Instead there might be, for example, such objects as "half a horse and a piece of river", "my ear and the moon" and other similar products of a surrealist imagination.²⁶

A remarkable admission of the irrationalism and stupidity which follows when the theory of reflection is rejected and in its place is postulated solipsism pure and simple. Kolakowski is not of course the first to make a fool of himself in this way: Hume had warned that the sceptic who failed to mitigate logical empiricism with practical common sense would find himself in a world in which

all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence.²⁷

The solipsism is not new: what is new (relatively speaking) is the presentation of this absurdity as a progressive step "beyond Marxism"!

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

²⁷ *Enquiries*, op. cit., p. 160.

The point needs to be made that since the experience of millions of people under the slavery of fascism, this destructive scepticism is no game. Its nihilism has had the most agonising and pernicious practical consequences, for in a world where everything is deemed arbitrary and artificial, we confront a relativism in the name of which every conceivable social and political abomination can defend itself. For what is fascism but the practical and nightmarish realisation of this "epistemology of the kaleidoscope"? If it is true, as Kolakowski suggests, that

no division, not even the most fantastic as compared with what we are accustomed to, is theoretically less justified or less "true" than the one we accept in actuality,²⁸

then what is to prevent a self-styled *avant garde* from arguing that it is time for a change? After all, who can object, in terms of Kolakowski's argument, if "romantics" divide the world up into supermen and subhumans, Aryans and Jews, masters and slaves. For what can there be to choose between one "product of the surrealist imagination" and another?

Empiricism provides, as I have already commented, an epistemological basis for the darkest reaction and most insane adventurism, for the consequence of its worship of "appearances" and contempt for reflection theory is a rejection of reason and the real world. It is a grim reminder of the gulf between the pious intentions and the possible practice of praxis theory that it should uncritically follow a creed of thought which locks thinking people up in a philosophical strait-jacket so that they come to drunkenly imagine that everything around them is of their own arbitrary making.

(iv) *Historical Materialism and the Relativist Imagination*

The metaphysical dualism which empiricism creates between the general and the particular, between reason and experience, object and subject, manifests itself likewise in the sphere of *morality*, where the dichotomy of the "two worlds" can be seen in the celebrated argument that it is logically impossible to deduce Ought from Is. Facts and values must be kept strictly apart. Moral judgments are mere responses of emotion, personal opinions which, when we enter the domain of science itself, should be kept *private*. Social criticism can thus be

²⁸ Kolakowski, op. cit., p. 69.

conveniently dismissed as an intellectual blunder, a simple error of scholarship.

Now certainly it *appears* that this positivist dogma meets with a scathing praxical response. Korsch quotes the words of Hilferding (who considered science to be value-free) in order to ridicule the "positivism" of the Second International, while Goldmann actually accuses Marxism of making a positivist distinction between value and fact.²⁹ And since most praxis theorising has a high moral tone, it seems rather unfair to identify its concepts with positivism at least in this aspect—the rejection by modern empiricism of values in science.

But matters are not so simple. I have already tried to show in the question of dialectics of nature how praxis claims to reject "the methodology of the natural sciences" while uncritically accepting its formulation in positivist terms. The same "uncritical criticism" is evident with regard to science in general. Zivotic, in his critique of natural dialectics, continually contrasts the understanding of *science* in which "the existing state of affairs is raised to the level of the only possible reality"³⁰ with *dialectics* which critically negates the world in the name of an "authentic generic human essence". Science is restricted to facts, "the existing state of affairs", dialectics to the "value profile of reality", the one is concerned with *Is*, the other with *Ought*—a familiar dualism indeed! For this is of course precisely the distinction which positivism itself draws. Positivism, we should remember, does not deny the possibility of all values—it merely rejects the existence of *objective* values, values which reflect the real world, and praxis theory, despite its apparent hostility to positivism, is happy to agree. After all, for its own ethic, the "authentic generic human essence" cannot derive from the existing state of affairs; it is very much, in Marx's words, an ideal "to which reality must adjust", and hence remains firmly entrenched in the fact/value dualism of the positivist dogma. Zivotic, in other words, is as critical of positivism as Kant was of Hume; for Kant accepted the sceptical doctrine of experience, and simply created alongside it a metaphysical *alter ego* which remained essentially apart. The truth is that the theorist is still tied to a positivist outlook whether he is drawn towards a mystical priesthood sermonising over the "authentic generic human essence" or puts in its place the logical scientist whose specialism it is to dabble in appearances. In both cases, the dogma of the "value-judgment" remains intact.

A similar problem appears in Petrovic when he comments on a

²⁹ Goldmann, op. cit., p. 69.

³⁰ "The Dialectics of Nature and the Authenticity of Dialectics", *Praxis*, 1967, p. 254.

passage of Marx's drawn from the *Grundrisse* where Marx had referred to the "very exalted view" of production held by ancient and medieval peoples in comparison to the attitudes of the modern bourgeois. Surely, says Petrovic, this is evidence that we cannot regard Marx's historical materialism as a theory which simply concerns itself with economics.

Not only is this thesis not "economic", it is not really scientific. It might be possible to establish by scientific methods whether one of two views was actually widespread in the ancient, and the other in the modern world. But what scientific methods can establish whether one view is more "exalted" than the other? What kind of observation, experiment, measurement, in other words, what empirical method can establish "exaltedness"?³¹

It is true that empiricism will not get us very far along the road to answering these questions, but where is the serious Marxist who has ever suggested that *science* was a value-free "empirical method"? Certainly it was not Marx, for the whole of *Capital*, as we have already seen, rests upon the anti-empiricist position that capitalism can never be understood from its "appearances"—a position which has of course been branded as "metaphysical" and "Hegelian" by the vulgar who are too timid to look beyond their noses.

The notion of "exalted" is clearly ethical, and it means, Petrovic suggests, "better, higher, more human". But does this mean that "exalted" is simply an arbitrary "value judgment"? Not at all: and Petrovic's own definition of "exalted" shows why. To be "exalted" is to be *more* human, to realise more fully mankind's *infinite* potential for progress, to bring man ever closer to an ideal which by its nature is absolute and infinite, and which unfolds ever more profoundly in the course of history itself. The "mors immortalis" is the objective standard which makes the notion of "exalted" scientifically intelligible and perfectly concrete. Our moral principles are not subjectivist inventions: they are reflections of the real world itself.

As for Marx's thesis, Petrovic is so concerned about the empiricist problem of "measuring" morality, that he fails to explain to the reader the real point which Marx intends to get across, and that is this. The "exaltedness" of production in pre-capitalist society is an exploitative *illusion* which capitalism with its blunt and explicit cash-nexus lays bare. In fact, the "nobility" of the ancient and feudal systems is simply the product of backwardness; whereas capitalism, with its barbarism of "the individual", brings man to the brink of a higher and more authentically human society which was inconceivable in early times,

³¹ Petrovic, op. cit., p. 46.

except as an otherworldly dream. Appearances notwithstanding, and despite the "illusions of the epoch", man is even *less* exalted in ancient times than he is under capitalism, for now he has within his grasp the possibility of eliminating exploitation altogether.

Marx's reference then to this *appearance* of "exaltedness" is not some sort of temporary deviation from science into philosophy: it is a comment which fully accords with real science—a science which is concerned with explaining *historical* reality—even though it contrasts somewhat with "empirical" science whose "methods" are powerless to go beyond fragmented appearances. To juxtapose, as Petrovic does, a scientific conception "empirically proved" with "a philosophical thesis founded on philosophical argument" is simply to express the empiricist dogma at its most unthinking . . . the sorry old tale that values are values and facts are facts, science is science and philosophy is philosophy, and never the twain shall meet!

Positivism by creating a metaphysical barrier between "experience" and our rational understanding veers helplessly into a self-defeatingly relativism which in turn can only lead to intellectual paralysis. Not surprisingly this catastrophic instability affects praxis theory every bit as much as it does the positivist philosophy upon which the praxis concept is "shamefacedly" based. Consider, for example, Lukacs' discussion on historical materialism in his *History and Class Consciousness* where he says:

A common argument against the validity of historical materialism and one regarded as decisive by bourgeois thought, is that the methods of historical materialism must be applied to itself. For it to be a valid system of thought it must be the case that every so-called ideological formation is a function of economic realities: and (as the ideology of the embattled proletariat) it too, is *a fortiori* just such an ideology, and just such a function of capitalist society.³²

One such bourgeois thinker was Karl Mannheim, whose objections to historical materialism I briefly touched on earlier. As far as Mannheim was concerned, as he argued in his *Ideology and Utopia*, every social group has its perspective determined by its "situation" and has an outlook relative to its social position. However, by "relative" Mannheim really means simply *relative*, for like all positivists, Mannheim could see no interpenetration between the particular and the general, the absolute and the relative, and hence assumed that if ideas were relative, they could not possibly be true. To find the truth,

³² Lukacs, op. cit., p. 228.

then, one must find a group which is not a group: a group whose relativism gives them a privileged access into the timeless world of the absolute, in short, a group whose perspective is not itself "situationally determined". But where are such transcendental creatures to be found? Why, of course, among the sect to which Mannheim himself belongs—the "classless" intelligentsia!

Now what is regrettable is that it is not only bourgeois thinkers who take these banal stupidities seriously: it is Lukacs himself. This type of "common argument" floors him. "I believe", he says,

that this objection can be upheld in part, but to concede it is not to the detriment of the scientific status of historical materialism.³³

But how can we combat relativism while conceding (at least "in part"!) its objections? Lukacs explains:

the substantive truths of historical materialism are of the same type as were the truths of classical economics in Marx's view: they are truths within a particular social order and system of production. As such, but only as such, their claim to validity is absolute. But this does not preclude the emergence of societies in which by virtue of their different social structures other categories and other systems of truths prevail.³⁴

In other words, we avoid the temptation to "total relativism" by plunging head-first into its midst! For what is the nub of Lukacs' reply? It is that to answer Mannheim's objections we need to remember that Marxism is the "self-knowledge" of capitalist society and therefore is as absolutely true for the proletariat as classical economics was true for the bourgeoisie. But what kind of truth is this? For not only does Lukacs confine Marxism in its scope and relevance to the capitalist epoch (which is absurd), but he reduces a universal science to the status of a "partisan prejudice" or a "pragmatist ideology". For how can we, on the basis of Lukacs' argument, *prove* that historical materialism is the "correct historical method" or that it is Marxism rather than liberalism, fascism, or anarchism which is the "self-knowledge" of capitalist society? It is moreover no answer to this problem simply to say that Marxism is the truth because it is the ideology of the proletariat, for many members of the working class may, and of course do, reject Marxism at any given historical point in time in favour of some other outlook which they believe expresses their best interests. How would we be able to say that they were in fact wrong? Lukacs totally ignores (as does Mannheim) the *objective* interests of the proletariat which

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

Marxism reflects—an interest which takes mankind a step beyond capitalism—and hence surrenders to a sceptical relativism which, taken to its logical conclusion, wipes out Marxism altogether. Leo Strauss, a reactionary philosopher and right-wing critic of liberalism, has no difficulty in demonstrating the absurdity to which Lukacs' position leads: for if, as he puts it,

Marxism is only the truth of our time or our society, the prospect of the classless society too is only the truth of our time and society; it may prove to be the delusion that gave the proletariat the power and the spirit to overthrow the capitalist system, whereas in fact the proletariat finds itself afterwards enslaved. . . .³⁵

And why not, on Lukacs' terms? For Lukacs rejects the scientific view that the classless society is a material *necessity* that is historically inevitable in some shape or form or timescale, and treats communism simply as an intellectual desire, a utopian dream, a possibility which arises not from the movement of reality, but simply out of consciousness—the *self-knowledge* of capitalism. In this, he is at one with the positivist Mannheim who regards Marxism as one pragmatist truth among many, and perfectly true—for the group which embraces it!

Positivism, with its subjectivist theory of knowledge and history, is hopelessly unable to sort out truth from myth. Its scepticism assures it that "all ideologies are equally bad", while its own "pure science" speaks for the truth. Lacking any other conception of reality, it is understandable that it should end up as the victim of its own appearances, having ensnared in its trap pragmatists and praxicists who believe that by going round in circles they can somehow change the world.

(v) *Positivism and Necessity*

Determinism, as we have already seen, arouses strong feelings of revulsion in the ranks of the praxis thinkers. Lefebvre, for example, expresses a typical view when he argues that determinism is a philosophical relic of the past and will disappear in that future which the free creativity of praxis alone can create. It is only "official" Marxism with its "empiricist, positivist attitude"—its "technocratic" praxis³⁶—which perpetuates man's enslaved subordination to objective laws.

³⁵ *Relativism and the Study of Man*, ed. Schoeck and Wiggins (New York, 1961).

³⁶ Lefebvre, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

And yet, of course, as I have already commented, this is irony indeed, for positivism does not accept the view that reality is governed by laws. On the contrary, it decisively *rejects* it, and regards the objective world as a chaos of fortuitous events waiting to be "ordered" by the mind of man. It is true that some early positivist thinkers like Comte did speak of *laws* in society, but these laws of motion were themselves seen as the creation of a "scientific" élite, who benevolently imposed them on a chaotic world. They were not pictured as the theoretical reflections of objective laws which exist in reality independently of the human will.

Praxis thinkers, in rejecting determinism as "positivist", ascribe to positivism views which empiricists have always dismissed as "metaphysical", etc. Positivism in fact has always embraced a sceptical creed which, in its essentials, is impossible to distinguish from the "revolutionary creativity" of the praxis school itself.

We see this clearly if we examine for a moment the practical positivism of Eduard Bernstein, the German socialist who developed, towards the end of the 19th century, a revisionist critique of Marx. The praxis writers, whose attack on Marxism comes from the "left", quite correctly charge Bernstein with quietism, positivism, conservatism and mechanism, but they do so in order to prove that *determinism* is basically to blame. It was Bernstein's "fatalistic" belief, they argue, in "eternal laws of nature" which led to this betrayal. But is it true that Bernstein's revisionism derived from a belief in historical laws? Not at all! In fact, precisely the opposite holds. Bernstein's revisionism became evident when he criticised *precisely the same features* of "orthodox" Marxism which the praxis writers themselves reject, and if the form of his critique is somewhat different its ultimate consequences are the same.

We see this not only with regard to determinism, but over the whole range of issues we have already noted. Like the praxis theorists, Bernstein rejected the universality of dialectics on the ground that "the struggle of opposites" was not "the basis of all development", but that "the co-operation of related forces is of great significance as well".³⁷ Similarly, he considered historical materialism to be far too dogmatic since it allowed insufficient room, he complained, for spiritual and ethical factors. Criticisms which have a familiar ring! Naturally we agree with the praxis theorists: Bernstein was an incorrigibly mechanistic thinker, but he was mechanistic precisely for the same reasons that the praxis version of Marxism is mechanistic, namely

³⁷ Cited by P. Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism* (Collier, 1962), p. 147.

through his rejection of an objective dialectics in the natural and social world.

Indeed, nowhere is this curious unity of right and "left" clearer than on the question which specifically concerns me here: the issue of necessity and determinism. Anyone who believes that Bernstein subscribed to a deterministic outlook ought to read the opening chapter of his *Evolutionary Socialism*, where he *rejects* materialism on the ground that the materialist is

a Calvinist without God. If he does not believe in a predestination ordained by divinity, yet he believes and must believe that starting from any chosen point of time all further events are, through the whole of existing matter and the directions of force in its parts, determined beforehand.³⁸

This too is a familiar criticism, that if matter is believed intelligible, then that can only be because it is *intelligent!* But this is the childish *non-sequitur* of the theologian, for why must matter be endowed with the qualities of consciousness before it can move? Why should we speak of existing matter as "determined beforehand" simply because it moves in a rationally intelligible world where everything must be caused by everything else? Bernstein's protest that a belief in causality is itself teleological derives from the same yearning for subjectivist "critical thought" and "independent activity" which praxis theory displays: materialism is a crude dogma which "interferes" with free thought. It is true that Bernstein's revision of Marxism is blatant and forthright: he proclaims the need to "go back to Kant" in order to refute materialism and warns that "the contempt of the ideal, the magnifying of material factors until they become omnipotent forces of evolution is a self-deception".³⁹ But if the attack on Marx is more brazen than is fashionable in the praxis school, his revisionism differs not one iota in its content from the idealism of a theory which proclaims that man's freedom can only be found *above* mundane necessity in a metaphysical world where everything created is basically his own. When Lukacs protests that

a Marxist who cultivates the objectivity of the academic study is just as reprehensible as the man who believes that the victory of the world revolution can be guaranteed by the "laws of nature",⁴⁰

his words could have been those of Bernstein himself. For Bernstein, like Lukacs and the other praxis writers, exalts the independent power

³⁸ *Evolutionary Socialism* (Schocken Books, 1961), p. 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

⁴⁰ Lukacs, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

of the spiritual and the ethical, ridicules the priority of material necessity in historical development, and laments the fact that Marxists tie the ultimate objectives of socialism to the immediate realities of a given situation. Of course, there is an enormous *apparent* difference between the revisionism of the right and the revisionism of the "left": for the one complains, while the other *insists*, that the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism is utopian, so that each accepts the premises of the other, but from an identically opposite standpoint. Both therefore endorse a positivist rejection of that material necessity which dialectically unites fact and value, Is and Ought, the ideals of socialism and the world of concrete reality. Whether the positivism is complacently quiescent, a positivism of the right, or whether it is impotently millenarian, the "left" face, the practical reality and the social consequences are ultimately the same.

We see this ironic "unity of opposites" in Avineri's regret that Marx should have insisted on placing his "utopia" (as Avineri regards it) at the summation of a concrete movement, for like Bernstein, Avineri believes that the movement and the end should remain metaphysically spliced apart. Although Marx's theory of revolution is, he says, based upon universal criteria, its realisation has to depend upon historical circumstances, and

paradoxically this historicism may be the most disappointing element in Marx's thought.⁴¹

There is nothing wrong with holding passionately to certain ideals: it is simply a methodological gaffe to believe that they can ever be realised! Where is the positivist who has ever cared to disagree? Conservatism may express itself in rightist form, as a "factual" respect for the *status quo*, but that is not its only shape. It can assume a "leftist" guise which involves, when all is said and done, merely crying for the moon, a cacophony of transcendental "oughts" which leaves the world precisely as it is.

Marxism as a science is irreconcilably opposed to all forms of positivism, whether contemplative or activist, "opportunist" or "ultra-left". It is concerned not simply with decrying one form of this empiricist doctrine while demagogically embracing another: it seeks to expose the foundations of positivism, to tackle the roots of this subjective idealism regardless of the multiplicity of its nuances and forms. As always, Marxism concerns itself with the *reality* of a phenomena and not merely with its multifarious appearances.

⁴¹ Avineri, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

The differences between the praxis concept, which appears revolutionary, and the philosophy of positivism, which is openly conservative, are merely verbal and formal. To judge a theory we must look to its practice, and whether we consider the question of Marxism as a world outlook, as a dialectical theory of nature, as a theory of reflection, as embracing historical materialism or as a deterministic science, what do we find? That on all these pivotal questions praxis and positivism answer with one voice. Sometimes, it is true, the notes soar heavenwards evoking transcendental visions of a self-creating mankind: on other occasions, the tone is sober and earthly, indeed, so timid and feeble as to be positively mole-like. But in each case, the singer is the same; and so too, as I shall now argue, are the social and political consequences which these choruses of mystification have in the outside world.

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PRAXIS AND POLITICS

In every new historical phase old mistakes
reappear momentarily (Marx and Engels)

Since the middle of the 1960s, we have witnessed a considerable upsurge of radical protest against conditions of life under monopoly capitalism, involving, often for the first time, many young people who had not taken part in struggle before. The inexperience and youth of many of the participants have inclined them in the first instance to anarchism, and this of course is not surprising. What is, however, worthy of note is that the attacks on authority, the demand for individual freedoms, the direct action movements which claim to have demolished organisational "hierarchies", have invariably been defended in the name of Marxism, or at least some particular interpretation (usually abstract and "libertarian") of Karl Marx. "Marxisms" have likewise proliferated among small but serious circles of the intellectually "sophisticated" groups whose interests centre on the ideas of the French theorist Louis Althusser, of Jean-Paul Sartre, the Frankfurt school, and so on.

It is in these groups and sects that the ideas of praxis have found a receptive audience. And although any revival of interest in Marxism is naturally welcome, it is significant how, in our present period, this interest has thus far centred around the presentation of Marxism in anarchist terms rather than as a materialist science. A "common intellectual universe", as one writer calls it, has developed, and as a "challenge" to what is seen as the Marxism of the orthodox, it has at its theoretical centre many of the ideas which we have encountered in our critique of praxis.¹

Now of course, although many of the formulations today are quite new, and "newness" is a quality highly prized by this self-styled theoretical *avant garde*, the ideas themselves, even as revisions of Marxism, are relatively old, and it has been the purpose of this book, in gathering together some of the "leftist" critics of Marxism extending back to the 1920s, to show the underlying unity which exists within the varying formulations of the praxis concept. Indeed, these leftist

¹ See G. Stedman Jones, "The Marxism of the Early Lukacs", *New Left Review* 70, p. 27.