Marxism and the Theory of Praxis

A critique of some new versions
of old fallacies

by

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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.

exposed this ideological fraud, and it is significant that it was a former "behavioural scientist", Daniel Ellsberg, who lifted the curtain on some of the lies and fabrications which have served U.S. foreign policy in the name of "science". Nor is it only in the United States that sham "impartiality" has played a reactionary role. In Britain, for example, it has become fashionable to preach racism in "scientific" quarters, as in the case of Hans Eysenck, a well-known psychologist who purports to prove that black people and the Irish are intellectually inferior to Anglo-Saxon whites.[2] Of course, Professor Eysenck insists that his "discoveries" are value-free, and are, as a matter of fact, a source of personal regret to him. But the idea that it is possible for scientific theory to be value-free and above the world of practice, should fool nobody, and it certainly did not fool the students at the University of Leeds who demanded recently that the authorities withdraw the honorary doctorate which they had offered to an American professor, because of the professor's "scientific" arguments that people of low IQ should be voluntarily sterilised. Of course, Professor Shockley protested that his theories were only intended as a "thinking exercise": they were not intended to be put into practice. The students, however, saw through the nonsense of "a theory without practice" and as a result of their pressure, the honour was withdrawn. Not of course without provoking a storm of protest from the "value-free" philosophers who argued, like Antony Flew, that to "confuse" genetic theories about intelligence with racism was a serious "muddle", the result of an inability to separate out value from fact![3]

What is this philosophy then, which purports to separate theory and practice, fact and value, in this drastic and self-defeating way? Although it appears with many labels and in a variety of forms, we can describe it broadly speaking, as positivism.

I will have a good deal more to say about this doctrine of positivism later (and particularly in Chapter 9), but for the moment it is worth stressing the following features. Positivism as a philosophical approach begins with the essentially correct and scientific premise that things in the external world are knowable to us only through *observation*. The problem arises, however, what do we mean by observation? And it is here that positivism, as a way of understanding the world, ceases to be "positive" and goes completely off the rails; for the positivists treat observation as though it was an essentially *passive* process, an act of

[2] See, as a recent example of his position, his remarkable letter in *New Statesman*, 27.4.1973.

[3] *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 4.5.1973.

merely "contemplating" the world rather than one of actually finding out. As a result, the errors flow thick and fast.

(i) The act of knowing things, seen as a process which is passive and contemplative, becomes hopelessly mixed up with the objects about which we want to find out. The term "sense data", which the positivist uses to describe his discoveries, smudges together the activity of our cognitive senses and the object world which these senses reflect.

(ii) Because of this confusion, the distinction between things as they *appear* (the impressions made upon our senses from the world around us) and things as they *really* are (the objective world itself) dissolves into thin air, and we are left pondering the absurd and anti-materialist conclusion (to which all positivism is driven) that the objective world outside our senses is an unknowable thing-in-itself, which may not even exist.

(iii) Taken to its logical conclusion, this attitude would make all science and scientific judgment a practical impossibility, for positivism leaves us uncertain as to whether the "causes" and "laws of development" which make reality intelligible to us, do in fact exist. Since everything ultimately rests with each observer's private world of "sense data" (which the positivist misleadingly considers the "facts"), nobody can really say what is true or false or right or wrong about the world outside. "There is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so."

(iv) Predictably an extremely contemptuous attitude towards people and society follows on. After all, if we cannot condemn or praise what is happening around us since these critical activities involve us making forbidden "value judgments", we will inevitably look upon the world with a cynical disdain, for even people themselves are the mere "sense data" of our own making. Flaubert, the French novelist of the nineteenth century, expressed the positivist creed to perfection, when he declared that "one must regard people in the same way that one regards mastadons or crocodiles. Can one possibly get worked up over the horns of the former or the jaws of the latter? Display them, stuff them, pickle them in spirits—that is all. But do not pass moral judgments on them." For that would mean admitting, of course, that outside of one's own "observing ego" there was an objective material world.

(v) It is clear, then, that the consequence of this form of scepticism

> is the destruction of science and reason. For in the last analysis, positivism leaves us simply to "manufacture" our own "reality" as we please; and anyone who wants to pass moral judgments, should turn to his priest or witch-doctor for help.

It is scarcely surprising that a philosophy which in the work of David Hume (1711–1776) began with "raising doubts", has ended up in well nigh total paralysis, and instead of getting to grips with practical problems (as Hume intended), positivism has increasingly withdrawn itself from the real world and become absorbed in rather trivial problems, often linguistic or semantic, of its own making. As Maurice Cornforth pointed out just after the war, positivism "concentrates within itself all the most negative features of bourgeois philosophy" and "at the same time it carries to the furthest pitch the narrow specialisation of philosophy, scholastic phrasemongering and barren abstraction".[4] The critique was also taken up by Barrows Dunham in a very fine book, *Man Against Myth*, in which he ridiculed the cowardice and triviality of philosophical empiricism, describing its "profound" propositions that "thinking makes it so", "all problems are merely verbal", etc., as nothing more than a "source of paralysis", "a frightened and self-defeated theory" which led straight to solipsism, that infantile belief that the world exists only in the individual's mind.[5] It is most revealing that even philosophers like Bertrand Russell (or for that matter Karl Popper) who defend empiricism, have become alarmed at the escalating subjectivism which this sceptical creed has unleashed, while Enst Gellner in a useful critique of "linguistic philosophy"—*avant garde* positivism—has commented acidly:

> It is the story of Plato over again—only this time it is the philosopher's job to lead us back *into* the cave.[6]

It is true of course that these currents of "arid mysticism", as Russell calls them, are by no means unrelated to the general uncertainty and insecurity of the post-war world, for the only response which some philosophers have to the growing social chaos, rising unemployment, runaway inflation and international currency crises in the West is to scuttle into an analytical world of their own and firmly bury their heads in the sand. But by no means all philosophers are prepared to retreat in this way and there is an increasing recognition that

[4] *In Defence of Philosophy* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1950), pp. xiii–xiv.
[5] *Man Against Myth* (Boston, 1947), p. 240; p. 255.
[6] *Words and Things* (Pelican, 1968), p. 117.

positivism, whatever its guise, has become bankrupt and has nothing more to offer. This is how a newly formed "Radical Philosophy Group" sees the situation:

> Contemporary British philosophy is at a dead end. . . . Its academic practitioners have all but abandoned the attempt to understand the world, let alone change it. They have made philosophy into a narrow and specialised subject of little relevance to anyone outside the small circle of professional philosophers.[7]

A philosophy which considers itself to be "pure theory" is no use to anyone, and the Group pledges itself to break down the barriers between philosophy and the social sciences, students and teachers, and the institutions of higher education and the rest of society. Philosophy must be transformed into an instrument of practical social change.

Now this critical reaction against the post-war "retreat" with its mole-like empiricism and warren of scholastic rabbit-holes is welcome indeed, for it promises to tackle a problem which goes right back to the origins of philosophy and the division of society into mutually antagonistic classes. As Marx and Engels write in *The German Ideology*,

> division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears. From this moment onwards consciousness *can* really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it *really* represents something without representing something real.[8] (stress in original).

In other words, the sharp division between theory and practice, which contemporary positivists take to absurd extremes, reflects a division, at a much more basic level, between mental and manual labour and this division lies at the heart of every exploiting society. To question abstract philosophy, a pure theory which flatters itself that it is something other than the consciousness of existing practice, is to throw into doubt the very structure of class society itself. And there is certainly plenty of evidence to show that the development of abstract philosophy ("above" the mundane world of practice) was itself the product of the division of society into warring classes.

Take Plato's *Republic*, for example. Here we are presented in the "preliminaries" with the picture of a kind of natural community (Glaucon rudely calls it "a community of pigs") where there are no slaves, no wars, no luxuries, and limited trade, and most revealingly of

[7] *Radical Philosophy*, Summer 1972: inside cover.
[8] *The German Ideology* (Moscow, 1964), p. 43.

all, no philosophers. Plato explains why. In a society without serious defects and deep divisions, a society where everybody leads "a peaceful and healthy life",[9] no philosophical "healing" is called for to put things right. But what happens with the onset of "civilisation" (i.e. an exploiting society)? Passions run riot, sensuality threatens "reason", war breaks out, and civil disorder is inevitable. The world of social practice seems to dissolve (when viewed from the standpoint of the landed aristocrat) into mere "chaos", a realm of shifting, bewildering "appearances", which the philosopher must somehow mystically transcend if he is to discover Order, Truth and the Good Life. A "higher" world of divine-like abstractions where there is no change. Of course the "good life" turns out to be an unrealisable utopia, for the real causes of "chaos", "excess" and bewildering "appearances" remain intact, and the irreconcilability between philosophical principles and practical change reveals itself not simply as a theoretical problem, but as a problem rooted in the character of social exploitation itself. The metaphysical nonsense of a "pure theory" is a sure sign that society is divided into those who "think" and those who work—an exploitative relation which creates antagonisms which are essentially irreconcilable.[10] No wonder, at the philosophical level, that theory and practice are thought to inhabit separate worlds.

It is of course perfectly true that some of the ancient Greek philosophers were materialists in that they accepted that a real world existed outside the mind; but like Plato, they came unstuck on the problem of trying to make the world of change, of "practice", theoretically intelligible. Atomism, for example, substituted for God the famous "brick of the universe", a kind of "primeval" unit, itself exempt from actual change. Theory still yearned for a world of timelessness. Even the theorists of the Renaissance, who accepted change as a fact of life and, like Machiavelli, despised those who justified practical idleness in the name of "contemplation", nevertheless professed to see beneath all the comings and goings "an order which remains ever the same".[11] One form of metaphysics was replaced by another, and the reason why even the greatest of the philosophers of the Renaissance and the later Enlightenment failed to resolve the divide

[9] *The Republic* (Penguin, 1955), p. 105.

[10] The same philosophical disdain for practice can be found in Aristotle, as for example in a passage in *Politics* where he puzzles over the problem of educating a "gentleman" to enjoy music without, at the same time, being degraded by the "manual labour" of playing a musical instrument.

[11] Machiavelli, *Discourses* (Pelican, 1970), I.11.

between theory and practice is not difficult to see: for all of them, whether we think of Bacon or Hobbes, Hume or Kant, took it for granted that society would be divided into warring classes—that *fundamental* change, a transformation of the exploitative basis of "civilisation" itself, could not come about. They either accepted empiricism—that truth is simply relative to the way we order the "appearances" of the world as they impress themselves upon our minds—or they resorted to a "higher metaphysics" which furnished absolute truths in a realm "above experience". Rousseau, for example, bitterly castigated the "celebrated philosophers" for their futile relativism, but was forced to "scan the heavens" for the principles of Justice and Equality so dear to his heart. Either reality was a figment of the imagination or it was an objective creation of God: but in neither cases could a *theory* of the universe be reconciled with the *practice* of historical change, the "only immutable thing"—*"mors immortalis"*.[12]

The present predicament of contemporary positivism, its inability to relate philosophical thought to the practical problems of society, has roots therefore which go right back to the origins of "civilisation" itself. No exploiting class can accept the view that the very foundation of society including human nature is *itself* in a continual process of change, and hence the philosophers who have consciously or unconsciously spoken on behalf of this class have invariably placed the world of Absolute Truth above history, so that what changes cannot really be true. What is and what ought to be, the world of facts and the world of values, theory on the one hand, and practice on the other, the absolute and the relative, each of these dichotomous pairs have been thought of as polar opposites, mutually exclusive and irreconcilably apart. As antagonistic to one another as the "doers" and "thinkers", the exploiters and exploited in the real world.

This means of course, if we accept and emphasise the "relativist" side of the equation, as positivism does, that we end up arguing, with Karl Popper, that history in itself has no real meaning and that, instead of the rational understanding of a real world, we have mere "hypotheses", interpretations, "conjectures". Instead of an objective truth, we are confined to the uncertain probabilities of the world of appearances. It is one thing to be open-minded; quite another to postulate in all seriousness that the real world does not, in fact, exist. How much worse is it then to put forward this credo of mere scepticism, as Popper does, in the sacred name of "rigorous science"!

For the problem is this. Although positivist philosophers talk a good

[12] Marx's words in the *Poverty of Philosophy* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1936), p. 93.

deal about basing knowledge in "experience", what they mean by experience is not activity in any real practical sense, but simply the "act" of passively observing a kaleidoscopic world of events with no logic or order of its own. This implies that we cannot really be sure whether the "patterns" we witness are actually real in themselves or merely "sense data" perspectives of our own mind; for the mind, as Locke puts it,

> in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas, which it alone does and can contemplate. . . .[13]

In other words, "experience", as construed by the positivists, does not enable us to actually get to grips with the real world, but in fact acts as a barrier beyond which the mind, entrapped in its own "thoughts and reasonings", cannot go. It is scarcely surprising therefore that this sort of "science" is quite compatible with any kind of mysticism we care to imagine, for if everything is an "empirical appearance", then how can truth and delusion be possibly separated out? As Frederick Engels pointed out in his witty (yet scathing) critique of empiricism in the *Dialectics of Nature*, even eminent natural scientists like Alfred Russell Wallace and William Crookes could believe in "spirits", on the deceptively plausible grounds that what was "physically verifiable" really did exist.[14] In an amusing passage, Engels describes, as an example of "scientific" mysticism, his encounter with a Mr. Spencer Hall in Manchester in 1843–44,

> a very mediocre charlatan, who travelled the country under the patronage of some parsons and undertook magnetico-phrenological performances with a young woman in order to prove thereby the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the incorrectness of the materialism that was being preached at that time by the Owenites in all big towns. The lady was sent into a magnetic sleep and then, as soon as the operator touched any part of the skull corresponding to one of Gall's organs,[15] she gave a bountiful display of theatrical, demonstrative gestures . . . right at the top of the skull he had discovered an organ of veneration, on touching which his hypnotic miss sank on to her knees, folded her hands in prayer, and depicted to the astonished, philistine audience an angel wrapt in veneration. That was the

[13] *Selections* (Everyman), p. xliii.

[14] See the fragment "Natural Science in the Spirit World", *Dialectics of Nature* (Moscow, 1964), pp. 51–62.

[15] Gall was an Austrian physician in the early 19th century who claimed that every mental faculty of man had an organ of its own, located in a specific section of the cerebrum.

> climax and conclusion of the exhibition. The existence of God had been proved.[16]

Of course not all the attacks on materialism are as childish as the antics of Mr. Spencer Hall, nor are all the "charlatans" involved necessarily so "mediocre", but our central point remains. Positivism tries to restrict science to the world of "appearances" and thus leaves it vulnerable to fetishism of every kind. The truth of a phenomenon is only intelligible when we really *understand* it, when we can begin to explain it, relate it, dig out its causes, in short, reason about it. This is why Engels warned that

> we should hardly err in looking for the most extreme degree of fantasy, credulity, and superstition, not in that trend of natural science which, like the German philosophy of nature, tries to force the objective world into the framework of its subjective thought, but rather in the opposite trend, which, exalting mere experience, treats thought with sovereign disdain and really has gone to the furthest extreme in emptiness of thought.[17]

Positivism provides a philosophy which can readily be used to support any claim, allegedly based on "experience" and experiment, about "the power of mind over matter". More to the point nowadays, its "arid mysticism" likewise provides apparent respectability to "scientific discoveries" which preach racism and class rule in the name of varying "genetic endowments". At the top of the IQ scale are, it goes without saying, top civil servants, professors, research scientists—in Eysenck's version—and at the bottom, "labourers; gardeners; upholsterers; farm hands; factory packers and sorters; and miners".[18] It is the "phrenology" of Engels' Mr. Spencer Hall brought up to date. For located in the brain, in the reticular and cortex arousal system, lie those heredity traits which make us introverts or extroverts, neurotics and criminals, slaves or masters for the rest of our lives.[19] This *must* be true, for there are "experiments" with identical twins and statistical analyses of extensive IQ testing to show this is so: in Engels' time, there were batteries and magnetic needles to reveal the existence of otherworldly spirits—now there are doses of glutamic acid to be used on unfortunate children in order to explore the possibility of

[16] *Dialectics of Nature*, op. cit., p. 53.

[17] Ibid., p. 51.

[18] See Tony Agathangelou's article, "Some Strange 'Facts'", *Morning Star*, 11.12.1973.

[19] H. Eysenck, *The Inequality of Man*, Woodcock lecture, University of Leicester, 25.11.1971.

"conditioning" the immutable gene . . . and the basis of both forms of pernicious obscurantism? The same empiricist lie that reality is no more than an assortment of mutilated appearances: if people of different classes or "races" look different, behave differently, think differently, then this is somehow "empirical proof" that class and "race" can only be explained in physiological terms. The historical forces which make people what they are, which shape them and mould them, giving them a specific appearance at a specific point in time—these are simply ignored—and the momentary form is ossified into a timeless reality. No real change is possible: all that remains is for charlatans and mystics to carry out their fascist-type experiments in order to coerce the "defective" and the "aberrant" to "genetically adjust" to a capitalist status quo.

Positivism with its dogmas of socially irresponsible (allegedly "value-free") science, of a theory without practice, brings to an ugly head the age-old philosophical activity of trying to freeze historical development into timeless "verities", mental abstractions, which leave the world as it is. Sacrificing objective reality for its empirical fragments, positivism strikes viciously at the roots of reason, our ability to control the world around us, and defends instead a religion of passivity and helplessness in the name of "science": we are all victims of circumstance, genetic inheritance, accident, instinctual impulses which nobody can control, and the only bit of philosophy we have to guide us through life is to follow the will of those who know better.

Such is the present state of contemporary positivist thought. Such is the dismal cultural backcloth to what we can call

(ii) *The Challenge of Praxis*

What exactly is "praxis"? It is the Greek (and German) word for *practice*. And it is of course the world of social practice, movement and change that contemporary positivism shuns like the plague. In demanding that practice should be focused at the centre of our scientific concerns, the champions of *praxis* insist that we are a part of the world we study and cannot possibly be expected to theorise in some kind of detached, neutral manner. Where positivism preaches resignation and acceptance, *praxis* demands commitment and change: for conformity, it puts criticism, for passivity, it demands action, and hence instead of theorising in the abstract, it calls for concrete practice. It rejects therefore—in its manifesto of protest—all the self-defeating antitheses which are the hallmark of positivism, the supposed "gulf"

between Ideal and real, concrete and abstract, fact and value, the world of is and the world of ought. Thinking is a *praxical* activity, it insists, and its role is not to contemplate the universe, but to transform it.

But why the substitution of a foreign word, *praxis*, for the English one? Because *praxis* is taken to mean a good deal more than "practice" in the everyday sense of the term. Listen to what Kenneth Megill has to say in his *New Democratic Theory* on this matter:

> praxis, unlike practice, is revolutionary in form. The man of praxis is revolutionary; the practical man takes the given social order as permanent. . . . To learn from praxis is to develop a revolutionary doctrine which will enable one to understand the basic forces in history and the possibilities for developing a revolutionary movement so that men may gain control over their lives.[20]

Whereas positivist philosophers stress principles in the place of reality, the theorists of revolutionary praxis insist on the necessity of change. Gayo Petrovic, a leading Yugoslav philosopher and editor of the journal *Praxis*, declares that "man is society, freedom, history and the future",[21] a *creative* being who is neither the helpless plaything of external forces nor a slave to sinful appetites, but a being *who makes himself*. One whose human nature is actually created in the course of praxis: a being who is in a continual process of change.

Since a man does not contemplate the world but creates it, the abstract theories which he has are at the same time concrete truths: theory and practice, ideals and reality are inseparably *fused*. Where positivism postulates a sharp division, praxis forges a basic unity, so that man and nature, the individual and the universe are blended together as an integral whole. Human activity is *reciprocal* and it is, as a praxis writer in Britain recently put it,

> the *reciprocal* action of all aspects of human activity [which] reveals man as producing the conditions that produce him. Human ideas modify, through praxis, the very existential substratum of ideas themselves; history is the unfolding of man shaping his world.[22]

Theory, that is to say, must be grasped as a practical force and it is quite wrong to picture ideas as though they somehow existed in a world outside reality. Consciousness, Alfred Schmidt writes, always enters as an "active spirit into the reality reproduced by it", hence it must be remembered that *facts* are produced by men, they are the product, not

[20] New York, 1970, pp. 57–58.

[21] *Marx in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (New York, 1967), p. 23.

[22] J. Coulter, "Marxism and the Engels Paradox", *Socialist Register*, 1971, p. 134.

of gazing passively at an external universe, but of actually making it.[23] Getting to know the world is an essentially creative process.

This means of course that if, as Antonio Gramsci puts it, the "only 'philosophy' is history in action, life itself",[24] what is needed are fewer abstract dissertations on the "nature of Truth" and many more practical sorties into the real world, intent on social and political change. Indeed, can we not say that philosophy *as such* with its traditional penchant for the abstract and the lifeless should be *done away with*, so that theoretical argument gives way to actual practice? What is the point of epistemology, for example, that branch of philosophy customarily concerned with the theory of knowledge, if what is true and what is false can only actually be demonstrated in the course of praxis itself? The revelation of a situation, writes Jean-Paul Sartre, "is effected in and through the praxis which changes it",[25] so that it follows that action, in the course of its accomplishment, "provides its own clarification". Henri Lefebvre, another French writer, summarily states the praxis case against philosophy when he argues that

> abstract logical consistency, theory divorced from social activity and practical verification, have no value whatever.

The essence of man is social and the essence of society is praxis: abstracted from praxis, theory can only become bogged down in mysticism and mystification.[26]

The theory of praxis, in other words, sets its sights on demolishing the positivist dogma *on every front*. In practical terms, praxis theory rejects positivism's uncritical acceptance of the capitalist system and looks instead to a society in which people can control their own lives, unhampered in their freedom by exploitation or repression. On the theoretical level, praxis demolishes all antitheses, conceptual expressions of practical antagonisms, between subject and object, facts and values, which make critical activity impossible, and conceives man as a being who is creatively united with the world around him. Particularly important as a work which seeks to forge unity in the praxis position on all fronts is George Lukacs', *History and Class Consciousness*—a book which gives pride of place (as Lukacs himself later reminds us) to praxis as a concept which resolves simultaneously problems of a practical and philosophical kind. Man, writes Lukacs, is

[23] *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (New Left Books, 1971), p. 196.
[24] *The Modern Prince and other Writings* (New York, 1967), p. 81.
[25] *Search for a Method*, trans. Barnes (New York, 1963), p. 32.
[26] *The Sociology of Marx* (Penguin, 1972), p. 33.

"a perfected whole", one whose external freedom mirrors the fact that he is in the process of overcoming the dichotomies of theory and practice, reason and the senses, form and content, a being for whom, indeed, "freedom and necessity are identical".[27] What Lukacs describes as *alienation*, the loss of self-identity and control, cannot be overcome in practice unless it is also overcome in theory, and for this reason the praxis concept is vital. It unifies both dimensions: subjective freedom realises its identity in an objective world, a world which is therefore not outside this subjectivity, but is itself the *objectification* of creative freedom. In Lefebvre's words,

> through praxis, thought is reunited with being, consciousness with sensuous or physical nature, the mind with spontaneity.[28]

In place of positivist division, there is praxical unity: instead of pessimistic doubt, there seems to be the optimistic reassertion of man's creative abilities, the real possibility of "the widening and enriching of humanity":[29] in short, a thorough-going commitment to radical change.

What a contrast to positivism! What a welcome development in a post-war world where cynicism and superficiality have veritably polluted the intellectual atmosphere, allowing racism and class prejudice, metaphysics and triviality to become scientifically respectable as "academic points of view"! Values have been dismissed as mere "prejudices" and facts distorted out of all recognition in the name of methodological sophistication and "pure science". Activity and commitment are darkly denounced as "unprofessional". It is no wonder that this stifling cultural climate has provoked a radical reaction, an increasingly powerful protest which demands from science, relevance, commitment and change, that a growing number of philosophers and social scientists have come to demand that the problems of practice be brought to the fore and that praxis itself should be the only kind of theory we ought to develop.

[27] *History and Class Consciousness* (Merlin Press, 1970), p. 136.
[28] Lefebvre, op. cit., p. 58.
[29] Petrovic, op. cit., p. 125.

2

PRAXIS AND MARXIST THEORY

There is no doubt about it: on first appearance, the theory of praxis seems impressive indeed as an authentic alternative to positivism. Abstracting from the various differences of detail which divide the particular theorists I want to consider, I have tried so far to present the praxis concept as it first strikes the reader. A concept which appears highly critical, thoroughly radical and passionately concerned with the question of social change.

But of course we cannot allow ourselves simply to be content with "appearances". The famous Monkey King of the 14th-century philosopher, Wu Ch'êng-ên, warns us repeatedly in the course of his adventures, to be wary of appearances—not to be fooled by things as they *seem*, but to have a good prod beneath the surface and find out what they *really* are. It is good advice, particularly when trying to assess the validity of a theory which lays so much stress upon being practical and concrete. For how can one be sure that praxis theory does in fact practise what it preaches?

A first step must be to examine the relation of the praxis concept to other theories, those which it claims to support and those which it rejects, looking carefully not merely at proclaimed principles, but also at the hidden philosophical basis upon which these principles rest. Having done this, we will then be in a position to take account of how praxis theory actually works out when put into the context of political programmes and movements for social change in the real world: the acid test itself.

I hope, broadly speaking, to carry out these two tasks in the course of this work. For what is the theory which seems closest of all to the praxis concept? It is obviously Marxism, and the similarity between the praxis critique and the theory of Marxism seems striking indeed. Not surprisingly praxis writers frequently cite Marx in defence of their theses and in some cases (in the writing of Alfred Schmidt or Shlomo Avineri, for example), present praxis theory as an interpretation of Marx's work itself. In fact, praxis writers sometimes go further and argue that the concept of praxis provides us with a theoretical *key* to understanding Marxism, indeed Marxism's authentic core. Without a grasp of *praxis,* Marxism itself cannot really be understood: the

question is one of central importance to praxis theory and thus forms the main theme of this book.

Marxism of course has always regarded practice as the essential dimension of all human activity, and its insistence that theory must prove itself in practice results from a materialist rejection of any idea of "pure theory" *as such*. Men are producing beings who produce ideas as part of the process of practical production: there are no eternal truths which are not an intrinsic part of the historical world which they reflect, there is no "human nature" which cannot change. Kenneth Megill quotes Marx's words in *Capital*:

> man opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature.[1]

Marx then not only considered man to be an essentially practical being—one who makes even his own nature—but stressed therefore as a consequence of this, that theoretical problems could not be resolved in a world of their own. "The question of whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking", wrote Marx, "is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question",[2] and there are a number of well-known passages in the *Paris Manuscripts of 1844* (at which we shall look later in more detail) where Marx argues that the "strife" between man and man reflects itself in *theoretical* antitheses which can only be resolved in a practical way, "by virtue of the practical energy of men".[3] In short, as he puts it in the second thesis on Feuerbach:

> the dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question,[4]

a scholasticism which, as we noted in the previous chapter, becomes so remote from the real world that it threatens to even choke our practical ability to think.

Clearly then the Marxist concept of practice appears "praxical" to its core, and so it seems quite natural to see Megill, for example, describing "democratic Marxism" as "a philosophy of praxis",[5] or

[1] *Capital*, I (Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), p. 177.
[2] "Theses on Feuerbach" (No. 2), in *German Ideology*, p. 651.
[3] *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (Progress Publ., 1959), p. 102.
[4] "Theses on Feuerbach", op. cit.
[5] Megill, *New Democratic Theory*, p. 58.

Gayo Petrovic defining praxis as "universal-creative, self-creative activity, activity by which man transforms and creates his world", with the comment that

> exactly such an interpretation prevails in Karl Marx.[6]

And yet, if it appears perfectly logical for praxis writers to present their theory as authentically Marxist, the matter is not quite as cut and dried as it seems. If we look a little more closely at what praxis theorists actually say about Marxism, a rather curious fact emerges which we must now consider.

(i) *The Theory of Praxis and the "Marxism of Karl Marx"*

It has long been customary for Marxists to speak of their world-outlook as *scientific* on the grounds that Marxism is not some sort of "revealed truth", but is rather a theory which is grounded in "the concrete study of concrete conditions", a theory which continues therefore to develop and grow as it comes into contact with new natural and social facts and must continually adjust itself to a changing historical world. Basic principles ceaselessly enrich their content and strengthen their form as life moves on. Marxism is thus not only the theory of Karl Marx, but it is the theory of Marx steeled and tempered, enriched and developed, by decades and decades of vital historical experience. To juxtapose Marx to Marxism, the original teachings to the developments which have come out of them, is as meaningless and futile as the attempt to separate the flow of a river from its actual source. For Marxism *is* the theory of Karl Marx as it has developed over the last hundred years of history.

And yet it is this simple point which praxis writers reject. Marx, they argue, has been betrayed, not developed, vulgarised not enriched, by the theoretical contributions of his collaborators and disciples, and nowhere is this great "betrayal" more apparent than in the concept of praxis itself. Praxis is a notion worked out by Marx *alone*: those who saw themselves as following in his footsteps have simply created a dismal trail of confusions and deformations, vulgarisations and dogmatisms, a series of theoretical positions which stand in sharp contrast to the actual position of Marx himself. Marx, in other words, must be rescued from the damage done by his followers—the millions of people the world over who are busy constructing new societies in

[6] *Marx in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, p. 78.

the light of what they see as Marxist principles—if the theory of praxis is to be placed in its proper perspective.

Who precisely are the "dogmatists" and "vulgarisers" to which praxis theory refers? Plekhanov, whose theoretical work Lenin highly praised, is one; and Lenin himself, regarded the world over as Marx's greatest and most gifted disciple, is another. In Shlomo Avineri's opinion, Lenin and Plekhanov were not dialectical but mechanistic thinkers,[7] while Lucien Goldmann, another praxis writer, singles out Lenin's famous *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* as a target for special abuse, describing it as "one of the most mechanistic and anti-dialectical books there is":[8] Alfred Schmidt feels that Lenin's philosophy owes more to Feuerbach than to Marx, while Sartre describes it bluntly as "idealist". As for Karl Korsch, a dissident writer of the 1920s whose work has aroused some interest in Britain today, Marxism in Russia became "bolshevised" after the revolution, and chiefly responsible for this "degeneration" was, of course, Lenin. Leninism far from enriching Marxist theory, is a wholesale perversion of the praxis concept.

Nor is Lenin the only famous disciple who led Marxism astray. Even Frederick Engels, life-long friend and collaborator of Marx, must accept a good deal of the blame, particularly if one remembers that hundreds of thousands of workers learnt their Marxism from Engels' excellently written and easily assimilable commentaries on the Marxist outlook. It was the view of George Lukacs in his influential *History and Class Consciousness* that Engels never really understood Marx's dialectics and hence applied them in an erroneous and mechanistic manner,[9] and Goldmann contends that it was thanks to Lukacs' "pioneering work" that the sharp differences between the position of Marx and Engels became "clearly visible".[10] Peterovic likewise sees "considerable differences" between the views of Marx and Engels and ascribes many of Lening's "philosophical errors" to Engels' influence. Avineri is harsher still: it is not only "the cruelty and harshness of Bolshevism" which can be blamed on Engels, but "the intellectual wastelands of Social Democracy"—"the ultimate conservatism of the German SPD" can also be laid at Engels' door—an indictment indeed! Engels' politics were as conservative as his philosophy was wrong, and classic theoretical works like *Anti-Dühring* and *Dialectics of Nature* are, it goes

[7] *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge Univ., 1968), p. 65.

[8] "Reflections on History and Class Consciousness", in *Aspects of History and Class Consciousness* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 68.

[9] *History and Class Consciousness*, op. cit., p. 132.

[10] Goldmann, op. cit., p. 65.

without saying, wholly inimical to praxis theory. A "strict differentiation" between the two founders of Marxism must be maintained and the "collective personality projected by partisan propaganda"[11] firmly discarded.

As far as the praxis "school" are concerned, then, "official Marxism", as Lefebvre calls it, is simply a perversion of the authentic Marxism of Marx himself: "official Marxism" fails to get to grips with the nature of praxis, but "takes an empiricist positivist attitude under cover of a philosophical phraseology",[12] and positivism with a Marxist guise is no better than positivism in liberal dress. The "new democratic theory", as Megill calls his version of the praxis concept, is as opposed to the conservative philosophy of the West as it is to the "conservatism" of the East; and "orthodox Marxism", whether we think of the theories of existing socialist societies or those of the Communist Parties which are seeking, broadly speaking, to follow the socialist path, is as much an enemy of praxis as the technocratic positivism which has come under increasing fire, as we noted in Chapter 1, from students of philosophy in Britain today.

It is, however, only fair to point out that praxis theory is not only fiercely critical of Marxist "orthodoxy", it is not always entirely happy with the developed position of Marx himself. Gayo Petrovic, for example, has to concede that some of Marx's own comments, like those in the oft-quoted Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* are not always easy to square with praxis thinking, and it is a striking feature of the praxis commentary on Marx's work that the early writings (pre-1845) play an important, if not preponderant, part in establishing their case. Avineri comments, as though this were a fact of immense significance, that Lenin wrote his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* without having read the Paris manuscripts, and praxis writers naturally reject Lenin's view—one which seems to me to be essentially correct—that "mature Marxism", real scientific Marxism, was only developed by Marx and Engels in the years *following* 1845.[13]

Certainly praxis writers find it necessary to either ignore or simply gloss over statements by Marx in which he explicitly rejects "the true socialism" of his earlier years, and it is amusing to find Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Search for a Method* thoroughly exasperated by Marx's own endorsement of views which praxis theorists disdainfully label as

[11] Avineri, op. cit., p. 3.

[12] Lefebvre, op. cit., p. 36.

[13] *State and Revolution*, *Collected Works*, 25, p. 401.

"vulgar", "dogmatic", "positivist", etc.[14] Sartre must content himself with the thought that if Marx meant what he said, he was momentarily confused and was only contradicting what he had said about praxis elsewhere in his work.

The problem then is this. Praxis theorists vehemently dissociate their position from what is generally known as Marxism, while insisting at the same time that they speak for the true Marx himself—an argument which is extremely puzzling, partly because the differences alleged between Marx and Engels are so obviously (as we shall see) differences manufactured by praxis theory itself, and partly because it does seem superficially that the praxis concept corresponds broadly with what Marxists have traditionally called "practice" and still do if their tongue is German or Greek!

We must investigate the matter further, looking specifically at the objections of praxis theory to what it calls "official" or "orthodox" Marxism. Is it really true that Marxism has strayed from the path of Karl Marx himself and has become another form of empiricism or positivism despite its stress on practice, revolution and the abolition of the exploitation of man by man? The charges which praxis makes against Marxism are extremely serious and thus deserve our immediate attention. I turn therefore to consider

(ii) *The Praxis Case Against "Orthodox Marxism"*

Broadly speaking, we can present the criticisms and accusations levelled against Marxism by praxis writers under five main heads:

1. *That Marxism cannot itself be a Philosophy*

Engels and Lenin, like other "orthodox" Marxists, have tried to convert Marxism into a philosophy of the universe, thereby ignoring the fact that questions about the nature of truth, reality and consciousness cannot be resolved theoretically in a philosophical manner: they can only be resolved, as Marx himself said, through *praxis*. Indeed, Marx explicitly rejected the need for all "absolute principles" and saw in communism not only the end of practical exploitation, but also the end of the theoretical expression of this exploitation, namely a purely philosophical conception of the universe.

[14] Op. cit., p. 86.

For how, to put the objection at its simplest, can we continue "interpreting" the world when the real need is to change it?

2. *That Dialectics cannot exist in Nature*

The dialectic of nature is a conception foisted upon Marx which is in fact quite alien to the dialectical character of his own theory. For if at the centre of Marx's theory is *praxis*—free, creative, *human* activity—then how can there be a dialectic outside of society and somehow in nature itself? Just as positivism is guilty of mechanically dividing subject from object, man from nature, so too is the "dialectic of nature" for it seeks to speculatively impose upon the world of nature a dynamic which only makes sense when analysed in human and social terms. Not only are "dialectical" principles about nature scientifically baseless and quite unprovable, but they seriously detract from the emphasis which Marx himself put upon man *as creator*, a being who moulds nature in his own image. Any attempt to place nature "outside" of man leads to metaphysics and a devaluation of the essentially *humanist* content of the revolutionary dialectic.

3. *That Consciousness cannot "reflect" Reality*

The "theory of reflection", which the orthodox champion, is a purely mechanistic notion borrowed uncritically from 18th-century materialism. Like the dialectic in nature, it is alien to the concept of praxis which ascribes to consciousness an essentially dynamic role. After all, if thinking is an intrinsic part of practice—of changing the world—then how can it be said that consciousness somehow *reflects* reality? Reflection theory relegates ideas to a role of passivity so that consciousness is made to appear as a force which tamely limps along behind reality, rather than playing an active part in transforming society. And in addition to passivity, this notion implies dualism for it inserts a "reflective" wedge between being and consciousness, thought and reality, two dimensions which are in fact not separate at all, but synthetically integrated by the unifying activity of creative praxis. Not only was reflection theory alien to the work of Marx, but even Lenin (who initially supported it) changed his mind when a close reading of Hegel impressed upon him the active, dynamic character of consciousness itself.

4. *That the Basis/Superstructure Analysis is a False One*

Just as consciousness plays an active role in society, so too does the world of politics and culture. Any attempt to ascribe ideas or politics

and culture to an ideological superstructure in contrast to some sort of "material basis"—the latter ultimately determining the former—can only lead to a futile dogmatism which shies away from the facts of social reality. Why should there be a "fixed" relation between say politics, economics and the world of culture? Surely such a relation must vary from time to time. It is of course true enough that under capitalism—*one* type of social system—economic forces do have preponderant importance, for the commodity brings all aspects of social life under its sway; but economic life did not play this crucial determining role in pre-capitalist societies, nor—if the dream of communism is to realised—will it have this importance in the society of the future where people will become full human beings and not remain mere "economic animals". The fact is that the basis/superstructure analysis was not intended by Marx as a "universal theory" but merely to illuminate the fate of man under capitalism.

5. *That Concepts of Determinism can only contradict Human Freedom*

Official Marxism seeks to make man permanently subject to "objective laws" which operate, it is said, independently of his will. And yet if, as Marx himself argued, man is the *maker* of his world, a being of praxis, how can he be the "dupe" of forces outside his control? A deterministic perversion of Marxism can only lead to fatalism and passivity—indeed the same kind of conservatism which prevails in all positivist thinking. It is true enough that men are influenced by their environment: but if they are *products* of their environment, they are also and more essentially the *producers* of their environment. If circumstances make men, it is because men make circumstances, the very point which Marx makes in the "Theses on Feuerbach", and which expresses the kernel of the praxis outlook. All talk about objective laws which determine the fate and destiny of mankind negate Marx's own stress on human *activity* and sacrifice human freedom to a resigned acceptance of forces "outside" our control. Indeed, the very notion of determinism conveniently pin-points all that is erroneous and untenable in "dogmatic", "vulgar" Marxism, and shows how sharply it contrasts with the dynamic humanism of the praxis concept.

Here then is the nub of the praxis critique of Marxism which I have presented under five main heads. Naturally not all the writers I shall draw upon in evaluating this critique would agree with precisely all the criticisms I have enumerated, nor would they necessarily accept the particular way in which I have formulated them. When examining each of the five criticisms in more detail I will of course try as far as

possible to let the praxis writers speak for themselves; but it does seem, despite these qualifications, true to say that the points expounded above do *generally* represent the praxis case, the criticisms of a "school" which, I should remind the reader, has been created for the purposes of this argument because of the broad similarities which the group of theorists selected do in fact have in common.

One further point. It soon becomes clear to the reader as he reads through the criticisms which I have summarised in my own words above, that all five are closely interrelated. Even although all the praxis writers might not agree with all of them it does seem to me that each follows on quite logically from the one preceding it, and that together they stand or fall pretty much as a whole. After all, if one denies that Marxism is a philosophy in the sense of being a comprehensive *weltanschauung*—a theory of the universe—(Point 1)—it is because one feels that Marx's theory is or should be applied only to society and not extended to include the sciences of nature (Point 2). Dialectics, strictly speaking, *begins* with human society and hence all talk of the priority of being to consciousness, and thus the reflection of being through consciousness, is just so much metaphysics. For what sense does it make to speak of some sort of reality *in itself* beyond the mind? (Point 3). And if the debate about the priority of matter to mind, nature to spirit is idle and irrelevant, then similarly the re-expression of this argument in specifically *social* terms—in terms of basis vs superstructure—is equally sterile (Point 4). Finally, of course, questions of Marx's theory as a comprehensive philosophy, a theory about society and not nature, a concept which unites rather than divides thought from being through praxis, all these polemical threads come to a head in the pivotal debate of Freedom vs Determinism, and their asserted irreconcilability (Point 5).

The next five chapters will be taken up with examining each of these arguments in greater detail.

3

IS MARXISM A PHILOSOPHY?

There is little question that those who stand accused of "vulgarising" Marx's theory have described Marxism as a *philosophy*. One need look no further than Lenin and his preface to the fiercely argued *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, where he observes that a number of "would-be Marxists" have "undertaken a veritable campaign against the philosophy of Marxism", adding that

> all these people could not have been ignorant of the fact that Marx and Engels scores of times termed their philosophical views dialectical materialism. Yet all these people who, despite the sharp divergence of their political views, are united in their hostility towards dialectical materialism, at the same time claim to be Marxists in philosophy.[1]

And in his classic summaries of Marx's teachings, Lenin frequently refers to "the philosophy of Marxism", stressing as always that its "consummate philosophical materialism" has provided mankind and especially the working class with "powerful instruments of knowledge".[2]

Yet, according to the praxis writers, the description of Marxism as a philosophy is a travesty of Marx's views and the concept of praxis. And why? Although, as I have argued, the position taken by praxis theorists is *broadly* similar, in answering this question in detail it is necessary to examine individually some of the arguments raised in the defence of the praxis critique. I begin with

(i) *Henri Lefebvre and the End of Speculative Philosophy*

As far as Lefebvre is concerned, it is only with the rise of "establishment Marxism" that Marx's theory has been expressed as a philosophy, as a set of universal laws which govern both the operation of nature and society: dialectical principles which apply to the world as a whole. Such a philosophy simply contradicts the essentially historical character of Marxist theory, for Marx was concerned not with "absolute truths" about the universe, but with problems of *change*. The

[1] *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1964), p. 9.
[2] *Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism* (Progress, 1969), pp. 6–7.