

*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".<sup>1</sup> 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

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

Lincoln against the slave-owners in the American civil war—were not in many cases immediately concerned with the achievement of socialism, so that their practical significance only makes sense when evaluated in terms of a *theoretical* standpoint which understands the differing stages through which the masses may have to pass on the road to socialism. In other words, their practice can only be understood in the light of a Marxist theory of history, the *philosophy* of historical materialism itself.

Korsch's claim then that Marxism cannot, in any sense of the term, be a philosophy involves a childish misreading of what Marx and Engels actually had to say on the subject: their discovery that all theory was by its nature tied to practice, no matter how idealist the theory, and however blind and foolish the struggle. *This* was what they meant by the unity of theory and practice, a phrase much beloved by praxis writers, but in reality, how feebly understood! It goes without saying that this discovery itself required, as an essential expression of its "practice", the development of consistent materialist premises which alone can furnish the philosophical foundations of Marxist thought. For philosophy stripped of its traditional mystique is simply the generalised expression of all theoretical statements, from simple everyday words to grand embracing concepts. And although it is typical of the intellectual posturing of praxis writers that they should imagine in some cases that one can actually do away with philosophy by some sort of heroic act of will, the truth is that just as Marxism, theoretically considered, is a philosophy, so too is Praxis. Despite the torrent of angry words and menacing gestures against those who, it is alleged, have converted Marxism into an "ideology", "a theory of the universe", a vulgarised, dogmatic, idealist outlook, praxis theory has, of necessity, its very own philosophical basis, and however little its practitioners are actually *conscious* of the fact, its very own "theory of the universe", upon which its more immediate principles and concrete observations rest.

What is this elusive theory which pretends not to exist? Which mentions the debate between materialism and idealism in order to abstain from the contest? Which chatters incessantly about Man and Nature and the Universe and yet claims only to be concerned with revolutionary praxis?

I shall try to answer these and other questions as I go along: all I have sought to establish in this chapter is two basic points. Firstly that Marxism, despite the praxical sound and fury to the contrary, is a philosophy; and that, secondly (whatever their other differences), so is Praxis! With this initial methodological stumbling-block out of the way, the argument can now proceed.

## 4

## IS THERE A DIALECTIC OF NATURE?

Fundamental to the theory of praxis is the view that dialectics can only be a part of *human* activity, the practical dimension of *man*, the creator of a *social* world. The idea that dialectics is more comprehensive in scope, that dialectical theory theoretically expresses *all* movement in the world of material reality is fiercely contested, and the notion of a "dialectic in nature" is considered unanimously by praxis writers to sum up all that is mechanistic, dogmatic and positivistic in "orthodox Marxism".

How, asks Sartre, can men be creative and free unless dialectics are *exclusively* human and social in character? Dialectics "without men" perverts Marxism into a "paranoid dream". The only dialectical materialism which makes sense is historical materialism—the dialectics of human relations.<sup>1</sup> Jeff Coulter agrees. A dialectic outside of human activity rules out the possibility of man becoming "an autonomous subject in a total praxis",<sup>2</sup> and leaves him as the victim of a "non-libertarian society", "permanently incorporated into a determinate ontological system". A most terrifying prospect! People will still have to pay attention to objective laws of nature! The concept, praxis writers insist, is both philosophically absurd and politically reactionary. The dialectic in nature puts, says Gustav Wetter, a curse on the dialectic,<sup>3</sup> and promotes, adds Zivotic, bureaucracy, authoritarianism and alienation.<sup>4</sup> Few concepts of Marxist "orthodoxy" anger the praxis thinkers as much as this one.

And who is actually responsible for putting this curse on to the dialectic? An outraged unanimity prevails: the villain of the piece is Frederick Engels. It is Engels who inflicted upon his comrade's theory the ugly naturalistic stigma that has so confused succeeding generations of Marxists and done so much damage to the movement.

Engels ventured where Marx had feared to tread, and the outcome was

<sup>1</sup> *Search for a Method*, op. cit., p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup> "Marxism and the Engels Paradox", op. cit., p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> Cited by Coulter, op. cit., p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> Miladin Zivotic, "The Dialectics of Nature and the Authenticity of Dialectics", *Praxis*, 1965.

dialectical materialism; an incubus which has not ceased to weigh heavily upon his followers. . . .<sup>5</sup>

These are grave charges, and they are by no means new.

As early as 1907, Victor Chernov, described by Lenin as “a Narodnik and a sworn enemy of Marxism”,<sup>6</sup> can be found setting up Marx against Engels, and accusing the latter of “naïve dogmatic materialism” and of “the crudest materialist dogmatism”.<sup>7</sup> Twelve years later—despite Lenin’s exposition in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*—George Lukacs in his *History and Class Consciousness* forcefully advanced substantially the same view, claiming that Engels’ philosophical formulations differed radically from those of Marx, and that, in particular, the attempt to apply dialectics to nature was an erroneous venture, foreign to Marx’s theory, and solely the responsibility of Engels. It is of the first importance, wrote Lukacs,

to realise that the method [of dialectics] is limited here to the realms of history and society. The misunderstandings that arise from Engels’ account of dialectics can in the main be put down to the fact that Engels—following Hegel’s mistaken lead—extended the method to apply also to nature.<sup>8</sup>

And there is no doubt that Lukacs’ critique of Engels struck a responsive chord. Lukacs explicitly acknowledged this when he later commented that his book fell in with a basic tendency in the history of Marxism that has taken many forms, all of which

have one thing in common, whether they like it or not and irrespective of their philosophical origins or political effects: they strike at the very roots of Marxian ontology. I refer to the tendency to view Marxism exclusively as a theory of society, as social philosophy, and hence to ignore or repudiate it as a theory of nature.<sup>9</sup>

Lukacs, one of the founding fathers of “praxis” (though by no means the earliest as we shall see), has been followed with enthusiasm by most other members of the praxis school—Avineri, for example, arguing that Lukacs and his disciples are “perfectly right” in maintaining that the dialectics in nature, in Engels’ sense of the term, has very little in common with the way Marx understood materialism.<sup>10</sup>

How true is the alleged division between Marx and Engels? *Prima*

<sup>5</sup> George Lichtheim, *Marxism*, op. cit., p. 247.

<sup>6</sup> *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, op. cit., p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> Lukacs, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> “Preface to the New Edition” (1967), op. cit., p. xvi.

<sup>10</sup> Avineri, op. cit., p. 69.

*facie*, from what we know of Marx and Engels’ intimate political and intellectual co-operation, it seems highly improbable that a rift of this magnitude could have divided the two men, but the charge is made so frequently (and fiercely), and not only by advocates of praxis theory, that it cannot simply be ignored. Nor is the matter merely one of academic interest: if millions of Marx’s followers have got his position on this basic philosophical question completely cockeyed, then the quicker we face the fact the better. Of course, if an investigation shows that in fact Marx *himself* suffered from the same “dogmatic” and “positivist” tendencies as Engels (in the dialectics of nature as on other issues), then it is important that the praxis writers should be made aware of this fact, for only a charlatan or an opportunist can wish to continue advocating a theory in the name of a thinker whose *own* position in fact flagrantly contradicts the one ascribed to him.

Before actually considering the charges themselves which have been levelled against the dialectics in nature, it is necessary, first of all, to sort out Marx’s own views on the subject.

#### (i) *Did Marx reject the Dialectic in Nature?*

As far as Lenin was concerned, Engels’ comments on nature and the universe in *Anti-Dühring* (one of the works singled out by praxis writers for sharp criticism) were “in full conformity” with the materialist philosophy of Marx.<sup>11</sup> Both in his commentaries on Marx and in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Lenin lays great stress on the basic unity which existed between the two founders of Marxism: he comments, for example, that

Marx frequently called his world outlook dialectical materialism, and Engels’ *Anti-Dühring*, the whole of which Marx read through in the manuscript, expounds precisely this world outlook<sup>12</sup> (stress in original).

And if there *was* any sharp divergence between Marx and Engels on these matters, Engels for his part was certainly not aware of it. As he puts it in the 1885 preface to *Anti-Dühring*,

Marx and I were pretty well the only people to rescue conscious dialectics from German Idealist philosophy and apply it in the materialist conception of nature and history.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Karl Marx*, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 229.

<sup>13</sup> *Anti-Dühring*, op. cit., p. 16.

But is it true that it was really Engels who was interested in the natural sciences and that Marx, with a shrewder sense of what was "authentically dialectical", was only concerned with society and man? Certainly this is what some of the praxis school suggest: Petrović, for example, asks

what is Marx's attitude toward the dialectic of nature? Here and there Marx used to remark that dialectical laws hold not only for society but also for nature. But he never became so interested in the dialectics of nature as to try and write more about it.<sup>14</sup>

These remarks "here and there" are, as I shall show in a minute, of the utmost importance: but how true is it that Marx was never really interested in these matters and so, as Lichtheim argues, "wisely left nature (other than human nature) alone"?<sup>15</sup> It is certainly true, as Engels comments, that he and Marx

could keep up with the natural sciences only piecemeal, intermittently and sporadically,<sup>16</sup>

and we know of course, that it was Engels rather than Marx who was to write at some length on the question of dialectics in nature and of the value of dialectical thinking in the natural sciences.

But why was this? Because Marx lacked a real interest in the natural sciences and was able to somehow sense, anticipating his praxis "champions", that dialectics could only really exist in the social world of man?

There are a number of good reasons for believing that this inference is basically false and that no real or significant difference exists between Marx and Engels on the question which arouses such ire from praxis quarters, the dialectic in nature. Marx's alleged "lack of interest" in the natural sciences can be quite simply explained from the division of work which he and Engels had worked out between them; it is moreover strongly refuted by evidence of Marx's real concern with a science of nature in even his earliest writings, in his joint writings with Engels, in the two men's correspondence, and indeed within *Capital* itself.

I shall say something about each of these points in turn.

Firstly—a simple point which it is vital to bear in mind but which is invariably ignored by praxis critics—is the fact that once it was clear to

<sup>14</sup> Petrović, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> Lichtheim, *Marxism* (London, 1964), p. 247.

<sup>16</sup> *Anti-Dühring*, op. cit., pp. 16–17.

Marx and Engels that they were both moving towards a scientific understanding of capitalism, they decided to divide up the work between them. This fact is important not simply because it explains why Engels was to devote more time than Marx to discussing philosophical questions, but also because it points to a basic unity of outlook which made such an agreement possible. The *German Ideology*, the *Holy Family*, and the *Communist Manifesto*, all joint works, are three outstanding testimonies to the essential unity which existed between Marx and Engels on political and philosophical questions, and it is not surprising that Marx, as he looks back upon his collaboration with Engels, should refer to the fact that Engels in his splendid treatise on political economy in 1844 and his *Condition of the Working Class in England*, completed in the following year, "had arrived by another road . . . at the same result as I",<sup>17</sup> and that when in 1845 Engels came to Brussels

we decided to set forth together *our* conception as opposed to the ideological one of German philosophy, in fact to settle accounts with *our* former philosophical conscience (stress mine).

Now this would be an astonishing thing to say if in fact Engels' conception of dialectics was "mechanistic" and "vulgar" and radically opposed to the "praxis" theory of Marx. There is not the *slightest hint* of such a disagreement, and although the comment refers to an earlier period, it was in fact written in 1859.

The fact then that Marx and Engels decided upon a division of labour in order to elaborate their new outlook in all its variegated aspects<sup>18</sup> is itself evidence that both felt a basic underlying agreement with the other on all essential issues. Nor is it only Engels who refers to the agreement to divide the work up between them: Marx refers to it explicitly in his work against *Herr Vogt* when he says, alluding of course to Engels, that "both of us work according to a common plan and in accordance with an earlier arrangement".<sup>19</sup>

Why then did the division of labour take the form it did? Engels answers this question in his Preface to the *Housing Question*:

as a consequence of the division of labour that existed between Marx and myself, it fell to me to present our opinions in the periodical press, and,

<sup>17</sup> Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Engels, *History of the Communist League in Marx-Engels, Selected Works* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), p. 442.

<sup>19</sup> Marx-Engels, *Werke*, Vol. 14, p. 472 (trans. mine).

therefore, particularly in the fight against opposing views, in order that Marx should have time for the elaboration of his great basic work.<sup>20</sup>

The fact then that Marx himself did not devote much time to discussing the philosophy of Marxism *as such* (as he would have had to do had he had to “fight against opposing views”) and therefore, time to the dialectics of nature, the question which concerns us here, is no evidence at all that these matters did not interest him or that his views about them differed in any real way from the views of Engels. It is rather to the “common plan” and “earlier arrangement” worked out between Marx and Engels which we should look, if we want a serious explanation.

This then brings me to my second point, for the truth is that even in Marx’s earliest writings, in fact long before Marx worked out a consistently materialist theory of society, it was clear to him that a dialectical understanding of man and society was impossible without a dialectical understanding of nature and the universe. Here Marx (like Engels) followed Hegel, and whatever their differences with the “mighty thinker” they accepted with Hegel that the truth was “the whole”; both nature and man had to be considered philosophically, if a mere relativism and subjectivism were to be avoided. A science of man was impossible unless it was based upon a science of nature.

Consider, for example, how in 1842—when Marx’s position is coloured by idealism—he still argues, in the objectivist manner of Hegel, that social institutions must be based upon the natural laws of the external world. It is true that Marx’s politics are still somewhat conservative (the argument is directed against laws allowing divorce on the wishes of either marital party), but that is not the point. The point is that even here, although still under the influence of idealism, Marx clearly sees the link between society and nature, and the need to understand one in terms of the other. The legislator cannot, he insists, permit his whims “to prevail against the nature of things”,<sup>21</sup> for he does not in fact “make” or “invent” the law

just as a swimmer does not invent nature and the laws of water and gravity.<sup>22</sup>

Human activity, in other words, cannot be understood in abstraction from the natural world. If this stress on an independently objective

<sup>20</sup> *Housing Question* (Progress Publ., 1970), p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> See Marx’s article in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, 19.12.1842, trans. in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, eds. Easton and Guddat, p. 141.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

nature is “positivism”, then it must be said that such positivism enters into the fibres of Marx’s thought long before he ever encounters Frederick Engels.

The truth is that from his earliest days Marx is impressed by the fact that the natural sciences are of crucial importance to the student of society, both because of the disciplined manner in which they investigate reality, and because without understanding nature one cannot really understand man. In the first weeks of 1843, in investigating the economic hardships of the peasants in the Moselle district of the Rhineland, Marx stresses the need to examine relationships objectively, as they really are, and adds

one can determine this with almost the same certainty as a chemist determines under which *external* circumstances some substances will form a compound.<sup>23</sup>

But it is not simply that Marx believes that one must emulate the nature scientist in the way in which one investigates objective reality. More profoundly there is, in *Paris Manuscripts* of 1844, for example, the clear grasp of the fact that a science of nature is as much a part of the communist outlook (Marx has by now mostly rejected idealism) as a science of man. There can be no question of an interest in one to the exclusion of an interest in the other. On the contrary, Marx argues, it is the great sin of “philosophy” that it has remained “alien” to the “constantly growing mass of material” which the natural sciences have developed<sup>24</sup> and

even historiography pays regard to natural science only occasionally, as a factor of enlightenment and utility arising from individual great discoveries.

Are communists to ignore the natural sciences because our basic concern is with the freedom of man? This may be the argument of certain praxis theorists but it was never the position of Karl Marx: for natural science, declares Marx, constitutes the practical force which has “invaded and transformed human life” through the development of industry, and thus even though it is still the basis of human life “in an estranged form”, it has prepared the conditions for “human emancipation”.<sup>25</sup> A concern with the natural sciences is vital. For natural science directed consciously towards human ends can thereby

<sup>23</sup> “Defence of the Moselle Correspondent: Economic Distress and Freedom of the Press”, *Writings of the Young Marx*, op. cit., p. 145.

<sup>24</sup> *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, op. cit., pp. 102–103.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

begin to lose its exclusive character, and become the basis of a science for man. Indeed, the very division between natural and human science can then be overcome and the real nature of industry as “the *actual*, historical relation of nature, and therefore of natural science to man”, can be properly understood.

Natural science will in time subsume under itself the science of man, just as the science of man will subsume under itself natural science: there will be one science.

It is of course true (as I shall show in a later chapter) that these youthful exuberant formulations have their weaknesses (which praxis writers ruthlessly exploit), but they make one point absolutely clear. As far as Marx was concerned, the understanding of nature holds the key to an understanding of man: as Marx says elsewhere in the *Manuscripts*, “only when science proceeds from nature—is it *true science*”.<sup>26</sup> And yet it is argued in all seriousness by praxis writers that Marx was not really concerned about the natural sciences or dialectics in nature and left that questionable area to the mechanistic formulations of the “positivist” Engels.<sup>27</sup>

This position is reiterated in *The German Ideology* where the two sides of history—the natural and the human—are considered “inseparable”,<sup>28</sup> while in *The Holy Family* Marx and Engels ridicule the idea that it is possible to even begin to understand historical reality if one excludes

from the historical movement the theoretical and practical relations of man to nature, natural science and industry.<sup>29</sup>

Now unless the unity of man and nature is simply asserted as a purely abstract (and thus rather pretentious) axiom, it must mean that a study of nature is fundamental to an understanding of man and that an

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Valentino Gerratana, in his recently translated essay, “Marx and Darwin”, *New Left Review*, No. 82, confirms the importance of these passages in the *Manuscripts* in understanding Marx’s attitude towards the natural sciences.

<sup>28</sup> *The German Ideology*, op. cit., p. 28. The passage in which this particular comment is made is in fact crossed out, indicating possibly that Marx and Engels were searching for something more historically precise than the mere assertion that men are united with nature. For the limitations of their earlier formulations, see the discussion in Chapter 8.

<sup>29</sup> *The Holy Family* (Moscow, 1956), p. 201.

understanding of the activity of one rests upon an understanding of the “activity” of the other. Just a cursory glance at Marx’s earlier writings reveals what praxis writers try to deny: that a passionate concern with and interest in the natural sciences is as evident in the work of Marx as it is in the writing of Engels.

Consider our third point: the evidence of the Marx-Engels Correspondence and the light which it throws on Marx’s attitude towards the natural sciences and Engels’ ideas in particular.

It is clear that Marx and Engels frequently discussed questions of natural science. We find Engels in a letter on July 14th, 1858, asking Marx to send on Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature* and entering into a lengthy discussion on the way in which the progress of the natural sciences would have given Hegel “facts . . . from every side” with which to flesh out his dialectical concepts—from the discovery of the cell to the law of the transformation of energy to recent advances in comparative physiology.<sup>30</sup>

In the course of this correspondence, we see not simply that Marx listens to Engels’ ideas on the natural sciences, but that the subject is one of great interest to him. On June 27th, 1867, Engels referred in a letter to Marx to the work of Hofmann on chemistry, arguing that it demonstrated, despite the author’s mechanistic outlook in general, how the atom, “formerly represented as the limit of divisibility”, is in fact nothing more than a relation. Between the divisions of matter there exist quantitative differences which turn into qualitative ones—a fundamental law of dialectical movement. How does Marx respond? In view of the persistent misrepresentations of Marx on the natural sciences it is worth quoting his reply in full:

You are quite right about Hofmann. You will also see from the conclusion of my Chapter III [of *Capital*], where the transformation of the handicraft master into a capitalist—as a result of merely *quantitative* changes—is touched upon that in that text I refer to Hegel’s discovery—the *law of quantitative changes turning into qualitative changes*—as holding good alike in history and natural science. In a note to the text (at that time I was attending Hofmann’s lectures) I mention the *molecular theory*<sup>31</sup> (stress in original).

So much then for Marx’s alleged lack of interest in the natural sciences. And so much for his supposed belief that dialectics were purely social in significance and had nothing to do with the natural world. Marx’s comments speak for themselves. Not only do they

<sup>30</sup> *Selected Correspondence*, op. cit., p. 131.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 229.



directly refute the “Engels ventured where Marx had feared to tread” thesis, but they show that Marx considered the *universality* of dialectics to be of sufficient importance to explicitly incorporate it into Volume I of *Capital*.

On May 30th, 1873, Engels wrote an extraordinary letter to Marx outlining some “dialectical ideas on the natural sciences” which had just come into his head that morning—ideas which of course he was to later elaborate at much greater length in *Dialectics of Nature*. Engels consults Marx:

seated as you are there at the centre of the natural sciences you will be in the best position to judge if there is anything in it.<sup>32</sup>

And what is Marx’s response? That these ideas are absurd and untenable—wholly at variance with his own, human-based, dialectical conceptions? That Engels had uncritically taken over from Hegel romantic notions of nature which are mechanical, metaphysical and purely speculative? Alas, Marx had not had the good fortune to encounter the dazzling arguments of praxis theory on the subject! Instead he replies:

I have just received your letter which has been most edifying for me. However, I don’t want to hazard a judgment until I have had time to think the matter over and at the same time consult the “authorities”.<sup>33</sup>

His letter then delves into the problems of economic theory which he has on his mind (along with the international situation), but he ends up by saying that one of the “authorities” he has in mind, Carl Schorlemmer,

after reading through your letter considers himself to be essentially in agreement with you, although he reserves judgment over the details. . . .<sup>34</sup>

It is clear then that Marx takes Engels’ ideas on dialectics extremely seriously although it is not clear on this particular occasion how he follows them up, for there follows a break in the correspondence until August 29th when other matters are discussed. But we do know that Marx was not simply *interested* in the line of thought which Engels spent so many years exploring, but was in *basic agreement* with it. Valentino Gerratana draws attention to a letter of Marx to Engels on

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>33</sup> Marx to Engels, 31.5.1873, *Werke*, 33 (Dietz Verlag, Berlin 1966), p. 82 (trans. mine).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

July 4th, 1864, in which we find Marx—immersed in works on physiology, histology and the anatomy of the nervous system—commenting

you know that (1) I get round to everything late; and (2) I always follow in your foot steps. So it is likely that now in my free time I will devote myself a lot to anatomy and physiology, and also that I will attend courses (with demonstrations *ad oculos* and dissections).<sup>35</sup>

As Gerratana adds, the fact that Marx is affectionately joking in these passages should not allow us to conceal the real significance of these expressions.

From them it is clear that (1) Engels acted as an important intellectual stimulus to Marx and (2) Marx attributed great value to the field which was systematically developed by Engels in *Anti-Dühring* and the *Dialectics of Nature*.<sup>36</sup>

How astonished Marx would have been to hear a confident George Lukacs (and his praxis disciples) assert that the dialectic in nature was a foreign importation into Marxist theory by the “mechanistic” Frederick Engels!

Indeed, nowhere do we see Marx’s real concern and interest in the natural sciences more graphically displayed than in the enormous enthusiasm with which he greeted Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*. He wrote to Engels on December 19th, 1860, that

this is the book which contains the natural-historical foundation of our outlook,<sup>37</sup>

and scarcely one month later, he confirmed this judgment, in almost identical terms, in a letter to Lassalle, January 16th, 1861: Darwin’s book, he exclaimed,

is very important and serves me as a natural scientific basis for the class struggle in history.<sup>38</sup>

What precisely Marx meant by “the natural-historical foundation”, a “natural scientific basis” for the class struggle will become clearer in a moment: his excitement about Darwin’s work (Marx sent Darwin a complimentary copy of Volume I of *Capital* and tried unsuccessfully to

<sup>35</sup> *Werke*, 30, p. 418.

<sup>36</sup> “Marx and Darwin”, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

<sup>37</sup> *Werke* 30, p. 131. I am indebted to Gerratana’s article for this reference.

<sup>38</sup> *Selected Correspondence*, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

dedicate Volume II to him) simply crystallises what emerges irrefutably from the correspondence, namely Marx's deep interest in the natural sciences and his essential agreement with what Engels had to say.<sup>39</sup>

It is not surprising therefore, to take briefly my fourth point in this argument, that Marx should have incorporated some of the ideas he worked out with Engels into his life-work, *Capital*, where, as we shall see in the next section, he defended both Hegel's law of the transformation of quantity into quality as it applies to nature and the vital importance to dialectical and historical materialism of Darwin's work.

The dialectic in nature, then, was no invention of Engels: it was worked out in collaboration with Marx and had his full agreement. But what of the concept itself? Because of the immense prestige Marx enjoys as a thinker and revolutionary, praxis theorists, it appears, prefer to manufacture imaginary differences between Marx and Engels, so that they can then carp at Engels rather than forthrightly criticise Marx himself, for it is Marx after all who is the real target of their attacks. But this rather shoddy manoeuvre should not side-track us into overlooking the actual criticisms themselves which praxis writers level against the dialectics of nature. True, these are the ideas of Marx as well as Engels: but how valid are they? It is to answer this question that I now turn to consider

#### (ii) *Nature and Rational Dialectics*

We must begin with Marx's attitude towards the dialectics of Hegel. It is well known that Marx, in a preface to the second German edition of *Capital*, decided in view of prevailing philistinism towards Hegel to openly avow himself "the pupil of that mighty thinker", even here and there "coquetting" in the chapter on value with modes of expression peculiar to him. Marx adds that

the mystification which the dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.<sup>40</sup>

What precisely was involved in this process of demystification? Why indeed did Hegel's version of the dialectic need to be inverted before it

<sup>39</sup> Gerratana gives a minor example of where in a matter of detail Marx and Engels differed. See *op. cit.*, p. 77.

<sup>40</sup> *Capital*, I, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

could be said to be wholly rational? Unfortunately the praxis writers are no help here, because not only do they fail to understand the Marxist dialectic (which they ascribe to Engels), but they are also confused about Hegel's own position on the subject.

Let me return for a minute to the criticism of Engels made by Lukacs in a passage in *History and Class Consciousness* which I have earlier referred to. In this passage Lukacs argues that Engels mistakenly followed Hegel's lead in applying dialectics to nature without realising that

the crucial determinants of dialectics—the interaction of subject with object, the unity of theory and practice, the historical changes in the reality underlying the categories as the root cause of changes in thought, etc., are absent from our knowledge of nature.<sup>41</sup>

But this is irony indeed—for the very conception of dialectics as the unity of subject with object, of theory and practice, is *itself* Hegelian, and all Lukacs has done (while criticising Engels for following Hegel's lead) is to reproduce a somewhat subjectivist rendering of Hegelian idealism and thus adopt a position which leads into the same mystical bog in which Hegel himself becomes ultimately entrapped. It is, in other words, not Engels but Lukacs himself who has "mistakenly followed Hegel's lead". True enough, Hegel has worked out some dialectical theses on nature (which Marx and Engels found enormously valuable), but these theses suffer ultimately from Hegel's idealist belief that if nature is rational then it can only be animated by Universal Reason, the absolute world of Spirit. This means then that reality is ultimately the force of Reason who is sovereign and creator of the universe, while the world of matter is simply a formless, chaotic flux—"prey to boundless and unchecked contingency"<sup>42</sup>—which assumes an ordered substance only as Reason actually creates the universe. In other words, the Spirit is *prior* to the world of nature, for in so far as nature exists *at all*—even as mere "externality"—it exists as "a representation of the Idea".

The notion then, as Lukacs puts it, that the crucial determinants of dialectics are represented by the interaction of subject with object, theory with practice, is ultimately an Hegelian conception; for although Hegel does speak of dialectics in nature, he rejects (like the praxis school) the materialist view that nature is in itself, independently of *all* consciousness (cosmic or individual), dialectical in character. The

<sup>41</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 24, fn. 6.

<sup>42</sup> *The Philosophy of Nature* (Oxford, 1970), p. 17.

difference between the Hegelian dialectic and the rather enfeebled praxis version is simply the difference between objective and subjective idealism: the world spirit which, for Hegel, exists independently of particular men—hence Hegel preserves the *objective* idealism of traditional theology—is somewhat diminished in stature by praxis theory, so that it simply becomes the practical energies of men in society. Whereas for Hegel nature exists as a rational system, a spiritually manufactured reality in its own right, for the praxis writers nature only becomes a dialectical reality when, in the words of Alfred Schmidt, it has been drawn into “the web of human and social purposes”:<sup>43</sup> it has no objective rationality of its own. The material world *in itself*, considered in abstraction from “the practico-intellectual form of its appropriation”,<sup>44</sup> i.e. human activity, can be of no interest to Marxism, for Marxism is about dialectics, and nature only becomes dialectical

by producing men as transforming, consciously acting subjects confronting nature itself as forces of nature. . . . Nature is the subject-object of labour. It's dialectic consists in this: that men change their own nature as they progressively deprive external nature of its strangeness and externality, as they mediate nature through themselves, and they make nature itself work for their own purposes.<sup>44</sup>

A mouthful indeed, and one which reflects all the weaknesses of Hegelian idealism without any of its strengths! For now dialectics is stripped of all objective reality (albeit of a divinely immanent kind), and simply conceived of as, in the words of one writer, “an affair of the mind”. It is only, says Schmidt,

the process of knowing nature which can be dialectical, not nature itself.<sup>45</sup>

It is no wonder then that this hollowed-out, weak-kneed version of the Hegelian dialectic is subject to the same devastating criticism which Marx levelled against Hegel's *Science of Logic* in one of the fragments of the *Paris Manuscripts*—what the editor calls Marx's “Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole”.

For what is the gist of Marx's argument? Marx concedes that the notion of the Spirit as historical *activity*, as practice, is an extremely important one, for there is no doubt that Hegel drew this conception from an idealised expression of *human labour* and, in speaking of the

<sup>43</sup> *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, op. cit., pp. 58–59.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

spirit as a force which creates itself, points towards an understanding of “the self-genesis of man as a process”. But precisely because this creative process is ultimately spiritual, the unfolding of an Idea,

the only labour which Hegel knows and recognises is *abstractly mental* labour.<sup>46</sup>

The dialectic simply *breaks down*. Why? Because it assumes to start off with “a non-objective spiritual being”—a creator who has yet to create—“a pure restless revolving within itself”—sheer subjectivity, in other words, God himself. Now, says Marx, this initial position is absurd, and it is absurd according to Hegel's *own* conception of the dialectic as the unity of theory and practice, subject and object. For how can a subject exist without an object? It must lack even the *objectivity* of being a subject, and is consequently nothing at all. Hegel must either confess that his abstract reason is so abstract as to be non-existent—in which case it can hardly play its role as world creator—or he must somehow or other persuade this abstract reason to “go forth freely from itself as nature”.<sup>47</sup> But how is this possible? The Spirit must, says Hegel, *resolve* to go forth as nature, but an act of resolution is an act of mediation—the mediation of the Spirit with its opposite—and hence in order to “go forth” the Spirit must *already* be in unity with the very material world which it is supposed to create. The conception of dialectics as an *Idea*, as spirit, ultimately dissolves reason into unreason, for it presents us with a creative historical force which is necessarily prevented from answering the supremely creative historical question—“what creates the creator?” Dialectics, which is supposed to be everything in theory, turns out in practice to be nothing at all. The entire *Logic*, declares Marx,

is the demonstration that abstract thought is nothing in itself; that the Absolute Idea is nothing in itself; that only Nature is something.<sup>48</sup>

That is to say, unless dialectics are themselves ultimately natural, they cannot be anything at all.

Everybody agrees that dialectics have something to do with activity, with practice, with history, but the problem is this. History is only really intelligible as history if it moves consistently and ceaselessly from one stage of development to another, dispensing therefore both with any idea of a First Cause or—at the other end of the line—with any

<sup>46</sup> *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, op. cit., p. 141.

<sup>47</sup> The words of Hegel, quoted by Marx, op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

ultimate "resting place". This is why, of course, in the last analysis, the dialectics of Hegel's *weltgeist* are not dialectical because they cannot account dialectically for their own origins. Instead Hegel must shore up his spiritual dialectic by granting it a purely miraculous quality of being able to create itself *out of nothing*,<sup>49</sup> and this means therefore denying it the ability, in any meaningful concrete sense, of creating itself at all. In short, unable to explain its own history, the idealist dialectic ceases to be authentically historical and ends up ignominiously, as Marx so eloquently points out, in a slough of mysticism. And if this is the fate of the majestic Hegelian dialectic, what is in store for its watery alter-ego, timidly wallowing in its own subjectivism—the "dialectic" of the praxis school?

According to Schmidt, "nature becomes dialectical by producing men", but how is such an act possible? How can nature produce men, if it is not already a productive force? And how can it be a productive force, endowed with historical creative capacities, if it is not at the same time essentially *dialectical* in character? The problem of course is that the praxis writers vociferously deny the dialectical "nature of nature": Schmidt holds, as we shall see, that nature is mechanical, not dialectical, while Lukacs, following yet again "the mistaken lead of Hegel", accepts an essentially pre-Darwinian view of nature as a chaotic set of forces which go round in a circle "repeating the same thing".<sup>50</sup> But if this is so, "whence cometh man?" To understand human dialectics dialectically, we must understand their *genesis*. And the genesis of man cannot be understood in terms of a nature which is only deemed capable of going round in circles, for surely no one is going to argue in all seriousness that a development as dramatic and far-reaching as the birth of man occurred simply as the miraculous spin-off from a mechanistic merry-go-round dumbly awaiting the human kiss of life before it could "become dialectical".

But praxis persists with its stubborn scepticism. How, asks Merleau Ponty, can matter, if one applies this word strictly, "contain the principle of productivity and novelty which is called a dialectic?"<sup>50</sup> But why, may we ask, should matter, if one applies this word strictly, necessarily contain the *principle* of productivity and novelty—i.e. the theoretical reflection of an objective fact—before it can move or create? This is an absurd idea and yet it has always been embraced by

<sup>49</sup> "Spirit may be defined as that which has its centre in itself. It has not a unity outside itself, but has already found it", *The Philosophy of History* (Dover Books, 1956), p. 17.

<sup>50</sup> Cited by Schmidt, op. cit., p. 210 (footnote).

traditional philosophy (whose idealist prejudices praxis theory uncritically accepts), precisely because, as I argued in an earlier chapter, traditional philosophy, soaked in the mentality of the exploiter, has always believed that it is *mind* which moves matter, subject object, the abstract the concrete—the "thinking" master his obedient slave. That creativity—the development of history—comes *from below*, from the bowels of the earth and not from the "aethers of heaven", is an idea which radically subverts the centuries-old arrogance of exploiting classes, and thus at the same time that *idealist* conception of authority and supremacy upon which their entire apparatus of repression ideologically rests. No wonder a scientific understanding of the universe as a world which is real in its own right, independently of mankind and its "divine" consciousness, is an epistemologically repulsive thought! Of course, idealism in our own time increasingly teeters on the brink of outright absurdity, so that rational questions about the nature of the universe and the origins of man are no longer asked. The simple truth is that unless matter *does* contain that "productivity and novelty which is called a dialectic", then its historical development cannot be rationally explained; and if the development of matter is inexplicable, so too is the development of man. The "dialectics" of praxis becomes as theoretically nonsensical as it is practically absurd, for how can we take seriously a concept of practice which is unable to explain its own *concrete* origins? How practical is a "praxis" which must somehow or other "create itself" and, as an impoverished echo of the great Hegelian dialectic, is condemned to take its place with the other innumerable myths in history which have enjoyed "immaculate conception" in the same way? The fact of the matter is that the only way in which dialectics can come about is *dialectically*, and unless reality has *always* been dialectical, it cannot be dialectical at all.

Of course it goes without saying that men through their practice transform nature with the result that nature begins, as it were, to assume an increasingly human appearance. And it is, naturally enough, out of the very human creativity we see all around us, in agriculture and industry, that the understanding emerges that men are not mere passive contemplators of the outside world—they are also its active creators. But the decisive question to answer if dialectics (and thus historical practice) is to be understood, is not whether men and nature interact—it is obvious they do—but rather the thornier chicken-and-egg riddle, *which comes first?* The decisive question, that is to say, is not interaction: it is *priority*, because unless we can answer *this* question,

dialectical thought collapses, and in place of the rational, we must rely upon the accidental and the arbitrary for an explanation.

How then is the praxis school to rescue its concept of practice from the paralysing subjectivism which afflicts all who persist in denying an objective, and thus ultimately natural, dialectic? Schmidt, perhaps more than any other praxis writer, is determined to try. Certainly he is aware that "loose" formulations of the praxis concept lead straight to subjective idealism, for if it is argued that dialectical nature is simply a product of human praxis, then can we not say with Lukacs that "nature is a societal category",<sup>51</sup> and that outside of praxis, nothing really meaningful exists at all? Such absurd subjectivism cannot, Schmidt concedes, be squared with Marxism; and indeed he himself cites a good number of Marx's own statements, all of which clearly emphasise the fact that men could in fact produce nothing at all unless an independent material world existed in its own right. In stressing this point, Schmidt of course is quite correct: no meaningful conception of practice is possible unless we accept a materialist theory of the universe. Unfortunately, however, these concessions to materialism simply increase Schmidt's difficulties in trying to reject subjectivism on the one hand, while still defending praxis on the other! For if it is argued that

all natural being has already been worked on economically and hence conceived<sup>52</sup>

what are we to say of that world of nature which natural science insists has in fact existed *long before* the development of human praxis? "This question is particularly annoying for the philosophy of Mach and Avenarius . . ." notes Lenin,<sup>53</sup> and it is a question which is no more palatable to the praxis school. For Schmidt cannot have it both ways: either he must hold that there is no world of nature outside of praxis, in which case the geologist and the zoologist are simply mistaken, or if there is such a nature, then it must—by virtue of the fact that it exists at all—have an historical reality, the capacity to develop, and thus an objectively dialectical character.

How does Schmidt get round this problem? By reviving the agnosticism of Immanuel Kant! He writes:

like all materialism, dialectical materialism also recognises that the laws and forms of motion of external nature exist independently and outside of any consciousness. This "in-itself" is, however, only relevant in so far as it

<sup>51</sup> Lukacs, op. cit., p. 234.

<sup>52</sup> Schmidt, op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>53</sup> *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, op. cit., p. 58.

becomes a "for-us", i.e. in so far as nature is drawn into the web of human and social purposes.<sup>54</sup>

And what does this mean? It means that until we relate ourselves practically to the world of nature, nature has "no relevance", so that as far as *we* are concerned, nature does not in fact exist. It only becomes real (and thus dialectical) when men make use of this nature in organising their lives, in which case it must follow that Schmidt's assertion that nature "exists independently and outside of any consciousness" cannot be proved. To say that nature as a thing-in-itself is "irrelevant" is to argue that objective nature is unknowable, and if *this* is dialectical materialism then it is a "dialectical materialism" which is indistinguishable from old-fashioned solipsism with its childish confession (in the words of Boltzmann, whom Lenin cites) that

to be consistent, one would have to deny not only the existence of other people outside one's self, but also all conceptions we ever had in the past.<sup>55</sup>

The praxical argument that nature only becomes dialectical through social activity suggests to Sartre, that whether we see a dialectic in nature or not is a matter for each individual to decide . . .

each one is free to *believe* that physico-chemical laws express a dialectical reason or not to believe it<sup>56</sup>

but this position does not satisfy Schmidt. As far as Schmidt is concerned, objective nature is not only non-existent, but he can *prove* its non-existence by stating with certainty what in fact nature *is*.

Before the existence of human societies, nature could only achieve polarities and oppositions of moments external to each other; at best interactions but not dialectical contradictions.<sup>57</sup>

A most remarkable statement indeed! For nature, despite its objective state of "non-existence", is not simply *not* dialectical, it operates like some static "eighteenth century" *machine*. Of course, how *mechanical* nature produces *dialectical* man is nowhere explained—Schmidt simply assumes that human history is able to leap miraculously out of a void of timelessness! His statement is not only absurd, but it makes a complete

<sup>54</sup> Schmidt, op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>55</sup> Lenin, op. cit., p. 84.

<sup>56</sup> *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, cited by Coulter, op. cit., p. 143. Of course, this line of argument leads to its own problems, for if each one is free to believe in natural dialectics, so too must each one be free to believe in determinism, reflection theory, etc., the very concepts against which Sartre so passionately argues.

<sup>57</sup> Schmidt, op. cit., p. 60.

nonsense of his *own* praxical theory of knowledge. For it is Schmidt's view, as we have already seen, that

when understood critically, Marxist materialism does not attempt to assert anything of the material world in abstraction from the practico-intellectual forms of its "appropriation" by a given society,<sup>58</sup>

but what now emerges is that this position is not only not true of "Marxist materialism"—it is also not true of the theory of Alfred Schmidt. For what we are told here is that nature *outside* of society and thus independently of human praxis, can be categorised and has been categorised: it is non-dialectical.

In its strange alternation between the old mechanics and the strict dialectics of Hegel and Marx, Engels' concept of dialectics corresponded to the pre-dialectical character of nature itself.<sup>59</sup>

and yet these bold assertions as to what nature is or is not *in itself* occur quite independently of those practico-intellectual "appropriations" which are, according to Schmidt, supposed to be the source of all knowable reality.

The attempt to rescue praxical dialectics from an ignominious subjectivism flops wretchedly, and in place of a materialist praxis all we have is a melange of confusion and contradiction. A dismal failure. In the name of materialism, Schmidt argues firstly, that objective nature is unknowable, secondly that it is therefore mechanical so that it only remains to be seen, thirdly, why the dialectics of nature cannot really exist.

The problem, says Schmidt, is that what Engels calls the "dialectics of nature" is simply a series of "abstract metaphysical theses". They are divorced from any concrete historical situation and cast in the form of natural laws—the law of the transformation of quantity into quality, the law of the interpretation of opposites, the law of the negation of the negation—which merely "stand over against reality", "strikingly empty or commonplace", in the words of another praxis writer, "compared with the exact concreteness of the dialectical concepts in the economic or socio-historical writings".<sup>60</sup> Now it is of course true

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>60</sup> Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism* (Pelican, 1971), p. 120. This "comparison" with the economic or socio-historical writings is, as we shall see, a complete red herring. For praxis theory finds the dialectical conceptions as applied to *this* field quite as unacceptable as the dialectical principles of the world of nature.

that Engels formulates his statements about dialectics in nature in general, universal terms; but because these statements are expressed as universal principles, does this mean that they therefore lack "exact concreteness" and "stand over against reality"? The praxis objection is so revolutionary as to be nothing more than a reiteration of that old, tiresome empiricist complaint that there can be no authentic principles of universality in the world, because everything exists as a given *particular*. "Matter only exists in particular forms of being",<sup>61</sup> says Schmidt, and hence nothing universal or general can be said about these "particular forms". Engels' dialectical principles (which apply to *all* forms of matter) must therefore remain "external" to their subject matter and constitute "a dogmatic metaphysic". But how, one may ask, can these principles be "dogmatic" or "metaphysical" if *nature itself* has revealed through the evolution of one form of motion into another, that it "does not move in the eternal oneness of a perpetually recurring circle, but goes through a real historical evolution"?<sup>62</sup> For note that neither Schmidt nor any of his colleagues actually question the *scientific facts* upon which Engels' dialectical principles are based and which point irrefutably to nature as an objective material process in ceaseless historical (and thus dialectical) change. Indeed, Schmidt for all his diatribe against "dogmatic metaphysics" and "speculative principles", has nothing specific to say at all about the *content* of Engels' theory: what he objects to is simply its *form*. One cannot say anything scientific about nature "in the abstract"—as a "supreme principle"—one can only examine it in its particular forms. But this argument is quite as childish and self-defeating as the position we tackled in the last chapter—the argument that it is possible to theorise without philosophy. For now it is being asserted that if something is a particular, it cannot be a universal, and that what is universal cannot at the same time be particular. The truth is, however, that nothing can exist which does not have the dimensions of *both*. All concepts are universal, for they clearly refer to a class or type of things: even everyday words are for this reason universal abstractions.<sup>63</sup> But if all concepts are universal, they are *only* universal because they relate to a given body of *particulars*, and indeed if this were not so, no universal

<sup>61</sup> Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>62</sup> *Anti-Dühring*, p. 36.

<sup>63</sup> "By means of his *word* man wrenches [Nature's peculiarities] out of the vortex in which they are swept away and vanish. . . . We are so accustomed to the word that we forget the magnitude of this grandiose act—the ascension of man on the throne of the universe." Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 137.

concept could possibly exist. Even the notion of infinity must refer to something which can be differentiated from its opposite. Hence the mere fact that Engels speaks of matter in *universal* terms—abstracting certain characteristics, motion, mutability, etc., which are to be found in all forms of matter regardless—does not and cannot mean that he is no longer concerned with matter in its *particular* forms; for the only way that one can in fact *identify* these particular forms is by abstracting from them those universal features which they have in common. It is true that when Engels speaks of certain universal laws of motion he is speaking “in the abstract”, but it is also true that no thinking of *any kind* is possible unless it is to one degree or another “in the abstract”. If Engels is guilty of “metaphysics” because he has something general to say, then so too is each and every one of us, for we necessarily employ a multitude of “metaphysical generalities” every time we speak. If we speak of food when we mean fruit, fruit when we mean cherries, and “cherries” when in fact we mean a given cherry at a given time at a given place, then, according to Schmidt, we must be guilty of “dogmatic metaphysical theses” which stand outside of reality. Of course, as we have seen, all words and thoughts are to some degree or other *abstract*: as Lenin points out, we cannot

imagine motion, we cannot express it, measure it, without interrupting its continuity, without simplifying, without vulgarising, disintegrating and stifling its dynamism. The intellectual representation of motion is always vulgarised and devitalised and not only through the thoughts but the senses as well.<sup>64</sup>

But if all thought is necessarily abstract, so too is it necessarily concrete, for nobody can abstract from a given set of particulars which are not there. The fact is that *all* knowledge without exception, from the simplest word to the most generalised theory, involves a search for the universal *within* the particular, the eternal *in* the transitory, the absolute *in* the relative, and this “unity of opposites” encompasses both the “particular determinations of matter” and the “supreme principles”. Need we add that Schmidt’s conception of praxis is no exception?

Schmidt’s argument rests, as we have seen, on the view that nature is intrinsically mechanistic and undialectical—able only to achieve “polarities and oppositions of moments external to each other”. But is this proposition not as universal and generalised as any which Engels makes? Indeed, whereas Engels’ points are properly argued and

<sup>64</sup> Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks—Collected Works*, vol. 38 (Lawrence and Wishart, 1961), p. 259.

rationally explained, relying not merely upon assertion but on a conscientious examination of natural-scientific discoveries which furnish practical proof for the view that “nature is the test of dialectics”, Schmidt’s “abstract” and universal theses are simply *assumed* and turn out to be in radical contradiction with everything that has been discovered about nature over the last one hundred and fifty years. The question then is not whether Schmidt and the other praxis theorists have been able to avoid general statements about the natural world (obviously they haven’t), the question is why have they been unable to progress beyond the mechanistic notions of the 18th century—both Schmidt and Lukacs embrace these *explicitly*—thus absorbing childish ideas which no thinking scientist could possibly take seriously today in his practical work. As Engels pointed out long ago about the natural scientists, they

may adopt whatever attitude they please, they are still under the domination of philosophy. It is only a question whether they want to be dominated by a bad, fashionable philosophy or by a form of theoretical thought which rests on acquaintance with the history of thought and its achievements.<sup>65</sup>

There is not much doubt about which form of philosophy dominates the world-outlook of praxis with its arrogant and unthinking rejection of the dialectical character of the natural world. After all, as Engels adds, “those who abuse philosophy most are slaves to precisely the worst vulgarised relics of the worst philosophies”; and after reading about a “pre-dialectical nature” able only to “achieve polarities and oppositions of moments external to each other” in the work of a 20th-century writer, it is surely difficult to disagree.

As for the argument that universal theories must be metaphysical, we concede that when such theories fly in the face of accepted scientific fact, this may be true. But when universal theories are scientifically derived and formulated, precisely the opposite holds. What seems more “abstract” and “metaphysical” is in fact far more *concrete* precisely because, through its very dimension of universality, theory expresses the interconnections of a vast number of particulars: such a theory is not abstract because it is general, on the contrary, it is a thousand times more concrete because it encompasses in its scope a far greater slice of reality than more limiting, particularising concepts. Thus, says Engels,

the general law of the change of the form of motion is much more concrete than any single “concrete” example of it,<sup>66</sup>

<sup>65</sup> *Dialectics of Nature*, op. cit., p. 213.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

since, as Lenin has pointed out, it represents a much more profound, complete and faithful reflection of the real world. Hence it is not surprising that although the germs of a dialectic in nature are implicit in the writing of Marx and Engels from their earliest periods, the concept itself only begins to assume a coherent, systematised shape after prolonged investigation into the actual character, the detailed anatomy and physiology, of society and nature—a lengthy encounter with precisely those facts which (as Engels noted in one of his letters) all helped to “flesh out” and at the same time demystify the profound and brilliant analysis of Hegel himself.

It is no wonder that Marx and Engels were highly delighted with a work which despite “its crude English method”, magnificently combined universal theory with specific fact: Marx, as we have seen, told Lassalle that Darwin’s *Origin of Species* provided him with a natural scientific basis to the class struggle, while Engels, in one of many comments, declared that

Darwin must be named before all others. He dealt the metaphysical conception of nature the heaviest blow by his proof that all organic beings, plants, animals, and man himself, are the products of a process of evolution going on through millions of years.<sup>67</sup>

Avineri may argue that

the origins of Engels’ views must be sought in a vulgarised version of Darwinism and biology, with the Hegelian terminology serving only as an external and rather shallow veneer,<sup>68</sup>

but this rather ungracious comment does not reflect Marx’s view. Marx, as we have seen, had the highest regard both for Engels’ scholarship and his ideas, and it was Marx himself who paid specific tribute to the importance of Hegel and Darwin in the development of his own theory. In a well-known passage in *Capital* (which Avineri must have overlooked) Marx made his famous comment on the dialectics of nature (to which he had already referred in a letter to Engels):

the possessor of money or commodities actually turns into a capitalist in such cases only where the maximum sum advanced for production greatly exceeds the maximum of the middle ages. Here, as in natural science, is shown the correctness of the law discovered by Hegel (in his *Logic*), that

<sup>67</sup> *Anti-Dühring*, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>68</sup> Avineri, op. cit., p. 70.

merely quantitative differences beyond a certain point pass into qualitative changes.<sup>69</sup>

Was it really only Engels who used “Hegelian terminology” in emphasising the dialectical character of the natural world? The praxis writers appear to believe that because human practice is creative, we can simply make up “facts” about the world as it suits us, there being no objective external reality. Before we assert confidently that for Engels,

the dialectic becomes a *Weltanschauung*, a positive principle for explaining the world, something it most definitely was not for Marx,<sup>70</sup>

should we not perhaps pause to ask what Marx could have possibly meant when he spoke of the correctness of dialectical laws of logic as applied both to society and to the natural sciences? As for the “vulgarised version of Darwinism”, as Valentino Gerratana has shown so well, both Marx and Engels carefully studied Darwin’s work, and Marx in *Capital* pays generous tribute to its “epoch-making” character. What was “vulgarised” about this? On the contrary, it was precisely Marx’ and Engels’ creative appreciation for the work both of Darwin and Hegel that has enabled Marxism to transform dialectics from a brilliant idea into a materialist science and to develop a conception of practice that is authentically universal and totally free from the pathetic subjectivism and mystifying arbitrariness of the praxis idea. When Marx enthusiastically championed Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, he did so because the work drew specific attention to the importance of *pre-human labour*, a dialectical practice *before man*, and referred ingeniously to the natural organs of plants and animals as having “different kinds of work to perform”.<sup>71</sup> Praxis theorists may still prefer to believe that nature goes round in circles and that anyone who denies this is being “dogmatic” and “metaphysical”; but as far as Marx and Engels were concerned, the historical character of nature furnished the very lynch-pin of the dialectical universe. Without a natural scientific basis, class struggle could not be properly understood: without its natural-historical foundation, the whole of Marxist theory is built on sand. After all, how can we really explain the production of man and his society through labour, unless we can also explain what produced this production?

<sup>69</sup> *Capital*, I, op. cit., p. 309.

<sup>70</sup> Schmidt, op. cit., p. 57.

<sup>71</sup> *Capital*, I, op. cit., p. 341.



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

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

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

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 342.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

## 5

## CONSCIOUSNESS AS THE REFLECTION OF REALITY

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

incompatible with Marx's conception of man as a creative being of praxis.<sup>1</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>1</sup> Petrovic, op. cit., p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit., p. 116.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 171.