

Misadventures of the Dialectic

Peter Dews

I would like to offer some kind of critical response to the ideas on dialectic and social science which have been developed by Roy Edgley in articles published in Radical Philosophy ('Reason as Dialectic' RP15) and, more recently, in Critique ('Dialectic: The Contradiction of Colletti', Critique 7). As Edgley's target in the second of these articles is the view of dialectic presented by Lucio Colletti in 'Marxism and the Dialectic' (New Left Review 93), this response will involve a defence of some of Colletti's main positions, although I hope to approach the issues involved from a slightly different angle.

These issues are important. Throughout its history Marxist thought has struggled to come to terms with the problematic inheritance of the dialectic. Successive theorists from Engels onwards have attempted to give a viable and coherent interpretation of its leading concepts, yet have diverged radically on such fundamental problems as the relation between the dialectic of Marx and that of Hegel. The question today remains as open and vexed as it has ever been, and in this context Colletti's NLR article must be seen as a bold attempt to cut through the confusion and mystification which has surrounded the dialectic in Marxist usage. Edgley himself acknowledges the service which Colletti has performed in pointing out how Marxists have consistently failed to distinguish between genuine contradiction and what is no more than a conflict of natural or social forces, and hence have lost their grip on the specifically logical nature of contradiction. But he then goes on to offer far-reaching criticisms of Colletti. I believe that the central core of these criticisms is unsubstantiated. Edgley's two articles, for all their good intentions, can only serve to thicken the intellectual fog which surrounds the problem of dialectics, and which the iconoclastic thrust of Colletti's 'Enlightenment Marxism' (Timpanaro) has already done much to dissipate.

Edgley makes much of the fact that Colletti's concept of contradiction as a purely logical phenomenon is in consonance with the accepted wisdom of bourgeois philosophy of logic. Colletti accepts a bourgeois dogma, that 'there are no contradictions in reality', itself a reflection of the idealism and anti-psychologism characteristic of the modern development of the subject, and in so doing abandons one of the central tenets of dialectical materialism. But the reason why Colletti does this is plain. Established science, the sciences of physics, biology etc which we already have, pays no attention whatever to dialectics. Indeed science as we know it, or in any sense we could understand, could not exist at all if the principle of non-contradiction were flouted, since this principle merely expresses a condition of the continued existence of any object. In his writings on Hegel Colletti has made clear

that Hegel's suspension of this principle was intended precisely to dissolve the reality of the finite and the material. Since, according to Hegel, 'every philosophy is essentially an idealism, or at least has idealism for its principle,' (1) the principles obeyed by the intellect in common sense and science which posit the existence of a finite, independently-existing reality, must be transcended. Hence the dialectic cannot be simply adapted or 'inverted'. It is intrinsically part of the armature of idealism (2)

This critique of Hegel was inherited by Colletti from his philosophical mentor Galvano della Volpe, a fellow PCI member during the fifties and founder of an influential school within Italian Marxism. Faced with the combination of a degenerate historicism ultimately derived from Croce with Soviet-style dialectical materialism, the dominant philosophical mode within the PCI at that period, Della Volpe fought a prolonged battle in defence of the scientific intellect and against the predations of an all-dissolving Hegelian Reason. As he pointed out in his key work Logica Come Scienza Positiva, even Hegel had to employ the principles of identity and non-contradiction in his everyday experience. Indeed he goes on to quote McTaggart to the effect that for Hegel, as for everyone else, an unresolved contradiction is a sign of error (3).

It is worth looking more closely at the context of this quotation. In his Studies in Hegelian Dialectic McTaggart points out that the dialectic, contrary to common supposition, does not reject the principle of non-contradiction. In fact, it is so far from denying it that it is especially based on it. For the relation of thesis and antithesis derives its whole meaning from the synthesis which follows them, and in which the contradiction ceases to exist as such. An unreconciled predication of two contrary categories, for instance Being and not-Being, of the same thing, would lead in the dialectic, as it would elsewhere, to scepticism, if it was not for the reconciliation in Becoming. Hence for Hegel: 'Contradiction is not the end of the matter, but cancels itself.' (4) It is the synthesis alone which has reality. But since the synthesis becomes in its turn a new thesis, the process can only conclude when we reach what alone is rational and real: the Absolute Idea (5). It will be clear that this account reinforces Colletti's conclusion that the notion of dialectical materialism is, in effect, aporetic. Hegel makes the use of one category lead inexorably to the use of its logical contrary (this is the sense in which he does attempt to transcend the intellect) precisely in order to do away with materialism. If Marx is shown to have been sympathetic to Engels' philosophical romancing in this area (a defence of dialectical materialism employed by Timpanaro), then so much the worse, says Colletti, for Marx.

It is important to note that, despite the apparent thrust of Edgley's argument, and despite the smear of collusion with bourgeois philosophy of logic, Edgley is in fact in agreement with Colletti on the substantive point at issue. He does not dispute the 'bourgeois philosophical' claim that there are no contradictions in reality in the sense in which that claim is intended. Indeed, Edgley's whole conception of practical reason, and of the logico-practical criticism of ideologies and scientific theories,

- 1 Quoted in Lucio Colletti, 'From Hegel to Marcuse' in From Rousseau to Lenin, London 1972, p111
- 2 See Lucio Colletti, art. cit., and idem., Marxism and Hegel, London 1973
- 3 See Galvano della Volpe, Logica come Scienza Positiva, Messina-Firenze 1950, pp95,101
- 4 G.W.F. Hegel, Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences, section 119, lecture note
- 5 See chapter one ('The general nature of the dialectic') of John McTaggart, Studies in the Hegelian Dialectic, Cambridge 1896, esp. pp8-10

depends upon the principle of non-contradiction: we criticize self-contradictory beliefs and theories precisely because what they assert to be the case cannot be instantiated in reality. So at least as far as natural science is concerned the actual position of Edgley's texts, as opposed to what might be termed their 'false-consciousness', does not stand counter to Colletti's aim of finally putting paid to what he calls the 'evening class philosophical pastiche'(6) of Diamat. Edgley does gesture in the Radical Philosophy article towards a theorisation of 'crucial differences in what we might call degree of dialecticity between the natural and the social sciences'(7), but this is no more than a piece of conventional piety. To call the natural sciences dialectical, we are told, implies that they investigate a reality whose underlying core ('essence') is composed of conflicting forces, and differs radically from its appearance. This could be made to fit in some cases: solid chairs and tables ('phenomenal appearance') differ radically from empty space filled loosely with atoms ('essence'), and atoms are composed of 'conflicting forces' (protons, electrons). But, even ignoring its readmission of conflict as a substitute for contradiction - and Edgley is in agreement with Colletti on the illegitimacy of this - the formulation is arbitrary and unilluminating. How could a science such as botany be made to fit this formula? Edgley's final criterion fares no better. To suggest that the natural sciences are dialectical because they 'develop historically through theory change centrally involving determinate contradiction between theories such that new theories both negate and preserve old theories'(8) seems to be perfectly in accord with Popper's suggestion, rejected only two pages earlier by Edgley, that dialectic is most plausible as an empirical theory about the temporal or historical development of thought.

However, natural science is not Edgley's main concern. In the Critique article he is prepared to drop the idea that the natural sciences are dialectical, except perhaps in the minimal sense that they are 'real human products'. Indeed the main tendency of Edgley's arguments is to assert a qualitative distinction between the natural and social sciences, based precisely on the distinctive 'dialecticity' of the latter. It is in this realm, Edgley believes, that the denial of the existence of 'contradictions in reality' can lead to dangerous consequences. To assert an absolute distinction between logic and reality, in accordance with the accepted wisdom of bourgeois philosophy, is to ignore the fact that propositions can be, indeed must be, concretely instantiated. Propositions can represent contradictory beliefs which are held by a single individual, or by different people, or by different social movements or institutions, and so on. Thought and language are part of reality. Yet an adherence to the principle of non-contradiction, combined with its corollary that contradiction is purely a relation between propositions, implies, Edgley believes, a denial of these obvious facts.

Clearly something strange is happening here. No one, least of all Colletti, would wish to deny that people can contradict themselves and each other, or that thought and language are in some sense 'part of reality'. Edgley, in fact, is making use of an ambiguity in the phrase 'contradictions in reality', and this is something which he freely admits: he is proposing 'another sense to the question'(9) of whether

6 Lucio Colletti, 'A Political and Philosophical Interview', New Left Review 86, p16

7 'Reason as Dialectic', p7

8 loc. cit.

9 'Dialectic: The Contradiction of Colletti', p50

there can be such contradictions. This in itself would be unobjectionable. But Edgley then goes on to exploit this ambiguity in order to turn the tables on Colletti by slipping from one meaning of the phrase to the other. Once this manoeuvre has been exposed, the basis of Edgley's argument is removed

Contradiction and language

In order to see how this, at first glance, convincing elision of two distinct meanings is achieved, we must look a little more closely at what is meant by the term 'proposition'. In the sense that people think thoughts, hold beliefs, speak sentences and so on, propositions are instantiated in reality. But, and this is the crucial point which Edgley neglects, a proposition is not just a string of sounds or signs: a proposition has a meaning, or, to be more precise a proposition is the meaning of a sentence. Thus the same proposition can be expressed in different idioms or languages, while the sentence in which it is expressed - obviously - changes. If this seems to smack of the bourgeois 'subliming' of logic which Edgley denounces, it is worth noting that such is the view of Edgley himself. In 'Dialectic: The Contradiction of Colletti' he speaks of propositions as the 'intentional objects' of 'psychological states, attitudes and acts'(10), and intentional objects, as Husserl emphasised, are only revealed via the 'meaning-component' (what he termed the 'noemat-ische Sinn') of a mental act. Moreover, in the penultimate paragraph of the same article, Edgley states both that: 'relations of logical conflict can be instantiated not only within and between individuals, but also within and between groups and classes of people in their social activities,' and that: 'logical relations are not simply truth-value relations but hold more generally in virtue of relations of meaning'(11). In other words the types of social conflict with which social science, according to Edgley, must deal are founded in contradictory meanings. This foundation in meaning applies even in the case of contradictory actions, as Edgley himself makes clear at paragraph 4.2 of his book Reason in Theory and Practice. Opening and shutting a window are not inherently contradictory actions. (It may be too hot in the room at one time, too cold at another.) Only in so far as they fall under some description which involves the intentions of an agent - that is, have a meaning - can actions be said to be contradictory (12).

The point is this: Edgley wishes to maintain, in accordance with Diamat, that there are contradictions in 'material reality' (so frequently invoked, though so rarely defined, by Marxists). But no one has yet succeeded or even remotely looks like succeeding in giving an account of the unavoidable concept of meaning in 'materialist' terms, that is to say in terms which are ultimately reducible to the vocabulary of physical observation, if not that of physical science. No doubt Edgley, like most other contemporary Marxists, finds totally alien this kind of empiricism and materialism, exemplified by reductionist positions within analytical philosophy (after all, he is proposing a new conception of science itself). But if that is the case - and Timpanaro's work has raised this question in an acute and embarrassing form - what precisely do Marxist invocations of 'material reality' commit us to?

The crucial transition in Edgley's argument in

10 loc. cit.

11 ibid., p52

12 See Roy Edgley, Reason in Theory and Practice, London 1969, pp109-10

this respect is to be found at the point in the Critique article where he discusses the relation between psychology and logic. Noting an ambiguity in terms like 'belief', 'assertion', 'judgment' etc. which seems to identify both 'intentional objects' and psychological states, he goes on to observe: 'It is then easy, and among philosophers a standing temptation, to identify the distinction between propositions and reality with the distinction between ideas and the 'material world'; so that ideas, judgments, beliefs, etc. are contrasted with reality, are regarded as non-real. Colletti's article exemplifies this tendency. '(13) But it is Edgley who is in confusion here, for he fails to remark on the intractable problems thrown up by any attempt to give a 'materialist' account (e.g. causal or dispositional) of psychological states such as belief, hope, fear and so on. In other words, Edgley fails to make clear that the psychological states with which he is concerned, and which no one would wish to deny are real, cannot be characterised without reference to intentional objects which are indeed 'non-real' (i.e. irreal in the Husserlian sense). For this is the whole puzzle of intentionality - that a content which masquerades as a separable object, and which can frequently only be described in terms of some imaginary or even impossible state of affairs, is that alone which makes a psychological state the kind of state it is. So the situations of 'logical conflict' between individuals, social institutions and so on, which Edgley considers to be instantiations of 'contradictions in reality', only involve such contradiction by virtue of a logical conflict between those 'meanings' through which the intentional object of a state of belief etc is constituted. These are Husserl's noematische Sinne which, it has been argued, must all ultimately be expressible as verbal meanings (14), and which must necessarily be employed to characterise the psychological states involved. To put it briefly: even when it entails material conflict between persons or institutions, 'logical conflict' is only such conflict by virtue of irreconcilable meanings which are not themselves part of 'material' or any other kind of reality. Indeed Edgley is caught in a double-bind. For if it were possible to give an account of intentional psychological states (e.g. of the difference between fear of embarrassment and fear of a grizzly bear) in terms of the schemas of natural science, there would be no more question of contradiction or 'logical conflict'. Meaning would have disappeared, since, as Edgley himself admits, there cannot be contradictions between processes in nature.

It will be seen that Edgley's argument is based on a false equation between the instantiation of contradictory states of affairs in reality (which he admits to be impossible - why else would self-contradictory theories be open to criticism?), and the instantiation of contradictory propositions in mental acts of belief, hope, judgement etc. This latter possibility in no way breaks down an invidious 'bourgeois' distinction between logic and reality. Edgley only manages to create the illusion that it does by oscillating between the proposition as object of a metadiscourse, and hence as part of the 'world', and the proposition as constitutive of that discourse in which the world is revealed; the discourse which, in phenomenological terms, we at any given moment 'inhabit'. This is how he makes the transition:

'A judgement or belief may not be part of the reality

13 'Dialectic: The Contradiction of Colletti', p51

14 See Ronald McIntyre and David Smith, 'Husserl's Identification of Meaning and Noema', The Monist, Vol. 59, No. 1

15 'Dialectic: The Contradiction of Colletti', p51

it is about, part of what it is true or false of. But reality is bigger and more complex than that'(15). Reality certainly is; but then no one would dream of denying it. Certainly not the anti-Diamatiker in the 'East German Debate'. (It could be noted in passing that, if Colletti has sided with the bourgeoisie by virtue of his position, then any form of support for dialectical materialism, the ossified philosophical ideology of the bureaucracies, must be seen as equally suspect.) The point of the rebel East Germans', and Colletti's, claim that contradictions are to be found only in thought and language, and not in reality, is not to deny the reality of thought and language. It is that propositions, thought or expressed, are only contradictory by virtue of their logically irreconcilable assertions about a reality of which they are not themselves part. The contradictions are in thought and language, rather than what the thought on language is about. It is only by shifting to a metadiscourse about contradictory propositions themselves that Edgley succeeds in conjuring up 'contradictions in reality', but even then he does so in a novel (and misleading) sense which has nothing to do with what the whole dialectical tradition has understood by that phrase. It is this which constitutes what I have termed the 'false-consciousness' of Edgley's texts. Their semantic slidings attempt to obscure the fact that, in using language to talk about language, there must always be an ultimate metadiscourse in which meaning 'opens up' the world, rather than forming an 'object' within it. This discourse, to be comprehensible, must obey the fundamental principles of logic, and it is this which lies behind the distinction between 'logic' (or the thought and language which it governs) and 'reality'. Even a naturalistic view of language presupposes language for its formulation; even the nature of the dialectic has to be expounded in a discourse which obeys the principles of identity and non-contradiction.

Science and Marxism

We must now take a closer look at how Edgley conceives the superiority of a 'dialectical' social science, and at what relation his ideas bear to the traditions of Marxism. He opens 'Reason as Dialectic' with a characterisation of what he considers to be the current crisis in philosophy of science (the split between an ahistorical empiricism and an opposing tendency towards acritical relativism), which he follows with a brief account of the fact/value dichotomy and of the form in which he sees this dichotomy as having haunted Marxism - scientific theory of society versus ethical or utopian socialism. Dialectic, Edgley believes, holds the key to the overcoming of this dichotomy. But his account of dialectic, even if it were immune to

THERE CAN BE NO SOCIALISM
WITHOUT WOMEN'S LIBERATION...



the criticisms outlined above, would fail to deliver the goods in a number of ways.

Firstly, Edgley seems confused as to whether his formulations are descriptive or prescriptive, and, if the former, as to what they are descriptive of. Social science, he claims, is dialectical because it deals with contradictions and other logical relations as instantiated in the beliefs and behaviour of persons, groups, and social institutions. Even if this were accepted as true, it would be inconsequential. It tells us nothing about the specificity of Marxism, since many currents in social science have an interest in the conflict of belief-systems or norms of action. In fact, according to Edgley's definition, all social science is always already 'dialectical' simply by virtue of its object. The term appears to have lost all determinate meaning, especially since it is plainly false that we require a special kind of Marxist 'dialectic as logic' in order to grasp historical events such as the clash between Galileo and the Church, one of Edgley's favoured examples. It may be true, as Edgley claims, that this kind of clash illustrates how 'logical conflicts' can have psychologically normative and pratico-critical implications which bourgeois moral philosophy has difficulty in dealing with, but there is no reason why this kind of moral problem should create any special difficulty for the practising historian or sociologist. Edgley is certainly guilty here of that same lack of attention to the actual history of research which he criticizes in empiricist philosophy of science. A glance at any of the classics of Marxist sociopolitical analysis - Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire, Lenin's Imperialism, Trotsky's The Revolution Betrayed - would have made clear that Marxism possesses no special 'logic' of instantiated contradictions which lies beyond the grasp of bourgeois social science. What does distinguish Marxism is a particular system of concepts (forces of production, relations of production, ideology, etc) which for the first time sets the analysis of social formations on a scientific basis.

This brings us to the second of Edgley's claims: that his conception of a dialectical social science can heal the rift between scientific theory and socialist practice. Much of Edgley's animus against Colletti is aroused by the latter's assertion of a split between Marx the scientist and Marx the philosopher, and echo of many previous divisions between a 'mechanistic' science and a 'moralistic' critique of capitalist society. In Edgley's account this split is overcome through the manner in which Marxism, in criticizing ideologies, simultaneously criticizes the 'contradictory' social reality which produces those ideologies. This is true as far as it goes, but fails to touch the deeper problem, since it shows that Edgley, rather than effecting a dialectical resolution, has already aligned himself on the side of the Ideologiekritiker in the longstanding debate between Marxism as critique and Marxism as science(16). This is an alignment which he cannot, however, acknowledge within his account of the theoretical divisions of Marxism, since this account is fundamentally confused. Edgley represents 'Marxism as a programme of revolutionary action' as having been 'squeezed out of the picture of coherent possibilities' by an historical division between the Stalinist emphasis on laws of inevitable social change and an 'ethical socialism' which he associates with the Marxism of the Second International (17). But there was never

16 On this debate see Alvin Gouldner, 'The Two Marxisms', in For Sociology, Harmondsworth 1976. The following argument owes a lot to this article.

17 See 'Reason as Dialectic', p3

any such division. Determinism and ethicalism do not stand opposed, but are complementary aspects of a single unity. Thus Stalinism did not stand in contrast to 'ethical socialism' - it was ethical socialism. As Althusser has argued, in its combination of economism and humanism, Stalinism represented a continuation of, and not a reaction to, the politics of the Second International(18).

The real historical division within Marxism, which Edgley fails to put his finger on, is somewhat different. It is the division, already indicated, between 'critical'/Hegelian and 'scientific'/anti-Hegelian versions of Marxism. Far from representing an 'ethical socialism' counterposed to science, it is precisely the first of these two currents which has been most suspicious of Kantianism and most contemptuous of the distinction between fact and value, seeking in Hegelian style to achieve its dissolution. Edgley clearly belongs, if somewhat eccentrically, within this camp, and it is this which accounts for his conception of a Marxist social science as critique of ideology, and thereby of its 'object' - the capitalist society which that ideology 'reflects'. But there is a problem here.

Historically the Marxist notion of critique represents a development of the mode of understanding which informed the Left-Hegelian critique of religion. Fundamental for the Left Hegelians was the idea of religion as possessing a certain rational dimension. Religion is not merely fantasy, but can be deciphered as a projection of the alienated being of real men and women. Correspondingly, in the Marxist conception, a critique seeks not merely to show a theory to be formally or empirically in error. Its aim is to read in an ideology, and even in 'objectivist' forms of science, the distorted trace of mankind's real historical potentialities, enchainment by the 'irrationality' of an oppressive (i.e. class) organisation of society. The difficulty with this conception, and no less with Edgley's version of it, is that the concrete complexity of the social formation ceases to be in any meaningful sense the object of an analytical and explanatory understanding. Marcuse's One Dimensional Man is a classic example of this kind of 'critical' Marxism, in its concern for wholesale unmasking of the dominant rationality, and its neglect of the more mundane questions of economics and social structure. But revolutionary movements cannot live by criticism alone, at least not if they wish to avoid the kind of anarchic subjectivism characteristic of much of the New Left which Marcuse inspired. They need concrete analyses of political, economic and social structures; theories of class-consciousness, state power, imperialism... It is not so much an alternative 'dialectical' conception of scientific knowledge which revolutionaries need - it is rather that scientific knowledge itself.

It is here that Edgley's theorising, despite his proclaimed concern for 'Marxism as a programme of revolutionary action', falls down. His idea of (Marxist) social science as dialectical by virtue of its concern with an object, social reality, which contains 'contradictions and other logical relations', implies not a single concrete methodological recommendation for any arena of Marxist research. Does a socialist science simply describe these logical relations, or try to explain them causally, or perhaps attempt some form of hermeneutic understanding? We are never told. Despite the promise of an alternative model of science, Edgley offers no

18 See Louis Althusser, 'Reply to John Lewis', in Essays in Self-Criticism, London 1976. Also the introduction to the same volume by Grahame Lock

counter-proposals to 'bourgeois' standards of explanation and validation. 'Dialecticity' appears to be simply a question of subject-matter, rather than method.

Viewed in this light, and in the light of his obvious orientation towards the 'critical' version of Marxism, Edgley's claim to have achieved a theoretical resolution of science and socialism, and his consequent reproaches to Colletti, must be treated with scepticism. The problem with the 'critical' version of Marxism is that the kind of social science which it does produce tends to consist of speculative generalisations about the nature of advanced industrial society, often open - the two are complementary - to reformist or ultra-leftist interpretations (cf. the contrary conclusions drawn by Habermas and Marcuse from the Frankfurt School thesis of the disappearance of the revolutionary proletariat). It is left to those on the 'other side', notably at present the Althusserians, to produce a working knowledge of capitalist society for the use of revolutionaries. This is a kind of 'Marxist social science' which resists assimilation into Hegelian categories, and Colletti at least has the merit of recognising that there is a genuine dilemma here. He does not, like Edgley, attribute the split down the middle of Marxism, as if it were some kind of bourgeois infection, to 'the almost inexhaustible capacity of the status quo to protect itself under threat'(19). Such a gesture would be 'metaphysical' in the sense Derrida gives to that term: the homogeneity of theory is secured by banishing into a false exteriority that which both founds and disrupts its discourse. Colletti, on the contrary, appreciates that such a chronic fissure within Marxist thought can only be the result of profound tensions in the work of Marx himself. After all Marx, in the postface to the second edition of Capital, did quote approvingly from the Russian reviewer of the first edition who wrote: 'Marx treats the social movement as a process of natural history, governed by laws not only independent of human will, consciousness and intelligence, but, rather, on the contrary determining that will, consciousness and intelligence'(20). Accusations of 'mechanism', for those addicted to them, could well begin here. On the other hand, the subtitle of Capital does announce it to be a 'Critique', and it is clear from the Grundrisse, the rough draft for Capital, that 'alienation' and other central concepts of critique continued to play a leading role in Marx's later thought.

Ironically, the opposition between Edgley, with his commitment to the distinction between social and natural science, and Colletti, with his insistence on the 'unity of science', can be seen as one more manifestation of this rent in the very fabric of Marxism. But whereas Colletti believes that it is vital for us to admit the problem - 'It is one we must take seriously. It is not to be solved by any verbal subterfuge.'(21) - Edgley is convinced that the important thing is, by a 'dialectical' conception of science, to resolve it. Yet, in the very process of attempting such a resolution, he places himself firmly on one of the contending sides. This could be seen as an example of that other characteristically Derridean movement in which the attempt to effect dialectical mastery of a difference ends by falling victim to its play. Marx expressed a similarly sceptical view of the power of theory in his 1844 Manuscript critique of Hegel's dialectic: 'And because thought imagines

itself to be the direct opposite of itself, i. e. sensuous reality, and therefore regards its own activity as sensuous, real activity, this supersession in thought, which leaves its object in existence in reality, thinks it has overcome it.'(22) Perhaps the conclusion to be drawn from this is that the science-critique dilemma will only be resolved - if at all, and if 'resolved' is the right expression here - in the course of a Marxist revolutionary practice. Certainly no theoretical Aufhebung will do.

This raises one final, and more general, point about the relation between Marxism in philosophy and in politics. Perry Anderson has recently suggested that the history of Western Marxism may be seen as a kind of immense detour, a turning away, occasioned by historic defeats of the working class in Western Europe, from substantive issues in economic and social theory into the more abstruse realms of philosophy and methodology(23). Although requiring a good deal of qualification, for instance with regard to its crude counterposing of philosophy and the 'concrete world', there is a certain core of truth in this theory. Many people today seem to consider Marxism as merely one more 'philosophical system', to be set alongside - and judged in the same terms as - phenomenology, say, or structuralism. This trivialisation is to a large extent the fault of Marxist philosophers themselves, in their self-imposed isolation from the substantive problems of Marxist theory and political practice. Edgley's conception of a 'dialectica' Marxist social science clearly illustrates this situation. Devoid even of the legitimacy of continuity with previous Marxist conceptions of the dialectic, it represents merely one more attempt to give the concepts of the dialectic some kind of acceptable content. Yet, if intended as descriptive, it bears no relation to Marxist social science as it has historically been practised, and, if intended as normative, it nevertheless contains no discernible methodological recommendations. This is undoubtedly the result of the estrangement indicated above, a forgetfulness of the fact that the most fruitful debates on method are usually inspired by practical or theoretical problems encountered by the researcher and - in the case of Marxism - activist. The conclusion to be drawn is that the time for apriorism and the theoretical 'resolution' of practical problems is gone. Marxism in philosophy, yes, but not a 'Marxist Philosophy': the distinction is important. A reference to some remarks of Althusser may help to make it clearer.

In his essay 'Elements of Self-Criticism' Althusser sketches some important amplifications of

22 Karl Marx, Early Writings, Harmondsworth 1975 p394

23 See Perry Anderson, Considerations on Western Marxism, London 1976



19 'Reason as Dialectic', p3

20 Karl Marx, Capital, Volume One, Harmondsworth 1976 p101

21 'Marxism and the Dialectic', p29

his 'revised' theory of philosophy as the 'class struggle in theory'. Since it is a discourse without an object, there can never be an epistemological break which would constitute philosophy as 'theory' in a sense parallel to that of scientific theory. Thus Althusser has conceded the point made against him by Desanti in the sixties, that it is precisely the function of ideology to prevent the splintering of scientific discourse by closing it off from 'third-level', i.e. 'philosophical', conflict(24). According to the new Althusser, philosophy must remain a constantly-shifting field of forces in which there can be no absolutely 'correct' position, since correctness and incorrectness do not depend on correspondence to an object, but are determined by a conjuncture which is largely 'outside' philosophy and which - although philosophy does not like to think so - constitutes philosophical discourse as such(25). This means that the task for those attempting to be both Marxists and philosophers (it would be mistaken to believe that there is any easy or ready-made conjunction of the two) must be one of intervention rather than construction. For any attempted Marxist philosophical edifice will find its foundations sinking into sand as the balance of class forces in

other instances of the social formation alters, and this can only be avoided if the Marxist in philosophy is distinguished by his or her awareness of what Althusser terms 'the primacy of the practical function over the theoretical in philosophy itself'(26). The need for this awareness was surely what Marx was pointing to when he levelled the following accusation at the thought of the Left Hegelians: '(it) has proclaimed itself the pure, resolute, absolute Criticism which has achieved self-clarity, and in its spiritual pride has reduced the whole process of history to the relation between the rest of the world, which comes into the category of the 'masses', and itself'(27). It is perhaps in terms of this criticism that the problematic Marxist notion of the 'end of philosophy' can best be understood. Certainly, as the 'disembodied' nature of Edgley's position illustrates, Marx's reminder of the inherent limitations of philosophy - of its obligation to refer itself to social and political practices - has lost none of its relevance for Marxists concerned with philosophy today.

24 See Jean-Toussaint Desanti, 'Materialisme/Epistemologie', Tel Quel 58

25 See Louis Althusser, op. cit. pp142-50

26 *ibid.*, p143

27 Karl Marx, Early Writings op. cit. p381

On 'On Practice'^{continued}

reflecting things immediately and not in their essence'. The debt to Plato's Theaetetus is no less certain for being indirect, as it almost undoubtedly was. But we can search in vain for any trace of that Kantian insight, that the very possibility of sense-perception is dependent on, and hence not prior to the forms of subjective apprehension, which lies behind the modern dialectical tradition in philosophy (That insight was of course to be much modified and transformed through consideration of the historical and collective nature of human subjectivity, the central issue treated in the historical materialism of Marx and Engels. But such notions could be nothing but 'idealism' for the idealism of Mao.)

Knowledge and practice are 'united' for Mao, then, only through being inter-dependent, as all good empiricists have always maintained. They are not united, because in the last analysis knowledge is not entirely active, since it depends on a 'given', and since also, in transforming that 'given', knowledge is active as a free non-material subjectivity, little resembling the physical practices of production. But never mind. So long as both one's social practice and one's free theorising, or 'conscious redness', are 'pure' and 'revolutionary', there is no need to enquire too closely into how they are possible. And this retention of an empiricist distinction between knowledge and practice underpinned the allocation to the cadres/intellectuals of the status of a 'class' within the united 'people', though this was not coupled with any too close examination into their actual relationship to the productive practices of the 'masses'. Nevertheless, if joined with the admission in the 1949 Constitution, that the People's Republic of China was a state capitalist society, this was a complacent anticipation of almost all that Marxist critics of the Chinese Communists later tried to prove against them.

The rejection of 'dogmatism', on the other hand, was also aimed at relieving the Chinese 'people' (more or less) of the necessity for anything so characteristic of the Western barbarians as their shameless propensity for all-out military class war-

fare within one 'nation'. In the 1930s and 1940s it was vital to assure intellectuals, officials and businessmen that there was no thought in Communist heads of actually fighting the war against Japan by means of a full-scale social revolution of workers and peasants. On the contrary, winning the war of national liberation before and instead of the Nationalists was supposed to count as winning the class struggle also. It was peace and land reform, but not socialism, which dissolved the armies of Chiang Kai-shek.

Some kind of neutral or objective observational basis for knowledge is always claimed by theories of 'national unity' or 'national interest', whether of the Right or of the 'Left'. Only on such an assumption could both the democratic visitors and their Red Army hosts 'see' the validity of the United Front policy; perish the divisive thought that one class might be inherently bound (and not just by its different experiences, but by what it was) to see things differently than another. As for human activity, when our own European empiricism could no longer credit its earlier theological account of the nature and goals of human action, it fell back upon categorical assertions of national will and personal subjectivity, in the movement known as Romanticism. In the same way, Mao both postulated and came to identify himself with a free subject, 'China', to which all class divisions were irrelevant, and in which all might share, if they chose, including the working people of Brixton or Columbus, Ohio.

In 1949 Mao won a battle that was lost in Europe in 1848. The European defeats set revolutionaries the task of working out a theoretically improved practice. Mao's victory inhibited such progress in China for a time. But later setbacks, in the Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, were to prove more fruitful. From them, not Mao but the Chinese proletariat began to take its first hesitant but decisive steps forward, almost, since the bitter defeats of the 1920s and 1930s. To do so was at the same time to abandon the rubbishy theoretical equipment with which they had been brow-beaten for thirty years, during the forging for China's new rulers of their very own empiricist version of the 'Mandate of Heaven'.