

'ON PRACTICE' III -

A Reply to Norman *

Rip Bulkeley

Richard Norman may have some cause to complain of my coyness and reluctance to set out my own ideas. But for my part, I think he might have been less hasty in constructing my position for me. For I wholly agree with him that the consequences of the theory he offers me would be disastrous. It seems to me unlikely, therefore, that I ever held that position, though of course no one can be an entirely privileged authority in their own case over such matters. However, Norman has established in his own person that I wrote opaquely enough to get myself seriously misunderstood by people to whom these are issues of long-standing study and concern. I apologise both to him and to any others who may have been similarly aggrieved.

Let me preface what follows by saying that I have little sympathy for the subjectivist/relativist/pragmatist epistemology which he and Collier have attributed to Binns. But I rather suspect that Binns' greatest mistake may have been to take too many things for granted, as already established within the Marxist theory of knowledge and reality, and to concentrate too closely on other aspects of the theory which he felt at the time to be of more urgent political importance. It is probably still very risky to assume that any generalised understanding of, or consent to, any basic principles of Marxism is common ground for radical British intellectuals.

Next, a rough working definition of 'practice'. I take practice to be people's more or less self-conscious, active, social conduct in relation to the satisfaction of their needs. Social self-consciousness in some degree is part of what is meant by calling any things people - there are no people prior to history. (But Andrew Collier has reminded me that a fully self-conscious and collective class practice is not given at all, but has to be won through organisation and struggle. And I agree with him.)

Norman fears that '... the unity of knowledge and practice, if pressed too far, lapses into irrationalism'. What is overlooked here is that the moments of that unity cannot go on being conceived in the familiar empiricist way. For empiricism, knowledge and practice are concepts grounded and constituted in their supposed distinctness from one another. If we attempt to think knowledge and practice still conceived on empiricist lines as a dialectical unity, obviously we will end up with an unviable monstrosity. It is too easy to object to the notion of a unity of knowledge with practice, then, just by assuming that the uncriticised, established notions of these things are what everyone 'must' be talking

about. But they are not at all what I supposed myself to be talking about, however cryptically, in my allusions to my own position in the Mao article.

There seems to be an awkward hiatus between Norman's defence of objectivism, which I do not attack, and my attack on empiricism, which he does not defend. But I think I agree with him that what is needed is an objectivism which '... treats practice ... as, in some sense, determining the nature of knowledge', though I might not have put it in quite those words.

To unite the notion of knowledge as a social human activity, with the requirement that it consist in a veridical correspondence between some parts of reality, which are people (or, in Norman's more abstract terminology, 'beliefs'), and other, ontologically independent, parts of reality, I suggest that a metaphor of 'matching' is more helpful than the familiar one of 'reflection'. Within 'matching' we can unite the moment of correspondence with the moment of activity or practice. The term connotes repeated adjustment and change in the continually renewed relationship between objective knowing subjects and the known objective world. It is also intended to have some of the force of the 'adaequatio mentis rei' (equalisation of the mind to the fact) or some medieval epistemology, and to echo the terminology of systems engineers when dealing with artificial perception or detection in complex processes. 'Matching' expresses the notion of correspondence in a manner suited to a conception of the world in terms of powers, processes and change; whereas 'reflection' expressed the same fundamental notion for the empiricist conception of the world in terms of completed, abstract things and states.

Conceived of as an adequate matching between people and the world of which they are part, knowledge would of course not be something that could be willed into existence by any subjectively self-certified 'leap of faith', for it itself would be a matter of the plainest material fact. Also, though the effectiveness of work predicated on a belief that such a material correspondence has been achieved is never enough to prove that it has been, such effectiveness is still a necessary condition for our sustaining such a belief. Marx merely repeated the views of Socrates, Galileo, Bacon, Hobbes and others in this respect.

As to the communicability or otherwise of experience, in respect of which Norman says I first set foot on the slippery slide into irrationalism, I must repeat my regret for the way in which my too close engagement with Mao's empiricism (the subject of

* Richard Norman, Discussion of Rip Bulkeley's 'On "On Practice"', RP21
* This replies to Rip Bulkeley, On 'On Practice', RP18

my article) may have led me to leave the matter so unclear. Far from conceiving experience as something which might first be 'had' and then not be able to be communicated, I find such a schema not so much unwelcome as incoherent. It is in the social practice of various groups that human experience is grounded and constituted. So that, far from experience being incommunicable, if there were not human sociality and communication, there could not be experience in the sense in which I use the term.

Certain corollaries follow. First, revolutionary practice (experience, understanding) is possible in various sorts and degrees for all who are oppressed and alienated within capitalism, that is - but only in the last and most abstract analysis - for everyone. There are indeed common practices and a unity of life in capitalism, however incomplete, in which a public though imperfectly objective understanding of the world is grounded. That is why it has been possible for Marxist insights to be taken up, in some form, by non-Marxist thinkers, and the other way around - sometimes.

But only sometimes. For there are also major oppositions in practice which constitute more or less extensive breaks inside the capitalist parody of community and communication. These breaks, these deformities of the bourgeois miscreation, are central to the structure; in a way, they are the structure, and so could not be removed without destroying it. (It is not that people separated in such a break 'view' the world differently, as Norman puts it, so much as they live it live it differently. Always on the understanding, which I had better re-emphasise, that no-one can live the world in Crusoesque atomicity, nor can any class exist except in its relations to another class or classes.)

In discussing the visit of the observation group to Yanan, perhaps I overstated the position which I wanted to contrast to Mao's. (It was his using that sort of example as centrally typical which seemed to me as significant in his theory as what he actually had to say about it.) Of course such an observation group might, depending on the already actual lives of its members in China at that time, have been able to understand fewer or more of the Chinese CP's policies. But, and perhaps this is one way into the heart of the matter, I would interpret that obviously sensible supposition in terms of there already being central aspects of their lives through which the visitors are actively involved with the practice of the Communists, and also with some of the things in the world with which the Communists were not just verbally but also actively engaged, such as the Japanese occupation or landlords.

Thus it is never a simple and, if I may take a turn with the dreaded epithet, 'non-dialectical' matter of people first understanding something and then doing something about it, which is the position I have criticised as 'empiricist' and 'idealist'. That is not how things are, because everyone is already engaged in a practice which, with other things, constitutes their knowledge and experience - had with and through their fellows - of the world in which they live. (Various institutions in our society, such as sixth forms, monasteries, universities, honeymoons etc, try more or less successfully to realise the myth that it is possible to retreat into isolated pre-social thought or feeling, secluded from the rest of social practice. The fact is, how-

ever, that no-one gives up eating for all that long. The sense in which it is true to say that understanding can precede commitment in capitalism is also the sense in which the understanding in question is distorted and incomplete, a product of the gulf which maims both practice and knowledge in our society. It is no less irrational for being 'normal' and widespread. People first 'fall in love', then 'make love'; a work of art is first 'conceived' and only then made. These examples are meant to show that we are already moving beyond this form, unevenly. But it is still pervasive as well as pernicious - a chasm in human being. And here on the page, my own words are only another attempt to think a unity which it is not yet possible to live and hence, on my own argument, which it is not yet fully possible to think either. But I prefer to struggle within a dynamic contradiction than to settle for some vacuously consistent, milk-and-water sterility.)

The causes inclining people to new practice and with/in it new knowledge are never 'purely rational grounds', not because there is no such thing as coming to understand something on rational grounds but rather because that real process still gets misrepresented, in terms of the purely abstract, mental, and immaterial origins of new knowledge which have been counterfeited into currency by centuries of the idealist tradition. Marxism cannot be reduced to attempts to do new things with those inadequate notions of reason, belief, knowledge, and experience. (For ordinary language buffs, one use of 'experience' in English already unites knowledge with practice. In this sense, experience can be gained only in a practice which is recognised to be social. And that experience, so gained, makes all the difference between abstract or potential knowledge and the real thing.)

Since I think experience is only possible on the ground of human community, I'm bound to agree that discussion and debate are also possible, to the same extent that experience is socially available - but not beyond those fluctuating limits. Now, the perspective of revolutionary Marxism is towards the overcoming of those real limitations on people which at present do make it impossible for everyone to understand the truth of existing society and of the process by which it is being overthrown. Far from being elitist as Norman suggests, people with such an approach are enabled to act concretely towards realising a society in which everyone may so live together that they will also understand one another, and join in building up each other's inter-related adequacy to a world they will be making adequate to themselves.

But no mere verbal exchanges within the present social and intellectual structures will substitute for that historical process. That is, to achieve the aims of epistemology, or at least to make any further major advances towards them, a communist society, brought about through social revolution, is necessary. A public and humane rationality cannot be accomplished first, in the 'free' heads of privileged left intellectuals, and then 'applied' under their benevolent direction by the docile manual side of history, the mass movement. Rather, as our active politics develops, so also can our understanding - the two are facets of one real process. If this implies that no-one under capitalism can have achieved total rationality or perfect science, well, that does not seem implausible to me. Though others are welcome to nominate themselves

for the status of mysterious exceptions - to whom history is pleased not to apply.

My claim that knowledge is 'entirely active' was very poorly expressed and deservedly misconstrued. Rashly, I left unspoken my assumptions, that a thorough analysis of the notion of activity reveals its logical interdependence with a notion of objective and independent reality, and that the 'pure action' of classical idealism was an incoherent concept. This is not a question of absolute alternatives (passive or active), but a question of what to emphasise so as to understand what knowledge is and so as to combat the forces which obstruct it in our time. Nothing can be active which does not also have its passive aspects. The power to affect other processes can only be present in a process which in turn 'pays the price' of being itself liable to the causal influences of other processes. All of which is to say no more than that the processes we are considering are always natural, never supernatural ones.

I am puzzled when Norman first quotes my sketch of what Marx saw as a central problem for 'the old materialism', and then serves up as the answer to it the very one given by the materialist Enlightenment, which Marx claimed to show was inadequate, namely that a causal and objectivist science is after all our best tool for changing and improving the world. Of course this is true, though we also need things not so easily listed under that heading, such as loyalty, discipline, solidarity and revolutionary skills. But Marx started out from the apparent inconsistency between the natural-scientific world-

view of the Enlightenment and its radical politics. He may have been wrong in thinking there was any such inconsistency. Or he may have failed to produce any answer to the problem. I am very interested in serious discussion of either hypothesis, which contributes to the critique of perhaps the upraising (Aufhebung) of Marxism. But I am not very interested in what appears to be a line of thought which simply opts for the certainties of pre-Marxist materialism and disregards the problems which Marx and others thought they gave rise to. Much more is needed to give a materialist answer to those problems (i.e. one which does not cheat by driving ontological wedges in between human beings and the rest of the universe) than an invocation of the efficacy of natural science along the lines so well worn by the empiricist philosophy of capitalism. For, unlike the capitalists, we are seeking to change the whole which includes ourselves, and are not merely trying to use our powers to change some parts of reality in order to preserve other parts against change.

So much, then, in response to some of the most basic issues raised by Norman's comments. I hope I may have satisfied him in some respects, or at least clarified our points of disagreement. But I realise there are important issues I have not touched on yet, such as that which he raises about the presence of ideology in the thought or knowledge of different social classes, and the related question about the special access to knowledge and philosophical insights which Marxism attributes to the historical development of the working class.



NOTE + BIBLIO. FOR
'TOWARDS A MATERIALIST THEORY
OF IDEOLOGY'

NOTE:

This article is a more formal version of a talk (by the same title) that I gave in a workshop at the January 1978 Radical Philosophy conference, convened on the general theme 'Philosophy and the Critique of Ideology'. The talk was, in turn, based upon the more detailed argument that I make in my RSJ article.

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