

Cutler on Laws of Tendency

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Some Notes on Cutler et.al. on
Laws of Tendency (Cutler et.al., Marx's
Capital and Capitalism Today, Vol.I, chapters
4, 5 and 6.)

Cutler et.al. declare themselves opposed to the epistemological privileging of any level of discourse, but prefer, instead, to engage in discursive analyses of specific problems. Nevertheless, their critique of specific laws of tendency in Marx's texts - concentration and centralisation of capital, the falling rate of profit, etc. - relies almost exclusively on a single epistemological argument: there can be no such 'thing' as a law of tendency.

The epistemology of capital - knowledge conceived as the appropriation of the concrete in thought - combined with the economism of the 1859 Preface entails the 'empty' anthropology of the human species as the transhistorical subject of the historical process. The readers' horror at the invocation of the categories of subject, anthropology and teleology is relied upon to complete the refutation of both the epistemology of 'appropriation of the concrete in thought' and economism. But, at best, these consequences, if they follow at all, follow from the conjunction of epistemology and economism. If the conclusions adduced do follow, then consistency requires only the modification or rejection of either economism or epistemology, but not both. Cutler et.al. proceed as if both were refuted.

Cutler et.al. concede that not all the laws of tendency advocated by Marx have the same form (indeed, in part it seems to be their aim to show this), but sometimes they write as if there were different notions of the status of laws of tendency in Marx which together form a single 'complex and contradictory notion' (p.132). Anyway, they distinguish tendencies as (1) 'progressively realised processes', and (2) 'the consequences of relations which establish pressure towards certain states of affairs'. There are several variants within (2) - depending

on the nature and source of counter-acting forces which may prevent or modify the realisation of the tendency concerned. Either the very relations which have the tendency as their consequence also produce its counter-tendencies (contradictory relations), or extraneous and particular circumstances, not derivable from the general concept of the relations concerned, may counteract the tendency. As in the case of the falling rate of profit, both types of counteracting force may be present.

The main argument against the notion of a law of tendency in each of these forms seems to be that the epistemology of 'assimilation of the concrete in thought' cannot accommodate the empirical failure of laws of tendency to be universally and necessarily realised. Either specific circumstances must be wholly irrelevant to the understanding of the operation of a mechanism over time, or they must wholly determine it. The latter crass empiricist position seems to be the one advocated by Cutler et.al. This is what is presupposed in their insistence (e.g. p.131) that 'general causal doctrines are not necessary for specific discursive analyses' (where else would these specific analyses get their conceptual materials, methodological procedures and criteria of adequacy?). Cutler et.al. preserve the appearance of getting away with this absurdity only by leaving the concept of the conditions of existence of 'specific discursive analyses' and problems completely open - all we know is that they are 'diverse'!

The notion of a law of tendency is identified with the first pole of the above dichotomy - the operation of a process whose working-out is independent of conditions or circumstances. This caricature of Marx is one they share with Popper, and the criticism is substantially the same, too - Marx confuses scientific laws (conditional but universal statements) with tendencies (about which there can be no necessity).

Cutler et.al. go further, though, and locate the source of this problematic concept in the idea of knowledge as an appropriation

of real objects and relations in thought. Marx's method involves the specification of fundamental real relations by means of abstract and general concepts. The logical consequences of this 'privileged' level of concepts are 'mapped' onto reality as necessary effects of the relations specified in the abstract concepts. Marx thus treats 'effects' as logically necessary relations, and therefore 'rationalises' reality. The effect of Marx's method on the discourse of Capital, according to Cutler et.al, is, then, to represent the circumstantially conditioned historical flow of events as the necessary and logical outcome of certain conceptual forms. This is why empirical circumstances and the partial or total non-realisation of tendencies cannot be accommodated with Marx's method.

Some critical responses to his 'argument'

(1) At the level of interpretation of Marx's 1857 Introduction it is a travesty. The movement from abstract to concrete is conceived by Marx in that text as a 'synthesis of many determinations' and not as the simple deduction of the logical consequences immanent in the most general concepts. This allows for a conception of method in which concepts of higher levels of abstraction are used as analytical resources at lower levels, but supplemented by additional conceptual elements from diverse sources.

(2) That descriptions of real effects follow logically from theoretical characterisations of real relations entails no confusion of the logical order of theoretical discourse with the causal order of a real process. It is, rather, a mark of the adequacy and explanatory power of the initial theoretical characterisations. This is, indeed, one of the main points of theoretical activity. The rejection by Cutler et.al. of the conception of knowledge as involving a relation between discourse and extra-discursive existents, however, does entail a denial of a distinction between a logical order in discourse, and a real order of (knowable) causes and effects external to discourse. Their main critical weapon is effective against themselves, but not against Marx.

(3) In their rejection of the 'privileging' of any level of discourse Cutler et.al. confuse two quite distinct features of discourse: (i) an asymmetry between different levels of conceptual abstraction in respect of the scope of their logical implications: the more abstract the level, the broader its implications, and (ii) epistemological privileging of specific levels of discourse as incorrigible. In classical rationalist metaphysics the highest levels of abstraction are also the epistemologically privileged, but in phenomenalist forms of empiricism, for example, it is the lowest level of abstraction (sense-datum statements) which is privileged. Feature (i) is essential to Marx's method of proof in Capital, as to all scientific proof, whereas (ii) is dispensable.

(4) On a realist epistemological reconstruction of the arguments of Capital, there is nothing problematic about the claim that a law of tendency really does characterise

the effects of specific social relations, but which (i) applies only when those social relations are subject to specifiable contextual conditions or are in certain specifiable intrinsic states and which (ii) may remain 'unrealised' in event-sequences because of the intervention of intrinsic or extrinsic counter-tendencies. In short, Marx's method, interpreted as a form of realism (Cutler et.al., though their account is inadequate in other respects, concur in this), can accommodate the existence of real tendencies whose realisation is dependent upon circumstances of operation.

(5) The mileage that Cutler et.al. get out of the apparent requirement of realist epistemology (for them - epistemology as such) that reality must be 'rational' rests partly on ambiguity, partly on misunderstanding. What is it for reality to be 'rational'? The strongest form of this thesis is the interpretation of causal necessity as a form of logical necessity. Cutler et.al. are right to characterise this as rationalist, but wrong to attribute it to Marx (see (2) above). In its weaker, and more plausible form, it consists in the thesis that reality necessarily and miraculously exists in a form appropriate to our knowledge of it. Realist epistemologies may seem to require an anthropomorphic conception of the external objects of knowledge. An ad hominem response to this would be that an anti-epistemological epistemology which entails that there are no external objects of knowledge at all is hardly preferable. But a more serious answer is that no such miraculous 'pre-established harmony' between concept and object is entailed by realist epistemology: from the premise that the world, or aspects of it, are known, it does indeed follow necessarily that the world, or aspects of it, exists in a form appropriate to human cognition. But the premise is itself quite contingent: the world might not have been known, or knowable, but since it is, we can deduce certain consequences as to its general character and our relationship to it.

Further elaboration of (4) above: Realist accounts of the status of laws of tendency. Realism argues that the world has ontological depth, and that this is presupposed in scientific practices such as experiments. In particular, this means that scientific laws are not, as empiricists and Cutler et.al. suppose, regular (universal) patterns of events. Laws are to be thought of, rather, as tendencies immanent in real mechanisms. A specific mechanism may be thought of as requiring certain external and internal conditions to be satisfied if it is to operate (the motor of a car requires fuel and ignition), and may operate without its various tendencies and powers being realised or exercised (the engine may not be in gear, the brake may be on, etc.). In experiments, typically, mechanisms are practically isolated and set in motion in such a way that tendencies are realised in regular event-sequences, but characteristically mechanisms in nature and society operate in open systems. That is to say, the simultaneous operation of a multiplicity of mechanisms generates interference-effects such that, in general, tendencies operate but are not

realised. Another way of putting this would be to say that tendencies are realised in open systems, but in the form of resultants of compounded forces.

Marx's method is to use abstraction in the construction of the concepts of systems of relations (simple commodity production, the CMP, etc.) which constitute social mechanisms, and to deduce the consequences of the operations of those mechanisms in the form of laws of tendency. The further 'synthesis of many determinations' is required if the resultant flow of events from a combination (articulation) of such operating mechanisms (such as constitutes a social formation), acting under specific historical circumstances, is to be analysed.

Final Remarks

(i) The above arguments should not be understood as advancing the truth or any specific law of tendency in Capital or any other Marxist text. The point is the more limited one that the epistemological critique of all such notions deployed by Cutler et.al. is ineffective.

(ii) Nor do I wish to be taken as defending even the coherence of some notions of law of tendency. Some historicist Marxist writers, including Marx on occasion, do, indeed, make use of transhistorical laws of tendency as 'progressively realised processes' - the necessary and progressive development of the forces of production in the 1859 Preface, for example - tendencies whose reality and realisation in sequences of events are independent of all circumstantial conditions. This conception of tendential laws does not seem to me to be coherent, in that it postulates an absolutely autonomous and omnipotent social mechanism. The idea of a

'terminal mechanism' also seems to me to be highly suspect. But there are, as I have suggested above, other ways of constructing a concept of tendential law.

(iii) The logical structure of some tendential laws is highly complex, and so the analysis of the conditions of their coherence is no straightforward matter, leaving aside the problems of measurement and empirical interpretation. For example, the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall is the postulated result of a deeper-level tendency of the organic composition of capital to rise. This tendency is itself a consequence of basic features of the CMP, but is also regarded by Marx as an instance of the supposed transhistorical law of the tendency of the productivity of labour to rise. Moreover, the same features of the CMP which ground the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, also ground its counter-tendencies (or, rather, some of them - cheapening of constant capital, increase in the rate of surplus value consequent upon cheapening of the labourers' means of subsistence, etc.). One among the many pertinent questions here would be: is there a theoretical case for the law which can be made out on the basis of the theory of the CMP independently of any reliance on the more suspect transhistorical law governing the productivity of labour?

(iv) Despite the epistemological and other problems of transhistorical laws, I don't think they can or should be dispensed with entirely. Other historical sciences - biology, for example - share similar problems. What is it that evolves? What is the unit upon which natural selection operates, and what is 'selected' in natural selection? These are unresolved problems, but they do not seem to be fatal to biological science.

