In Search of a Method: Hegel, Marx and Realism

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The development in recent years of a realist philosophy of science has provoked considerable interest within Marxist social science (1). Its attraction lies in the potential it holds for the construction of a philosophical antidote to positivism and conventionalism. In a short space of time 'transcendental realism' has established itself as a rigorous contender in the epistemological arena. For some, it holds the promise of a firm foundation to a Marxist epistemology that has been sadly lacking in most variants of post-war Marxism. My concern here is neither to develop nor undermine the philosophical ground upon which transcendental realism is based, rather it concerns the pragmatic development of a realist philosophy into a methodology suitable for the social sciences: a form of method that is capable of challenging the hegemony of empiricist modes of research.

It is becoming increasingly fashionable to refer to the predominance of positivism in the past tense as a philosophy of science which, by virtue of the glaring cracks in its infrastructure, is straining under the weight of criticism. Such references are wholly misplaced. Despite the loss of considerable ground in the philosophical arena, positivism in its empiricist guise is alive and well, and winning more than its fair share of methodological battles. Its strength lies in its accessibility. There are numerous texts available on the practice of empiricist social research, most of which offer 'easy-to-follow' rituals, but no comparable accessible accounts of how the critical analysis of concepts may be approached. No matter how much the situation may be lamented, the pragmatism of the empiricist package cannot be denied. Like British reformism it is strong because, within limits, it works.

Interestingly enough, the problem for the Marxist tradition does not rest with the absence of methodological insights. Virtually every direct reference, tantalising insight and obscure allusion to method has been trawled from Marx's texts, particularly from his later works. Rather, the problem lies with the inability of Marxism to present such insights in a form that illustrates their potential use (2). Whereas empiricism arrives on the methodological scene with its bag of statistical and research techniques ready for operation, the Marxist methodological inheritance adds up to little more than a series of vague incantations of doubtful application. How, for example, do you get behind 'appearances' to the underlying 'essences'? What criteria are available to establish arrival at this point? How do you peel historical forms from 'given' concepts? Identify levels of abstraction, or better still a 'mediation'? In what way does an abstract universal concept differ from a general abstract concept? Despite the rhetorical nature of these questions they do highlight the problem that currently confronts and limits substantive Marxist research. It is as if the methodological insights gleaned from Marx's work, once grasped, fall between speculative fingers when an attempt is made to analyse a social object other than the capitalist mode of production. Marxism, however, is well qualified to step outside of the mode of production matrix and face empiricism on its own ground. Empiricism is not simply a statistical concern, it is also a conceptual discourse, and it is precisely upon the ground of conceptualization that Marxism is competent to engage. The unproblematic manner in which concepts have been taken up in empiricist studies is one area in which Marxism can offer a lead.

The lack of a coherent initiative in this area can partly be explained by the reaction within certain traits of Marxism to the notion of method. The term 'method', perhaps because of its lingering positivist associations, tends to conjure up an image of rigid methodological protocols - formal grids, as it were, capable of invariant application. Reaction to such a system is, of course, understandable and entirely justified, but it is an overreaction to reject method out of hand. Methodology is not limited to a set of repeatable formulae that fashion objects in their own image, it may also refer to a looser notion: a set of guidelines which outline how to critically analyse and re-work existing conceptions of social processes.

The mode of conceptual analysis proposed in this paper is not particularly new (3). Its roots lie in Greek philosophy, particularly in Plato and Aristotle's work, although in its developed form it owes a considerable debt to Hegel's revision of analytical method in the Science of Logic. The approach is encapsulated in the demands that both Plato and Hegel made of cognition:

... that it should consider things in and for themselves, that is, should consider them partly in their universality, but also that it should not stray away from them catching at circumstances, examples and comparisons, but should keep before it solely the things themselves and bring before consciousness what is immanent in them (4).

In the second part of the Science of Logic Hegel re-works the familiar categories of traditional subjective logic. The outcome is a series of logical tools capable of constructing objects within a specific ontology: one characterised by depth and structured by real universals whose properties are capable of generating certain effects in the contingent world. At a general level, Hegel's ontological framework may be considered loosely similar to Bhaskar's construction of a realist ontology in a Realist Theory of Science. The point here, however, is neither to show how 'realist' Hegel 'really was', nor deny the idealist matrix
that he imposes upon his logical categories; rather the reason for embracing this somewhat opaque text rests squarely upon the repertoire of analytical tools contained within its pages. The value of Hegel's methodological insights rests upon their potential to identify the diverse kinds of structured social relationships that are present in the social world, and offers a key to understanding the logical tools which characterise Marx's analytical approach to social processes. This methodological development has obvious implications for political practice. Honing the tools of conceptual analysis is not simply a process designed to improve theoretical rigour; such a cache of critical techniques offers a greater degree of engagement with the results of studies conducted along empiricist lines. A re-evaluation and re-working of empirical material that moves beyond the taken-for-granted nature of empiricist concepts will provide a surer footing for political practice. This paper represents a limited attempt to develop a realist antidote to the practices of empiricism. The first section sets out the analytical task to be achieved and looks at the recent proposals for the role of abstraction in Marxist studies. Following this, a number of methodological insights drawn largely from Hegel's Science of Logic are raised which have received scant attention in the lengthy debate on Marx's analytical method. Lastly, the manner in which we should approach the subject of methodology is outlined.

Realism and Abstraction

It would be a mistake to assume that realism as a philosophy of science is concerned with each and every relationship in the social world (5). The attraction of a realist philosophy for the social sciences lies in its concern to identify a series of structured relationships which possess causal powers, which, in turn, may explain the regular pattern of events that pre-occupy much of empiricist thinking. Briefly sketched, realists acknowledge a dual structure of reality: a domain of phenomena and events and a domain of structured relations which possess causal powers which may or may not be realised at the empirical level. The powers reside within the structures, but operate through the activities of agents, if, and only if, they come into contact with certain kinds of contingent relations in specific spatial and/or temporal arrangements. The social relationships that are directly of interest to realism are only those that exhibit a structure which admit emergent causal properties capable of explaining events in the social world. Realism, then, is only concerned with the identification of particular constellations of social relations: the basic properties which constitute certain structures and constrain them to act in certain ways and not in other ways. Thus, the first task of realist analysis appears straightforward: identify the number and variety of propertied structures before moving on to consider their place in the contingent world. The question, however, is how? Naturally enough no check list of such entities is provided, but more significantly neither are the criteria by which such structural relations may be identified. This opens up the risk as Urry has pointed out, of catching at general processes which are capable of literally explaining too vast a range of empirical phenomena (6).

The categories of political economy are perhaps among the best known victims of this practice. Theories which attempt to understand the nature of the capitalist state by starting with the abstraction 'capital' fall directly under this criticism (7). The danger here, of course, as Adorno recognized, is that to conceptualize everything in terms of the 'grail' categories of political economy is to turn the whole of the social world into a giant workhouse. What is required is an analytical method that assists our identification of social structures, their causal relations, and their potential range and scope.

Sayer's work on the process of abstraction in RP28 is, to my knowledge, the only attempt to provide a non-arbitrary procedure to achieve this task. Drawing upon Marx's comments on method in the 1857 Introduction, Sayer sets up a distinction between 'rational' and 'chaotic' abstractions and outlines them as follows:

- Good or 'rational' abstractions should isolate necessary relationships. This concrete, as a unity of diverse determinations is a combination of several necessary relationships, but the form of the combination is contingent, indeed ... a bad abstraction or 'chaotic conception' is one which is based upon a non-necessary relationship, or which divides the indivisible by failing to recognize a necessary relationship (8).

Sayer clarifies the distinction between 'rational' and 'chaotic' abstractions by pointing out that the necessary relationships isolated by rational abstractions exhibit internal relations, as, for example, in the master/slave relationship or the landlord/tenant relationships; whereas, in contrast, the non-necessary relationships of 'chaotic conceptions' are characterised by an external relationship between objects. The importance of the necessary/internal criterion rests upon a specific notion of causation. Causation is located in the nature of the structures themselves: a structure possesses a necessary way-of-acting by virtue of the relations that constitute its existence. Individuate the sets, non-necessary, internal relations within an object of study and you have the basis of a framework for understanding the external relation between successive events that empiricism acknowledges as a causal association.

How far, then, does the dichotomy - necessary/internal and non-necessary/external - which underpins 'rational' and 'chaotic' abstractions - take us towards the establishment of a non-arbitrary procedure, a guideline for identifying social structures which generate causal powers? My answer is: not very far. The validity of the distinction between the two types of abstraction is not in question; I consider the listed characteristics of each type to be correct. My reservations, however, concern their role in a method of investigation that considers conceptualization an important part of the research process. The problem is, if you like, one step removed from the problem of incantations in Marx's method. How do you isolate 'necessary' conceptions? Are they all so blindly obvious as the landlord-tenant, or master-slave relation, and if so, does that not cast doubt upon their value? Where are the causal powers in those relationships? It appears as if the process of analysis has yet to take place. Secondly, are chaotic conceptions readily identifiable? Do some objects lend themselves to chaotic conceptualization, are the intrinsically 'chaotic', or does this depend upon the mode of analysis brought to bear upon an object?

In answer to the second question, the 'chaotic' quality of a concept is not strictly the property of a concept but the product of the type of analysis performed upon an object. Concepts are not in themselves 'chaotic'. The rubric may only be applied to conceptions which are the end product of an analytical exercise, commonsense or otherwise, which designates the superficial aspects of an object - and goes no further.

To take an infamous example: the concept of population is, perhaps, the best known 'chaotic conception'. Few concepts in Marxist social theory have been dismissed so abruptly as a consequence of Marx's comments on the method of political economy in the 1857 Introduction. Its crimes appear to be two-fold: first, it is posited as an empirical object - and goes no further. Concepts are not in themselves 'chaotic'. The concept of 'capital' fall directly under this criticism (7). The danger here, of course, as Adorno recognized, is that to conceptualize everything in terms of the 'grail' categories of political economy is to turn the whole of the social world into a giant workhouse. What is required is an analytical method that assists our identification of social structures, their causal relations, and their potential range and scope.

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practice. Such conceptions would constitute a felony if, and only if, they were presented as the results of analysis, and herein lies the paucity of much empiricist analysis. Class, for example, would be a chaotic conception if it were presented in terms of a series of common, shared patterns of empirical instances - such as income, education, attitudes, beliefs and so forth. This leathery conception may, however, form the starting point for a different mode of analysis; one that did not involve looking around and catching up in circumstances, but attempted to specify the relations that presupposed its existence.

Most of the phenomena that form the starting point of analysis are already known under some form of description, and chaotic conceptions, inadequately analyzed abstractions, are the very subject matter of a more rigorous analytical method. The shortcoming of many analyses can be located in their failure to interrogate the simple objects facing them. The mistake is to assume as known that which is to undergo analysis. Most objects that enter into our frame of reference are known to us in one form or another and thus, they are a product of a prior synthesis. A synthesis that is invariably worked up from commonplace conceptions drawn from immediately accessible experience. An inadequate mode of analysis would simply reproduce this descriptive immediacy and fail to treat 'given' concepts as the very source material of analysis. What is at issue, therefore, is not that abstractions such as population are wrong or bad in themselves, but that certain analytical methods produce chaotic abstractions and other methods do not (9).

This takes us closer to the meaning of an empty abstraction. This type of abstraction is inadequate because the type of analysis and form of classification that is brought to bear upon an object distorts or fails to reveal the basic relations that make it what it is and no other. Each and every object may be regarded from different points of view, and abstraction may have different lines open to it. The richer the object to be analysed, that is, the more complex are the properties which it offers to our attention, the more open an object is to diverse forms of presentation. Thus, population, for example, could be analysed along many different lines: demographic, branches of production and so forth. In a similar vein, the abstraction 'capital' could be analysed as a 'mere thing' and not as a specific social relation, and presented in its different forms of wealth. In this instance, everything from cattle to usury could be subsumed under the concept of 'capital' (10). This 'catch-all' mode of analysis represents one way among a number of alternative ways in which an object may be broken down. But the deficiency of this analytical procedure, a procedure which breaks down an object on the basis of external comparison, is that it is both exhaustive and arbitrary. A clear example of the bankruptcy of this mode of analysis is demonstrated by Marx in his Marginal notes to Wagner's 'Textbook on a Political Economy'.

In this text Marx ruthlessly pilloried Wagner's analytical technique which attempted to 'demonstrate' the importance of economic goods and use values over commodities and exchange values. Starting from the concept of non-equation of the method that attempts to arrange the derived (connects) the concepts of good, value and use value in turn, and then pronounces the importance of use value over exchange value on the assumption that the majority of economic goods, state services in particular, are not commodities. As is well known, Marx chastises Wagner for starting his analysis with concepts and not particular historical conditions; but of equal significance is Marx's condemnation of a method that attempts to arrange the derived under abstract rubrics, without regard for the actual relation and inter-connection of the objects to that rubric. Marx points out the paucity of this practice in a bitter aside:

(\text{The only clear thing that lies at the basis of German stupidity is the fact that linguistically the words: value or assessment were first applied to the useful things themselves which existed for a long time even before they were brought into commodities. That, however, has just exactly as much to do with the scientific determination of 'commodity-value' as the circumstance that the word salt was first applied by the ancients to cooking-salt and consequently even sugar, etc., count as species of salt since Pliny's time (indeed, all colourless, solid bodies which are soluble in water and can be measured by a trial before they are introduced into commodities). That, however, has just exactly as much to do with the scientific determination of 'commodity-value' as the circumstance that the word salt was first applied by the ancients to cooking-salt and consequently even sugar, etc., count as species of salt since Pliny's time (indeed, all colourless, solid bodies which are soluble in water and can be measured by a trial before they are introduced into commodities).}) (11).

The example is instructive; much of what passes for analysis has adopted a similar procedure. A number of externally related phenomena are drawn together on the grounds of certain similar attributes, yet the importance of the common properties enjoyed by a series may have no bearing upon the nature of the object in question. Value is an empty abstraction, therefore, if it has been analysed as a form of 'worth' which in turn subsumes all economic goods which possess the property of usefulness for 'man's need'. As Marx indicates, the conflation of worth and value ... has just as much, and just as little, to do with the economic category 'value' as with the chemical value of the chemical elements (atomicity) or with the chemical equivalent or equivalent values (compound weights of the chemical elements) (12).

This type of analysis, which neglects the particular features which distinguish different relations from each other, and retains only those that are common to them all, yields the inessential and the contingent. Analysis in the realist sense occurs through rigorous specification and not through exhaustive comparison; it can be made in a single instance and involves the identification of the characteristics of a particular social object that make it tend to act in certain ways and not others. Initial attempts to analyse 'corporatism' in the mid-1970s, for example, yielded a series of general assertions parading as incisive abstractions which failed to reveal the distinctive nature of a corporate state. On the basis of four isolated features - unity, order, nationalism and success (the subordination of democratic rights to economic goods) - corporatism was deemed to be a distinctive economic system in contrast to both capitalism and socialism (13). Yet, as a number of critics have pointed out, the four properties of corporatism identified are perfectly compatible with the long-term interests of capital. They 'do not clash with the general use of profit yardsticks', the basis of capitalist social relations (14). Abstracting a set of common features which add up to a series of generalities is a peculiarly poor mode of analysis. The end result, an empty notion of corporatism, is precarious; and merits the status of chaotic conception.

Before attempting to construct a realist mode of analysis it is important to say a little more on the relationship between generalization and abstraction. The methodological protocol that states that abstraction is not generalization is correct, but quite a difficult guideline to follow. To abstract is to focus upon one aspect of a particular object at the expense of another aspect. The function of abstraction is to brush aside those features which are held to be complicating and obscuring to our comprehension of an object. This task, however, which is achieved by abstracting from particular cases or individual instances, produces a conception characterised by generality. It is necessary, therefore, to distinguish between abstractions which possess the quality of generality and abstractions which are merely generalizations. The distinction between the two types of general abstraction is not simply one of degree, that is, one abstraction covers more or less phenomena than the other, but more significantly, one of perspective: what features of an object are held to be complicating and obscuring. The empty abstraction is, if you like, too general; it gives the user a vague sense of reference,
rather than a specification of the properties of an object, their combination, and their powers.

Locke's notion of abstraction produces the hollowness of the empty abstraction: the higher the level of abstraction, the higher the degree of generality. From this standpoint, abstraction is equivalent to the process of generalization. In contrast, the process of abstraction for Marx, involved a grasp of the particular significance of particular objects. Both Locke's and Marx's notion of abstraction exhibit characteristics of generality and one-sidedness, but what differentiates them is the degree of specification. An empty, general abstraction is likely to be found at the top of a pyramidal arrangement of conceptions, where the less abstract conceptions are subordinated to the more abstract conceptions. The conception of the local state which is developed in terms of institutions or the functions carried out at the local level is a case in point. In this instance, the local state represents little more than a collective name, an aggregate of particulars that fall under it at one point in time (15). What is lost in this type of abstraction is the particularity of the general conception. Analysis should concern itself with the particular social form of an object to ascertain what, if any, necessary properties it may possess and under what social conditions such properties are likely to be found. It may be that, in the case of the local state, analysis will reveal that its usefulness as a concept is limited to a collective representation. This, however, is an open question and one that can only be decided through the painstaking process of analysis.

In analysis, the work of abstraction should not be represented as one of selective omission, where concepts summarize or classify a formless mass of detail, but as constructive analysis. There is little reason in pursuing abstraction to a useless point, a point, that is, at which the conception reached ceases to possess any penetrating insight. Marx sharply rebuked Proudhon in The Poverty of Philosophy for adopting just such a procedure (16). In contrast, Marx considered the conceptualization of an object to be an achievement, obtained by forging more exact specifications of an object; namely a series of judgements which revealed the substantive nature and form of an object (17). An achievement which, it should be stressed, is worked out a posteriori; it does not spring, as if by magic, from the analyst's mind.

The Notion of Method

The role of judgement is central to the process of abstraction and directly relevant to the task of identifying any necessary relationships an object may possess. We do not possess a concept of an object if we are unable to say anything about a particular object except apply a concept to it. This is the basis of Wittgenstein's argument against the notion of a private language (18). Concepts are explicated by other concepts, they do not produce meaning in themselves. The role that judgements perform in this context is one of explanation. This is the hub of Marx's point in the 1857 Introduction where he refers to classes as an empty receptacle indifferent to its content. In formal logic the categories of thought are treated as empty receptacles indifferent to their content. In Hegel's hands they suffer a reversal: content determines the judgement of Inherence, which simply affirms, either positively or negatively, one of the many properties an object possesses. A judgement is considered correct if the two conceptions are positively related, or they are negatively related. The simplest form of judgement in Hegel's schema is the judgement of Inherence, which simply affirms, either positively or negatively, one of the many properties an object possesses.

Conceptual raids on Hegel's Science of Logic have produced a series of categorial trophies. The quest for the dialectical grail has given us a number of unfamiliar and unwieldy categories: negation, negation of negation, being, essence, absolute; together with a few familiar sounding, yet apparently different categories: identity, difference, quality, quantity, appearance and contradiction. The categories have been drawn from all three books of the Logic, but commentators have generally paid a disproportionate attention to the categories in the first two books which comprise the Objective Logic of Being and Essence, at the expense of the categories in the Third Book which covers the ground of Subjective or formal logic (20). The general neglect of Hegel's re-working of formal logic is perhaps somewhat surprising given that the subject matter comprises the familiar ground of judgements, syllogisms, universals and the processes of cognition generally. Perhaps, this familiarity is the reason for this neglect. Yet, like all of the categories mentioned in the Logic, they also undergo a particular twist in Hegel's conceptual hands. In formal logic the categories of thought are treated as empty receptacles indifferent to their content. In Hegel's hands they suffer a reversal: content determines the judgement of Inherence, which simply affirms, either positively or negatively, one of the many properties an object possesses. Hegel bathes the categories of formal logic in an ontological pool characterised by depth and structured by objects in possession of necessary, causal properties.

The category of judgement, for example, takes on board an ontological dimension. The copula 'is' between subject and predicate carries an ontological burden, but this burden does not express a uni-dimensional ontology, rather the different modes of judgement correspond to different levels of reality. Within traditional logic, the four-fold classification of judgements - Quality, Quantity, Relation and Modality - are treated on a single plane; no one class of judgement represents a better or more adequate form of judging than another. In contrast, Hegel's classification, which mirrors the above order, but appears under the different headings of - Inherence, Reflection, Necessity and Notion - represents differences in the content of the real world. Judgements, for Hegel, add up to more than a child's game of fitting together the pieces of a coloured jigsaw puzzle! (21); they reveal the substantive nature of an object - what makes it what it is and no other- by forging more exact specifications of an object.

The simplest form of judgement in Hegel's schema is the judgement of Inherence, which simply affirms, either positively or negatively, one of the many properties an ob-
ject may possess (22). The proposition, that capital is an instrument of production, is a judgement of this kind. It is a simple judgement because it lacks specificity; it lacks the specification of the basic combination of properties that distinguish capital as a particular historical relation of production. An instrument of production may take the form of a stone or even a hand, and as such it is appropriate to a wide range of societies (23). The judgement may be correct, but it is limited to the designation of a superficial particular fact.

All this is fairly trite, particularly in relation to the concept of capital, but the importance of including this step in an outline is the need to actually start analysis at this level. Specifying what properties form a contingent and superficial aspect of an object is a precondition of further analysis. The unproblematic manner in which objects are taken up in empirical research, particularly if they are so 'real' (class, landlord and so forth) that we cannot afford to ignore them, is an indication that no object should be simply taken for granted.

The second step in Hegel's schema is the judgement of Reflection (24). The role of this type of judgement is not to attribute a single property to an object, but to establish the relational nature of an object, that is, a connection to something else. Whereas the judgement of inherence is primarily a judgement of quality, the judgement of reflection is defined as a quantitative judgement. Within this category fall enumerative judgements of the 'Some or several landlords' variety and counter-judgements of the 'All landlords are ...' variety. The first, the enumerative judgement, is more commonly known under the description of statistical aggregation. Judgements, in this instance, do not escape from the distractions of mere association; relations between objects are aggregated up with little concern for why such relationships occur, or what causal mechanisms may or may not be at work. Quantitative judgements of this kind do not reveal what kinds of things things there are; number only has significance in relation to number.

Enumerative judgements are, if you like, a cautious approach to collective judgements or judgements of completed enumeration. At their worst, collective judgements simply draw out the common, general properties of a number of individual objects and represent this property as the hallmark, the ground of the individual objects. Wagner's notion of use value fits snugly into this category of judgements and so too does the judgement that 'all landlords are ...' variety.

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At best, such judgements may identify a set of properties which constitute an object but fail to draw out the implications of this identification. For example, studies of landlords may isolate the rent relations between landlord and tenant, but fail to unpack its significance for understanding the activities of landlords in the housing market. Hegel reproaches collective judgements for their superficial generality and inability to lay bare the principal properties of an object. This drives Hegel onto the ground shared by modern realist philosophers who argue that abstraction should isolate the necessary and not the superficial aspect of an object. The judgement of Necessity, Hegel's third mode of judgement, specifies the substantive properties of an object (25).

The problem here, however, is how do you recognize a 'necessary' property? The siting, sorting and discarding of incidental properties occurs in the judgement of Inherence, but the process does not magically lead to the individuation of a set of necessary properties. Some objects may have no causal properties within their bounds. As mentioned earlier, the simple pointing out of necessary relationships, as for example in the capital-labour, master-slave, or landlord-tenant relationships, is not enough. They are not judgements; they do not specify the necessity of the relationships, any causal powers or potential ways of acting inscribed in the relationships. Hegel's account of the judgement of Necessity in the Logic does not produce any methodological insights as to how the necessary properties of an object might be identified, the properties are merely stated in judgement form. In keeping with his idealist concern for categorical progression in the Logic, we have to wait until the last judgement, the judgement of Notion, to gain an insight into the methodological steps required. At its simplest, to unravel the basis of necessity in a relationship such as the capital-labour relation requires an analysis of the social conditions which presuppose it, which make it possible for the relation to be given (26). The 'necessity' of any property an object may possess can only be known on the basis of this analytical step. Although for Hegel the judgement of Necessity is logically prior to the judgement of Notion, for methodological purposes the two practices co-exist.

This analytical step can be illustrated by contrasting the two following judgements: capital is an instrument of production and capital is money that begets money by purchasing labour at its cost of reproduction. Now ontologically speaking these are two different types of judgement. The first is a qualitative judgement which, as shown, lacks specificity; the second judgement, however, identifies two necessary aspects of the nature of capital. It is necessary for capital to be money that grows, otherwise it is just plain money. It would be quite meaningless if the quantity of money at the end of the formula M-C-M were identical with the quantity at the start. Unlike the process of commodity exchange, C-M-C, which involves a qualitative change in products, the only rationality for M-C-M lies in an increase in money. Secondly, the property of expansion attributed to capital is only possible through the exploitation of labour. Capital buys labour power which it necessarily misrepresents as a commodity in order to reproduce itself on an expanded scale. The necessary, internal relation between capital and labour is not a property of objects isolated on the basis of the requirement of capital to expand.

This may be familiar ground for some, but the point of interest here is not one of political economy; it is one of method. To arrive at a necessary judgement, I have had to touch upon the social conditions that underpin that necessity. The appropriation of a surplus through the purchase of labour-power is only possible under certain social conditions. The prerequisites of the relation are a population that is divided into possessors of wealth in the form of money and non-possessors of money who only have their labour to sell in order to live. The 'obviousness' of the necessity in the judgement is not apparent until the conditions which shape and structure that necessity have been specified.

In contrast to the oft-quoted examples in realist texts of physical or chemical objects whose necessary properties appear readily accessible, the changing structure of social activities, and their concept-dependent nature (they are already known under conventional descriptions) implies the need for a more explicit justification of ascribed necessary properties. This is particularly important given that the combination of properties within a structure of relations which produces causal powers may only occur within limited time/spatial conditions. It is not simply the case that necessary judgements require mediating specifications to support them, rather the mediating specifications have to be known prior to a specification of an object's necessary properties. It is a question, then, not of this or that object possessing necessary powers, but of a particular form of an object possessing necessary powers under specific social conditions.

It is therefore the 'form' of necessary properties, the social conditions that underpin necessary relationships, that has been neglected in accounts that have attempted to apply a realist philosophy to the objects of the social world. What makes an object what it is, can only be ascertained by a grasp of both its social form and content (27). Capital for example is a sum of values; but under certain
social conditions, a particular form of money, namely money capital, comes to possess the necessary property of expansion.

The limitations of the judgement of necessity to express the particularity of objects was recognized by Hegel. The last form of judgement, the judgement of Notion, acknowledged that individual objects possess necessary properties if they are constituted in a particular way (28). Unlike Hegel's discussion of the other types of judgement, however, the judgement of Notion is clouded with idealism. The World Mind, in the form of the Notion, is swept in to unify the individual object and its particular constitution with the universal genus. It is not the individual subject who produces the adequate concept of an object, it is an all-embracing thought process - the World Mind - of which individual thought is merely an expression. It is this aspect of Hegelian thought, the idea that universal thought determines the real, which Marx decisively rejected (29).

For Marx, the value of Hegel's treatment of formal logic did not rest with the particular mental tricks he performed upon the categories; rather it lay with Hegel's assessment and revision of the categories in accordance with their ability to produce a substantive specification of the object in question. There is nothing peculiarly idealist about this type of procedure; all methodological prescriptions are based upon an ontological conception of some nature. For example, empiricism assumes an atomistic conception of ontology of separate events or phenomena with no necessary connections between them. Hence, it was not a different conception of ontology that primarily distinguished Marx from Hegel's mode of analysis, but the fact that marx did not confute logic and ontology he maintained a distinction between the knowing object and the material object (30). The fact that we, as subjects, possess and use a particular series of logical categories to forge more exact specifications of an object does not imply, as Hegel believed, that those same categories produce the real. Rather, it is because the social world has the particular structure that it has, that the categories of judgement reveal the necessary and contingent aspects of objects. Engels recognized this philosophical point in his use of judgements in the Dialectics of Nature (31).

Marx's methodological debt to Hegel can partly be located in the critical analytical judgements developed by Hegel in the Science of Logic (partly because, for reasons of space, I have not developed the role of synthesis in either Marx or Hegel's methodology) (32). The common ground they occupy is characterised by a profound distaste for a shallow analytical method that, at its worst, treats social objects in an unproblematic manner, as given entities; or at best, mechanistically breaks down objects into their self-evident properties which produce little insight into the nature of the objects themselves. Marx and Hegel, however, as I have indicated, do not stand alone on this ground: it is also shared by modern realist philosophers.

**Analytical Method**

At this point it might be useful to briefly draw together the analytical guidelines raised in this paper in the form, as it were, of a realist antidote to empirical modes of conceptualization. Two general threads can be drawn from the argument before moving on to specific guidelines. First, the mode of conceptualization advocated in this paper foregoes an unproblematic manner, as given entities; or at best, mechanistically breaks down objects into their self-evident properties which produce little insight into the nature of the objects themselves. Marx and Hegel, however, as I have indicated, do not stand alone on this ground: it is also shared by modern realist philosophers.

The next step is one of analytical separation and isolation. The properties and relations that are basic to an object's existence are abstracted from the properties of an object which are considered incidental and superficial. Or, to put it another way, abstraction is concerned with the properties of a particular object which, if absent, would no longer allow the object to be the type of thing it is. This takes us into the realm of classification: the sorting and sifting of the necessary from the contingent properties, the enduring from the ephemeral properties, and the basic from the common properties. For example, if we take a closer look at the landlord/tenant relationship, a frequent line of classification in research texts exhibits an alarming artificiality (33). Invariability, two characteristics of landlords are abstracted which form the basis of a classification: the number of dwellings owned and their legal title (i.e. company, institution, trust, individual, and so forth). In the empirical sense, the legal title of the landlord may be subdivided to take account of the characteristics of age, sex, marital and employment status. On what grounds such characteristics are selected, one is never quite sure. Nor is it clear how the characteristics identified relate to any causal capacity of the types of landlordism produced.

In terms of the schema of judgements outlined earlier,
attributes of size or legal status are, respectively, enumerative and collective judgements which, although not of an incidental quality, do not express any necessary characteristics of landlordism. Attributes of sex, age and marital or employment status are judgements of inherence which offer no insight into the nature of landlordism. In consequence, studies of landlordism based upon these pre-given characteristics exhibit a disturbing arbitrariness in their findings. The inconsistency of the size criterion, for example the disagreement over how 'small' is a small landlord across the studies, is a testament to the lack of rigour produced by this mode of analysis (34). The concept of landlord is no less chaotic at the end of the analysis than it was at the start.

This type of unreflective analysis highlights the significance of adopting the previous methodological step: the need to unpack the 'given' object through a careful description of its constituent parts. What, if any, are the basic characteristics of landlordism, by virtue of which the term may be applied? In this example, the basic characteristic of landlordism is residential property rent, although in other objects there may be more than one necessary characteristic. In the absence of a rent relation, that is, a monetary payment from the tenant to the landlord in exchange for the right to use a residential space, the term landlord-tenant would be an inappropriate term to describe the relationship involved. The abstraction of the general rent relation, however, does not magically divine a coherent classification of landlords, it is in itself an object of further interrogation, as Engels demonstrated in The Housing Question (35). The merit of the abstraction is that it provides a selective focus for the construction of a typology of landlords. The role that property rent fulfils for different landlords, a process that can only be known through an empirical analysis of the economic, social and historical conditions that shape and constrain landlords' activities, may provide structural groups of landlords which admit the possibility of emergent causal powers (36).

Whether the causal powers inscribed in a particular group of landlords are realized or not, however, will vary according to the local conditions in which they operate. It is at this stage of the research process, when individual landlords in particular areas are being considered, that the characteristics of size, legal title, age and so forth, of landlords may be of value in an explanation of the workings of the private rented housing market.

For the purpose of presentation, I have glossed over a fourth methodological point in the outline of the landlord-tenant relationship. The identification of any necessary properties or characteristics of landlordism in general or groups of landlords in particular can only be ascertainled on the basis of a knowledge of the social conditions which produce that necessity. Those conditions are limited in time and space, and hence subject to change and modification. Hence analysis is not concerned with ahistorical or aspatial objects, but objects with a particular form that possess necessary causal properties under specific social conditions.

Conclusion

The analytical guidelines presented in the landlord-tenant example raise the question of the connections and tensions between the general object, its particular form and its individual instance (37). Within realism there is no determinate relation, no rigid top-down explanation between the causal powers of a particular object and their expression in the social world. Realism, as Sayer has demonstrated in RP28, is not a philosophy of reductionism. The complexity of a particular conjunction cannot be unravelled by something as simple as a string of necessary definitional terms; it involves a detailed grasp of the plurality of the structures present, in particular their internal causal powers and their capacity for joint power by virtue of their combination, together with an understanding of the material circumstances in which they are to be found.

This paper has concentrated upon the conceptualization of social objects or structures of relations within the research process. The methodological guidelines offered are specific to the study of social relations; they are not field invariant (38).

The very fact that social objects are already known to us under a particular description, that such conceptions are open to change, and that structured relationships are only reproduced by virtue of the activity of human agents, implies a methodic activity that is constructive rather than preventive (39). By constructive I wish to convey the notion of achievement mentioned earlier in the paper, in contrast to a preventive procedure which simply transfers or imposes a grid upon a particular content. With a constructive method the subject matter is worked up, not multiplied. The analytical guidelines in this paper do not rest with the formal application of the labels 'chaotic' or 'necessary' upon an unsuspecting content, nor do they involve a roll-call of judgements, or for that matter a simplistic plea for 'historical specificity'. The guidelines in this paper address a problem that besets both Marxist research in particular and empirical research in general: the ambiguity and vagueness of its conceptual propositions and, in consequence, an imprecision in the specification of the relationships that hold between objects. There are, I am sure, few opponents of conceptual precision, yet at the same time, aside from the 'grail' concepts of political economy, which have been subject to both positive and negative criticism, there appears to be an unwillingness within substantive Marxist research to question and re-work our existing stock of concepts and their meanings. Conceptual innovation appears to attract greater credence than conceptual re-presentation. Terms such as the local state, collective consumption or social reproduction, to name but a few, are invoked as if, in themselves, they actually explain something. There is a general reluctance to reflect upon the analytical potential of the more commonplace social objects and the local form of the macro-structures that shape our social world. This is not to argue that under every commonplace object, or local social structure, a devastating political insight is waiting to be revealed; but it is an argument to at least reflect upon 'given' objects. The rewards of such a practice are not necessarily a number of political insights at the level of the mode of production, but they may inform and assist in the construction of local socialist strategies.

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Notes and references


3 It is, however, distinct from the conceptual analysis developed at Oxford and Cambridge in the mid-20th century and exemplified in the works of J. L. Austin and G. Ryle.


5 Derek Sayer, 1979.


CONCEPTUAL COPS INFILTRATE LEFTIST CELL

The Radical Philosophy Group has affiliated to the Socialist Society.

The Socialist Society's summer school 1982 and the Moving Left Show organised by the Communist Party were, in their own terms, very successful events. Many people attended, and 'plenary sessions' and 'workshops' went reasonably well. Whatever criticisms there might be of the form of these events and of the Radical Philosophy Group's paper, there are a number of Conceptual Commisarriors, including me. Much of the discussion continues to employ the quasi-military rhetoric of 'strategy' and 'tactics', and to talk as if the problem for 'socialists-and-the-labour-movement' were largely problems of being, if not 'in retreat', certainly not poised for victory in the face of various onslaughts. Gramsci's 'war' discourse playing out the Vietnam themes in a minor key! The tendency of 're-construction' male radicals to leave the awkward and messy business of clearing up the socialist kitchen to women!...