

THE MARXIST THEORY OF TRUTH



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One of the main problems facing marxist theory is that of its own status. On the one hand the theory of the formation of ideology seems to suggest that all beliefs are relative to the believer's society; while on the other hand there is the assumption that marxism has a form of scientific validity which renders it independent from any socially relativistic considerations. In this paper we shall look at four types of answer to the questions "What sort of thing is 'truth' for marxist theory?", and "In what way is marxist theory true?" It should be noted at the outset that this four-fold taxonomy is not exhaustive of all possible versions of marxism, and that it is somewhat arbitrary - for instance the final category, totalistic marxism, has no independent significance from the point of view of the factors considered in the second part of the paper. It is included in the first part so that its relationship with the others can be clarified and not for any fundamental novelty that it introduces.

1 - Positivist marxism and its solution

The origins of this view are to be found in Engels, and it was expounded at length by Plekhanov and Bukharin. It appears to have been the explicit position of Lenin at certain pessimistic periods of his life, but above all else it characterised the marxism of the Second International. Marxism was viewed as positive science, as the means for acquiring objective knowledge whose relationship with the revolutionary development of the working class was entirely contingent. As Hilferding put it in 'Finance Capital':

To recognise the validity of Marxism does not at all mean to make value judgments, much less to point out a line of practical action. It is one thing to recognise a necessity, and quite another to put oneself at the service of that necessity.

The positivistic view thus contrasts two kinds of belief, those which occur as an undistorted reflection of reality, (usually mediated by sense impressions) and which are therefore the proper objects of genuine science; and on the other hand those beliefs which are adventitious or highly distorted reflections of reality which go to make up nonsense and ideology. Thus Engels ('Anti-Duhring' Moscow 1962 p54) writes:

But whence does thought obtain all these principles? From itself? No ... these forms can never be created and derived by thought out of itself, but only from the external world ... the principles are not the starting point of an investigation, ... but its final result; they are not applied to nature and history, but abstracted from them; it is not nature and the realm of humanity which conform to these principles, but the principles are only valid in so far as they are in conformity with nature and history. That is the only materialistic conception of the matter ...

Commenting favourably on this section, Lenin in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* p33/4, claims that:

... it is obvious that these mental images arise exclusively from sensations... Are we to proceed from things to sensation and thought? Or are we to proceed from thought and sensation to things?

The first line, i.e. the materialist line, is adopted by Engels...

Such an interpretation of marxist theory solves the problem by uniquely exempting science from relativisation to social conditions, and then by including marxism in science on a par with physics and biology. The criterion for truth is then the same for all the sciences including marxism: *correspondence* with an as yet uncategorised 'nature' through the usual experimental testing procedures. Not all beliefs in society therefore, are a simple product of that society. Those determined by empirical experiments have an independent and relatively objective side endowing them with a supra-social significance. This distinguishes marxism from all other social theories.

2 - Structuralist marxism and its solution

Again the origins of this view are to be found in Engels, where some specialist scientists are chided for being insufficiently interdisciplinary in their approach. But in its dominant contemporary form, academic French marxology, it takes on methodological features derived from the scientific work of such thinkers as Levi-Strauss.

While for the positivists, the validity of a belief followed from its derivability from a world experienced but *not yet conceptualised*, usually by means of such carriers of knowledge-by-acquaintance as sense-experience; such a procedure is quite out of place for the structuralists. For they deny that such experiences are possible prior to the creation of a complete and consistent structure-in-thought in which such experiences could be embedded. In their view marxism shows its superiority to other alternatives by its unique (or greater) success in this task. While for the positivists marxism is the true science of society, and is thus on a par with other supposedly true scientific theories such as Darwin's theory of evolution; for the structuralists it forms the uniquely preferred framework determining and dominating the appearance of these theories. Thus it is not on a par with them, but is logically connected to, and theoretically more general than these theories.

Contradictions in thought are, for the structuralists, to be removed by replacing the thought-structure with the superior marxist alternative, which is supposedly free from such debilitating consequences.

There are occasions where even those who claim to have no connection with structuralism as such, clearly share their conclusions in this respect. For instance Lucien Goldmann in later works such as *The Human Sciences and Philosophy*, writes:

At the root of the distinction between good and bad schemata, as at the root of any scientific conception, there is thus one criterion of truth: the adequacy of the conception to objective reality. (Op Cit p117)

As it stands, this could well be positivistic marxism; but in the same book (p96), it is made clear that a marxist understanding of society must fulfil the

... urgent need for synthesis between individual

facts and explicative sociology, a synthesis which alone can bring us nearer a real comprehension of the human facts.

And therefore the adequacy of marxism is to be judged in terms of its second-order ability to synthesise the various specific 'knowledges', rather than in terms of any single specific contribution or addition to them.

We shall briefly mention Goldmann's ambiguities later on. However it is Althusser who provides us with perhaps the clearest case of structuralist marxism, in his essay 'On the Materialistic Dialectic'. His structured whole remains completely *within* thought, and as a consequence marxism is thought of as being true in virtue simply of its comprehensiveness and lack of contradictions, in respect of its thought-structure alone. In this essay knowledge is presented as consisting of three levels of thought. Thus 'Generality₁' is defined as 'constituted either of still ideological concepts, or of scientific 'facts''. And 'Generality₂' is defined as '... the corpus of concepts constituting the 'theory' of science'. Finally we are left with 'Generality₃' (Historical Materialism), which alone is unqualifiedly identified with 'Knowledge'.

Not only does marxism provide the correct thought-structure for creating the unique synthesis of the special sciences, but it does so entirely *intellectually*, without needing to change the world in any other but intellectual ways:

The work whereby Generality₁ becomes Generality₂ ... only involves the process of theoretical practice, that is, it all takes place within knowledge

('For Marx' p184-5)

3 - The solution of practical or interventionist marxism

One principle implicitly accepted by the positivists and structuralists, is of the desirability and possibility of a neutral scientific explanation of external reality. Lenin, in his Philosophical Notebooks (Collected Works, Moscow 1963 p135-6) derides this claim basing himself on a quotation from Hegel:

"The customary tenderness for things, whose only care is that they shall not contradict one another, forgets here as elsewhere that this is no solution of the contradiction, which is merely planted elsewhere, namely, into subjective or external reflection; and that the latter does in fact contain the two moments - which this removal and transplantation proclaim to be a mere positedness - in one unity as transcended and related to each other". (This irony is exquisite! "Tenderness" for nature and history (among the philistines) - the endeavour to cleanse them from contradictions and struggle...)

A crucial part of Lenin's case, explicitly in the Philosophical Notebooks and implicitly in his revolutionary activity in the first twenty years of this century, is the view that questions of truth and falsity about the objective world cannot be raised independently of the interplay and opposition of forces which govern our life and action. The philistine's "tenderness" toward objective reality is for Lenin a product of his one-sided, contemplative conception of reality, which leaves out all creativity, activity and revolutionary change:

Theoretical cognition ought to give the object in all its necessity, in its all-sided relations, in its contradictory movement, in and for itself. But the human notion 'definitively' catches this objective truth of cognition, seizes and masters it, only when the notion becomes 'being-for-itself' in the sense of practice.... Marx, consequently, clearly sides with Hegel in introducing the criterion of practice into the theory of

knowledge: see the Theses on Feuerbach.

(Ibid p211-2)

Lenin sees the rational kernel in Hegel as follows:

The activity of man, who has constructed an objective picture of the world for himself, changes external actuality, abolishes its determinateness (= alters some sides or other, qualities, of it), and thus removes from it the features of Semblance, externality and nullity, and makes it as being in and for itself (= objectively true).

(Ibid p218)

This does not merely set boundaries to the theory of knowledge, but makes objective truth 'an intrinsically different sort of thing:

The unity of the theoretical idea (of knowledge) and of practice - this NB - and this unity precisely in the theory of knowledge, for the resulting sum is the 'absolute idea' (and the idea = the objectively true).

(Ibid p219)

The lesson Lenin draws from this for dialectical materialism is quite unambiguous:

Practice is higher than (theoretical) knowledge, for it has not only the dignity of universality, but also of immediate actuality.

(Ibid p213)

Kolakowski, in *Marxism and Beyond*, pp59-87, seems to think that nothing more novel than practice as verification (with historical hindsight) is involved in Lenin's views. The last two quotations show that this is incorrect, that practice is of necessity present in the very foundations of objective truth. How could this be so? The answer lies in one of the distinctions fundamental to revolutionary marxist practice (but seldom found in the rarified atmosphere of contemporary academic marxology): that between *propaganda* and *agitation*.

On the face of it propaganda is just "many ideas among few people", and agitation "few ideas among many people", but the use of these in revolutionary politics manifests a qualitative difference between them. In itself spreading propaganda does not change the social reality, though it may (and ought to) change some people's conceptions of that reality. Its limitations when detached from participation in the current stage of the workers' struggles, are made obvious by the failure of the Socialist Party of Great Britain to attract more than a few hundred followers in over 70 years of existence. For serious revolutionaries, therefore, it is necessary but ancillary to participation in the class-struggle itself - and this is where agitation comes in. For agitation is *intervention* by means of agitational programmes by a revolutionary organisation in the inchoate and spontaneous reaction of the proletariat to its conditions of existence. It is intended as a limited campaign around which the most advanced sections of the class can rally, through which *in struggle* they can educate themselves and the rest of the class. The use of ideas in intervention through agitation thus presupposes some knowledge of the level of consciousness of the proletariat, and also some idea of what it has to be to seize power. For instance if the workers are only peripherally concerned by Stalinism and the Vietnam war, but centrally concerned by the Industrial Relations Act, unemployment and the wage-freeze, then it is obvious that agitation can only begin with the latter. Equally, if relying uncritically upon 'left' trade union leaders, rather than building the forces of the rank-and-file, must lead to 'schizophrenic class-collaboration' (Scanlon's self-description BBC TV 12/12/72); then this too will hardly lead to the self-development of the class either.

Agitation then, when at all successful, changes the reality which gave rise to the need for this precise agitational programme. The agitational use of ideas therefore could not in principle statically describe a frozen social reality, for that reality is not definable independently of the agitation. It follows that in these circumstances, objective truth is *underdetermined* by forces which are purely external to human self-activity (which is, of course, not to say that it is underdetermined by conscious practice). In capitalism this underdetermination is a function of a *contradictory overdetermination* of reality. (For instance capitalism both needs an *increased* organic composition of capital [to exploit living labour power more completely] and a *decreased* organic composition of capital [to prevent a declining rate of profit.]). Revolutionary practice is possible because it occupies the nodal points of reality's contradictory overdeterminations - or (perhaps more illuminatingly) because it occupies the interstices between the external underdeterminations.

Successful agitation leads to the supersession of one agitational programme by another. Hence at one time it can be the demand for bread, at another the slogan "All power to the soviets", and at another the programme of the first congress of the Communist International. Clearly the only kind of structure which could be of use to practical or revolutionary marxism in its task of transforming reality, is *not* one in which practice has been divorced from theory, in which the uncovering of truth 'all takes place within knowledge'. On the contrary, this would be to turn marxism into the new scholasticism rather than a living science. The physical scientist's ability to utilise experiment, to interact with the physical world, is of the same order of importance as the revolutionary marxist's ability to do likewise in society. What distinguishes a revolutionary party from a sect or mere grouping of individuals, is thus precisely its ability to intervene in social reality. Only this can bring marxism to life, and without it marxism must remain a dead, scholastic and academic fossil.

Returning to Lenin, we can now see the hopelessness of trying the usual academic game of distilling some doctrinally-pure essence from the 40 or 50 volumes of the Collected Works. It can't be done, and this is part of the reason why Lenin was such a great revolutionary. Agitation which successfully altered a political situation, brought into being the necessity for altered agitational work. Any attempt to find common ground between the agitational programmes at distinctly different stages of the struggle can thus at best find accidental identities. Hence Lenin's own metaphor for this phenomenon - 'bending the stick'. We can see it in action in the changes in line on the limitations of trade unionism from 1895/6 to 1899 ('On Strikes'), 1902 ('What Is To Be Done?'), 1905 ('The St Petersburg Strike'), and 1917 ('Lecture on the 1905 Strike'); where if we were to try to find any one line persisting throughout these times we would necessarily fail, but where each possessed (in varying degrees) a validity with respect to the different situations involved.

Underlying the practical revolutionary's stance is an entirely different view of what process validates ideas in general, from the positivist and structuralist interpretations. These latter see the criteria of validity as being located *extrinsic* to the social life of those holding the ideas, in an autonomous a-social realm of experience (positivists), or an equally a-social autonomous realm of reason (structuralists). But for the practical revolutionary marxist, the only significant criterion of validity is life, action and struggle. You can devise the most elegant and rigorous proofs for any supposed truth, but so long as the social group to which you are appealing lacks the social conditions in which they can take root and flourish, in which the new ideas can clarify and help understand already existent problems, then they are doomed to social insignificance when Lenin asserted that the unity of theory and practice occurred *within* the theory of knowledge, that practice is higher than theoretical knowledge, he meant that no notion of

validity was sufficient which excluded the process whereby the class could seize upon these ideas and make them relevant to their immediate problems, and in doing so advance the development of the class itself.

For interventionist marxism therefore, objective truths are not *uncovered* so much as *created*. It is in the act of us *making* them that they become revealed. To attempt to reveal them first and only later to act is to remove practice from where it belongs - *within* the theory of knowledge. But practice can only be introduced inside the theory of knowledge by making corresponding corrections to our concept of the external world. The clue is provided by Lenin's earlier quotation of Hegel - the philistine's tenderness toward nature and history, the endeavour to cleanse them from contradictions and struggle... The problem (or one aspect of it) seems to be due to a superficial or unscientific view of the external world, which is taken to be a *given* rather than a complex determination of many underlying elements. For Hegel the complex determination was always a contradictory one - the forces maintaining and expanding the given reality inevitably giving rise to even more powerful self-destructive forces; and Marx demonstrates the correctness of this thesis concretely in the specific case of capitalism. Now such a view shows the distorting one-sidedness of analysing reality as a simple summation of all the existent things. Reality is infinitely richer than this. Among the existents there are those with a fantastic capacity for growth and development and others which for all their massiveness are obsolete relics on their last legs. And reality contains alongside the existents, *coexisting in time*, the world of *potentials* as well. Practice, in the first instance, does nothing but alter the boundaries between things which are already with us in existence or potential. However a change in the boundary between the existent and the potential subsequently dominates the change in the forces underlying each.

The richness and complexity of the real, and its non-identity with the merely existent, provides the ontology for a world in which practice dominates and determines reality. The future will be what it will be because men in specific historical circumstances will have brought it about. The present is the sum of infinitely many determinations, and is not to be identified with a list of those things merely existent at a given point in time. We clearly need a guide to the crucial features of this infinite morass if we are not to get lost, and it is this which is uniquely provided by practice - not just any notion of practice, but the specifically marxist notion of the class practice of the proletariat. This is a point we shall return to in greater detail later (in the section on the scientific nature of marxism), but here we shall mention briefly what it is and what role it plays. That the proletariat is exploited, degraded and made the instrument for the impersonal dictates of capitalism, follows as a matter of logic from the existence of the wage-labour/capital distinction and the existence of competition. The proletariat can only begin to act as a class for itself when it has thrown off the shackles of a system which subordinates everything to the impersonal needs of profit. The conscious practice of the class as a *class* can thus be none other than that of the abolition of capitalism. It cannot do less than this without failing to act as a class for itself, and it cannot do more than this - for the abolition of capitalism abolishes the class as a class. If the practice of the class for itself can be none other than the abolition of capitalism, then we have a means for sorting through the infinite complexity of the determinations of reality according to whether they can be utilised to this end or not. Thus for the proletariat there are some determinations which stand out uniquely as being essential for the science of the class qua class, and others which are irrelevant. Here indeed we have a set of ideas (revolutionary theory) which is to be uniquely preferred, but it is in this privileged position only as a result of its being viewed from the standpoint of a certain class and as ancillary to the practice of that class.

It is sometimes thought that marxists of the interventionist variety, like Lenin or Gramsci, treat theory too peremptorily. Exactly the opposite is the case - theory is used to show not only what is, but the whole complexity of reality. Theory ceases to be adequate to the task of uncovering objective truth alone not because we use it less, but because we use it more - to show the all-sidedness of reality, potential and existent. Only such an all-sidedness makes intervention possible at all. Conversely, only the discipline of class practice can provide a principle giving logical coherence to the complexity of the all-sided determinations.

Understanding bourgeois society thus consists in locating its strengths and weaknesses guided by such works as 'Capital', which explain the actual workings and outline the limits of the potential workings of the system as a whole. It does not consist in looking for a deterministic plan of the cosmos in the manner of Laplace. But unlike revolutionary voluntarism it recognises the necessity of theory as the creator of our knowledge of the potential 'space' we occupy as revolutionaries - it shows us what degrees of freedom we possess, and in what areas we possess them. Without it we should flounder directionlessly. The more theory we have and the better it is, the greater is our freedom to act; and it is this fact which distinguishes the practical revolutionary's viewpoint from the purely contemplative marxism of the positivist and structuralist. These latter two, simply because they are compelled to see knowledge of actions as purely external to them, are forced to look upon explanation of these actions in purely coercive terms. Freedom and determination of action become opposed polarities. For the revolutionary on the other hand, it is only through the very existence of the determination of action in certain specific ways that freedom, rational freedom of action becomes possible. The proletariat is only potentially free, but a prerequisite for its actual freedom is precisely knowledge of the specific forces which currently prevent it being so.

4 - Totalistic marxism and its solution

Lukacs in *History and Class Consciousness* has a concept of the totality which stands half way between the structuralists' notion of structure and the interventionists' notion of practice. Its differences with Althusser's 'structure' are considerable. For a start one of its most important premises is that contradictions or antinomies of thought are the most crucial instances necessary reflections of a contradictory life being lived by the thinker of these contradictions, rather than his contingent inability to find the 'right' way of thinking. Hence the need for action, for to eliminate the unsatisfactory thoughts, one must first change the unsatisfactory life in which they are embedded. Furthermore, and as a corollary to this, so long as capitalism exists, so too will the unsatisfactory lives. Therefore the totality-in-thought can now exist in *potential only*, to be realised in and by the proletariat only after world revolution.

But in spite of the fact that it exists in potential only, Lukacs clearly believes that we can here and now proclaim in an absolute sense the superiority of the potential consciousness of the working class, due to its *unique* ability to abolish the class antagonisms which themselves have given rise to alienation and reification, and thus to the distortions apparent in the antinomies of bourgeois thought. To put it more crudely, the objective interests of the proletariat are those of the totality of mankind, and it is 'totality' in this sense that makes Lukacs think of the marxist articulation of this fact as the only absolute or unqualified truth to be found.

Goldmann, as we mentioned above, is rather equivocal. Contrast his quotation above with its talk of the only satisfactory criterion of truth being "... the adequacy of the conception to objective reality",

with that of an earlier work, his book on Kant:

My own position here can be briefly set out as follows:

(a) *The only possible criterion of truth is action, practice.*

(b) *In a society where it is not the community, the 'we', but the individual, the 'I', which constitutes the subject of action, the criterion of truth can only be individual and cannot have a universal validity. In so far as limited groups (classes, nations etc) constitute the subject of action, there arise class ideologies and national ideologies which may be true or false according to whether or not they have the whole of humanity as an end.*

(Op Cit p158)

This illuminating footnote puts the Lukacsian case very clearly and concisely. The category of the totality serves two separate functions therefore. Firstly as *potential* rendering practice necessary, and secondly as *actual*, as that which guides the intellectual work of its proponents (such as Goldmann) here and now.

II

How do these versions of the marxist theory of truth square with those characteristics which Marx and subsequent marxists took as being central and specific to the marxist system? Let us now look at how each satisfies the requirements of being *materialistic*, *communist*, *scientific* and finally *revolutionary and dialectical*.

1 - Materialism

The positivistic interpretation accepts the mind/matter distinction, and asserts both the ontological and epistemological primacy of matter. Thus in our earlier quotations from Lenin and Engels we were enjoined to assert both that matter came before mind, and also that in our investigation of the world we must begin with concrete materiality.

But what status do these methodological and philosophical assertions of materialism themselves have? They are themselves *prima facie* underivable from concrete materiality and thus appear to be self-denying. And even if this objection looks too easy and sophistical to carry much weight, we can pursue it at a deeper level. For what is it about matter that makes it matter-for-us? Is it just that we cannot avoid positing a pure externality? That it is an undeniable fact that our will and subsequent reality do not coincide? That pure externality presents itself to us unavoidably as the element of *resistance* to our will? For if so we have no proof of metaphysical materialism, only a proof of metaphysical idealism. It only contributes to metaphysical materialism if these two exhaust all the possibilities, and no one after Hegel could imagine us to be tyrannised by concepts to that extent.

So the positivists are forced to concede the epistemological point that a conceptual matrix is a logical prerequisite before 'matter', even if it is to function for us as the ultimate parameter of explanation, can become matter-for-us in thought or experience. Since the *ontological* primacy of matter for the positivists followed on the other hand *a-posteriori* from 19th-century scientific atomism; that too can be safely assumed obsolete after the demise of those theories themselves in the 20th century.

In these respects structuralist marxism is much less crude, for the above objections are quite in-

applicable to it. There is also no doubt that on this question it is much closer to Marx's own views. We can see this in many places from Marx's doctoral dissertation to 'Capital' itself; but it is perhaps clearest in his general introduction to the 'Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy', where he says:

It seems to be the correct procedure to commence with the real and the concrete, the actual pre-requisites.... Yet on closer consideration it proves to be wrong.... (Instead) we proceed from the imaginary concrete to less and less concrete abstractions, until we arrive at the simplest determinations. This once obtained, we might start on our return journey, until we finally come back to (the concrete), but as a rich aggregate of many determinations and relations. The concrete is concrete because it is a combination of many determinations, i.e. a unity of diverse elements. In our thought therefore it appears as a process of synthesis, as a result and not a starting point.

(D. McLellan, *Marx's Grundrisse* p34)

Thus the structuralist interpretation makes the material the concrete product of the many determinations, and has no other use for the concept of the material except this. Now while this certainly does not deny the category of matter, it hardly makes it play the kind of dominant role that perhaps it ought, if it is to call itself 'materialism'; for it makes the concrete a product, a determination rather than a parameter or determinant of the system. Thus while it is not necessarily false, its notion of the material is quite gratuitous: doing no work at all in the system. And thus it does not preserve a version of marxism which is properly speaking materialistic.

The notion of the material as it appears in interventionist marxism, is defined quite differently from those considered hitherto. It is not what the idea refers to that makes it material, but rather the relation between this idea and the real social and cultural life in which this idea is to be embedded. An idea is material not because it is about atoms and physicality, but because it becomes a material force in a really existent society; and to do this it may just as easily be about spiritual chimeras (e.g. witchcraft in 17th century Europe) as about more solid objects. The materiality of an idea is thus its actual power to influence, change and control social behaviour absolutely irrespective of the content of that idea. By making materiality a relation between ideas (theory) and the real social world, interventionist marxism makes the unity of theory and practice a necessary consequence of its materialism rather than a contingent extra. It is thus the only version of marxism so far considered with its own theoretical defences against degeneration into yet another schema for merely interpreting the world rather than changing it. Gramsci too was well aware of the necessity for the relational as opposed to the referential definition of materiality. Only the former correctly identifies the element making the ideas 'historical fact' rather than '... abstractions whose origins are purely and abstractly ratiocinative'. (*Prison Notebooks* p346)

Ideas become material forces not through some crystallisation in 'matter', but solely due to their cultural or social significance. Thus even (and perhaps especially) conceptions of the most solid and impenetrable 'matter' can be immaterial and ideal, according to interventionist marxism, if they fail to express themselves in the events of social life.

Totalistic marxism stands ambivalently between the interventionist and structuralist interpretation, due to its ambivalence on the actual or potential nature of the totality itself. As potential to which the proletariat must strive through action, it can easily adopt the interventionist relational view; but as actual, as that which currently guides the activities

of marxist intellectuals it has to adopt the structuralist view. For it accepts the possibility of proving the intellectual superiority of marxism not due to the specific cultural conditions around us here and now, but to an intrinsic superiority which is discovered by purely abstract ratiocinative means.

2 - Communism

Of course, as with materialism, any version of marxism can come up with the platitudinous belief in the truly communist society in which the individual and society become a harmonious unity. At this level there is approximate equality between the different versions. But in this section we are looking at the question more methodologically. Does communism come about through a giant accident making the individuals act cooperatively (perhaps due to a fatalistic belief in a millenarian preestablished harmony)? Or is there something about marxism which makes it more logical than that?

On the positivist view it does indeed seem purely accidental, for it presents us with man-the-knower essentially in the role of an individual, learning the truth through his contemplation of reality. Such a view methodologically excludes the community or society from the primitive concepts of its system, and they can therefore only appear at all as the contingent end-product of summations of individuals.

The structuralist alternative, on the other hand, presents us with an inconsistent mixture of extreme communality and extreme individualism in its method for obtaining truths. Since society is a complexly structured whole, the structuralists would seem committed to looking at the community rather than the individual as the source of knowledge. But if we probe a little further, we shall see that this act of looking at the world is purely contemplative and purely individual. For Althusser for instance, the individual knower must be both within the structured whole for it to be a structure at all rather than a mere aggregation, and at the same time outside it to render his own creation of the structure-in-thought objective and scientific. But it is as outsider to the social structure that man-the-knower appears essentially: to use his terminology the creation of Generality-3s all takes place within knowledge. As such we find the same criticisms applying here as with positivism, and the same methodological commitment against the community when the question of the discovery of truth arises.

The same is true for Goldmann's *The Human Sciences and Philosophy*. On the one hand he recognises the need for a synthesis of the facts of our experience with explicative sociology, a synthesis which could not fail to be communal if expressed in action. But unlike his younger self, in his later work he makes it clear that the synthesis is a purely individual and intellectual process. The confusing ambivalence arises out of a genuine attempt to get away from the methodological individualism of positivism, but one which fails precisely because it does not go far enough. One cannot go beyond methodological individualism without transcending the narrowly intellectualistic approach that goes with it.

Interventionist marxism is of course necessarily committed methodologically to the community on the question of truth and knowledge, for it views thought in terms of its social or communal embodiment, and never in terms of its supposed intrinsic properties. Because it ties thought more firmly to social reality than other interpretations of marxism, it can more reasonably assert that the intellectual problems associated with communist society which are themselves nurtured by certain conditions specific to capitalism, will disappear along with those conditions. But more importantly, not only is thought tied to the real social conditions, but it can only be the property of social groups rather than individuals, and hence the

specific problem posed of how *individuals* can exist both freely and harmoniously in communist society contraposes the real order of things. The thinking 'individual' is but an abstracted microcosm of the groups of which he forms an element. Therefore to show that two individuals are in irreconcilable conflict one needs to show that they are members of necessarily opposed and hostile groups within their society.

Much of what is the case for interventionist marxism applies for totalistic marxism too. For there too solutions for problems in thought are to be found in the social, communal embodiments of this thought rather than through abstract ratiocination. But there still remains the intellectualistic residue for the totalists, which effectively has them on *both* sides of the fence: they believe enough in the properties of pure ratiocination to believe that with it alone the superiority of the proletarian world-view is provable.

3 - Scientific nature of marxism

None of our four interpretations has much difficulty in distinguishing science from non-science according to their own criteria for doing so; and each is able to show itself as scientific according to these criteria.

The positivistic view thus sees Marx's contribution to historical science as essentially on a par with Newton's in physical science and Darwin's in biological science. On the other hand the structuralist view sees science in terms of its abstracting and generalising power to reproduce the concrete-in-thought accurately in all its variety of aspects. Thus for Althusser, marxism is scientific not because it is on a par with Darwinism, but because it is the science of all the sciences, and thus in a sense more scientific than any one of them.

By contrast with both these views, the interventionist marxist has a more operationalist view of what science is. A scientific theory is scientific due to its capacity to enable us to interact with the world in ways hitherto unknown to us. And this is a property which remains even after the scientific community has rejected this theory as 'false'. For instance, although Newton's theories of refraction are based on a premise now believed false (that light travels faster in a denser medium), some of them can still be regarded as scientific in the above sense nonetheless. Because the interventionist marxist divorces the question of absolute veracity and falsity from that of scientificity, he is able to ignore the spurious claims of the former, while using the latter as an essential element in his system. In doing so he of course puts science in a completely different mould from verificationists or falsificationists, who both see the connection between truth and falsity and scientificity as indubitable. For them it is this connection which is necessary, while that between science and technology is only contingent; whereas for interventionist marxism the only necessary connection to be found is precisely the one between science and technology.

In what way then is marxist theory scientific? What does it enable us to do in the world? 'Us' is too general here, for marxist science is of use only to the proletariat and its allies. (It is of use to the bourgeoisie too, but only in the secondary sense, for the containment of a proletariat using it in a primary sense). According to marxism, the self emancipation of the proletariat is the act of the proletariat itself, acting for itself, and doing so fully self-consciously. To act for itself, it has to come to understand the relationship between itself and capital. It has to come to understand that capital is both created by labour and at the same time stands above and dominates labour. It has to be able to see the dynamics of the development of capitalism, for only this demonstrates where the contradictions and crises can be found and exploited. In other words, although marxist theory is not a scientific prerequisite for

anyone without qualification, it certainly is for the working class as a class. As such, marxism is (as a matter of fact) not only necessary, but also a *unique* science for the proletariat qua proletariat. For the working class only marxist theory has this ability, to enable it to act as a class for itself. Therefore from the point of view of the class, marxism is its only science.

Again the totalistic interpretation provides us with no novel position compared with those considered so far: it again exists between the structuralist and interventionist position on the question of science. But what is of interest now is that in spite of these very fundamental differences, there is pretty common agreement amongst our interpreters as to the area of Marx's work which contains his fundamental scientific discovery: it is his discovery in 1857 of the notion of surplus value, of the distinction between labour and labour power.

Positivistic marxism uses the two-fold appearance of labour, and cites such evidence as the accumulation and growth of capital (seemingly *ex nihilo*), as the description of external reality verifying the truths of marxism. This, it is believed, is what makes marxist materialism *scientific*. But in doing so it has to cite methodological procedures such as verification or falsification according to which marxism is scientific. But that involves forcing external reality into a conceptual mould of some kind or another - for what is verified or falsified is a *sentence* expressing a putative scientific law, and the only thing that can be logically related to it is *another sentence*. Hence the necessity for the conceptualisation of reality prior to the possibility of science, and a denial of the premise that we must begin with the material world rather than our own conceptualisations of it. In its attempt to become scientific, positivistic marxism thus degenerated into self-contradiction.

The structuralist view certainly avoids these problems, but in doing so gets itself into cognate difficulties. Unlike the positivist, it cannot take on trust the validity of a purely external empirical criterion of scientificity, for to be scientific is precisely to impose a meaningful structure of conceptualisation on empirical data themselves; and therefore such data cannot be used to 'correct' the structure without contradiction. The only alternative is to construct a viable structure-in-thought containing historical materialism as its base, and then to prove that this marxist synthesis is in fact uniquely available. Such a uniqueness proof is of course not possible so long as elements can only modify and be modified by their *own* structure, for then all conflict takes place at the level of the structure alone, and unfortunately these structures are by definition too total to do so. For not only are the parameters in terms of which the world is to be explained structure-specific, but so too are the very conceptualisations of the world they are used to explain. The very incommensurability of these world-syntheses effectively prevents any demonstration of the superiority of any one of them. To accord any one of these the honourific description of being scientific in these circumstances, as does structuralist marxism, seems quite gratuitously and pompously misleading.

Just because interventionist marxism denies the significance of 'science' in any absolute sense independent of practice, but asserts only the existence of a *class* science of the proletariat for itself; it is unencumbered by these problems. Marxist theory is the science of the proletariat acting for itself, and this can be demonstrated as a matter of logic. If there exists a proletariat, then so too must *wage-labour and capital and thereby surplus value and profit*. With the market comes *competition and accumulation* and thence *crisis and the centralisation of capital*. All these follow as necessarily implied by the structure of relations which render the proletariat possible. But the system they describe, capitalism, is not one in which the proletariat acts for itself. On the contrary

it is one in which it is compelled to act against itself. Capital inverts the order of the artisan to the tools which form an extension of himself. Capitalism's impersonal laws dominate the new machinery, and thereby its operators too. As a result instead of the artisan's tools and artifacts becoming nature humanised, the wage-labourer becomes humanity depersonalised. Yet capital grows only out of wage labour itself: the proletariat creates its own chains by its own natural efforts under capitalism. Again it follows as a matter of logic that the proletariat can only act for itself when it has triumphed over capitalism. The class science of marxism is there to show the working class the nature of its oppression and the clues to its transcendence - to give coherence to its spontaneous reaction against its condition of life. Thus because interventionist marxism recognises only *class* truths, it avoids the spurious notions of scientificity that are employed by positivists and structuralists.

4 - Truth as revolutionary and dialectical

Of the dialectic Marx said:

In its rational form it is a scandal and an abomination to bourgeoisdom and all its doctrinaire professors, because it includes in its comprehension and affirmation recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking-up; because it regards every developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose on it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary.

(Afterword to the second German edition of *Kapital*)

At the heart of the problem for marxists, who believe after all that it is the working class itself which must liberate itself, but that this cannot occur without marxist theory; is whether it is possible to generate a notion of truth such that it *complements* freedom rather than *substituting* for it. Knowledge as it is conceived by all contemplative epistemologies, and this includes both the structuralist and positivist versions of marxism, are quite incapable of doing this. The reasons for this derive from aspects of Hegel's work, but it was really only Lukacs who made it fully explicit in his essay "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat". If knowledge of man is restricted to him qua known object rather than knowing subject, then to the extent that we can obtain such truths about him, he is that much less able to subject himself to conscious self-modification. Knowledge and the freedom for self-emancipation thus become opposed polarities, making the marxist case that self-emancipation presupposes knowledge of the relationship between self and capitalism, impossible in principle. Such a view would only leave open two possibilities: fatalistic mechanism in which the self-activity of the masses has no meaning, or voluntaristic philistinism in which knowledge or theory has no part to play

Why then are positivists and structuralists guilty of this? The answer lies in the extent to which they are still embedded in the kind of pre-dialectical problematic to be found jointly in the classical schools of Rationalism and Empiricism. The categories of description, explanation and action were taken to be *separable* according to this problematic. Empiricists believed that explanation might be incomplete description, and Rationalists vice-versa, but they agreed that at least *one* of these two categories must have its own independent criteria, and also that both must at least be separately identifiable so that the reduction (or partial reduction) of one to the other might proceed. And it certainly never occurred to them that there might be a real unity not only between the descriptive and explanatory, but also between these and action.

The complete separation between thought and action was axiomatic for them. Positivist marxism steps into this problematic and sees no reason for changing any part of it. Structuralist marxism is unhappy about one part of it: the separability of description and explanation, and indeed makes great play about this; but this only serves to hide the fact that the major point is being left untouched, for thought is still seen as separate in principle from action. Hence Althusser's point that truth is created entirely within knowledge. Since knowledge and action are seen as separate, in the same way that action cannot modify knowledge, knowledge cannot modify action either except in purely *negative* ways. It can tell us of the ways capitalism forces us to behave, but not of the ways that action itself can abolish and change the given social reality.

Knowledge of truths is thus seen as independent of action for the structuralists, and when these truths are about ourselves, just because our action can't change them they are paradigm cases of knowledge of the self as *object* only, and hence are subject to our above objections. It is said that in May '68 Althusser was seized by a diplomatic illness and was thus 'unable' to commit himself. Meanwhile back at the drawing-board, with the riots outside, he was back at work trying to locate the dominant contradiction... If true, it would certainly fit.

For the interventionist marxist, a notion of truth in which proletarian self-activity was *not* implicit would be an infinite, amorphous and undifferentiated aggregation of mutually contradictory conceptions of reality, totally useless for the real business of smashing capitalism, and actually harmful in wasting the time of the potentially useful cadres. Such a view is also held, in the main, by totalistic marxism. The quotation from Goldmann's *Kant* above makes this very clear. According to this view the process whereby the positivists and the structuralists propose gaining knowledge is purely individual, and is thereby incapable of having a universal validity. By a curious paradox it is precisely those who start off with pretensions of universal validity rather than the more limited end of giving coherence to the struggle of the proletariat against their conditions of existence, who are the very people incapable of achieving such a universal validity.

If the basis for our thought is the spontaneous and continuous struggle against the conditions that capitalism forces on to the proletariat, and if our intention as revolutionaries is to give this coherence, to show the way forward into revolutionary politics, then marxist theory takes on a different form. It gives the spontaneous struggle the capacity to be more effective, for it to go from strength to strength until it annuls the conditions giving rise to the struggle in the first place. In short, if marxist theory is nothing other than a tool for the self-emancipation of the class, and if revolutionary parties become repositories for the use of this tool; then marxism can *complement* the freedom and self-activity of the class, instead of standing above it as a rather fearsome and reproachful ogre.

This is the sense in which marxist theory is revolutionary for interventionists. The truths that it contains are no stultifying rigid reified 'facts' but guides to the self-development of the class.

The class content of truth and knowledge is indeed irreducible, but it is precisely this which enables the marxist theory to function as class-science, as the promoter of the freedom of the proletariat. It is because historical changes are, in the main, class-based that thought and truth are also. And only such a view renders possible the task which Lenin correctly saw as necessary for an intelligible epistemology: to introduce the unity of theory and practice *inside* the theory of knowledge. Logically following through the consequences of this view must change many aspects of philosophy, but none so disruptive as the realisation that the performance of real revolutionary practice is the precondition for being a marxist philosopher.