

TRUTH AND PRACTICE

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Peter Binns' paper 'The Marxist Theory of Truth' in *Radical Philosophy* 4 exemplifies what seems to have become a new orthodoxy among Marxists, as well as many bourgeois philosophers, and social scientists: that truth is historically and socially relative, and that the decision between contesting theories (and the associated practices) must be made on grounds of practical utility.

My aim in this paper is to defend an objectivist view of truth and hence of Marxism as the science of social formations, and to show the practical importance of this view. As the view which I describe as objectivist is roughly that which Peter Binns (and also Kolakowski, in a paper I shall be considering) calls 'positivistic' Marxism, I shall start by pointing out that the latter term is misleading, and that many of the ideas attributed to objectivist Marxists on the basis of their alleged similarity to bourgeois positivists are not in fact held by them.

The objectivist position is: (a) that a thought is true if it corresponds to or adequately reflects reality, (b) that thought is a product of and dependent upon reality, but reality is independent of thought, and not at all its product (though a given reality may be the product of action which has involved thought); (c) insofar as it is scientific, theory is independent of its subject; one must ask not 'Whose theory is it?' but 'Is it adequate to its object?' (These points, I take it, are shared by structuralists and so-called 'positivist' Marxists; my own view differs from the structuralism of e.g. Louis Althusser in stressing the importance of a genetic account of knowledge in relation to its object).

Bourgeois positivism is by no means exhaustively defined by these beliefs; of greater significance are its views: (1) that theoretical knowledge is a construction out of sensations, (2) that a reality is only understood scientifically when it is reduced to atomic components, related only mechanically and differing only quantitatively; (3) that practical or evaluative conclusions cannot be obtained from factual premises.

So far as I know, no Marxist (except perhaps the empirio-criticists) has held (1), and none has held (2). (3) was held by Hilferding, but not by the other objectivists - Engels, Plekhanov, Lenin etc. Goldmann, who is by no means an objectivist, shares this last positivist assumption, and criticises the objectivists for their 'fallacy' in denying it (see his paper 'Is There a Marxist Sociology', English translation in *Radical Philosophy* 1)

Hence the accusation that the objectivist Marxists must be purely contemplative and individualistic in their conception of science is simply false. They are in no way committed to methodological individualism or to theory without practical implications. As to the social and practical nature

of scientific enquiry and experiment, this is common ground not only of all Marxist theories, but of intelligent bourgeois theories as well.

Of course it is certain that for Marxism there is a close relation of theory to social practice, and not merely to the practice of scientific enquiry - 'theoretical practice' - but to social production and the class struggle. A Marxist theory of knowledge must therefore articulate the relations of theory to practice in all their complexity; it will not suffice to notice that they are connected in various ways and with no more ado stew them up in the same pot until they are indiscriminable. The defect of the pragmatist/relativist account is that instead of effecting a fusion of theory and practice it effects a confusion of them.

Essential to Marxist materialism, as to any non-idealist philosophy, is the primacy of being over thought, the dependence of consciousness on material reality. This dependence is twofold: in the dependence of man's consciousness on his social existence, and in the character of thought as a more or less adequate reflection of reality.

The 'interventionist' concept of materialism proposed by Peter Binns radically rejects this relation of thought to reality:

An idea is material not because it is about atoms and physicality, but because it becomes a material force in a really existent society ... 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. (RP4, p.7)

This would make Berkeley, Kant and Hegel into materialists.

A conception of the relation of thought to reality which is more representative of pragmatist/relativist Marxism is that of Karl Korsch. Peter Binns, if I interpret him correctly, makes the distinction between thought and reality and recognises a one-way relation of determination between them - ideas determine reality through practice. The origin and object of the ideas are left out of account, and they are judged by their results. Korsch on the other hand is already compelled to reject the correspondence theory of truth by his conception of the relation of consciousness and reality, which is essentially that they are inseparable (a view criticised by Lenin in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*). Korsch says: '... the coincidence of consciousness and reality characterizes every dialectic, including Marx's dialectical materialism' (*Marxism and Philosophy*, pp.77-78).

If consciousness and reality already coincide it cannot be asked whether or not they correspond; moreover a change of consciousness will be a change

of reality. Knowledge and practice become indistinguishable.

This is a view often encountered in Marxist circles; it is defended as 'dialectical', while its opponents criticize it as insufficiently materialistic. But the truth is that it renders any dialectic impossible, by making the notion of contradictions 'in the very essence of objects' incomprehensible. Subject and object are merged in a 'night in which all cows are black', and all contradictions resolved by the bald assertion of the identity of opposites. (cf. Lenin: 'The identity of social being with social consciousness is sheer nonsense and an absolutely reactionary theory', *M&E-C*, p.313).

The dualism of consciousness and reality, subject and object, as represented by classical bourgeois philosophy has of course to be overcome. But this should be done by asserting that every subject is also an object; there is no such thing as the subject in the Kantian/Sartrean sense of 'that which can never be an object'. This solution retains the possibilities of interaction between subject and object, including their conflict, and of 'false consciousness'; it asserts the independence of the object and hence the possibility of its recalcitrance. If the subject's cognition of the object could change the object, the practical resolution of contradictions would not be necessary.

Every subjectivization or relativization of truth removes content from the theories it treats of; it cuts away their objective reference. If Marxism thus loses its objective reference and becomes merely the systematic expression of the class consciousness of the proletariat, it is no more a science than is theology, which is the systematic expression of the consciousness of a religious community.

We cannot understand a belief or a theory unless we understand it as laying claim to truth, and hence as having the possibilities of truth or falsehood. Every theory is also the expression of a certain consciousness, class and individual. We can tell something - not necessarily something admirable - about the societies which gave rise to Newtonian and Darwinian theories by examining their content. But our prime concern with these theories is with their truth (or falsity), and this is determined by reference to their objects. If we ignored the fact that a theory laid claim to truth we could not even assess it as an expression of the consciousness of its epoch.

The whole point about a theory, as opposed to a fantasy, is that it is about reality, hence its value depends on its truth, and can only be determined by comparing it with reality, not by examining it itself, or establishing its subjective or social origins, although this latter may be of importance both in assessing the prevalence of a belief as evidence for its truth, and in studying the individuals and societies holding the belief.

Every correspondence theory of truth has the essentially materialistic consequences that reality precedes and is independent of thought, that thought lays claim to reflect and correspond to reality, that the truth or falsity of a thought is determined by reference to the reality it claims to reflect, and that the meaning and identity of a thought are determined by the conditions which would make it true.

The only way in which reality is determined by thought is insofar as it is altered by action which is based on thought. This brings us to the crucial question for a Marxist theory of truth: the relation of objective knowledge to practice, as forms of the relation between thought and reality.

It is a commonplace that for Marxism objective knowledge is closely connected to practice, in that social practice is the source, the test and the aim of objective knowledge. It is an easy - though mistaken - step from this recognition to a pragmatist view of truth, which defines truth in terms of practical usefulness, and opens the possibility that some theory may be true for me but false for you, because useful to me and detrimental to you.

I shall discuss this in relation to Leszek Kolakowski's paper 'Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth' (from his book *Marxism and Beyond*) as this seems to me to be an unusually lucid exposition of a version of the pragmatist/relativist view. Kolakowski begins by distinguishing two practice-orientated theories to truth, and goes on to propose a compromise and attribute it to Marx. The first theory (the one I wish to defend) he calls 'Marxism of a positivist orientation', the theory of Engels and Lenin. This

invokes the effectiveness of human actions as a criterion with whose help it is possible and justifiably to verify the knowledge we need to undertake any sort of activity... treats truth as a relation between a judgement or a sentence and the reality to which it refers; at the same time this relation is independent of man's knowledge of it. Man's practical activity does not create it but merely ascertains its occurrence. (p.59)

The other theory is that of William James and the pragmatists generally, for which

usefulness is seen not as a tool for establishing the truth of man's knowledge independent of him, but as what creates this truth.

As an example, Kolakowski gives the sentence: 'Rational beings are alive elsewhere than on earth'. We do not know if this is true or false. But we know the meaning, i.e. we know what it would be for it to be true. The view of Engels and Lenin recognises that at any time human knowledge is incomplete, our best scientific theories are imperfect and will be improved upon, though we cannot of course use any other criteria of the truth of specific statements than those currently at our disposal. In stating that there is absolute truth this theory states only that the above sentence, for example, must be either true or false, that which it is does not depend on our consciousness, and that the question can only be resolved by an extension of our knowledge of objective reality by scientific practice.

The pragmatist view would no doubt be that at the present time it is neither true nor false that there are rational beings elsewhere than on earth. The extreme pragmatist might hold - and perhaps we can pin this one on William James's tail - that we can decide the question on grounds of usefulness: suppose belief in bug-eyed Martians would promote world peace, it might be considered useful and therefore true. This kind of pragmatism is, as Kolakowski admits, an idealist theory, making being dependent on consciousness.

Now we come to Kolakowski's 'Marxist' synthesis. Its marxian credentials depend on placing a weight of theory on the epistemological passages in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, 1844* which they cannot take. I am of the opinion that there is much that is of profound interest in these manuscripts, but it is not in the scattered epistemological passages, which are badly thought out and contain some sheer howlers - for instance the response to questions about the origin of the world and man. On the other hand there is no doubt that Kolakowski is correct in placing both Engels and Lenin on the side of opposition to his own theory. See Engels:

It was decided mercilessly to sacrifice every idealist crotchet which could not be brought into harmony with the facts in their own and not in a fantastic interconnection. And materialism means nothing more than this.

And Lenin:

If truth is only an organising form of human experience, then the teachings of, say, Catholicism are also true ...

... (truth) exists independently of everybody. (M&E-C, p.110)

Note that Engels and Lenin are rejecting precisely those moderate forms of the pragmatist/relativist position that claim to be materialist on the grounds that they do not deny the objectivity of facts but only of their interconnection, or that they take social and not individual practice as defining truth.

According to Kolakowski's theory, there is a natural substratum of 'reality' which is independent of us, and resistant to our activity. However this remains an unknowable 'thing in itself': 'Only "things for us" and not "things as they are in themselves", can have conceptual counterparts.' The objects of our knowledge are supposed to be constituted as the objects they are by human practical considerations.

Marx rejects the antithesis between the world shaped into a human image and the world pre-existing 'in itself' that one seeks to grasp in a futile attempt to go beyond oneself as a man.

Active contact with the resistance of nature creates knowing man and nature as his object at one and the same time. (op.cit. pp.74-75)

Here again we see the merging of subject and object into a primal soup, rather than a theory which would allow self-critical cognition by making the subject the object of scientific enquiry, discovering what its objective needs and capacities are, and possibly revising the conclusions of previous cognition. For instance, Kolakowski's question:

What justifies our belief that the visual world of a fly, made up of light and dark spots of neutral colours, is less 'authentic' or less 'true' than ours, except the fact that ours is better adapted to our needs?

seems to disregard the fact that we can study the fly's visual system and understand why it is what it is; and we can do the same for our own visual system. Again, take this passage from Kolakowski:

... what is lasting in human nature is also the inviolable datum of all analysis and is the only state that can possibly be the absolute starting point. We cannot weigh the influence of this 'absolute' on our vision of the world. We can examine only what can undergo change; otherwise we would have to be able to shed our own skin and observe ourselves from outside. This is possible for the individual thanks to the existence of other individuals, but it is not possible for the social subject as a whole. (p.71)

This seems to forget that what is lasting in human nature is the object of human biology and related sciences; it is not an inviolable datum, i.e. a fact which determines the nature of our knowledge but is not itself a possible object of knowledge. All data can be violated.

Kolakowski's main anti-objectivist point is that there are many possible sets of concepts with which

to describe reality, and what we know as reality is that set of concepts determined by our practical needs.

No division, not even the most fantastic as compared with what we are accustomed to, is theoretically less justified or less 'true' than the one we accept in actuality.

and he tells us that

the surrealist world seems more 'strange' to us than the usual one only because we do not have names for its components and do not use it in technology. (p.69)

This is an unfortunate example, for he is arguing that only language and practical needs make us accept our world rather than the surrealist one. Yet surrealist art is precisely the pictorial transcription of connections made by language and fantasy - connections themselves determined by unconscious needs - and it is refuted as a picture of reality by reference to the objective world as contrasted with language and fantasy. When a surrealist artist paints a picture of a woman's stomach as an oven door which opens revealing a bun cooking inside, this derives from a connection made by language - the colloquial expression 'a bun in the oven' for pregnancy - which is in turn no doubt determined by unconscious connections. One falsifies this as a picture of reality by 'social practice'.

I shall now quote a passage from Kolakowski on the relation of practical needs to cognition, and I hope to show why his theory does not follow from certain of his premisses.

The assimilation of the external world, which is at first biological, subsequently social and therefore human, occurs as an organisation of the raw material of nature in an effort to satisfy needs; cognition, which is a factor in the assimilation, cannot evade this universal determinism. To ask how the world would be seen by an observer whose essence was pure thinking and whose consciousness was defined exclusively by a disinterested cognitive effort, is to ask a barren question, for all consciousness is actually born of practical needs, and the act of cognition itself is a tool designed to satisfy these needs. (pp.64-65)

'Cognition cannot evade this universal determinism', that is to say, our beliefs, like all other phenomena, have their causes, and these are to be found in the interaction of human need and environment in practical human activity. But this does not itself say anything about the truth or falsity of these beliefs. True beliefs have their causes, and so do false ones. I may believe that the sun is shining because I see that it is, and a causal account can be given of that perception. Because I am paranoid, I may believe I am being pursued by the police; and I may just happen actually to be pursued by the police; this would be a true belief, but not knowledge. Lastly, I may believe that a woman still loves me, when she does not, because it would be too painful to admit the truth to myself.

The identity of a belief is determined by its object, by what is believed, not by its causal origin. The truth of a belief is determined by its relation to the relevant facts, i.e. the reality of its object. The status of a true belief as knowledge is something to do with the causal relations of the holding of the belief with the fact by virtue of which it is true.

Hence (1) the fact that all cognitive processes are governed by causal laws by no means obliterates the distinction between truth and falsity; (2) the

fact that false beliefs are as much accounted for by practical needs as are true ones, and indeed more obviously and directly accounted for by them (for where our interest is not involved we have less motives for self-deception or repression), calls into question the determination of truth by these ends.

Yet it can perfectly well be accepted that the function of consciousness is to serve practical needs. This is quite compatible with objectivism. Take for example Freud's account in 'The Two Principles of Mental Functioning' (Collected Papers, Vol. IV). According to this, mental processes are originally under the sway of the pleasure-principle. 'These processes strive towards gaining pleasure; from any operation which might arouse unpleasantness ('pain') mental activity draws back (repression)'. The pleasure-principle therefore at first takes the line of least resistance and hallucinates satisfaction of its wants.

This attempt at satisfaction by means of hallucination was abandoned only in consequence of the absence of the expected gratification, because of the disappointment experienced. Instead the mental apparatus had to decide to form a conception of the real circumstances in the outer world and exert itself to alter them. A new principle of mental functioning was thus introduced; what was conceived of was no longer that which was pleasant, but that which was real, even if it should be unpleasant. This institution of the reality-principle proved a momentous step.

In place of repression, which excluded from cathexis as productive of 'pain' some of the emerging ideas, there developed an impartial passing of judgement, which had to decide whether a particular idea was true or false, that is, was in agreement with reality or not...

A new function was now imported to motor discharge ... it was now employed in the appropriate alteration of reality. It was converted into action.

Freud here asserts the primacy of the pleasure-principle - i.e. of human needs - explaining all knowledge of the world in terms of it. Yet precisely to serve those needs, consciousness of the world must cease to be determined by them. Only on the basis of this consciousness is their real satisfaction by practice possible. (cf. Lenin: 'If the sensations of time and space can give man a biologically purposive orientation, this can only be so on condition that these sensations reflect an objective reality outside man' [M&E-C p.166] What Lenin says here of time and space applies a *fortiori* to other aspects of reality.)

Practice itself both requires a knowledge the content of which is not determined by practical considerations, and provides access to such knowledge. One knows the world, not in pure contemplation, but in acting upon it; that is true. But it is the opposite of pragmatism. It is not that what reality is is a construction made by us for practical considerations; it is that the practice of transforming reality shows the resistance of that reality to our ends, and forces us to acknowledge it as an *independent* reality, which cannot be moulded by our consciousness, but only by strenuous practical effort guided by painstakingly objective knowledge.

Not that the pragmatist wants to substitute fantasy for practice - far from it. The needs which according to his theory determine what is reality are practical needs, not the primary processes of which Freud is speaking. But at this more developed level of interaction of man and the world, the pragmatist's subjectivization of the concept of reality serves the same function of robbing the transformation of the world, including here the current modes of social practice, of its urgency.

Let me summarise my case against Kolakowski: he claims that we cannot know whether the concepts of reality which we have are true of 'reality in itself', because:

- (a) we have no reason to suppose that the categories imposed on reality by our needs have any basis in reality considered aside from our needs;
- (b) we cannot 'jump out of our skin' to the extent that we could see how the needs which we actually have would affect our conception of reality;
- (c) as all our beliefs are causally determined by a process in which our needs are determinants, we cannot judge their truth or falsity in abstraction from their function in relation to our needs.

I am claiming that (a), (b) and (c) are all false. (c), because precisely in order to serve our needs, cognition must attain a certain independence of them; (b), because we can study human needs objectively, and revise our account of 'external' reality insofar as it was in the first place distorted by their influence; and (a), because if reality were not *in itself* cognitively digestible, there could no more have evolved rational beings than living beings could have evolved in the absence of alimentarily digestible reality. It is not a coincidence that we need to divide the world into objects, classify objects into kinds, and isolate causal laws governing their behaviour; and that there really are discrete objects, natural kinds, causal laws. It is no more puzzling than that cats have slits in their skin at just those points where their eyes are.

The controversy about truth, between the objectivist and the pragmatic/relativistic views, seems in relation to Marxism to be a meta-theoretical controversy, a debate about the status of Marxist theory which would leave the content of that theory untouched. Yet it should be obvious that neither side believes that the dispute is without implication for Marxist theory and practice. I shall try to show its relevance for two issues: (1) the relation of facts to values, and (2) the relation of freedom to necessity.

(1) FACTS AND VALUES

Like the 'neutral science' conception of Marxism held by Hilferding, pragmatist Marxism inherits the worn out dogma of bourgeois philosophy and social science that one cannot reach conclusions in the imperative from premisses in the indicative. Whereas this dogma leads Hilferding to divide Marxism into two distinct parts, a neutral science and an ethics, it leads the pragmatist to insist that Marxist science has premisses in the imperative. Clearly this has the same tendency to deprive the imperatives of their ground in science. The question then arises, If you can't get practical conclusions from facts, where on earth can you get them from? And if we examine the roots of this dogma in bourgeois thought we can only conclude, *Nowhere on earth*. It derives from Kant's attempt to render morality independent of anything in man's empirical being, and ground it in a transcendent 'Reason'; it can be found in Kierkegaard's insistence that morality has 'no finite teleology' (or in plain English, no earthly use), and in Liberal Protestant theology's claim to base its speculative dogmas on its moral imperatives, justifying this in terms of the 'primacy of practical reason'.

It seems to me perfectly obvious that from certain kinds of facts - facts about human needs and wants and the practice necessary for their satisfaction, facts about the irrationalities and contradictions in existing modes of social practice - practical conclusions follow. Goldmann (in his paper referred to), which criticising the objectivists, appears to admit that they can base a 'social technology' which equals socialist politics on their

objective science of Marxism. But what more is required? One can only assume that this practice of 'social technology' is rejected because *it is not a moral practice*. But what place can a moral practice have in Marxism? Vorlander - himself a fact/value dichotomist - mentioned that he had been told by someone who knew Marx personally that Marx burst out laughing every time anyone spoke to him of morality (quoted by Goldmann, *op.cit.*). Are we to take that as merely a personal quirk of Marx's? Is it not rather to do with something about the form of every moral theory, properly so called?

The formal characteristic of every moral theory is that it issues imperatives which every individual is responsible to carry out (in appropriate circumstances), and may be blamed for not doing so. This can be summarized in three words - universal individual responsibility. (The theories of ethics of Aristotle, Spinoza and Nietzsche do not fit this model; but then they are in an important sense not moral theories; which is why they are of such value in developing a socialist theory of practical reason).

Now the content of a morality may be rational - i.e. it may aim at the maximum happiness or satisfaction of human needs, or it may be irrational - i.e. it may enjoin the pursuit of aims not grounded in these, and potentially antagonistic to them. The history of moral philosophy has largely been the history of the dispute between these two types of morality. The latter type (e.g. Kant, Fichte, Kierkegaard) claim that morality has nothing to do with happiness or the satisfaction of human needs. I shall not dispute this, as though there were already some agreed content to morality, of which we could determine the relation to happiness. I shall simply say that if it is so, then morality is just another obstacle to happiness which we must seek to abolish, along with disease, ignorance, poverty, chastity and obedience. (cf. Nietzsche: 'Insofar as morality condemns as morality, and not with regard to the aims and objects of life, it is a specific error with which we should show no sympathy.' - *Twilight of the Idols*, p.46).

This sort of morality can be traced, as Marx has done, to the need of capitalist society at a certain stage of its development to inculcate the virtues of thrift, hard work and sobriety in all classes. (See the *1844 Manuscripts*, pp.110-113)

The naturalistic morality which escapes this criticism (e.g. Utilitarianism, though this has the additional defect of conceiving happiness on the model of commodity-exchange) may be characterized as rational in content, but to the extent that it is so, the rational content comes into contradiction with the moral form i.e. the fact that it addresses itself to universal individual responsibility. The contradiction consists in the fact that its rational ends cannot be achieved by moral means,

- (1) because individual practice can only to a very limited extent secure these ends. Individual practice should therefore be directed towards the collective effort to secure these ends. This collective practice is, from the collective point of view, self-interested and hence amoral; and under conditions of class struggle it may be highly immoral from the individual point of view. (cf. Engels: 'it is precisely the wicked passions of man - greed and lust for power - which, since the emergence of class antagonisms, serve as levers of historical development', *op.cit.* Presumably the proletarian revolution is not exempt from this motivation.)
- (2) The attempt to carry out a moral practice, on the part of the individual (even of all individuals) is actually antagonistic to the rational ends. Its tendency is to lead the individual to pursue that change which can be pursued in isolation - the change of himself,

i.e. his adaptation to existing conditions, which is beneficial neither from the standpoint of his own possibilities of happiness nor from that of the rational collective practice (the struggle for socialism).

- (3) While class rule remains with us, the universalism of morality has no basis in reality and can only be a mystification.

There may indeed be 'moral virtues' which have a provisional rationality within an irrational society - prudential virtues as long as there is material insecurity, qualities which are of value in the class struggle, even 'disinterested altruism', but it is best not to make virtues out of these necessities (cf. Oscar Wilde: 'the great advantage of socialism is that it relieves one of the sordid necessity of living for others' - *The Soul of Man under Socialism*) Marxists should recognise - as did the great Soviet philosopher of law, Pashukanis - that morality is destined to wither away, along with the state and law. The sort of 'virtues' which one might hope would flourish in a socialist society - sincerity and generosity in personal relations, devotion to the pursuit of truth, creativity, as well as mere abstention from anti-social acts - cannot be made the object of effective moral imperatives anyway, they can only be the product of a satisfying existence (Cf. Nietzsche: 'a well-constituted human being, a "happy one", must perform certain actions and instinctively shrinks from other actions... In a formula: his virtue is the consequence of his happiness' - *op.cit.* p.48)

Though I believe there is generally a moralistic conception of Marxism in the background of attempts to make commitment prior to science and therefore arbitrary, it is often defended without explicit reference to morality, on grounds of class-relativism. The point of Marxism, it is said, is to serve working class interests, that of bourgeois science to serve those of the bourgeoisie. This last statement of course is true, but it does not settle the question of the truth of these theories, which is a separate question from their social origin. Arguments have been put forward by Marxists as to why it is no accident that the proletarian theory should also be the true one (e.g. by Bukharin in *Historical Materialism*, by Goldmann in *The Human Sciences and Philosophy*.) These arguments are a necessary part of Marxism as a self-critical theory. An extreme class-relativist would have no place for such arguments, as he is wholly concerned with the class nature and not at all with the truth of Marxism. (There is also a moderate class-relativism which concerns only the determination by class interest of the selection of certain facts as important. This is Goldmann's view in *The Human Sciences and Philosophy*, and that of E H Carr in *What is History?* It is quite acceptable with these qualifications: (a) the criteria for selecting certain facts as important can also be objectively valid or invalid; (b) Marxism can accommodate any fact unearthed by the bourgeois social 'sciences', whereas the latter are unable to accommodate many Marxian discoveries, notably the existence of objective, internal, antagonistic contradictions in bourgeois society).

One might ask the class-relativist, Why should certain individuals from other classes get involved in the workers' struggle? If there is to be a rational ground, and morality is ruled out, it must be conviction of the truth of the Marxist analysis. However a more important problem of the class-relativist position is that it assumes an already clear-sightedly revolutionary proletariat; yet why should the proletariat be revolutionary? If bourgeois theories were correct, it would be rational for the workers to collaborate with the bourgeoisie to increase the GNP. The Marxist analysis of classes makes it clear why socialist revolution is really in the workers' interest; this is the case only given that it is true. Of course there are also good

reasons why the workers should be receptive to Marxist theory, especially in times of capitalist crisis; they do not have the barriers that the bourgeois do to the understanding of the contradictions of capitalism, because they bear the marks of those contradictions in their own flesh.

But rational as it may be for the workers to be revolutionary, it is nevertheless the case that the majority are not. If Marxism is to serve the objective interests of the workers, it must come into conflict with their current beliefs about their interests. The workers like any other class are subject to false consciousness, and there have been theories which have been systematic expressions of proletarian consciousness, and yet highly reactionary. Cf. Nietzsche's account of Master and Slave morality in *The Genealogy of Morals*. One can easily see how the consciousness of an oppressed class could make it receptive to ideologies of renunciation in this life and punishment of the worldly and successful in the next.

Religion in its ascetic, other-worldly and vindictive aspects can be just as much an expression of the consciousness of an oppressed class as can a revolutionary theory. Of course it is not in the interest of the oppressed class to adhere to the former, but an objective analysis is necessary to show this.

Moreover recent history has shown that the proletariat can often adopt fascist and sectarian politics which are even more regressive than those of the bourgeoisie. It is no use for the class-relativist to appeal to the concept of potential as against actual class consciousness, for Marxist theory is already needed in order to give an objective content to that concept; potential consciousness is by definition not a given which Marxism could 'express'.

There is not, as is so often assumed, anything elitist about the view that I am putting forward. The accusation that there is, is constantly reiterated; but it itself is based on the elitist belief that the 'intelligentsia' has the monopoly of science and the proletariat the monopoly of ideology. The issue is not intellectuals versus proletarians but science versus ideology. Prescientific consciousness is essentially ideological and if a workers' movement bases itself on this consciousness and not on Marxist science, it will be nothing but an instrument of mystification. Any attempt to make science relative to its class subject must inevitably lead to this. It involves a mistaken view of the relation of science to ideology in that science becomes expressive rather than destructive of ideology. But ideology is error.

Establishment of Truth depends on destruction of Falsehood continually, On Circumcision, not on Virginity, O Reasoners of Albion!
(William Blake, 'Jerusalem', *Complete Works*, p.687)

Finally, one can see in practice how failure to recognise the objectivity of theory has led to its subordination to short term practical and propaganda needs in the life of the workers' movement; the resultant errors have been far-reaching. Examples: (i) the concept of 'strict party discipline', so necessary to the period of revolution and civil war, which became so fetishized that it prevented Stalin's opponents within the party from appealing to the class over the heads of the party leadership until it was too late to do so; (ii) the rejection of Freudian theory by certain elements on the left as allegedly politically inconvenient, with their consequent lapse into idealist psychology of consciousness on the one hand and Pavlovian crudities on the other.

(2) FREEDOM AND NECESSITY

The cluster of views (pragmatist, relativist, subjectivist, interventionist) which I have been criticising also seems to involve a regression to a pre-Marxist conception of the relation of freedom to necessity, both in the sense of the relation of conscious human activity to the causal laws governing the historical process, and of the relation of the 'realm of freedom' to the 'realm of necessity'.

Already in the writings of Plekhanov - whose Marxism is infinitely more subtle and applicable to complex historical realities than that of most of those who dismiss him as a 'vulgar Marxist' - there is a definitive reply to those who see a paradox in the fact that Marxism stresses human activity and the role of theory, and also sees the historical process as governed by causal laws (see his *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* and *The Role of the Individual in History*). It is simply a vulgar mistake to suppose that a Marxist will be any less of an activist for the knowledge that his revolutionary activity and the theory which guides it are themselves products of the historical process. The conception of freedom as the knowledge and use of causal laws, including reflective knowledge of the laws governing one's own knowledge and activity, is in no way paradoxical unless one already presupposes subject-object dualism; and it is integral to Marxism (though not unique to it; it is shared by the theories of Spinoza and Freud). Yet it continues to be a stumbling block to many would-be Marxists, and even to Marxist theoreticians. This can only be put down to a mystique of the subject in the prevalent ideology, a mystique which manifests itself in Peter Binns' paper:

If knowledge of man is restricted to him qua known object rather than knowing object, 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.
(*op.cit.* RP4 p.9)

But insofar as man is known, he is by definition known as 'known object'; this in no way precludes the identity of that known object with a knowing and acting subject. One is reminded of Marx's jibe against the Young Hegelians:

Consciousness or self-consciousness is considered to be the sole human quality. Love, for instance, is rejected, because in it the beloved is only an 'object'. Down with objects!
(Letter to Feuerbach, 11 August 1844)

In connection with this subject-object dualism the term 'interventionism' is itself suspect. Intervention by whom into what? The human subject into objective causal processes? It is already part of them. The individual into history? He is already part of it. The party into the struggles of the class? Need I say more?

This picture of someone originally outside of the historical process stepping into it in order to know and act on it may have a superficial biographical justification in the case of us petty-bourgeois intellectuals. But the more correct picture is of someone who is already part and parcel of the historical process, whose whole being and consciousness is a product of that process, stepping back in order to obtain objective knowledge of that process, including his own being and consciousness, in order to demystify himself and act more effectively within that process (of course this stepping back is also part of the historical process).

The dualist mystique of the subject is more consistently used in the attacks on Marxism of the non-Marxist left. I shall criticise this in relation to the following passage from Paul Cardan:

What appears to us as questionable in *Capital* is its methodology. Marx's theory of wages and its corollary, the theory of the increasing rate of exploitation, begin from a postulate: that the worker is completely 'reified' (reduced to an object) by capitalism. Marx's theory of crises starts from a basically analogous postulate: that men and classes (in this case the capitalist class) can do nothing about the functioning of the economy.

Both these postulates are false. But both have a deeper significance. Both are necessary for political economy to become a 'science' governed by 'laws' similar to those of genetics or astronomy. But for this to be achieved, the things to be studied must be objects. It is as objects that both workers and capitalists appear in the pages of *Capital*. If political economy is to study the mechanism of society, it must deal with phenomena ruled by objective laws, i.e. laws not constantly modified by the actions of men and classes.
(*Modern Capitalism and Revolution*, p.33)

Leaving aside verbal matters such as the misuse of the term 'reification' (which should be reserved for the appearance of social relations and human activities as objects, not of people as objects, which is a philistine cliché), it can be observed that Cardan is conflating two possible criticisms here: (1) that Marx, in formulating the laws governing the economy under capitalism, has abstracted from the politics of capitalist society, i.e. the class struggle. Insofar as this is true, however, it is a necessary abstraction, as one must know how classes are constituted by capitalist production before one can understand their struggle. Because political action is a relatively conscious activity as compared with economic activity, this is confused with (2) the methodological criticism that human activities, including purely economic ones, cannot be studied scientifically. In order to be objects of science, Cardan is claiming, men must be 'reduced' to objects. If 'object' here simply means object of science, object as opposed to subject, it is unclear where the 'reduction' comes in. More likely, what is meant is 'ruled by objective laws'. But unless human activities are to be separated off from the whole of material reality, in an idealist or dualist fashion, it must be admitted that they are ruled by objective laws; that fact does not make them passive, as Cardan seems to think. Some of these laws cannot be modified by the actions of men, but they govern the actions of men, they do not preclude these actions. Some of the laws governing the actions of men are also subject to change by those actions. But these changes themselves are governed by objective laws.

The metaphysical assumption behind Cardan's theory seems to be that men as subjects cannot also be objects; that as subjects they are active and this activity is not according to objective laws; from this he infers that treating men as objects is somehow 'reducing' and morally repugnant; that it is nevertheless a necessary condition of studying them scientifically, which is therefore also objectionable; that the motivation of such study must be the desire to make men the passive objects of bureaucratic manipulation, and hence that objective science is out of place in the workers' movement.

This subject-object dichotomy is probably derived from Sartre's earlier thought. Sartre did not work out his theory in relation to economics, but he did in relation to psychology. According to Sartre subjectivity, human consciousness, can never be made the object of knowledge or activity; subjectness and objectness are seen as mutually exclusive. This leads to the granting of only a very precarious existence to the science of psychology. The objective laws governing the psyche, indeed its objective being, are said to be a product of the belief in

those laws and that being, a belief which is in 'bad faith'. Hence the object of psychology is seen as having fictional existence only: laws only govern human behaviour because men, on the basis of a form of false consciousness, act as if there were laws governing human behaviour. Cardan has simply extended this theory from psychology to economics. It is easy to see the idealist implications of all this; the practical message of idealism has always been 'Don't bother changing the world, the source of your problems is in your own mind; change your attitude and all those nasty psychological and economic laws will go away.' The trouble with this idea of freedom is that it not only leaves everything unchanged, it incapacitates one for changing anything; for the freedom that can change things involves knowing and operating with causal laws.

No doubt Sartre and Cardan want to fill the vacuum created by the dethronement of science with a theory which will be an expression of the consciousness of the subject; but we have already seen what is wrong with this: it takes what is a product and symptom of the social reality of a given social formation, as a true reflection of that social reality. Hence it confirms everyday consciousness in the mystifications from which science could have liberated it. Yet the proletariat needs a theory, not to satisfy a desire for a systematic expression of its consciousness, but to understand and act upon social reality.

In this view of Sartre and Cardan we have an admittedly non-marxist philosophy claiming that consciousness is independent of causal laws, and its description independent of science. It is clear how an adherent of this philosophy could deny the possibility of unbreakable laws in social science.

But it is worth pointing out that Marxism, in rejecting the autonomy of consciousness, rejects also the only possible basis for the doctrine that there are no immutable laws in social science. See for instance Marx's letter to Kugelmann about the concept of value in *Capital*:

That this necessity of the distribution of social labour in definite proportions cannot possibly be done away with by a particular form of social production but can only change the mode of its appearance is self-evident. No natural laws can be done away with.
(*Selected Correspondence*, p.209)

This brings me to my final point - the relation between the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom. In *Capital* (vol.III, pp.799-800), Marx tells us:

... the realm of freedom actually begins where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases... With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase... Beyond (the realm of necessity) begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working day is its basic prerequisite.

Marx, while recognising a degree of flexibility and development in the concept of a need, clearly did not see the expansion of human needs as limitless, otherwise the conquest of the realm of necessity could never take place. If human needs are capable of indefinite expansion, and are thus totally socially relative, the absolute abundance which is the necessary condition of communism (i.e. of the realisation of the principle: 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs'), and of the withering away of the state, is in principle

unrealisable; scarcity and conflict about the distribution of material wealth must then be permanent features of human life. Precisely the attempt to treat everything as mutable leads to the conclusion that these features of all hitherto existing (primitive or class-divided) societies, are ineliminable.

Yet the constant concomitant of the pragmatist/relativist view of Marxism, with its Faustian conception of the autonomy of the subject and the omnipotence of practice, is that man is characterised by unlimited self-malleability as a species, and that the needs of the individual are totally socially relative.

This view of man, though it would render impossible communism and the disappearance of the state, would I admit by no means remove workers' power and the expropriation of the bourgeoisie from the agenda (though no doubt it would remove some of the subjective motivation for them). But the same can be said of ethology, yet socialists have generally felt obliged to marshal the arguments against this ideology (and rightly so; though it goes without saying that the case against ethology should be argued on the strictly scientific level, not that of utopian moralism).

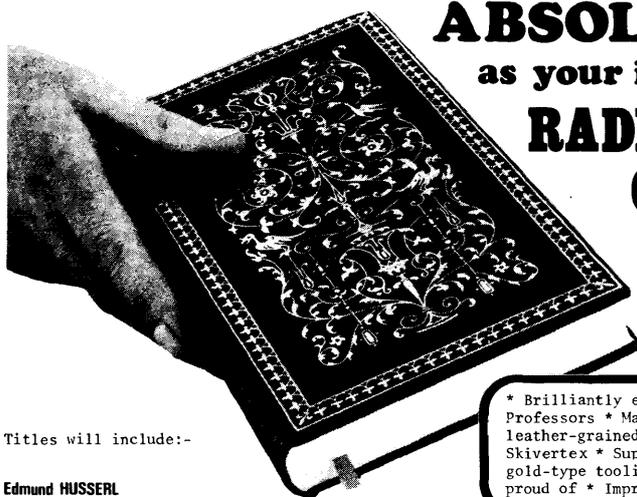
Unfortunately the slogan - literally meaningless outside the context of idealism - that 'there is no such thing as human nature' has been repeated so often that it has acquired the force of a truism in

Marxist circles, absolving Marxists from scientific investigation of just what needs, dispositions, laws and structures are invariant elements of human social existence, and under what conditions specific modifications of human motivation, consciousness and behaviour will occur.

The ideological possibilities of this doctrine of the limitless malleability of man should be obvious: (i) liberal utilitarianism, of the most inegalitarian variety. This is after all where the doctrine originated. Here it is used to defend the rejection of any concept of priorities of certain social needs over others; wants arising out of fancy or emulation are equated with those arising from the stomach (a conclusion sometimes erroneously drawn from the first page of *Capital*). For a criticism of the use of this view by modern apologists of capitalism see MacPherson's paper 'Post-liberal-democracy?' (in *Ideology in Social Science*, ed. Robin Blackburn). (ii) The apologetics of bureaucratic manipulation. If man is infinitely malleable, the road is open for bureaucratic politicians and educationalists to force people into whatever mould they consider desirable. Where this manipulation has socialist pretensions, it is often expressed as a reliance on moral conditioning rather than material conditions as the cement of socialist society (e.g. Che Guevara's essay on man and socialism in Cuba). But this amounts to the complete abandonment of Marxism.

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