The identification of theory and practice is a critical act, through which practice is demonstrated rational and necessary, and theory realistic and rational (Antonio Gramsci).¹

I

In contemporary sociological and political theory the opposition of theory and practice refers to a number of aspects of the relationship between theories of various kinds and social life. It can refer, for example, to the relationships between the various sciences (particularly the social sciences) and their ‘objects’, between scientific knowledge and its necessary practical applications and broadly between social science and politics.² Many Marxist writings since Lenin attempt to unite those three levels in a theory of the total society with a practical intent. This theory is intended to inform practical political activity in order radically to change the complex of social institutions which make the theory itself possible, in this way abolishing the theory in practice. That theory and practice in this sense can inextricably inform each other in this way within the politics of the labour movement, is one meaning in Soviet Marxism of the phrase ‘the unity of theory and practice’.³ Following Marx’s Theses on Feuerbach, Marxists have assumed that if a social theory is true, it will be transcended (abolished) in the practical activity undertaken informed by it. It is to try to conceptualize such putative moments of transition when theory becomes real that Anglo-Saxon writers in this field have adopted the German word

² See Brian Fay, Social Theory and Political Practice (London: Allen & Unwin, 1975), Ch. 1.
Richard Kilminster

Although it is clear that this concept cannot be a category of empirical, sociological enquiry. Conversely, if the theory is untrue, then the activity undertaken will demonstrate its inadequacies, necessitating the elaboration of further theory, which will suggest further action, and so on. Hence, in this tradition, epistemological matters of the verifiability or falsifiability of social science hypotheses are, therefore, considered to be issues which cannot be settled solely in theory. They are in part practical questions.

So it is clear that the issue of the relationship between theory and practice in the writings of Marx and later Marxists does not, strictly speaking, constitute a 'topic' for discussion, like Marx's analysis of feudalism or his critique of political economy or Gramsci's theory of hegemony or Marxist theories of the state. Rather, it articulates what has been the whole raison d'être of Marxist social theory and practice. Each development in Marxist theory has sought its own abolition. Because of that practical intent, exponents of Marxist theory have spent a good deal of time trying to demonstrate the implicit practical intent embodied in other social theories which do not explicitly have the same practical orientation as their own, e.g., those informed by positivism or hermeneutics. This implicit practical application is related to the function such theories perform in society and then ploughed into their own general theory. Jürgen Habermas, for example, has described his own aim as to develop a theory of society with a practical intention and 'to delimit its status with respect to theories of different origins'. For all these reasons it is more accurate to refer to Marx's theory, and many of the later Marxist versions, as a practical-theoretical framework. Habermas summarizes well the practical orientation of the Marxist tradition which I have been characterizing:

Historical materialism aims at achieving an explanation of social evolution which is so comprehensive that it embraces the interrelationships of the theory's own origins and application. The theory specifies the conditions under which reflection on the history of our species by mem-

---


7 Ibid., 1–2.
bers of this species themselves has become objectively possible; and at the same time it names those to whom this theory is addressed, who then with its aid can gain enlightenment about their emancipatory role in the process of history. The theory occupies itself with reflection on the interrelationships of its origin and with anticipation of those of its application, and thus sees itself as the necessary catalytic moment within the social complex of life which it analyses; and this complex it analyses as integral interconnections of compulsions, from the viewpoint of the possible sublation—resolution and abolition—of all this.

My approach to discussing what Marx and certain European Marxists have said about those kinds of questions is a sociological one. But this stance should not discourage philosophical readers, because I think that Marx's work raises some fundamental questions about the human sciences, including that of the status of philosophy itself. By philosophy here, and in the paper generally, I am not referring to the official philosophy of Russian communism—dialectical materialism. Rather, I mean traditional European philosophy in two aspects (which may of course overlap to some degree with the concerns of 'Diamat'): (a) as the repository for issues of justice, freedom, democracy, happiness, fulfilment, the good life, Ought-questions, etc.; and (b) as traditional epistemology. Later on I will discuss the relationship between these two aspects of philosophy in Marx.

Much of my argument draws on conclusions I have established in my book *Praxis and Method*. There I argued, *inter alia*, that the practical-theoretical social science inaugurated by Marx constituted an early stage of the historical transcendence of philosophy. That is, first, its supersession as the competent discipline to analyse the complex societies in course of formation in Marx's time: the social sciences took on this task. Moreover, secondly, the category of practice in Marx provided for the transcendence of philosophy in the other two senses previously mentioned: as wisdom and as traditional epistemology. Putting the matter sociologically, Marx's theories can be seen as a symptom of a stage in a long historical process whereby philosophers have become increasingly defunctionalized. I realize that put baldly in that way, the thesis sounds provocative and declaratory, begging a number of important questions. What has become of the grand questions of philosophy in this transition? Isn't there a job for philosophy as logic? Doesn't philosophy function in certain circumstances as social critique? Isn't philosophy a method? In any case, didn't Pascal say that the minute we doubt philosophy is the minute we begin

---

8 See Gustav A. Wetter, op. cit.
Richard Kilminster

doing it? I have tried to advance a preliminary sociological characterization of this problem elsewhere and I cannot deal directly with these questions in this paper. But the point is that the status and role of philosophy is placed on the agenda as a consequence of the practical character of Marx’s theories and by the historical experiences of putting them into practice.

The opposition between theory and practice is used in everyday speech in a variety of ways, as when people say that in theory everyone should have a television licence, but that in practice not everyone has. The terms are also commonly used to refer to the body of principles of proper procedure in a profession, trade or craft, as opposed to their practical application. In the social sciences, as I have said, the dualism refers to a cluster of aspects of the relationship between sciences (particularly social sciences) and practical social life. In Marx’s statement that his conception of history ‘does not explain practice from the idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice’, we find formulated abstractly what has become the central proposition of the sociology of knowledge. It is not my object to undertake a full-scale classification of these and other usages. This whole area is a prime target for the kind of conceptual clarification which has become the characteristic occupation of modern Anglo-Saxon philosophers in the historical transformation of philosophy I referred to above. (Although such an exercise would, in my view, need to be supplemented by a sociological analysis of the genesis of the various usages of the terms which could explain their interrelatedness, transferences of use from one sphere to another and their connection with wider societal developments.) But even a preliminary glance at the contemporary commonsense and technical meanings in English of the traditional opposition between theory and practice reveals two important features which will be relevant to the later discussion.

First, in virtually all uses of the dualism people usually have in mind practical, lived social life as opposed to abstract ideas, or perhaps action (practice) versus reflection or thinking (theory). This feature points to the opposition in its modern form being a product of the same stage of social development to which also corresponded the dualistic metaphysics of

---


Theory and Practice in Marx and Marxism

traditional European philosophy after Descartes. That tradition of philosophy also operates with distinctions of a fundamentally similar kind to theory and practice: mind and matter, consciousness and being, thought and reality and ideality and materiality, around which polarities epistemological and ontological debate revolves. (The antithesis theory and practice is also a specifically philosophical polarity.) Its level of abstraction means that a number of theoretical problems, social activities and social phenomena I have mentioned, can be accommodated under the dualism. A further example of this flexibility is that the Marxist philosophers discussed in this paper lump together under the term 'theory' both sides of the sociological enterprise—theory and empirical observations; and 'practice' for them refers loosely to any social activity or circumstances. For the Greek philosophers, by contrast, \textit{theoria} and \textit{praxis} were not separate spheres of thought and action but different walks of life, called by Aristotle the contemplative and the political or practical. I will not be concerned with the Greek writers since for my purposes the proximate origins of Marxist conceptions of the issues identified by the opposition lie in the modern European tradition of philosophy, particularly in the work of Kant and Hegel.

Secondly, and much more speculatively, modern usages sometimes, though not always, also carry a connotation of ideality, which may bespeak the same origin. On the level of method, we find this idealization in formulations of theory such as Max Weber’s ideal-types or Boyle’s law of gases, both of which refer to ideal states of affairs in society or nature which may not appear in empirical cases (practice). Another kind of idealization occurs when, for example, the opposition of theory to practice refers to principles or rules of proper procedure and their application, where there is often a strong implication present that practice \textit{should} be congruent with theory. Here a state of play between theory and practice is implied which \textit{ought} to exist.

That there is a significant relationship between practical social life and the theories of various kinds which people develop within it, was a legacy of the Enlightenment which was first given a systematic social-scientific formulation by Marx. He enshrined it in his theory of social being and consciousness or base and superstructure. It is epitomized by his frequent

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{12} Theory, meaning a set of principles of an art or technical subject as distinct from its practice, were first juxtaposed in that sense in English in 1613. The opposition was used to refer to abstract knowledge opposed to practice in 1624. The use of the word ‘theory’ to refer to a mental scheme or conception of something to be done dates from 1597. The adjective ‘practical’ was opposed to theoretical, speculative or ideal from 1617 onwards. (\textit{Shorter Oxford Dictionary}.)
\end{itemize}
inversions of the kind of advocating explaining the theory by the practice and not the practice by the theory or not to look everywhere in history for the category but to explain the category from real history.\textsuperscript{14} It was an insight developed in a dialogue with idealist philosophers and theologians who seemed to be suggesting that consciousness was the motor of social and natural reality. In his time Marx had to fight for the contrary view against people who thought of practical affairs as in some ways secondary or vulgar. The concept of the primacy of practical, social conditions in society and its determinacy in explaining human thinking and action, was for Marx what Paul Tillich called a \textit{Kampfbegriff}, a polemical concept born in argument, debate and controversy.\textsuperscript{15} It had, obviously, important political resonances. But Marx’s declaration in the \textit{German Ideology}\textsuperscript{16} that ‘The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones . . . but real premises . . . the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live’ is, in social science today, a truism. But this characterization does not denigrate Marx. By a process of historical transmission and sedimentation (not solely from Marx, although he is an important exemplar) this fundamental, secular starting point for a social science is today built into social theory and historiography as an assumption, hardly even in need of being made explicit. Indeed, it may even be said to have become part of the modern mentality.\textsuperscript{17}

Hence, no secular school of social science would deny the general principle of the primacy of the structure of practical, human social relations as the sole locus for the adequate explanation of the ways in which people come to develop ideas about those relations, human relations in general and about the natural world. Today we do not have to ask the question ‘Is human thought determined by the structure of social relations?’, but rather the key question is exactly \textit{how} it is. And the trajectory of what Karl Mannheim called a sociology of the mind\textsuperscript{18} since Marx, has been that the basic insight has been systematically differentiated and empirical enquiries undertaken into \textit{kinds} of correspondences between consciousness and practical social life. The young Marx’s remarks on knowledge and action, on the other hand, were pervaded by a Utopian vision of a self-determining mankind, creating in \textit{praxis} a more or less total reconciliation of subjectivity

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{The German Ideology}, 50.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{The Socialist Decision} (1933), translated by Franklin Sherman (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 114.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{The German Ideology}, 31.
and objectivity and of philosophy and social life. Not surprisingly, he would never be drawn on which relations between ‘thought’ and ‘reality’ might remain the same whilst others may change as the result of forms of action. Nor on which were more readily subject to being altered by specified forms of practical activity on various levels. Marx’s formulation of the problem is undiscriminating, woolly and abstract. ‘Explaining the theory by practice’, as another way of referring to the sociology of knowledge, often entails demonstrating empirically that groups of people have been concealing, dissimulating, justifying or in various ways legitimating their activity (which is what one finds in investigating developments in Marxism). But the connection between ‘consciousness’ and social activity is not necessarily always of this kind. As Norbert Elias has shown, once one makes the necessary differentiations, the sociological approach to explaining the genesis of thought forms need not entail that one asserts relativistically the ideological character of all knowledge, in the sense of all knowledge being reducible to its justifying or rationalizing function in given cases.

So, tackling developments in Marxist theory sociologically exemplifies his legacy in modern social thought, which compels us to view him and his successors in this way.

Also, this method has an important advantage. Traditionally, as I have said, Marxists have assumed that if a social theory is true then it will be transcended (abolished) by the practice undertaken on its basis; and if it is not true, then the extent of its error will be revealed by the practice it initiates. I would not be the first to point out that this notion lends itself to powerful political groups legislating by fiat whether or not such a transcendent state of affairs has indeed ensued from a phase of action of one kind or another. Or, conversely, consistent with this conception, powerful groups can easily claim, as a way of legitimating their power, to have special access to a ‘correct’ theory of social dynamics prior to its supposed realization in various kinds of practical activity. In other words, the doctrine of the ‘unity of theory and practice’ in this sense can have an ideological function. A sociological analysis, however, can potentially better enable us to understand whether either of those two kinds of legitimation is occurring in given cases, something which relying on the self-descriptions of the groups concerned would not. (Although, as I explain in the next section, space does not permit me to undertake this kind of inquiry in this paper.)

19 Kilminster, Praxis and Method, Ch. 2.
21 Georg Lukács’s concept of the ‘imputed’ consciousness of the proletariat is a doctrine which notably lends itself to the kind of legitimation of power mentioned in the text. See Kilminster, op. cit., Part Two.
In looking sociologically at the relations between changes in Marxist theory and modern social developments, there is a balance to be maintained between two aspects of the explanation. That is, between showing how (a) the character of the theory was tailored to particular actions and policies contemplated or being rationalized by the groups concerned; and (b) in each case a relatively autonomous framework—Marx’s theory itself—was being employed. In other words, there is, in a given case, an interplay between the needs of the circumstances and the wider structure of assumptions in the theory which the people in those contexts had inherited. Norbert Elias has called these two inseparable levels of inquiry, respectively, knowledge-transcendent and knowledge-immanent developments. Lack of space prevents me from undertaking the first part of the task. (This would involve tracing in detail Marxist theoretical responses to social and political developments such as the collapse of the Second International, the Bolshevization of Russia, the decline of working class revolutionary commitment, Stalinism and the events of 1968.) Instead, I shall concentrate on the second level of the explanation.

In what follows, then, I shall examine the basic structure of Marx’s practical-theoretical framework, i.e. the conceptual baggage, as it were, which the later writers and practitioners carried with them. I want to place it further back into its more far-reaching, remote, longer-term structural and historical presuppositions. My aim is to try to detect fundamental, but historically produced, patterns of thinking and assumptions present in Marx’s social theory which shape in advance the ways in which society is grasped and, consequently, the way in which the theory is held to relate to practical social life. As a preliminary characterization, I find helpful the time-honoured formulation that Marx’s social science was a synthesis of English political economy, French Utopian socialism and German philosophy. Political economy provided the social-scientific concepts

---

23 See Tom Bottomore, Marxist Sociology (London: Macmillan, 1975), and George Lichtheim, From Marx to Hegel and Other Essays, (London: Orbach & Chambers, 1971). I would add that a systematic sociological comparison of the three modern historical configurations in which the relations between theory and practice became a burning issue for intellectuals—Germany in the 1840s, the Weimar Republic in the 1920s and Western Europe and the USA in the late 1960s—remains to be undertaken.
from the most developed social science of the time and Utopian socialism the desirable vision of a classless society of human association and planful co-operation. A ‘secularized’ version of the Hegelian dialectic united the first two traditions in the notion of the historical necessity of socialism, scientifically shown to be built into history.

From the point of view of epistemology, I think the significance of Marx’s use of the category of practice is as follows. At the historical stage at which he stood Marx inherited the philosophical vocabulary of traditional European epistemology, mediated to him via the legacy of Kant and Hegel. Following in the wake of Newtonian science, traditional epistemology had a particular cast in which, polarized into rationalists and empiricists, philosophers from Descartes onwards debated the foundations of knowledge in terms of the two sides of cognition: the individual thinking mind and what it experiences. Debates thus circulated around the issues of how the human mind comes to know what it does and what part it and the ‘external’, mechanical, world, known to humans through the senses, respectively play in the creation of ideas. Some of the characteristic dualisms of the tradition I have already mentioned. The epistemological ones include subject/object, thought/reality, reason/experience, the intellect versus the senses, the ideal and the real and consciousness and being. For Marx, the various positions taken in these debates are epitomized by the polar doctrines of idealism and materialism. Kant and Hegel had both insisted in different ways that consciousness was active in shaping its perception of the world. In the Theses on Feuerbach Marx mentions that idealists had stressed this side but says that idealism was, however, out of touch with real sensuous reality. Materialism, on the other hand, stressed that experience was the final arbiter in knowledge and materiality the fundamental stratum of reality. This meant that materialism gave force to the real sensuous world, although materialists tended to regard the mind as passive in the process of cognition.

Utilizing the category of practice, meaning mundane human social activity, Marx argues against materialism in an idealist fashion and against idealism in a materialist fashion, their unity constituted practically.  

This formulation is Alfred Schmidt’s, from The Concept of Nature in Marx, translated by Ben Fowkes (London: New Left Books, 1971), 114. Although, like Marx’s remarks on the transcendence of idealism and materialism via the category of practice, it does not separate the epistemological and ontological dimensions in the two doctrines. Consequently, in this respect the text is ambiguous at this point. In Marx, however, the ambiguity may be a product of his attempting to recast the debate in a way which moves away from the older philosophical materialism towards a theory of social mediations in which extra-human nature is independent of human beings but not a final ontological level. (See Schmidt, ibid., Ch. 1 and 113ff.)
Marx, there is no point in reducing cognition to either of its material or ideal poles because both sides are, and always have been, in an active relation in human practical activity. Objective reality is ineradicably subjectively constituted through practice since conscious, labouring mankind is part of Nature. Hence, Nature inevitably has a socially imprinted character and an autonomous role in human affairs at the same time. Human beings only encounter, and hence know, the world through their active contact with it. As Kolakowski has put it, for Marx 'Active contact with the resistance of nature creates knowing man and nature as his object at one and the same time'. In the literature, this world-constituting active sense contact takes another meaning of the term *praxis*. Interestingly, though, Marx is unable to carry through this Hegelian drive away from ontological reductionism and his social theory remains burdened with the dualistic ontology of traditional metaphysics. The sociological theory of base and superstructure, or the determination of social consciousness by 'social being', falls back into the old static dualism, implicitly assuming that the reified economic base and the superstructure of ideology are two separate entities.

As has been pointed out by many philosophers, Marx’s practical theory of truth, even if he himself never made it explicit, meant that the classical definition of truth (agreement of concept with reality) was thrown into question. Marx said that if the correspondence of thought and reality, or knowledge and the world, was ongoingly maintained by human practical activity in ordinary life, then the relationship between them was, therefore, subject to being changed by practical activity. In other words, the question of truth as the correspondence between thought and reality could not be settled entirely in theory—it was partly a practical question. (Philosophers have discussed the apparent affinity between Marx’s theory of truth and that of pragmatism, but beyond asserting that I do not regard them as comparable, I cannot go further into this interesting question here.

What is important, however, is that since Marx was talking about human practical activity here in a social sense, then the practical aspect of the

---


29 On the difference between Marx’s theory of truth and that of pragmatism I agree with Ernst Bloch (op. cit., 92) that ‘for Marx an idea is not true because it is useful, but useful because it is true’.

166
problem of knowledge as he saw it inevitably began to shade over into politics.

Hence, Marx's (often unsystematic and polemical) ruminations about epistemology in the traditional categories of idealism and materialism, were not just intended as contributions to that field. The whole point of his discussions of materialism and idealism was that various positions defined within that polarity carried with them (once one had switched to regarding socio-natural reality as actively constituted by praxis) by their very nature, practical, political implications. The idea that consciousness was cognitively active in real, practical, productive activity, suggested that people could actively move to change the world that their active, practical cognition constituted. This was something which a passive materialist theory could not theorize. Indeed, adherence to such a one-sided theory actually justified a kind of political practice by its epistemological exclusions. For example, the kind of materialist theory which stated that ideas were simply a reflection of the circumstances and environment surrounding people, implied politically that if one changed people's circumstances then they would correspondingly be changed as well. Such a view lent itself to elitist forms of Utopian socialism. Similarly, Marx implicitly links the inherent epistemological individualism of forms of materialism with the individualism of bourgeois liberalism: 'The highest point attained by that materialism which only observes the world... is the observation of particular individuals and of civil society'.

In the 1840s, when Marx was most concerned to develop a unified theory of society and history which would inform politics, Left Hegelians like Bruno Bauer were rabidly anti-liberal through critique. This Hegelian exercise entailed the critical comparison of some aspect of society with its ideal, or perfect potentiality. They would critically compare, for example, a given particular set of judicial institutions with the pure, universal category of Justice, of which the institutions were only an imperfect embodiment; or, say, a particular constitution with the universal idea of Democracy. Marx sees this procedure as ineffective verbal radicalism only, and enjoins 'practical-critical activity'. This would be activity which did not just compare—on the theoretical plane of ethics—reality with what it ideally ought to be, but actually tried to make reality accord with what it ought to be, in practice. In this situation, the ought-ridden postulates of philosophy as wisdom would be transcended (abolished) in practice. This is, I think, the force of Marx's dictum 'You cannot transcend philosophy without realizing it and you cannot realize it without...

31 Ibid., 82.
transcending it'. He is, in effect, talking about creating a society which no longer requires ethics.

In a word, Marx tries to unite epistemology and ethics by yoking together the traditional epistemological doctrines of idealism and materialism with the great ideologies of the nineteenth century—liberalism, conservatism and socialism. The result is, he hoped, a more comprehensive synthesis epistemologically and ethically, the practical, political implications of which refer not to bourgeois society but to the whole of humanity: 'the standpoint of the new materialism is human society or social humanity'. So for Marx mankind makes its own world, which it constitutes by its practical activity, which therefore means that it can potentially consciously change it in various ways. Under conditions of social class fettered historical alienation, however, this constituting process has become lost to consciousness, exacerbated by social life under advanced stages of the division, and alienation, of labour. For sequences of mass action mentioned by Marx whereby the given circumstances of social life and their being consciously changed by people somehow coincide, recent writers have reserved the term revolutionary praxis.

The point is that for Marx questions of knowledge and questions of ethics are to be fed into a scientifically informed politics on behalf of the current underprivileged class. Its task is to hasten the historical process towards the idealized state of socialism, which is in any case built into its tendency. What others think merely ought to be (a socialist society) is actually embodied in what is as its telos, as Hegel taught. It reaches real, historical maturity whether people have ideals about it or not. The key quotation from Marx about this is:

Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.

Another way of putting these matters which will bring out the issues from a different angle, is to see Marx's project, following Rotenstreich,

33 See the contribution to this volume by Steven Lukes.
34 Theses on Feuerbach.
35 On unresolved tensions and ambiguities in Marx’s concept of labour and their consequences for attempts to put his theories into practice, see R. N. Berki ‘On the Nature and Origins of Marx’s Concept of Labour’, Political Theory 7, No. 1 (February 1979), 35–56.
36 The German Ideology, 48.
as seeking in practical politics the unity of the philosophical realms, theoretical and practical reason. In attempting to reconcile the ‘starry heavens above me and the moral law within me’, Kant had separated nature and practical reason (ethics) or, more broadly, science and morality. Both theoretical and practical reason were spontaneous aspects of Reason, the former the domain of categories which limited knowledge and the latter the domain of ethical imperatives, a practical sphere separate and alongside the reality of nature. Hegel, however, claimed, against Kant, that the world is knowable because it is inherently rational. Reason has complete spontaneity on the intellectual plane as Kant had said, but this only made reality knowable because the object was the objective embodiment of Reason anyway. The embodiment of Reason in the world meant that it could be demonstrated that history was its gradual teleological unfolding in various spheres as determinations of the Idea. But it also meant that practical reason (ethics) could not be maintained as a separate sphere on the Kantian model, because, like Reason in general, it must also be embodied in the world as well. So, for Hegel, there was no need to assure the actualization of Reason in practical life by the creation of a separate Kantian ethical sphere: the level of speculation in his system assured their unity.

But for Marx, the Young Hegelians who embraced this position could only put to real people in real societies the ‘moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical . . . consciousness’. In other words, there was no passage from the achieved level of speculation to the practical realization of the unity of Reason in the world. The Young Hegelians were the ‘staunchest conservatives’. For Marx, however, history is the arena for the practical actualization of Reason. This translates into the proposition (expressed as the development of the forces of production outstripping their necessary relations of production) that in practice people must realize the inherent rational potentiality for social organization, development and progress spontaneously bequeathed to the bourgeois epoch. It is this potential which is fettered by archaic social class relations, necessitating revolutionary change. In my view, Marx’s whole theory of history as a series of progressive socio-economic formations is predicated on the assumption that they have been mediated by their necessary telos of socialism as the end to the alienated ‘pre-history’ of mankind. Indeed, the Hegelian version is seen by Marx as a ‘metaphysically travestied’ version of what is a real, scientifically describable, historical process. The forces and relations of production dialectic in Marx parallels Hegel’s categorial unity of content and form, whereby it is the developing content
Richard Kilminster

(forces of production) which determines changes of form (relations of production) towards the self-development of the Idea (socialism). Once Marx has translated the Hegelian conception of history as the embodiment and realization of Reason into the terms of a socio-economic theory of development, then the theory articulating the process and a moral indictment of society were for him necessarily the same thing.

III

By way of an epilogue, I will briefly discuss some of the implications of the questions dealt with in this paper and highlight some problem areas. Changes in Marxist theory in Europe this century have been conditioned by many social developments, events, practical exigencies and policies, which the theories have in various ways reflected, legitimated or rationalized. At the same time, the theory which the various protagonists brought to bear on those situations contained more remote, longer-term presuppositions which go back a long way in the development of European societies. These fundamental, but historically produced, patterns of thinking shape in advance the ways in which society is conceptualized and, consequently, the ways in which the theory was held to relate to practical social life. When one is assessing the degree of success and consequences of attempts to put Marx's theories into practice, both these two levels—the circumstances and the basic structure of assumptions in the theory—must be taken into account.

The framework of practical-theoretical social science handed down by Marx was permeated with the traditional philosophy in a dialogue with which it had been forged, both epistemologically and ethically. Marx reconciles idealism and materialism on the plane of social practice but still refers to his synthesis by the metaphysical term 'materialism.' The dualistic social theory of base and superstructure reproduces the being and consciousness polarity of traditional metaphysics; and the notion of active subjective cognition indissolubly constituting its objects in practice is still a resolution of the subject-object problem within the duality itself. (Lukács' later vision of proletarian class consciousness overthrowing 'the objective form of its object' and constituting the identical subject-object of history, is a view of the possibilities of mass human action profoundly steeped in these presuppositions.) And, finally, Marx's attempt to unite the traditional philosophical dualism of idealism and materialism with socialism, conservatism and liberalism in order to link epistemology and ethics in politics, carried forward a particular epistemological-political synthesis. This established for later generations within the Marxist tradition the idea that various philosophical positions about the nature of ideas defined in terms of sense perception were somehow significantly related to political ideologies.
Marx had already tried to sublate debate within the categories of idealism and materialism by reference to social practice, but he was unable to consummate the break, remaining burdened with the philosophical heritage he was trying to overcome. Like Comte and St Simon, Marx was grappling with the important problems of how a theory of society was related to human social development, its subject matter, and what were the practical implications of types of social theory. He shared with them also the Enlightenment view that an adequate theory of society facilitates the practical steering of social processes for the benefit of mankind. Because of the stage at which he stood, however, he could only articulate the problem with the traditional epistemological vocabulary available to him, synthesized with the great nineteenth century ideologies. The epistemology had been a product of philosophers ruminating upon the implications of Newtonian science for human knowledge, as well as the kind of self-awareness associated with that stage of the civilizing process (Elias); 41 and the ideologies related to the stage of development of social class antagonisms Marx was living through. Today, however, we have to ask ourselves whether we can any longer relevantly pose the general problem of the relation between theories of various kinds and practical social life (traditionally identified as issues of theory and practice) in those terms. If not, then the problem has to be thought out in a different way.

Marx was only able to incorporate ethics into his practical–theoretical framework by paying the price of teleology. He translated the Hegelian conception of the historical realization of Reason embodied in the world into a historical, dialectical progression of socio-economic epochs preparing mankind for the ideal state of socialism. He thus wrote the Utopian ideal of socialist equality, freedom and human co-operative association, which others merely thought desirable, or for the lack of which they indicted bourgeois society in moral terms, into the real movement of history and claimed this process to be scientifically demonstrable. Later on, in the 1920s, it was the removal from Marx’s theory of this supposition that social reality was inherently meaningful and rational in its tendency towards what society Ought to be, which gave rise to the problem for Marxists of how to re-incorporate this ethical level into a social science denuded of historical necessity.

In non-Marxist forms of social enquiry today it is common to find a pre-Hegelian logical separation of matters of fact from questions of value, of Is and Ought, science and morality and factual and normative questions, enshrined in the different disciplines of sociology and social philosophy. These separations are not only regarded as logically or methodologically

---

sound, but also as providing a bulwark against the abuse of the supposed Marxian fusion of Is and Ought by bureaucratic socialist elites who have justified directive and totalitarian practices by claiming that their policies are based in a correct scientific analysis of historical development and are thus also morally right. It is significant that in Eastern Europe philosophy often serves the function of critique under conditions of generalized censorship and repression, with the considerable development of philosophies of value and philosophical anthropology, ultimately designed to develop criteria for indicting the social order.

To return more specifically to Marx, the image of man built into the theory was a correspondingly rationalistic one. Human beings should be self-determining, self-conscious and freed from the constraints of social alienation. It is an image of people as knowing, choosing and acting, but not as also affective, constrained and interdependent. Later followers of Marx have striven to realize that one-sided, idealized model of man in practice, or it is an image which implicitly guides their social-scientific enquiries. They generally, therefore, fail to take cognizance of the fact that observations of people living in real societies at various stages of development suggest that social life would be impossible without some social constraints, in the broadest sense. Consequently, one finds a tendency in Marxist writings, stemming from the assumptions of the theory they inherit, to champion more or less total human freedom as a political goal. The more realistic question as to how far this is possible is seldom asked. (I think Habermas has realized this, but I will mention him in a moment.)

Marx's theory, then, defines methodologically the relevant theoretical problems, shapes the way in which theories are seen as related to social life, moulds in advance the parameters of sociological enquiry and delimits in a characteristic way the questions which can be put to society. First, methodologically speaking, the inherently dualistic character of the theory has inevitably led to the problem of how to resolve the reciprocal effectivity of 'ideal' and 'material' factors in the historical process, 'material' having been linked by Marx with economic activity. This characteristic has thus structured later inquiries into adaptations and sophistications of the base and superstructure model. But these elaborations still reproduce the


fundamentally metaphysical structure of the theory and thus remain trapped within its basic antinomy. Secondly, even though the practical questions asked by the later Marxist practitioners related closely to the circumstances they lived through, the way they interpreted their society was determined by the framework’s basic assumptions. It induced its adherents into asking questions such as: What is preventing ‘the revolution’ from taking place, given that the level of social development seems apposite? What are the cultural mechanisms whereby working class consciousness is systematically dismantled? Is there a substitute proletariat to be seen? And against the proposition that political activity should be geared towards the goal of the revolutionary victory of the proletariat which will usher in socialism, all other activity towards, for example, minimizing social inequality or social constraints can only be described as reformism. Revolution versus reform is an antinomy which flows directly from a theory which assumes that practical activity can hasten the arrival of an idealized state of equality said to be embodied in the historical process.

The two examples of Adorno and Habermas will illustrate my general point. In both cases we see the fascinating interplay between the social developments they are responding to and the presuppositions of the theory they are bringing to bear on them. Adorno justified his doggedly philosophical stance after the late 30s because the historical opportunity of the emancipation of mankind by the revolutions of the proletariat (the realization of philosophy) had been ‘missed’. As a result, he was condemned to maintain a ‘negative’ critique of society which shows the existing order as perennially capable of becoming something other than it is. This philosophizing keeps alive the possibility of emancipation. This strategy still assumed, however, that ‘the revolution’ should have occurred and that if it had done so it would have liberated mankind. It therefore took seriously, as a real possibility, social consequences predicted by the mythological strand in Marx’s thought, i.e. the practical fusion of Is and Ought in a future world of human association for which history had been preparing humanity. Once one has made that assumption, then its non-arrival leads to the conviction that the idealized sequence is more real than the empirical reality and something to which reality must ultimately adjust itself. But if it is held that the moment to realize human emancipation has been lost, then we have in this position a kind of theological picture that in the present conditions man is living, if not in a fallen state, then certainly in purgatory. The result is a tragic pessimism and nihilism.

In the work of Habermas we can see how he operates within the inertia of the Marxist tradition and takes up from Adorno the redefinition of the

problems of theory and practice after Stalinism, fascism and the thesis of the disenchantment of the world elaborated by philosophers in modern times. I will take up only one aspect of his later work in order to illustrate the point I am making about the presuppositions of the Marxist framework; that is, the notion of the ideal speech situation. Built into all individual speech acts, he says, is the assumption that one can be understood by potential interlocutors who are equal partners in discourse. This is a transcendental presupposition for all communication. This idealized state of affairs is, however, no mere abstract Utopia, for it is partly present now, in society, in every individual speech act. It is, therefore, not an arbitrary postulate of a total community of equality, for it is already, as it were, partly realized. The postulate thus provides a critical yardstick for objectively evaluating given societies as only providing conditions of ‘distorted communication’ compared with those of the ideal speech situation, which those instances of distorted communication also are. In this respect, at least, Habermas's work constitutes the reappearance of Left Hegelian critique in a modern guise. The ideal-speech situation corresponds to Hegel's telos of self-knowing Reason embodied as universality in all particularity, which was reworked by Marx as the Utopian tendency of history. Habermas has grounded more systematically Adorno's later Hegelian stress on the 'Utopian moment of the object' and his crusade against 'identity thinking' as the means of negatively criticizing what is in terms of what it could ideally be.

The point is that the Marxist tradition itself, as adapted to twentieth century conditions, provides the framework which has posed the problems and the parameters of their solutions. Critical theory and critical sociology reproduce the Marxist socialist theory but without the original agent, the proletariat, and without the original catalyst, the party. The result is that the critical theory remaining after those excisions must necessarily have to replace the old telos of history with an idealized state of affairs which cannot be realized.

There are four reasons for this, (a) The Utopia cannot any longer be justified as the outcome of historical necessity. The critical theorists are


‘modernists’ who, following Weber and the existentialists, know that since the Middle Ages European societies have become increasingly depleted of inherent religious meaning. After the death of God, the Marxist concept of historical necessity only reproduces Christian theology in a secular form, with socialism taking the place of heaven. In any case, the moment to realize this outcome was missed. Moreover, historical necessity was associated with orthodox, bureaucratic, positivistic Marxism, which was at least a necessary condition for Stalinism.48 (b) Suggesting that there was a real possibility of the realization of any idealized state would lend itself to abuse by bureaucratic socialist elites in practice because it would give them the theoretical means by which to claim that a given society was its embodiment. This would thus preclude further social critique since the standard had been proclaimed as realized. The ideal speech situation, however, although present in all individual speech acts, is never totally realizable. Habermas has implicitly developed the later Marx’s acknowledgment of the perennial ‘realm of necessity’ in human affairs, which the early Frankfurt School enshrined as the notion of the necessity of some form of alienation in society;49 and there is a distant echo in this aspect of his work of the existentialists’ insistence that both authenticity and inauthenticity are distinctive, necessary and irreducible modes of existence.50 Consequently, his theory entails that conditions maintaining some distorted communication must, dialectically, always be present for the ideal-speech situation to have any existence and critical purchase. Indeed, it is this state which sustains for humanity’s good positivism as instrumental reason. (c) More remotely, the inertia of the socialist tradition perpetuates an early nineteenth century rationalistic image of human fraternity which implicitly guides the inquiry. (d) Lastly, at a deeper conceptual level, the work is permeated with the philosophical categories of European rationalism, particularly the philosophies of Kant and Hegel, which have left behind in social science and European culture in general, a profoundly idealizing mode of thought.

The result of all these factors is that the socialist Utopia here had to become a postulate, a possibility, grounded in some way that was more amenable to empirical reference than the Hegelian dialectics of Adorno and in a way which provided a non-arbitrary, objective criterion of social critique which had more power than mere moralizing. The answer lay

49 Kilminster, op. cit., Ch. 14.
in the ideal speech situation, knowable in theory but by definition unrealizable in practice.51

University of Leeds

51 I am grateful to Aidan Foster-Carter, Ahmed Gurnah and Alan Scott for many stimulating discussions of this paper and to Zygmunt Bauman and Bill Rees for detailed comments on an earlier draft.