

# Marx's Conception of Science

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The task of regenerating revolutionary socialism is both daunting and exhilarating. This tradition has to find a way, not to 'bring socialist consciousness into the working class', but to reconstruct its own consciousness. Only then will that class be able to free itself from all those ideological shackles which tie it to the existing social order. That requires nothing less than a critical re-examination of every aspect of what used to be thought of as 'Marxist theory'. Not one scrap of that body of doctrine and not one episode of its history should be disregarded. But neither should any piece of it be accepted without careful scrutiny, for insights of Marx which are essential for our time lie buried under the dead weight of dogma.

That job is arduous and painful enough. But more is needed. We have to challenge the very idea that 'scientific socialism' held about itself. This contradicted Marx's own understanding of science, which contains the very heart of what must be recovered, and then developed, from his work. For this purpose, I have tried to tease the actual writings of Marx himself away from the many layers of interpretation and misinterpretation which have collected around them. [1]

Perhaps Marx's aim can be summed up as the effort to fuse the concept of socialism with the struggle of the working-class movement for its independence. Each of these existed long before his time, but they stood opposed to each other. As we lost sight of his fundamental notions, the two sides broke apart once more. We were left with the day-to-day work of the trades unions and parties of the class, under leaderships which continually adapted to the power of capital, while the notion of a new, 'truly human' social formation grew ever more remote. Our task is to re-unite these opposites.

Marx's chief work, *Capital*, when it was read at all, was assumed to be a theoretical account of the workings of 'capitalist economy', a machine which was doomed to malfunction. Its breakdown would inevitably drive forward the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat, leading to state ownership of industry. This picture was inscribed within a 'theory of history'. Consciousness was alleged to be 'determined' by socio-economic forces, and class struggle climaxed in a series of revolutions, in which state power, accounted for by a 'Marxist theory of the State', passed from one class to another. Around this set of theories was wrapped a philosophical outlook called 'dialectical materialism'.

This theoretical framework was thought to cover every-

thing in a complete, integral outlook. But it actually omitted the main problem: the theoretical status of the theory itself. How did the Marxists explain themselves? Did the theory guarantee its own truth? Although hidden, such questions kept finding sharp expression in the course of the history of Marxism.

I do not believe that what we summed up under the title 'scientific socialism' represented the actual conceptions held by Marx himself. Marx did sometimes refer to his work as 'scientific', but what did he mean by this term? During the nineteenth century, the idea grew up that society and history could be studied in a manner which mimicked the successful efforts of the natural sciences. The followers of Marx tried to assimilate this idea to those of Marx. Like the materialist philosophers of the eighteenth century, they thought the social world was a kind of complex mechanism, whose parts interacted according to discoverable laws.

The revolutionary party knew the secret of these laws. Thus it could predict the result of various ways of proceeding in the class struggle, and develop its so-called 'strategy and tactics'. This knowledge was not available to ordinary workers, who, without our special assistance, could at best reach the level of simple trades unionism in their thinking. The 'correct' answers could only be worked out from a 'body of knowledge' authorised by us. There is no need to recount the dire effects this outlook had on the international workers' movement.

To find out what Marx meant by science in relation to his own work, we need first to investigate his use of the word 'critique'. It has often been pointed out that the titles of nearly all his major writings contain this word: *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843); *Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole*, (the last and most important section of the 1844 Paris Manuscripts); the *Holy Family: Critique of Critical Criticism* (1845); the various versions of the *Critique of Political Economy* (*Grundrisse*, 1857-8, 1859, and *Capital*, 1867); and the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875).

Marx begins the Introduction to his 1843 *Critique*, the only part he ever published, by asserting that 'the critique of religion is the premise of all critique'. Did 'critique' here mean refuting an incorrect theory, in order to provide a better one, for instance, replacing a false religion with a true one? Of course not. On the contrary, as he explains in a famous passage, religion is not simply

a mistaken idea about the world:

The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly the struggle against the world of which religion is the spiritual aroma. Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress, and also the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. ... The critique of religion is therefore in embryo the critique of the vale of tears, the halo of which is religion. [2]

Here is the key to Marx's understanding of critique. A theory subjected to criticism - for instance, Ricardo's theory of value - is regarded as the highest expression of an existing, defective way of life. This is precisely because of its scientific character. (Marx wastes little time on the vulgar economists, who merely give expression to the prejudices of capital.) The critique of Ricardo's work, which is the systematic theoretical reflection of the actual social relations, takes Marx to the heart of the inhumanity of bourgeois society. As he stresses in *Capital*,

the categories of political economy are forms of thought which are socially valid, and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of production.[3]

Similarly, in Hegel's Idea of the State, or in his *Logic*, Marx finds distilled the essence of the entire social order. 'Marxism' was very keen on 'Marx's method', as if this could be set out in a few simple rules, disconnected from any particular 'application'. This was a total misunderstanding of what Marx was doing. If we restrict the meaning of the word a bit, we can say that Marx did not have a theory at all. A theory sets out a formal explanation of something, so, before it begins, it must take this object as given. The categories that the theory will use in the explanation, and the logical method which is supposed to tie its propositions together, must also be accepted from the outset. But the aim of Marx's forty years of work was not at all to produce a set of ideas which would 'explain the world'. Indeed, he uncovered those very aspects of modern society, starting with the division between mental and physical labour, which underlay this conception of theory.

So there are two kinds of science: 1. Marx's science-as-criticism; 2. everybody else's theoretical science. The second kind constructs theories. Since these are necessarily based on presuppositions which take the object for granted, theoretical science could also be called dogmatic. It can never know that these assumptions secretly embody the character of the existing social forms.

How does the idea of 'critique' tie in with Marx's use of the word 'dialectics'? (This word is very rarely found in his writings, by the way.) Plato defined dialectic as

the way to get beyond 'opinions'.

It is the only activity whose method is to challenge its own assumptions so that it may rest firmly on first principles. [4]

Two thousand years later, Hegel's dialectic was an all-sided world outlook which enabled him to unify two things: the unfolding investigation of the world, and the historical development of the world. That is why, for Hegel as for Marx, there is no 'method', outside the actual investigation itself. His profound advance was to try to do this absolutely, without presuppositions drawn from 'mere opinion'. In this he partially transcended uncritical science, which can explain many things, but must presuppose itself.

But only partially. Trying to find a way to grasp the world in thought, Hegel's critique of what is given to us was limited by the boundaries of philosophy. His dialectic began with criticism, but ended up by trying to reconcile in thought the opposing aspects, 'transfiguring and glorifying what exists'. In direct opposition to Hegel's dialectic, Marx's critical science

includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction; because it regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion; and because it does not let itself be impressed by anything, being in its very essence critical and revolutionary.[5]

Marx could break through the barrier of bourgeois 'opinion', because he had discerned within bourgeois society that revolutionary force which would overthrow it: the proletariat.

Proletarian revolutions ... criticise themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacy, weakness and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again, more gigantic, before them, recoil ever and anon from the infinite prodigiousness of their own aims, until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible.[6]

So, in *Capital*, Marx was not attempting to produce an economic theory, superior to previous theories. Economists, even the most rigorously objective of them, start from the acceptance of capital, wages, money, etc., as human ways of behaviour. They see their task as being to 'make sense' of these categories. But, as Marx explains,

to the individuals who exchange their products, the relation between their own private labour and the



collective labour of society appears to them in ... a crazy (verrückte) form. The categories of political economy consist precisely of forms of this kind.[7]

Economists spend their lives trying to make sense of something that is crazy.

But how does Marx know this? His knowledge of the madness of the most fundamental bourgeois social forms does not derive from his scientific work, but precedes it. Suppose that, when Marx investigates the use of child labour in coal-mines, say, someone were to object that there is no economic reason why children should not be employed in this way, would the appropriate response be 'scientific' discussion? Surely it would be the most violent abuse we could muster! That is why the sustained indignation of many passages in *Capital* are not at all 'out of place in a work of science' - in Marx's sense of science.

Now we can face the question: against what measuring-rod does Marx's critique measure its object? With what criterion does he test the old science and find it wanting? From what standpoint does he look at it? The germ of his answer is to be found in the last three of the Theses on Feuerbach:

9. The highest point reached by contemplative materialism, that is, the materialism which does not comprehend sensuousness as practical activity, is the contemplation of single individuals and of civil society.

10. The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society or social humanity.

11. The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.[8]

Thus 'critique' brings Marx's science and his revolutionary practice into a single whole. Dogmatic science is incapable of this. Its theories can never grasp their own presuppositions, their own unity with the object they are trying to account for. When 'scientific socialism' attempted to explain the workings of the class struggle, and to deduce the proletarian revolution as its logical conclusion, the 'scientific' analysis of existing conditions was quite disconnected from the idea of communism.

But Marx's critical science, or science-as-critique, is firmly based upon his understanding of what is 'truly human', and its struggle against the inhuman shape taken by human life. He does not seek to impose a new socialist form, a 'socialist alternative', thought out in advance. Socialist revolution for Marx implies the removal of obstacles to a human way of life. Stripping off these forms of inhumanity will allow the humanity which already exists, imprisoned within those forms, to flourish. The pattern of

critique and the pattern of socialist revolution are identical.

The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, ie, the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control.[9]

So Marx's concept of science is rooted in his understanding of the nature of humanity which, in producing its own material and spiritual conditions of life, makes itself what it is, and continually remakes itself. In our social history, we create and recreate our own forms of consciousness and our own social relations. Until now, this has taken place blindly, through class and other conflicts. To actualise the essential freedom of humanity, denied by its alienated way of life, the contradiction between its present conditions of life and true humanity must find self-conscious practical expression. That is the historic role of the proletariat. Marx's conception of science-as-critique aims to show how the revolutionary class must achieve the level of understanding necessary for the transition to a truly human life.

To sum up: Marx's science begins and ends in the world, not in thought. Beginning with the 'standpoint of social humanity', it criticises the highest forms of existing science, as they try in vain to rationalise the lunacy of an inhuman world. It ends in revolutionary practice, in which human creative power self-consciously liberates itself from social relations dominated by capital.

## Notes

[1] See Smith, C: *Marx at the Millennium*. (Pluto Press, 1996). Also 'Friedrich Engels and Marx's Critique of Political Economy', in *Capital and Class*, 62, June 1997.

[2] *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction*. See, for example, *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, (MECW), Volume 3, p 175.

[3] *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter I. Penguin Edition, p 169.

[4] Plato: *The Republic*. Penguin Classics Edition, p 302.

[5] *Capital*, Volume I. Postface to the Second Edition. Loc cit, p 103.

[6] *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

[7] *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter I. Penguin Edition, p 169.

[8] See, for example, MECW, Volume 5, p 5.

[9] *Capital*. Loc cit, p 173.