

Marx and Positivism

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This is the summary of a talk given at the International Socialist Forum

Background

It is important to locate any philosophical discussion within a concrete historical context. This is in keeping with Marx's own dictum in the Theses on Feuerbach that "Previously philosophers have only interpreted the world, the task however is to change it". In this spirit, I list some of the relevant issues that confront all those who wish to build an effective movement for socialism:

1. The apparent "triumph" of capital as it appears to establish a global hegemony.
2. The collapse of state bureaucratic regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe into robber-baron, jungle capitalism. The same process is effectively taking place in China but with different dynamics.
3. The revolutionary developments in the productive processes on the planet, centred on the development of the "new technologies" of information processing, communications, and biotechnology, together with associated technologies for automatic control of the productive processes. Generally this can be described as making explicit that which was implicit in the revolutionary developments within physics and molecular biology in the first half of this almost completed century.
4. There is a positive feedback between these new technologies and the development of the understanding of nature. The greater understanding of nature leads to improved technologies, which lead to a better understanding of nature, and so on. This process has continued rapidly to accelerate in last couple of decades. It is commercially driven by the intensification of competition between different sections of capital thus leading to the highly unstable situation of the global capital system at present.
5. The increasing destitution of the majority of humanity of the so-called "Third World" (actually "Two Thirds World", to quote Fr. Sean McDonagh), as these countries seek to pay back massive debts to imperialist finance capital through the "structural adjustment programmes" of the IMF.
6. The increasing threat to the basis of life itself through the pollution and destruction of the biosphere by profit-hungry capital and the former state bureaucratic regimes.
7. The wretched state of social democracy with its open bootlicking of the representatives of capital personified in the antics of certain European leaders, supported enthusiastically by the former "communist" parties.
8. The cacophony of squabbling sects representing the allegedly anti-Stalinist revolutionary socialist movement – each sect existing in its own hermetically sealed universe of discourse, "knowing" that it and it alone has the key to building the "revolutionary party". Out of desperation for new members and influence they attempt to form alliances, with paper-thin protestations of the need for open comradely democratic discussion. Meanwhile, no doubt, they report back to their respective central committees on the possibilities for recruitment of a new layer of paper sellers.
9. The clear need for a mass party of the working class for socialism built *by* the working class not *for* the working class by an elite group of revolutionary know-a-lots. Such a party will be internationalist at its core due to the character of the class whose interests it pursues.
10. There are many rich opportunities for building such a party present today during the intensifying crisis – the crisis of "the social metabolic processes" to quote Istvan Meszaros [1] – of the global capital production system, its manifest inability to create a viable future for the human species.
11. The need to thoroughly grasp the origins of the crisis in the revolutionary movement, particularly its historical and theoretical basis. There can be no no-go

areas, sacred cows to be still worshipped, shibboleths to be recited afresh.

Positivism

I believe a central issue is the concept of the "revolutionary vanguard party" and its malign influence on the development of the socialist movement, particularly the disastrous consequences for the Russian revolution. I also believe that the origin of this tragic mistake lies in the French revolution, which ascribed excessive importance to the role of a revolutionary intellectual elite, those who can apply reason to society as a whole. This was given philosophical form in the philosophy of positivism.

According to The Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers [2] "positivism" is the name given (a) to a doctrine and movement founded by the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and (b) to the general philosophical view of which Comte's Positivism is one instance. In this latter sense positivism is the view that all genuine knowledge is based on sense experience and can only be advanced by means of observation and experiment.

Metaphysical or speculative attempts to gain knowledge by reason alone, unchecked by experience should be abandoned ("meaningless" according to Vienna circle Logical positivists) in favour of the special sciences. All positivists hold that the task of philosophy is to understand the methods by which the sciences are advanced but not to seek for any independent knowledge of the world. In short they are empiricists.

Francis Bacon in many ways can be considered the founder of empiricism and therefore positivism, and a key figure (or "organic intellectual") in the rise of the English mercantile bourgeoisie. He held that it was impossible to "deduce" the ultimate facts of nature, philosophers should not wander beyond "the limits of nature". He thinks that there are ultimate facts that should be approached "without any previous conception" – that they should be accepted "on the faith of experience" and uses the word "positive" to denote these "inexplicable" facts. Bacon was much admired by the 18th century empiricist philosophers in England and France and hence his usage of the word "positive" came to be applied to the methods of the natural sciences in their reliance on observation and experiment.

Saint-Simon in his Essay on the Sciences of Man (1813) applies the word "positive" to the sciences which are based on "the facts which have been observed and analyzed"; sciences not so based are called "conjectural". Comte (sometime secretary to Saint-Simon) uses the word in this sense in article entitled Plan of the Scientific Works Necessary for the Reorganisation of Society (1822) and later in his Course of Positive philosophy (1830-42). In the latter he says that the function of theories is to co-ordinate observed facts rather than explain them in terms of causes. Comte is usually credited with being the originator of the famous Law of Three Stages (in fact this is due to Saint-Simon) in which the human mind passes from a *theological* through a *metaphysical* to a final *positive* stage. In the first two stages, attempts are made to penetrate to the inner nature of things by explaining behaviour in terms of supernatural or metaphysical entities. In the final, positive, stage this attempt is abandoned and the positive thinker seeks only to establish by reasoning based on observations the invariable sequences and co-existences of phenomena.

Comte held that the time would come when human society itself would be studied by such positive methods. Such a positive science he called "sociology" or sometimes "social physics". He argues that the development of society corresponds to the three stages. First, a theological social outlook upheld by priestly learning and authority. This is followed by the era of metaphysical criticism of traditional doctrines, when they are replaced by such unverifiable doctrines as belief in natural rights and the sovereignty of the people. In Europe this is the era of the Reformation, Enlightenment, and the French revolution. This era would be replaced by a stable society where agreement is established on the basis of incontrovertible positive social knowledge. A new form of authority would then reside in a new spiritual power consisting of men of science whose knowledge would enable humanity to achieve a peaceful unity of thought and action. In later years Comte developed this authoritarian doctrine into a Religion of Humanity. His prominent English supporters, JS Mill and the novelist George Eliot refused to follow him in this direction. Positivist Societies flourished for many years and one group of Positivist Proletarians was allowed to join the First International.

In positivism there only two types of knowledge: knowledge of matters of fact, how things are through observation and experiment, and then there is knowledge of logic and mathematics which is not

about the world at all. All other books that do not fit into these two categories are "sophistry and illusion". This view was widely held in the 19th century by men of science but not in faculties of philosophy where various forms of Idealist metaphysics prevailed.

Positivism in the form of Logical Positivism revived in the 1920s particularly in the Vienna Circle, and also in Berlin, based on the work of the early Wittgenstein and the developments in Physics (quantum theory and, especially, relativity). This group of thinkers asserted that Kant's category of the Synthetic *a priori* must be rejected, and that only verifiable matters of fact or truth of mathematics or logic were meaningful. Everything else was strictly meaningless. Unfortunately, "when it came to explaining what exactly the facts are, which observation and experiment can reveal, positivists give as widely different answers as the metaphysicians" [2, page 256]. Bacon's "simple nature", Hume's "impressions" or the "atomic facts" of the 20th century positivists raise theoretical problems every bit as difficult and elusive as those of the metaphysicians. Two members of the Vienna Circle, Kurt Goedel and Karl Popper, effectively dismantled the whole program of Logical Positivism. The former showed that mathematics itself was incomplete and could not be reduced to "pure" logic, and the latter that the method of science was based on conjectures and refutations not verifications.

At this point I would like to refer the reader to two papers by two American academics: Marxism and Positivism by James Farr, and Marxian Science and Positivist Politics by Terence Ball (see reference [3]). They demonstrate clearly, and with much greater erudition than I could claim, that the ideas of the Positivists were an anathema to Marx himself but NOT to Engels. To give a flavour of these articles I will like to quote the following :

Never one to mince words, he (Marx) condemned the "shit positivism" (Scheisspositivismus) of Comte and vehemently denied ever "writing Comtist recipes for the kitchens of the future"(4). More tellingly, Marx insisted that the much vaunted value neutrality and expertise of Comtean social engineers was a sham, inasmuch as they purport to stand above society, manipulating social variables and changing circumstances of everyone except themselves. "The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and education," wrote Marx, "forgets that the circumstances are changed by men and that the

educator himself must be educated. This doctrine has therefore to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society"(Marx and Engels [5]). This is, of course, impossible. For the social technician is also human, and is therefore " no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man, the state, society"(Marx [6]). Contra Comte, there can be no objective asocial Archimedean point from which expert engineers may move people and manage societies. (Ball, reference [3] page 241).

And also:

Physical reductionists marching under the banner of unified science [a key positivist notion-DH] fail to understand this elementary but quite crucial point. They mistake the "language of commodities" for the language of physical things [Marx(7)]. In so doing they are not only bad scientists but fetishists as well. Physicalism [the reduction of all reality to physics-DH] is in short a version of fetishism. Physical thing terms cannot provide the bedrock of a unified scientific vocabulary because they misdescribe the very reality a social science attempts to capture ... Even Darwin was guilty of this(biological reductionism). After an initial fascination with Darwin, Marx viewed his achievements in a more sceptical light. Indeed, he finally found Darwin's theory downright "amusing" because it smuggled a social interpretation of capitalist society into biological law: "It is remarkable how Darwin recognises among the beasts and plants his English society with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, inventions, and the Malthusian 'struggle for existence'. His is Hobbes' 'bellum omnium contra omnes', and one is reminded of Hegel's Phenomenology where civil society is described as a 'spiritual animal kingdom', while in Darwin the animal kingdom figures as civil society."(Marx Engels [8]). From James Farr [3], pp. 223-4.

[Both these two articles should be read by comrades. I will try to get them made available on the internet-DH]

I would also argue that these ideas were *not* abhorrent to Lenin and Trotsky, despite the former's celebrated attack on the Russian Machist Positivists [9]. Lenin replaced the positivists' sensationalist relativism by an even cruder vulgar materialist empiricism, e.g. the idea that our brains "photograph" reality. Of course as everyone knows Lenin modified these philosophical

views after reading Hegel's Science of Logic, but by then the die was cast and the vanguard party was ready to assume its historical role. Ironically the least knowledgeable of its central committee elite, J Stalin, was waiting in the wings ready to deal with the intellectuals. The appalling debacle of Stalinism and Fascism shaped the rest of the century.

After the revolution, and long before Stalin got control of the bureaucratic apparatus created by Lenin and Trotsky, there were crude examples of positivist methods. For instance workers were put into a special apparatus to attempt to improve their productivity. Then there is Trotsky's talk about remaking humanity "as in a mortar and pestle" – chemical social engineering as it were – and the enthusiasm for Taylorism in the early Soviet Union. There is also Lenin's simplistic mechanistic positivism in his celebrated equation: "Soviets + Electricity = Socialism". Ball's paper clearly shows the connection between the Soviet use of psychiatric methods against dissidents and a positivist philosophical outlook.

It is also important that the reformist branch of social democracy was also heavily influenced by positivist scientific social engineering. The espousal of eugenics by British Fabians and Scandinavian social democrats is but one example. Recent revelations that the latter actually carried out the forced sterilization of biologically "inferior" people is both shocking and instructive.

Of course it is critically important for capital to have its cadres of scientific and technical experts, its social engineers, and administrative bureaucratic elites. It is essential that these social layers are kept loyal and uncritically carry out their allotted tasks of creating the means of engaging in economic and, if necessary, military competition. Such elites are also essential for creating the means of repression and oppression of the vast bulk of humanity, those who earn their living through labour, be they workers or peasants. Such elites are the "organic intelligentsia" of the ruling class described by the Italian Marxist, Gramsci. [10]

I believe a central issue facing the revolutionary socialist movement is the need to win over to the side of labouring humanity elements of the scientific and technical intelligentsia in new non-positivist relationship – a true organic intelligentsia.

My proposal is to fight for the setting up of "Community Development Parks" especially as part of the implementation of a Workers International Plan

for Development [11]. The potential of the new technologies for implementing such a plan is obvious.

References

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