

What is Orthodox Marxism?

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.

Marx: *Theses on Feuerbach*.

THIS question, simple as it is, has been the focus of much discussion in both proletarian and bourgeois circles. But among intellectuals it has gradually become fashionable to greet any profession of faith in Marxism with ironical disdain. Great disunity has prevailed even in the 'socialist' camp as to what constitutes the essence of Marxism, and which theses it is 'permissible' to criticise and even reject without forfeiting the right to the title of 'Marxist'. In consequence it came to be thought increasingly 'unscientific' to make scholastic exegeses of old texts with a quasi-Biblical status, instead of fostering an 'impartial' study of the 'facts'. These texts, it was argued, had long been 'superseded' by modern criticism and they should no longer be regarded as the sole fount of truth.

If the question were really to be formulated in terms of such a crude antithesis it would deserve at best a pitying smile. But in fact it is not (and never has been) quite so straightforward. Let us assume for the sake of argument that recent research had disproved once and for all every one of Marx's individual theses. Even if this were to be proved, every serious 'orthodox' Marxist would still be able to accept all such modern findings without reservation and hence dismiss all of Marx's theses *in toto*—without having to renounce his orthodoxy for a single moment. Orthodox Marxism, therefore, does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the 'belief' in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a 'sacred' book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*. It is the scientific conviction that dialectical materialism is the road to truth and that its methods can be developed, expanded and deepened only along the lines laid down by its founders. It is the conviction, moreover, that all attempts to surpass or 'improve' it have led and must lead to over-simplification, triviality and eclecticism.

1

Materialist dialectic is a revolutionary dialectic. This definition is so important and altogether so crucial for an understanding of its nature that if the problem is to be approached in the right way this must be fully grasped before we venture upon a discussion of the dialectical method itself. The issue turns on the question of theory and practice. And this not merely in the sense given it by Marx when he says in his first critique of Hegel that "theory becomes a material force when it grips the masses".¹ Even more to the point is the need to discover those features and definitions both of the theory and the ways of gripping the masses which convert the theory, the dialectical method, into a vehicle of revolution. We must extract the practical essence of the theory from the method and its relation to its object. If this is not done that 'gripping the masses' could well turn out to be a will o' the wisp. It might turn out that the masses were in the grip of quite different forces, that they were in pursuit of quite different ends. In that event, there would be no necessary connection between the theory and their activity, it would be a form that enables the masses to become conscious of their socially necessary or fortuitous actions, without ensuring a genuine and necessary bond between consciousness and action.

In the same essay² Marx clearly defined the conditions in which a relation between theory and practice becomes possible. "It is not enough that thought should seek to realise itself; reality must also strive towards thought." Or, as he expresses it in an earlier work:³ "It will then be realised that the world has long since possessed something in the form of a dream which it need only take possession of consciously, in order to possess it in reality." Only when consciousness stands in such a relation to reality can theory and practice be united. But for this to happen the emergence of consciousness must become the *decisive step* which the historical process must take towards its proper end (an end constituted by the wills of men, but neither dependent on human whim, nor the product of human invention). The historical function of theory is to make this step a practical possibility. Only when a historical situation has arisen in which a class must understand society if it is to assert itself; only when the fact that a class understands itself means that it understands society as a whole and when, in consequence, the class becomes both the subject and the object of knowledge; in short, only when these

conditions are all satisfied will the unity of theory and practice, the precondition of the revolutionary function of the theory, become possible.

Such a situation has in fact arisen with the entry of the proletariat into history. "When the proletariat proclaims the dissolution of the existing social order," Marx declares, "it does no more than disclose the secret of its own existence, for it is the effective dissolution of that order."⁴ The links between the theory that affirms this and the revolution are not just arbitrary, nor are they particularly tortuous or open to misunderstanding. On the contrary, the theory is essentially the intellectual expression of the revolutionary process itself. In it every stage of the process becomes fixed so that it may be generalised, communicated, utilised and developed. Because the theory does nothing but arrest and make conscious each necessary step, it becomes at the same time the necessary premise of the following one.

To be clear about the function of theory is also to understand its own basis, i.e. dialectical method. This point is absolutely crucial, and because it has been overlooked much confusion has been introduced into discussions of dialectics. Engels' arguments in the *Anti-Dühring* decisively influenced the later life of the theory. However we regard them, whether we grant them classical status or whether we criticise them, deem them to be incomplete or even flawed, we must still agree that this aspect is nowhere treated in them. That is to say, he contrasts the ways in which concepts are formed in dialectics as opposed to 'metaphysics'; he stresses the fact that in dialectics the definite contours of concepts (and the objects they represent) are dissolved. Dialectics, he argues, is a continuous process of transition from one definition into the other. In consequence a one-sided and rigid causality must be replaced by interaction. But he does not even mention the most vital interaction, namely the *dialectical relation between subject and object in the historical process*, let alone give it the prominence it deserves. Yet without this factor dialectics ceases to be revolutionary, despite attempts (illusory in the last analysis) to retain 'fluid' concepts. For it implies a failure to recognise that in all metaphysics the object remains untouched and unaltered so that thought remains contemplative and fails to become practical; while for the dialectical method the central problem is *to change reality*.

If this central function of the theory is disregarded, the virtues

of forming 'fluid' concepts become altogether problematic: a purely 'scientific' matter. The theory might then be accepted or rejected in accordance with the prevailing state of science without any modification at all to one's basic attitudes, to the question of whether or not reality can be changed. Indeed, as the so-called Machists among Marx's supporters have demonstrated, it even reinforces the view that reality with its 'obedience to laws', in the sense used by bourgeois, contemplative materialism and the classical economics with which it is so closely bound up, is impenetrable, fatalistic and immutable. That Machism can also give birth to an equally bourgeois voluntarism does not contradict this. Fatalism and voluntarism are only mutually contradictory to an undialectical and unhistorical mind. In the dialectical view of history they prove to be necessarily complementary opposites, intellectual reflexes clearly expressing the antagonisms of capitalist society and the intractability of its problems when conceived in its own terms.

For this reason all attempts to deepen the dialectical method with the aid of 'criticism' inevitably lead to a more superficial view. For 'criticism' always starts with just this separation between method and reality, between thought and being. And it is just this separation that it holds to be an improvement deserving of every praise for its introduction of true scientific rigour into the crude, uncritical materialism of the Marxian method. Of course, no one denies the right of 'criticism' to do this. But if it does so we must insist that it will be moving counter to the essential spirit of dialectics.

The statements of Marx and Engels on this point could hardly be more explicit. "Dialectics thereby reduced itself to the science of the general laws of motion—both in the external world and in the thought of man—two sets of laws which are identical *in substance*" (Engels).⁵ Marx formulated it even more precisely. "In the study of economic categories, as in the case of every historical and social science, it must be borne in mind that . . . *the categories are therefore but forms of being, conditions of existence. . . .*"⁶ If this meaning of dialectical method is obscured, dialectics must inevitably begin to look like a superfluous additive, a mere ornament of Marxist 'sociology' or 'economics'. Even worse, it will appear as an obstacle to the 'sober', 'impartial' study of the 'facts', as an empty construct in whose name Marxism does violence to the facts.

This objection to dialectical method has been voiced most clearly and cogently by Bernstein, thanks in part to a 'freedom from bias' unclouded by any philosophical knowledge. However, the very real political and economic conclusions he deduces from this desire to liberate method from the 'dialectical snares' of Hegelianism, show clearly where this course leads. They show that it is precisely the dialectic that must be removed if one wishes to found a thoroughgoing opportunistic theory, a theory of 'evolution' without revolution and of 'natural development' into Socialism without any conflict.

2

We are now faced with the question of the methodological implications of these so-called facts that are idolised throughout the whole of Revisionist literature. To what extent may we look to them to provide guide-lines for the actions of the revolutionary proletariat? It goes without saying that all knowledge starts from the facts. The only question is: which of the data of life are relevant to knowledge and in the context of which method?

The blinkered empiricist will of course deny that facts can only become facts within the framework of a system—which will vary with the knowledge desired. He believes that every piece of data from economic life, every statistic, every raw event already constitutes an important fact. In so doing he forgets that however simple an enumeration of 'facts' may be, however lacking in commentary, it already implies an 'interpretation'. Already at this stage the facts have been comprehended by a theory, a method; they have been wrenched from their living context and fitted into a theory.

More sophisticated opportunists would readily grant this despite their profound and instinctive dislike of all theory. They seek refuge in the methods of natural science, in the way in which science distills 'pure' facts and places them in the relevant contexts by means of observation, abstraction and experiment. They then oppose this ideal model of knowledge to the forced constructions of the dialectical method.

If such methods seem plausible at first this is because capitalism tends to produce a social structure that in great measure encourages such views. But for that very reason we need the dialectical method to puncture the social illusion so produced and help

us to glimpse the reality underlying it. The 'pure' facts of the natural sciences arise when a phenomenon of the real world is placed (in thought or in reality) into an environment where its laws can be inspected without outside interference. This process is reinforced by reducing the phenomena to their purely quantitative essence, to their expression in numbers and numerical relations. Opportunists always fail to recognise that it is in the nature of capitalism to process phenomena in this way. Marx gives an incisive account⁷ of such a 'process of abstraction' in the case of labour, but he does not omit to point out with equal vigour that he is dealing with a *historical* peculiarity of capitalist society. "Thus the most general abstractions commonly appear where there is the highest concrete development, where one feature appears to be shared by many, and to be common to all. Then it cannot be thought of any longer in one particular form."

But this tendency in capitalism goes even further. The fetishistic character of economic forms, the reification of all human relations, the constant expansion and extension of the division of labour which subjects the process of production to an abstract, rational analysis, without regard to the human potentialities and abilities of the immediate producers, all these things transform the phenomena of society and with them the way in which they are perceived. In this way arise the 'isolated' facts, 'isolated' complexes of facts, separate, specialist disciplines (economics, law, etc.) whose very appearance seems to have done much to pave the way for such scientific methods. It thus appears extraordinarily 'scientific' to think out the tendencies implicit in the facts themselves and to promote this activity to the status of science.

By contrast, in the teeth of all these isolated and isolating facts and partial systems, dialectics insists on the concrete unity of the whole. Yet although it exposes these appearances for the illusions they are—albeit illusions necessarily engendered by capitalism—in this 'scientific' atmosphere it still gives the impression of being an arbitrary construction.

The unscientific nature of this seemingly so scientific method consists, then, in its failure to see and take account of the *historical character* of the facts on which it is based. This is the source of more than one error (constantly overlooked by the practitioners of the method) to which Engels has explicitly drawn attention.⁸ The nature of this source of error is that statistics and the 'exact' economic theory based upon them always lag behind actual

developments. "For this reason, it is only too often necessary in current history, to treat this, the most decisive factor, as constant, and the economic situation existing at the beginning of the period concerned as given and unalterable for the whole period, or else to take notice of only those changes in the situation as arise out of the patently manifest events themselves and are therefore, likewise, patently manifest."

Thus we perceive that there is something highly problematic in the fact that capitalist society is predisposed to harmonise with scientific method, to constitute indeed the social premises of its exactness. If the internal structure of the 'facts' of their interconnections is essentially historical, if, that is to say, they are caught up in a process of continuous transformation, then we may indeed question when the greater scientific inaccuracy occurs. It is when I conceive of the 'facts' as existing in a form and as subject to laws concerning which I have a methodological certainty (or at least probability) that they no longer apply to these facts? Or is it when I consciously take this situation into account, cast a critical eye at the 'exactitude' attainable by such a method and concentrate instead on those points where this *historical* aspect, this decisive fact of change really manifests itself?

The historical character of the 'facts' which science seems to have grasped with such 'purity' makes itself felt in an even more devastating manner. As the products of historical evolution they are involved in continuous change. But in addition they are also *precisely in their objective structure the products of a definite historical epoch, namely capitalism*. Thus when 'science' maintains that the manner in which data immediately present themselves is an adequate foundation of scientific conceptualisation and that the actual form of these data is the appropriate starting point for the formation of scientific concepts, it thereby takes its stand simply and dogmatically on the basis of capitalist society. It uncritically accepts the nature of the object as it is given and the laws of that society as the unalterable foundation of 'science'.

In order to progress from these 'facts' to facts in the true meaning of the word it is necessary to perceive their historical conditioning as such and to abandon the point of view that would see them as immediately given: they must themselves be subjected to a historical and dialectical examination. For as Marx says:⁹ "The finished pattern of economic relations as seen on the surface

in their real existence and consequently in the ideas with which the agents and bearers of these relations seek to understand them, is very different from, and indeed quite the reverse of and antagonistic to their inner, essential but concealed core and the concepts corresponding to it."

If the facts are to be understood, this distinction between their real existence and their inner core must be grasped clearly and precisely. This distinction is the first premise of a truly scientific study which in Marx's words, "would be superfluous if the outward appearance of things coincided with their essence".¹⁰ Thus we must detach the phenomena from the form in which they are immediately given and discover the intervening links which connect them to their core, their essence. In so doing, we shall arrive at an understanding of their apparent form and see it as the form in which the inner core necessarily appears. It is necessary because of the historical character of the facts, because they have grown in the soil of capitalist society. This twofold character, the simultaneous recognition and transcendence of immediate appearances is precisely the dialectical nexus.

In this respect, superficial readers imprisoned in the modes of thought created by capitalism, experienced the gravest difficulties in comprehending the structure of thought in *Capital*. For on the one hand, Marx's account pushes the capitalist nature of all economic forms to their furthest limits, he creates an intellectual milieu where they can exist in their purest form by positing a society 'corresponding to the theory', i.e. capitalist through and through, consisting of none but capitalists and proletarians. But conversely, no sooner does this strategy produce results, no sooner does this world of phenomena seem to be on the point of crystallising out into theory than it dissolves into a mere illusion, a distorted situation appears as in a distorting mirror which is, however, "only the conscious expression of an imaginary movement".

Only in this context which sees the isolated facts of social life as aspects of the historical process and integrates them in a *totality*, can knowledge of the facts hope to become knowledge of *reality*. This knowledge starts from the simple (and to the capitalist world), pure, immediate, natural determinants described above. It progresses from them to the knowledge of the concrete totality, i.e. to the conceptual reproduction of reality. This concrete totality is by no means an unmediated datum for thought.

"The concrete is concrete," Marx says,¹¹ "because it is a synthesis of many particular determinants, i.e. a unity of diverse elements."

Idealism succumbs here to the delusion of confusing the intellectual reproduction of reality with the actual structure of reality itself. For "in thought, reality appears as the process of synthesis, not as starting-point, but as outcome, although it is the real starting-point and hence the starting-point for perception and ideas."

Conversely, the vulgar materialists, even in the modern guise donned by Bernstein and others, do not go beyond the reproduction of the immediate, simple determinants of social life. They imagine that they are being quite extraordinarily 'exact' when they simply take over these determinants without either analysing them further or welding them into a concrete totality. They take the facts in abstract isolation, explaining them only in terms of abstract laws unrelated to the concrete totality. As Marx observes: "Crudeness and conceptual nullity consist in the tendency to forge arbitrary unmediated connections between things that belong together in an organic union."¹²

The crudeness and conceptual nullity of such thought lies primarily in the fact that it obscures the historical, transitory nature of capitalist society. Its determinants take on the appearance of timeless, eternal categories valid for all social formations. This could be seen at its crassest in the vulgar bourgeois economists, but the vulgar Marxists soon followed in their footsteps. The dialectical method was overthrown and with it the methodological supremacy of the totality over the individual aspects; the parts were prevented from finding their definition within the whole and, instead, the whole was dismissed as unscientific or else it degenerated into the mere 'idea' or 'sum' of the parts. With the totality out of the way, the fetishistic relations of the isolated parts appeared as a timeless law valid for every human society.

Marx's dictum: "The relations of production of every society form a whole"¹³ is the methodological point of departure and the key to the *historical* understanding of social relations. All the isolated partial categories can be thought of and treated—in isolation—as something that is always present in every society. (If it cannot be found in a given society this is put down to 'chance' as the exception that proves the rule.) But the changes to which these individual aspects are subject give no clear and unambiguous

picture of the real differences in the various stages of the evolution of society. These can really only be discerned in the context of the total historical process of their relation to society as a whole.

3

This dialectical conception of totality seems to have put a great distance between itself and reality, it appears to construct reality very 'unscientifically'. But it is the only method capable of understanding and reproducing reality. Concrete totality is, therefore, the category that governs reality.¹⁴ The rightness of this view only emerges with complete clarity when we direct our attention to the real, material substratum of our method, viz. capitalist society with its internal antagonism between the forces and the relations of production. The methodology of the natural sciences which forms the methodological ideal of every fetishistic science and every kind of Revisionism rejects the idea of contradiction and antagonism in its subject matter. If, despite this, contradictions do spring up between particular theories, this only proves that our knowledge is as yet imperfect. Contradictions between theories show that these theories have reached their natural limits; they must therefore be transformed and subsumed under even wider theories in which the contradictions finally disappear.

But we maintain that in the case of social reality these contradictions are not a sign of the imperfect understanding of society; on the contrary, they belong to *the nature of reality itself and to the nature of capitalism*. When the totality is known they will not be transcended and *cease* to be contradictions. Quite the reverse, they will be seen to be necessary contradictions arising out of the antagonisms of this system of production. When theory (as the knowledge of the whole) opens up the way to resolving these contradictions it does so by revealing the *real tendencies* of social evolution. For these are destined to effect a *real* resolution of the contradictions that have emerged in the course of history.

From this angle we see that the conflict between the dialectical method and that of 'criticism' (or vulgar materialism, Machism, etc.) is a social problem. When the ideal of scientific knowledge is applied to nature it simply furthers the progress of science. But when it is applied to society it turns out to be an ideological weapon of the bourgeoisie. For the latter it is a matter of life and

death to understand its own system of production in terms of eternally valid categories: it must think of capitalism as being predestined to eternal survival by the eternal laws of nature and reason. Conversely, contradictions that cannot be ignored must be shown to be purely surface phenomena, unrelated to this mode of production.

The method of classical economics was a product of this ideological need. But also its limitations as a science are a consequence of the structure of capitalist reality and the antagonistic character of capitalist production. When, for example, a thinker of Ricardo's stature can deny the "necessity of expanding the market along with the expansion of production and the growth of capital", he does so (unconsciously of course), to avoid the necessity of admitting that crises are inevitable. For crises are the most striking illustration of the antagonisms in capitalist production and it is evident that "the bourgeois mode of production implies a limitation to the free development of the forces of production".¹⁵

What was good faith in Ricardo became a consciously misleading apologia of bourgeois society in the writings of the vulgar economists. The vulgar Marxists arrived at the same results by seeking either the thorough-going elimination of dialectics from proletarian science, or at best its 'critical' refinement.

To give a grotesque illustration, Max Adler wished to make a critical distinction between dialectics as method, as the movement of thought on the one hand and the dialectics of being, as metaphysics on the other. His 'criticism' culminates in the sharp separation of dialectics from both and he describes it as a "piece of positive science" which "is what is chiefly meant by talk of real dialectics in Marxism". This dialectic might more aptly be called 'antagonism', for it simply "asserts that an opposition exists between the self-interest of an individual and the social forms in which he is confined".¹⁶ By this stroke the objective economic antagonism as expressed in the *class struggle* evaporates, leaving only a conflict between the *individual and society*. This means that neither the emergence of internal problems, nor the collapse of capitalist society, can be seen to be necessary. The end-product, whether he likes it or not, is a Kantian philosophy of history. Moreover, the structure of bourgeois society is established as the universal form of society in general. For the central problem Max Adler tackles, of the real "dialectics or, better, antagonism" is nothing but one of the typical ideological forms of

the capitalist social order. But whether capitalism is rendered immortal on economic or on ideological grounds, whether with naïve nonchalance, or with critical refinement is of little importance.

Thus with the rejection or blurring of the dialectical method history becomes unknowable. This does not imply that a more or less exact account of particular people or epochs cannot be given without the aid of dialectics. But it does put paid to attempts to understand history *as a unified process*. (This can be seen in the sociologically abstract, historical constructs of the type of Spencer and Comte whose inner contradictions have been convincingly exposed by modern bourgeois historians, most incisively by Rickert. But it also shows itself in the demand for a 'philosophy of history' which then turns out to have a quite inscrutable relationship to historical reality.) The opposition between the description of an aspect of history and the description of history as a unified process is not just a problem of scope, as in the distinction between particular and universal history. It is rather a conflict of method, of approach. Whatever the epoch or special topic of study, the question of a unified approach to the process of history is inescapable. It is here that the crucial importance of the dialectical view of totality reveals itself. For it is perfectly possible for someone to describe the essentials of an historical event and yet be in the dark about the real nature of that event and of its function in the historical totality, i.e. without understanding it as part of a unified historical process.

A typical example of this can be seen in Sismondi's treatment of the question of crisis.¹⁷ He understood the immanent tendencies in the processes of production and distribution. But ultimately he failed because, for all his incisive criticism of capitalism, he remained imprisoned in capitalist notions of the objective and so necessarily thought of production and distribution as two independent processes, "not realising that the relations of distribution are only the relations of production *sub alia specie*". He thus succumbs to the same fate that overtook Proudhon's false dialectics; "he converts the various limbs of society into so many independent societies".¹⁸

We repeat: the category of totality does not reduce its various elements to an undifferentiated uniformity, to identity. The apparent independence and autonomy which they possess in the capitalist system of production is an illusion only in so far as they are involved in a dynamic dialectical relationship with

one another and can be thought of as the dynamic dialectical aspects of an equally dynamic and dialectical whole. "The result we arrive at," says Marx, "is not that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they are all members of one totality, different aspects of a unit. . . . Thus a definite form of production determines definite forms of consumption, distribution and exchange as well as *definite relations between these different elements*. . . . A mutual interaction takes place between these various elements. This is the case with every organic body."¹⁹

But even the category of interaction requires inspection. If by interaction we mean just the reciprocal causal impact of two otherwise unchangeable objects on each other, we shall not have come an inch nearer to an understanding of society. This is the case with the vulgar materialists with their one-way causal sequences (or the Machists with their functional relations). After all, there is e.g. an interaction when a stationary billiard ball is struck by a moving one: the first one moves, the second one is deflected from its original path. The interaction we have in mind must be more than the interaction of *otherwise unchanging objects*. It must go further in its relation to the whole: for this relation determines the objective form of every object of cognition. Every substantial change that is of concern to knowledge manifests itself as a change in relation to the whole and through this as a change in the form of objectivity itself.²⁰ Marx has formulated this idea in countless places. I shall cite only one of the best-known passages:²¹ "A negro is a negro. He only becomes a slave in certain circumstances. A cotton-spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. Only in certain circumstances does it become capital. Torn from those circumstances it is no more capital than gold is money or sugar the price of sugar."

Thus the objective forms of all social phenomena change constantly in the course of their ceaseless dialectical interactions with each other. The intelligibility of objects develops in proportion as we grasp their function in the totality to which they belong. This is why only the dialectical conception of totality can enable us to understand *reality as a social process*. For only this conception dissolves the fetishistic forms necessarily produced by the capitalist mode of production and enables us to see them as mere illusions which are not less illusory for being seen to be necessary. These unmediated concepts, these 'laws' sprout just as inevitably from the soil of capitalism and veil the real relations between objects.

They can all be seen as ideas necessarily held by the agents of the capitalist system of production. They are, therefore, objects of knowledge, but the object which is known through them is not the capitalist system of production itself, but the ideology of its ruling class.

Only when this veil is torn aside does historical knowledge become possible. For the function of these unmediated concepts that have been derived from the fetishistic forms of objectivity is to make the phenomena of capitalist society appear as supra-historical essences. The knowledge of the real, objective nature of a phenomenon, the knowledge of its historical character and the knowledge of its actual function in the totality of society form, therefore, a single, undivided act of cognition. This unity is shattered by the pseudo-scientific method. Thus only through the dialectical method could the distinction between constant and variable capital, crucial to economics, be understood. Classical economics was unable to go beyond the distinction between fixed and circulating capital. This was not accidental. For "variable capital is only a particular historical manifestation of the fund for providing the necessaries of life, or the labour-fund which the labourer requires for the maintenance of himself and his family, and which whatever be the system of social production, he must himself produce and reproduce. If the labour-fund constantly flows to him in the form of money that pays for his labour, it is because the product he has created moves constantly away from him in the form of capital. . . . The transaction is veiled by the fact that the product appears as a commodity and the commodity as money." ²²

The fetishistic illusions enveloping all phenomena in capitalist society succeed in concealing reality, but more is concealed than the historical, i.e. transitory, ephemeral nature of phenomena. *This* concealment is made possible by the fact that in capitalist society man's environment, and especially the categories of economics, appear to him immediately and necessarily in forms of objectivity which conceal the fact that they are the categories of the *relations of men with each other*. Instead they appear as things and the relations of things with each other. Therefore, when the dialectical method destroys the fiction of the immortality of the categories it also destroys their reified character and clears the way to a knowledge of reality. According to Engels in his discussion of Marx's *Critique of Political Economy*, "economics does not

treat of things, but of the relations between persons and, in the last analysis, between classes; however, these relations are always *bound to things and appear as things.*"²³

It is by virtue of this insight that the dialectical method and its concept of totality can be seen to provide real knowledge of what goes on in society. It might appear as if the dialectic relations between parts and whole were no more than a construct of thought as remote from the true categories of social reality as the unmediated formulae of bourgeois economics. If so, the superiority of dialectics would be purely methodological. The real difference, however, is deeper and more fundamental.

At every stage of social evolution each economic category reveals a definite relation between men. This relation becomes conscious and is conceptualised. Because of this the inner logic of the movement of human society can be understood at once as the product of men themselves and of forces that arise from their relations with each other and which have escaped their control. Thus the economic categories become dynamic and dialectical in a double sense. As 'pure' economic categories they are involved in constant interaction with each other, and that enables us to understand any given historical cross-section through the evolution of society. But since they have arisen out of human relations and since they function in the process of the transformation of human relations, the actual process of social evolution becomes visible in their reciprocal relationship with the reality underlying their activity. That is to say, the production and reproduction of a particular *economic* totality, which science hopes to understand, is necessarily transformed into the process of production and reproduction of a particular *social* totality; in the course of this transformation, 'pure' economics are naturally transcended, though this does not mean that we must appeal to any transcendental forces. Marx often insisted upon this aspect of dialectics. For instance:²⁴ "Capitalist production, therefore, under its aspect of a continuous connected process or as a process of reproduction produces not only commodities, not only surplus value, but it also produces and reproduces the capitalist relation itself, on the one hand the capitalist and on the other, the labourer."

To posit oneself, to produce and reproduce oneself—that is

reality. Hegel clearly perceived this and expressed it in a way closely similar to that of Marx, albeit cloaked in abstraction and misunderstanding itself and thus opening the way to further misunderstanding. "What is actual is necessary in itself," he says in the *Philosophy of Right*. "Necessity consists in this that the whole is sundered into the different concepts and that this divided whole yields a fixed and permanent determinacy. However, this is not a fossilised determinacy but one which permanently recreates itself in its dissolution."²⁵ The deep affinities between historical materialism and Hegel's philosophy are clearly manifested here, for both conceive of theory as the *self-knowledge of reality*. Nevertheless, we must briefly point to the crucial difference between them. This is likewise located in the problem of reality and of the unity of the historical process.

Marx reproached Hegel (and, in even stronger terms, Hegel's successors who had reverted to Kant and Fichte) with his failure to overcome the duality of thought and being, of theory and practice, of subject and object. He maintained that Hegel's dialectic, which purported to be an inner, real dialectic of the historical process, was a mere illusion: in the crucial point he failed to go beyond Kant. His knowledge is no more than knowledge *about* an essentially alien material. It was not the case that this material, human society, came to know itself. As he remarks in the decisive sentences of his critique,²⁶ "Already with Hegel, the absolute spirit of history has its material in the masses, but only finds adequate expression in philosophy. But the philosopher appears merely as the instrument by which absolute spirit, which makes history, arrives at self-consciousness after the historical movement has been completed. The philosopher's role in history is thus limited to this subsequent consciousness, for the real movement is executed unconsciously by the absolute spirit. Thus the philosopher arrives *post festum*." Hegel, then, permits "absolute spirit qua absolute spirit to make history only in appearance. . . . For, as absolute spirit does not appear in the mind of the philosopher in the shape of the creative world-spirit until after the event, it follows that it makes history only in the consciousness, the opinions and the ideas of the philosophers, only in the speculative imagination." Hegel's conceptual mythology has been definitively eliminated by the critical activity of the young Marx.

It is, however, not accidental that Marx achieved 'self-under-

standing' in the course of opposing a reactionary Hegelian movement reverting back to Kant. This movement exploited Hegel's obscurities and inner uncertainties in order to eradicate the revolutionary elements from his method. It strove to harmonise the reactionary content, the reactionary conceptual mythology, the vestiges of the contemplative dualism of thought and existence with the consistently reactionary philosophy which prevailed in the Germany of the day.

By adopting the progressive part of the Hegelian method, namely the dialectic, Marx not only cut himself off from Hegel's successors; he also split Hegel's philosophy in two. He took the historical tendency in Hegel to its logical extreme: he radically transformed all the phenomena both of society and of socialised man into historical problems: he concretely revealed the real substratum of historical evolution and developed a seminal method in the process. He measured Hegel's philosophy by the yardstick he had himself discovered and systematically elaborated, and he found it wanting. The mythologising remnants of the 'eternal values' which Marx eliminated from the dialectic belong basically on the same level as the philosophy of reflection which Hegel had fought his whole life long with such energy and bitterness and against which he had pitted his entire philosophical method, with its ideas of process and concrete totality, dialectics and history. In this sense Marx's critique of Hegel is the direct continuation and extension of the criticism that Hegel himself levelled at Kant and Fichte.²⁷ So it came about that Marx's dialectical method continued what Hegel had striven for but had failed to achieve in a concrete form. And, on the other hand, the corpse of the written system remained for the scavenging philologists and system-makers to feast upon.

It is at reality itself that Hegel and Marx part company. Hegel was unable to penetrate to the real driving forces of history. Partly because these forces were not yet fully visible when he created his system. In consequence he was forced to regard the peoples and their consciousness as the true bearers of historical evolution. (But he did not discern their real nature because of the heterogeneous composition of that consciousness. So he mythologised it into the 'spirit of the people'.) But in part he remained imprisoned in the Platonic and Kantian outlook, in the duality of thought and being, of form and matter, notwithstanding his very energetic efforts to break out. Even though he was the first

to discover the meaning of concrete totality, and even though his thought was constantly bent upon overcoming every kind of abstraction, matter still remained tainted for him with the 'stain of the specific' (and here he was very much the Platonist). These contradictory and conflicting tendencies could not be clarified within his system. They are often juxtaposed, unmediated, contradictory and unreconciled. In consequence, the ultimate (apparent) synthesis had perforce to turn to the past rather than the future.²⁸ It is no wonder that from very early on bourgeois science chose to dwell on these aspects of Hegel. As a result the revolutionary core of his thought became almost totally obscure even for Marxists.

A conceptual mythology always points to the failure to understand a fundamental condition of human existence, one whose effects cannot be warded off. This failure to penetrate the object is expressed intellectually in terms of transcendental forces which construct and shape reality, the relations between objects, our relations with them and their transformations in the course of history in a mythological fashion. By recognising that "the production and reproduction of real life (is) in the last resort the decisive factor in history",²⁹ Marx and Engels gained a vantage point from which they could settle accounts with all mythologies. Hegel's absolute spirit was the last of these grandiose mythological schemes. It already contained the totality and its movement, even though it was unaware of its real character. Thus in historical materialism reason "which has always existed though not always in a rational form",³⁰ achieved that 'rational' form by discovering its real substratum, the basis from which human life will really be able to become conscious of itself. This completed the programme of Hegel's philosophy of history, even though at the cost of the destruction of his system. In contrast to nature in which, as Hegel emphasises,³¹ "change goes in a circle, repeating the same thing", change in history takes place "in the concept as well as on the surface. It is the concept itself which is corrected."

5

The premise of dialectical materialism is, we recall: "It is not men's consciousness that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness." Only in the context sketched above can this premise point

beyond mere theory and become a question of praxis. Only when the core of existence stands revealed as a social process can existence be seen as the product, albeit the hitherto unconscious product, of human activity. This activity will be seen in its turn as the element crucial for the transformation of existence. Man finds himself confronted by purely natural relations or social forms mystified into natural relations. They appear to be fixed, complete and immutable entities which can be manipulated and even comprehended, but never overthrown. But also this situation creates the possibility of praxis in the individual consciousness. Praxis becomes the form of action appropriate to the isolated individual, it becomes his ethics. Feuerbach's attempt to supersede Hegel foundered on this reef: like the German idealists, and to a much greater extent than Hegel, he stopped short at the isolated individual of 'civil society'.

Marx urged us to understand 'the sensuous world', the object, reality, as human sensuous activity.³² This means that man must become conscious of himself as a social being, as simultaneously the subject and object of the socio-historical process. In feudal society man could not yet see himself as a social being because his social relations were still mainly natural. Society was far too unorganised and had far too little control over the totality of relations between men for it to appear to consciousness as *the* reality of man. (The question of the structure and unity of feudal society cannot be considered in any detail here.) Bourgeois society carried out the process of socialising society. Capitalism destroyed both the spatio-temporal barriers between different lands and territories and also the legal partitions between the different 'estates' (Stände). In its universe there is a formal equality for all men; the economic relations that directly determined the metabolic exchange between men and nature progressively disappear. Man becomes, in the true sense of the word, a social being. Society becomes *the* reality for man.

Thus the recognition that society is reality becomes possible only under capitalism, in bourgeois society. But the class which carried out this revolution did so without consciousness of its function; the social forces it unleashed, the very forces that carried it to supremacy seemed to be opposed to it like a second nature, but a more soulless, impenetrable nature than feudalism ever was.³³ It was necessary for the proletariat to be born for social reality to become fully conscious. The reason for this is that the

discovery of the class-outlook of the proletariat provided a vantage point from which to survey the whole of society. With the emergence of historical materialism there arose the theory of the "conditions for the liberation of the proletariat" and the doctrine of reality understood as the total process of social evolution. This was only possible because for the proletariat the total knowledge of its class-situation was a vital necessity, a matter of life and death; because its class situation becomes comprehensible only if the whole of society can be understood; and because this understanding is the inescapable precondition of its actions. Thus the unity of theory and practice is only the reverse side of the social and historical position of the proletariat. From its own point of view self-knowledge coincides with knowledge of the whole so that the proletariat is at one and the same time the subject and object of its own knowledge.

The mission of raising humanity to a higher level is based, as Hegel rightly observed³⁴ (although he was still concerned with nations), on the fact that these "stages of evolution exist as *immediate, natural principles*" and it devolves upon every nation (i.e. class) "endowed with such a *natural principle* to put it into practice". Marx concretises this idea with great clarity by applying it to social development:³⁵ "If socialist writers attribute this world-historical role to the proletariat it is not because they believe . . . that the proletariat are gods. Far from it. The proletariat can and must liberate itself because when the proletariat is fully developed, its humanity and even the appearance of its humanity has become totally abstract; because in the conditions of its life all the conditions of life of contemporary society find their most inhuman consummation; because in the proletariat man is lost to himself but at the same time he has acquired a theoretical consciousness of this loss, and is driven by the absolutely imperious dictates of his misery—the practical expression of this necessity—which can no longer be ignored or whitewashed, to rebel against this inhumanity. However, the proletariat cannot liberate itself without destroying the conditions of its own life. But it cannot do that without destroying *all* the inhuman conditions of life in contemporary society which exist in the proletariat in a concentrated form."

Thus the essence of the method of historical materialism is inseparable from the 'practical and critical' activity of the proletariat: both are aspects of the same process of social evolu-

tion. So, too, the knowledge of reality provided by the dialectical method is likewise inseparable from the class standpoint of the proletariat. The question raised by the Austrian Marxists of the methodological separation of the 'pure' science of Marxism from socialism is a pseudo-problem.³⁶ For, the Marxist method, the dialectical materialist knowledge of reality, can arise only from the point of view of a class, from the point of view of the struggle of the proletariat. To abandon this point of view is to move away from historical materialism, just as to adopt it leads directly into the thick of the struggle of the proletariat.

Historical materialism grows out of the "immediate, natural" life-principle of the proletariat; it means the acquisition of total knowledge of reality from this one point of view. But it does not follow from this that this knowledge or this methodological attitude is the inherent or natural possession of the proletariat as a class (let alone of proletarian individuals). On the contrary. It is true that the proletariat is the conscious subject of total social reality. But the conscious subject is not defined here as in Kant, where 'subject' is defined as that which can never be an object. The 'subject' here is not a detached spectator of the process. The proletariat is more than just the active and passive part of this process: the rise and evolution of its knowledge and its actual rise and evolution in the course of history are just the two different sides of the same real process. It is not simply the case that the working class arose in the course of spontaneous, unconscious actions born of immediate, direct despair (the Luddite destruction of machines can serve as a primitive illustration of this), and then advanced gradually through incessant social struggle to the point where it "formed itself into a class". But it is no less true that proletarian consciousness of social reality, of its own class situation, of its own historical vocation and the materialist view of history are all products of this self-same process of evolution which historical materialism understands adequately and for what it really is for the first time in history.

Thus the Marxist method is equally as much the product of class warfare as any other political or economic product. In the same way, the evolution of the proletariat reflects the inner structure of the society which it was the first to understand. "Its result, therefore, appears just as constantly presupposed by it as its presuppositions appear as its results."³⁷ The idea of totality which we have come to recognise as the presupposition necessary to

comprehend reality is the product of history in a double sense.

First, historical materialism became a formal, objective possibility only because economic factors created the proletariat, because the proletariat did emerge (i.e. at a particular stage of historical development), and because the subject and object of the knowledge of social reality were transformed. Second, this formal possibility became a real one only in the course of the evolution of the proletariat. If the meaning of history is to be found in the process of history itself and not, as formerly, in a transcendental, mythological or ethical meaning foisted on to recalcitrant material, this presupposes a proletariat with a relatively advanced awareness of its own position, i.e. a relatively advanced proletariat, and, therefore, a long preceding period of evolution. The path taken by this evolution leads from utopia to the knowledge of reality; from transcendental goals fixed by the first great leaders of the workers' movement to the clear perception by the Commune of 1871 that the working-class has "no ideals to realise", but wishes only "to liberate the elements of the new society". It is the path leading from the "class opposed to capitalism" to the class "for itself".

Seen in this light the revisionist separation of movement and ultimate goal represents a regression to the most primitive stage of the working-class movement. For the ultimate goal is not a 'state of the future' awaiting the proletariat somewhere independent of the movement and the path leading up to it. It is not a condition which can be happily forgotten in the stress of daily life and recalled only in Sunday sermons as a stirring contrast to workaday cares. Nor is it a 'duty', an 'idea' designed to regulate the 'real' process. The ultimate goal is rather that *relation to the totality* (to the whole of society seen as a process), through which every aspect of the struggle acquires its revolutionary significance. This relation informs every aspect in its simple and sober ordinariness, but only consciousness makes it real and so confers reality on the day-to-day struggle by manifesting its relation to the whole. Thus it elevates mere existence to reality. Do not let us forget either that every attempt to rescue the 'ultimate goal' or the 'essence' of the proletariat from every impure contact with—capitalist—existence leads ultimately to the same remoteness from reality, from 'practical, critical activity' and to the same relapse into the utopian dualism of subject and object, of theory and practice to which Revisionism has succumbed.³⁸

The practical danger of every such dualism shows itself in the loss of any directive for *action*. As soon as you abandon the ground of reality that has been conquered and reconquered by dialectical materialism, as soon as you decide to remain on the 'natural' ground of existence, of the empirical in its stark, naked brutality, you create a gulf between the subject of an action and the milieu of the 'facts' in which the action unfolds so that they stand opposed to each other as harsh, irreconcilable principles. It then becomes impossible to impose the subjective will, wish or decision upon the facts or to discover in them any directive for action. A situation in which the 'facts' speak out unmistakably for or against a definite course of action has never existed, and neither can or will exist. The more conscientiously the facts are explored—in their isolation, i.e. in their unmediated relations—the less compellingly will they point in any one direction. It is self-evident that a merely subjective decision will be shattered by the pressure of uncomprehended facts acting automatically 'according to laws'.

Thus dialectical materialism is seen to offer the only approach to reality which can give action a direction. The self-knowledge, both subjective and objective, of the proletariat at a given point in its evolution is at the same time knowledge of the stage of development achieved by the whole society. The facts no longer appear strange when they are comprehended in their coherent reality, in the relation of all partial aspects to their inherent, but hitherto unelucidated roots in the whole: we then perceive the tendencies which strive towards the centre of reality, to what we are wont to call the ultimate goal. This ultimate goal is not an abstract ideal opposed to the process, but an aspect of truth and reality. It is the concrete meaning of each stage reached and an integral part of the concrete moment. Because of this, to comprehend it is to recognise the direction taken (unconsciously) by events and tendencies towards the totality. It is to know the direction that determines concretely the correct course of action at any given moment—in terms of the interest of the total process, viz. the emancipation of the proletariat.

However, the evolution of society constantly heightens the tension between the partial aspects and the whole. Just because the inherent meaning of reality shines forth with an ever more resplendent light, the meaning of the process is embedded ever more deeply in day-to-day events, and totality permeates the spatio-temporal character of phenomena. The path to conscious-

ness throughout the course of history does not become smoother but on the contrary ever more arduous and exacting. For this reason the task of orthodox Marxism, its victory over Revisionism and utopianism can never mean the defeat, once and for all, of false tendencies. It is an ever-renewed struggle against the insidious effects of bourgeois ideology on the thought of the proletariat. Marxist orthodoxy is no guardian of traditions, it is the eternally vigilant prophet proclaiming the relation between the tasks of the immediate present and the totality of the historical process. Hence the words of the *Communist Manifesto* on the tasks of orthodoxy and of its representatives, the Communists, have lost neither their relevance nor their value: "The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties *by this only*: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the *entire* proletariat, independent of nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of *the movement as a whole*."

March 1919.

NOTES

- 1 *The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, in *Early Writings* edited by T. B. Bottomore, London, 1963, p. 52.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 3 *Nachlass I*, pp. 382-3. [*Correspondence of 1843*].
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 398. See also the essay on Class Consciousness.
- 5 *Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, in S.W. II, p. 350.
- 6 *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, translated by N. I. Stone, London, 1904 (my italics). It is of the first importance to realise that the method is limited here to the realms of history and society. The misunderstandings that arise from Engels' account of dialectics can in the main be put down to the fact that Engels—following Hegel's mistaken lead—extended the method to apply also to nature. However, the crucial determinants of dialectics—the interaction of subject and object, the unity of theory and practice, the historical changes in the reality underlying the categories as the root cause of changes in thought, etc.—are absent from our knowledge of nature. Unfortunately it is not possible to undertake a detailed analysis of these questions here.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 298-9.
- 8 Introduction to *The Class Struggles in France* in S.W. I, p. 110.

But it must be borne in mind that 'scientific exactitude' presupposes that the elements remain 'constant'. This had been postulated as far back as Galileo.

- 9 *Capital* III, p. 205. Similarly also pp. 47-8 and 307. The distinction between existence (which is divided into appearance, phenomenon and essence) and reality derives from Hegel's *Logic*. It is unfortunately not possible here to discuss the degree to which the conceptual framework of *Capital* is based on these distinctions. Similarly, the distinction between idea (Vorstellung) and concept (Begriff) is also to be found in Hegel.
- 10 *Capital* III, p. 797.
- 11 *A Contribution to political Economy*, p. 293.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 273. The category of reflective connection also derives from Hegel's *Logic*. [See Explanatory Notes for this concept].
- 13 *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Moscow, n.d., p. 123.
- 14 We would draw the attention of readers with a greater interest in questions of methodology to the fact that in Hegel's logic, too, the relation of the parts to the whole forms the dialectical transition from existence to reality. It must be noted in this context that the question of the relation of internal and external also treated there is likewise concerned with the problem of totality. Hegel, *Werke* IV, pp. 156 ff. (The quotations from the *Logic* are all taken from the 2nd edition.)
- 15 Marx, *Theorien über den Mehrwert*, Stuttgart, 1905, II, II, pp. 305-9.
- 16 *Marxistische Probleme*, p. 77.
- 17 *Theorien über den Mehrwert*, III, pp. 55 and 93-4.
- 18 *The Poverty of Philosophy*, pp. 123-4.
- 19 *A Contribution to Political Economy*, pp. 291-2.
- 20 The very subtle nature of Cunow's opportunism can be observed by the way in which—despite his thorough knowledge of Marx's works—he substitutes the word 'sum' for the concept of the whole (totality) thus eliminating every dialectical relation. Cf. *Die Marxsche Geschichts-, Gesellschafts- und Staatstheorie*, Berlin, 1929, II, pp. 155-7.
- 21 *Wage Labour and Capital*, in S.W. I, p. 83.
- 22 *Capital* I, p. 568.
- 23 Cf. the essay on *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat*.
- 24 *Capital* I, p. 578.
- 25 Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford, 1942, p. 283.
- 26 *Nachlass* II, p. 187. [*The Holy Family*, Chapter 6].
- 27 It comes as no surprise that at the very point where Marx radically departs from Hegel, Cunow should attempt to correct Marx by appealing to Hegel as seen through Kantian spectacles. To Marx's purely historical view of the state he opposes the Hegelian state as 'an eternal value'. Its 'errors' are to be set aside as nothing more than 'historical matters' which do not 'determine the nature, the fate and the objectives of the state'. For Cunow, Marx is

inferior to Hegel on this point because he 'regards the question politically and not from the standpoint of the sociologist'. Cunow, *op. cit.* p. 308.

It is evident that all Marx's efforts to overcome Hegelian philosophy might never have existed in the eyes of the opportunists. If they do not return to vulgar materialism or to Kant they use the reactionary elements of Hegel's philosophy of the state to erase revolutionary dialectics from Marxism, so as to provide an intellectual immortalisation of bourgeois society.

- 28 Hegel's attitude towards national economy is highly significant in this context. (*Philosophy of Right*, § 189.) He clearly sees that the problem of chance and necessity is fundamental to it methodologically (very like Engels: *Origin of the Family* S.W. II, p. 293 and *Feuerbach*, etc. S.W. II, p. 354). But he is unable to see the crucial importance of the material reality underlying the economy, viz. the relation of men to each other; it remains for him no more than an 'arbitrary chaos' and its laws are thought to be 'similar to those of the planetary system'. *Ibid.* §. 189.
- 29 Engels, Letter to J. Bloch, 21 September 1890, S.W. II, p. 443.
- 30 *Nachlass* I, p. 381. [*Correspondence with Ruge (1843)*].
- 31 *The Philosophy of History*. Phil. Bibl. I. pp. 133-4.
- 32 *Theses on Feuerbach*, in S.W. II, pp. 364-7.
- 33 See the essay *Class Consciousness* for an explanation of this situation.
- 34 *The Philosophy of Right*, § 346-7.
- 35 *Nachlass* II, p. 133. [*The Holy Family*, Chapter 4].
- 36 Hilferding, *Finanzkapital*, pp. VIII-IX.
- 37 *Capital* III.
- 38 Cf. Zinoviev's polemics against Guesde and his attitude to the war in Stuttgart. *Gegen den Strom*, pp. 470-1. Likewise Lenin's book, "*Left-Wing*" *Communism—an Infantile Disorder*.