

Marxism and the Theory of Praxis

A critique of some new versions
of old fallacies

by

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THE PROMISE OF PRAXIS—AN END TO POSITIVISM?

(i) "Non-Practical Thinking" in Contemporary Positivism

Theory and practice: the two must unite! This cry of protest is to be heard everywhere today by those who find their interest in philosophy and society sabotaged and sidetracked by the scholasticism and "academicism" of much of official philosophical thought and by many of the attitudes and postures adopted in the social sciences.

Some even regard the term "science" as a dirty word, for "science" today is often taken to mean theory without practice, facts without values, technical knowledge without human consideration. Science, we are told, can only be concerned with "means": what actually happens to knowledge is somebody else's concern. Indeed so extreme has this "agnosticism" become, that Marx's famous dictum has been explicitly turned on to its head so that one social scientist has written that "the function of science is to understand and interpret the world, not to change it".¹ It is scarcely surprising, then, that much academic social science seems pointless and trivial—a body of work more concerned with methodological technique than with serious social criticism.

A leading U.S. sociologist once described his "conceptual framework" as "non-practical theory" and, ironically, he had a point: for learned works on "pure theory" are unlikely to assist in solving social problems, while the professional desire to be "value-free" often means in practice robbing work of its *value* for society. The attempt to keep value judgments out of social science is simply a back-handed way of supporting the *status quo*.

Fewer and fewer people today take seriously the claim that it is possible to be "impartial" (i.e. *indifferent*) towards the class-divided society in which we live. Indeed, it was precisely this cloak of "neutrality" which thousands of natural and social scientists in the U.S. used to try to conceal their complicity in the slaughter, bombing and defoliation which the Americans and their South Vietnamese puppets practised in Vietnam. Radicals like Noam Chomsky have courageously

¹ Heinz Eulau, *The Behavioral Persuasion in Politics* (New York, 1963), p. 9.

the external world—it may be religiously conceived, biologically governed, psycho-analytically manipulated, etc.—that all we can say about its mystifying relativism is that it never changes. The world of the relative is only intelligible if it has an *absolute* basis to its own relativity; but whereas praxis theory ends up as the mystified victim of this dialectical law of opposites, Marxism is able to *consciously* explain it. Historical materialism, as the systematic application of materialist dialectics to society, harmoniously unites universality with concreteness. Precisely because it is a universal theory of society, it enables us to concretely evaluate each social formation in the light of its own specific reality: it is “dogmatic” and “mechanistic” to the praxical sceptic only because, as the most advanced social theory of our time, it passionately seeks to approximate to the objective truth.

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IS MARXISM DETERMINISTIC?

As far as the praxis theorists are concerned, “determinism” is a word of abuse: it represents the very antithesis of that freedom and creativity for which, they believe, the “authentic Marx” really stands. Determinism summarily expresses all that is stifling and “bureaucratic” in the Marxist “orthodoxy”—all that is inimical to the “humanist vision”.

The objections to the determinist view seem quite straightforward: determinism insists that the universe, including of course man, is subject to laws of motion which operate with the force of necessity and independently of the human will. How then, asks an angry Coulter, can human freedom be possibly realised if a “mechanistic-materialist” analysis reduces man to the “mere predicate of the movement in external events”—events which trigger “pre-determined responses” thereby denying man his role as *creator*?¹ Freedom and creativity can have no place in the deterministic universe. Petrovic put the praxis case thus:

no matter how exactly we may formulate and systematise these laws, it seems legitimate to pose the question to what extent the idea of the inevitable, exceptionless general laws of every being can be reconciled with Marx's idea of man as a free creative being of praxis. If all that exists is subjected to dialectical “laws”, how can man be exempted? And if man is not exempted, how can we speak of his freedom and creativity?²

If the activity of men is governed by laws which operate independently of their intended will, then, argues Sartre, such men are “entirely determined by prior circumstances”, the mere “sum of conditioned reflexes” and the passive product of external forces.³ If we are to “reconquer men within Marxism”, it is not only the dialectic in nature, the theory of reflection and the basis/superstructure analysis which must go: Marxism must be freed from these inexorable laws of motion—for it goes without saying, that the “dialect is not a determinism”.⁴

On the surface of things, the matter seems cut and dried: one cannot be a revolutionary and an activist if at the same time one is chained to determinism. There is, however, only one problem. The comments and

¹ Coulter, op. cit., p. 131.

³ Sartre, op. cit., p. 86.

² Petrovic, op. cit., p. 64.

⁴ Ibid., p. 73.

formulations of Karl Marx himself! For as Sartre gloomily observes, there are occasions where Marx himself appears to be one of determinism's most enthusiastic champions. He draws his reader's attention to Marx's response to the formulation of his theory by a critic in the *European Messenger* of St. Petersburg, May, 1872, where Marx is clearly impressed by the defence of his work expressed in the critic's article. This defence is unambiguously determinist in its formulation. The Russian writer quotes from the Preface to the *Critique* and proceeds to emphasise the fact that at the heart of Marx's theory is the discovery of those laws of motion which govern the formation of social orders and the transition of one to the other. Marx, says the writer,

treats the social movement as a process of natural history, governed by laws not only independent of human will, consciousness and intelligence, but rather on the contrary, determining that will, consciousness and intelligence.⁵

The deterministic essence of Marx's theory is reiterated in almost every sentence of the extract of the critic which Marx himself cites in his afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*. Marx is unequivocally described as a determinist: how does he react?

Whilst the writer pictures what he takes to be actually my method, in this striking and [as far as concerns my own application of it] generous way, what else is he picturing but the dialectic method?⁶

A "dialectic method" which can only be determinist to the core!

Sartre of course is appalled. Can Marx not see the fiercely anti-praxical implications of the statement which he has just quoted with such glowing approval? Is he not aware that this deterministic manifesto flagrantly contradicts his own demand for the workers' "conscious participation in the historical process which is overturning society" and indeed the theoretical position which he sketches out in the famous *Theses on Feuerbach*, and in particular, Thesis no. 3?

The third of Marx's theses on Feuerbach has, it should be noted, a rather special role to play in the praxis mythology about Marx. It is, as they see it, their ideological trump-card which shatters all "mechanistic misconceptions" and proves conclusively that it was Marx himself who gave the praxis concept its most authoritative imprimatur. "If you still think Marx is a determinist," chorus the praxis school, "then for heaven's sake, read the thesis on Feuerbach, no. 3!" Avineri, for example, believes that it is simply enough to quote the thesis in order to

⁵ Cited in *Capital*, I, op. cit., p. 17.

⁶ Ibid.

dispense with, once and for all, that "conservatism and quietism" inherent in Engels' "distortions" and in the 18th-century materialist view that man is determined by objective conditions.⁷

What exactly does the third thesis say? I quote it in full:

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. Hence, this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, one of which is superior to society (in Robert Owen, for example).

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionising practice.⁸

Now what does this thesis mean? Looked at superficially, it appears to suggest that Marx is opposed to the "materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances" because it forgets that it is men who change circumstances. It is not, Marx seems to be saying, circumstances which make men, but rather men who make circumstances. Naturally, this is how Sartre reads the passage:

... to act upon the educator, it is necessary to act upon the factors which condition him. Thus the qualities of external determination and those of that synthetic, progressive unity which is human *praxis* are found inseparably connected in Marxist thought.⁹

But is Marx really saying here that because men change circumstances they are not therefore the product of the world around them and are hence determined by nothing but themselves? The truth of a statement, like the truth of a phenomenon, does not always coincide with its appearances, and the real meaning of the third thesis is a good illustration of this axiom of science. It *appears* to be rejecting materialism and determinism: in fact, it is doing nothing of the kind. Those who see in the thesis an attack on materialism are arbitrarily foisting on Marx an issue which did not concern him. Marx at no time after 1844 *disputes* materialism: he takes it for granted that men indeed *are* the product of their circumstances. Otherwise the repeated affirmations of materialism in *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology*

⁷ Avineri, op. cit., p. 67.

⁸ *Theses on Feuerbach*, addenda to *The German Ideology*, pp. 651-652. (This is the version as edited by Engels in 1888; it is more or less identical to the original which is also reproduced here.)

⁹ Sartre, op. cit., p. 87 (footnote).

which were written at the same time as the *Theses* would make no sense at all. But why then does Marx say that the materialist doctrine "forgets that it is men who change circumstances"? He says this, *not* because he is critical of materialism *as such*, but because he has become critical of a particular *version* of materialism, namely "all hitherto existing materialism"—"that of Feuerbach included" (Thesis 1), "old materialism" (Thesis 10), or what he elsewhere calls "contemplative materialism" (Thesis 9). It is therefore not unreasonable for Marx in the third thesis to refer to this "contemplative materialism" as "the materialist doctrine", for although this is now no longer the case, contemplative or mechanical materialism *was* in 1845 the *only* materialism which has "hitherto existed". What Marx is concerned with is not doing away with materialism (as the praxis commentators sometimes assert), but with *improving* it. A materialist doctrine which forgets that it is men who change circumstances must be replaced by a materialist doctrine which will be capable of explaining human activity as "revolutionising practice". Thesis 10 makes this point crystal clear:

the standpoint of the old materialism is "civil" society; the standpoint of the new is *human* society, or socialised humanity.¹⁰

It is only the *old* materialism which is passivist and uncritical: the *new* materialism represents the standpoint of human society because it points to action. Man is the product of his circumstances—Marx does not deny this. All he says is that it is not *enough*: men can, by understanding the circumstances which govern their lives, actually change these circumstances, so that passive contemplation can give way to conscious action. It is this which is the *new* materialism—an activist, dialectical materialism which is clearly delineated in *The Holy Family* where Marx and Engels comment, in *defence* of materialism, that "if man is shaped by his surroundings, his surroundings must be made human".¹¹ Indeed, the third thesis continues to refer to life, i.e. circumstances, as the *educator* of man, the force which determines his fate: this is not contested. What is contested is the fact which the old materialism omits or "forgets" to add, that this educator is by no means outside of the control of man and can therefore be increasingly "educated" in turn. The new materialism does not *exclude* the old materialism—it builds upon it.

The third thesis therefore in no way rejects *determinism*: what it does

¹⁰ *The German Ideology*, op. cit., p. 652.

¹¹ *The Holy Family*, op. cit., p. 176.

is to reject a *one-sided* determinism which leads merely to passivity and impotent "contemplation". Indeed, Marx even goes further. For the thesis states that the doctrine of old materialism

necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, one of which is superior to society (in Robert Owen, for example).¹²

Now the implications of this statement are most interesting. If the old materialism produces a dualism between the individual and society, his ideas and the outside world, then in fact the old materialism undermines itself and collapses into idealism: since men are "entirely governed" by circumstances, when they *do* act, they must seek out a Rational Truth from some sort of trans-circumstantial world, for as passive beings who merely contemplate their experience they can derive their motivating principles in no other way. "Contemplative materialism", in other words, is not *consistent* materialism at all, because when it "necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts", it has to abandon its materialist explanation of the universe. Robert Owen, as Marx points out, is indeed a case in point.

According to Owen, "the character of man is, without a single exception, always formed for him".¹³ A position which *appears* to be militantly deterministic:

Man, therefore, never did, nor is it possible that he ever can, form his own character.

But is it in fact consistently deterministic? It is of course not: firstly, because this determinism cannot explain the origin of those views which oppose it; and secondly, because this determinism cannot account for the forces which are to bring its own perspective to realisation. In the first place, it is not *circumstances* which have shielded people from the truth—it is merely "erroneous maxims"—nor, in the second place, is it the changing of circumstances which will improve society: it is simply "the adoption of principles of truth".¹⁴

From this day a change must take place; a new era must commence; the human intellect, through the whole extent of the earth, hitherto enveloped by the grossest ignorance and superstition, must begin to be released from its state of darkness. . . .¹⁵

¹² Op. cit., p. 652.

¹³ *The Life and Ideas of Robert Owen*, ed. A. L. Morton (Lawrence and Wishart, 1962),

p. 74.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

In other words, men will only be truly governed by circumstances beyond their control when "enlightened ideas" rule the world. Only outright idealism can rescue mechanical materialism from the impasse in which it finds itself when it sets about (as it necessarily must do) trying to explain activity in the world.

Plekhanov in his brief analysis of French materialism in *The Development of the Monist View of History* confirms this point when he shows how the assertion that the environment is everything easily slides into its one-sided opposite, namely the view that "the world is governed by opinions", i.e. the environment is nothing at all. The stubbornly mechanistic character of the "old materialism" divides society into "two parts", so that determinism is disrupted by dualism, and the materialist standpoint withers at its roots.

The third thesis on Feuerbach does not then, as Sartre contends, reject a materialist determinism: it defends it in the only way in which materialism can be defended, namely as a materialism which is conceived in an activist manner. Materialism which is not activist will cease to be materialism, and its deterministic core will dissolve into the dualism of the "two parts".

Here of course, there is a further irony. Not only is Sartre's anti-deterministic reading of the third thesis unfounded, but it is subject to precisely the same criticism—that it leads ultimately to the dualism of man and nature, the individual and society, environment and opinions—which Marx levels against the *mechanical* materialism of Feuerbach and Owen. When Sartre states that "the qualities of external determination and those of that synthetic, progressive unity which is human *praxis* are found inseparably connected in Marxist thought", he presents a mere *dualism* between the environment and human practice and not an authentically historical *unity* which is only possible when the mechanistic interaction between the "two parts" gives way to that consistently determined whole which Sartre of course rejects.

The third thesis is of profound importance: it is of profound importance because, despite an apparent ambiguity in its formulation which praxis writers try to exploit, it defends materialism, supports determinism, and rejects the very dualistic modes of thought which praxis thinking is forced to endorse.

There is no doubt, then, that Marx is a determinist, although as I have argued, a consistent, practical determinist and not a determinist of the "contemplative", dualist variety. He refers repeatedly to the fact that human life and human history cannot be scientifically understood unless we grasp the fact that men enter into productive relations

"independently of their will" in social formations shaped by natural laws of motion. But how are we to understand this position of Marx's? Surely, says the praxis school, Marx is only a determinist when he is referring to the fact that under an alienating and fetishistic system like capitalism men lose control of their circumstances and thus appear to be governed by laws which operate independently of their will. Can Marx really mean that this will also be the situation in a *rational* society, where people will be masters of their lives and be able to consciously control the world of things?

Let me investigate this matter a little further.

(i) *Determinism and Laws: an Illusion of Capitalism?*

Lukacs in his lengthy essay on "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" in *History and Class Consciousness* paints a graphic picture of how helpless men become under capitalism. It is a point nobody can deny. The *Communist Manifesto* brilliantly describes modern bourgeois society as a society which "has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange" and yet finds itself overpowered by the instruments of its own creation. It resembles "the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the nether world whom he has called up by his spells".¹⁶ Nowhere does this catastrophic helplessness become more evident than when bourgeois society is plunged into economic crisis and is tragically paralysed by its own abundance.

But what does Lukacs deduce theoretically from these economic facts? Man in capitalist society, writes Lukacs,

confronts a reality "made" by himself (as a class) which appears to him to be a natural phenomenon alien to himself; he is wholly at the mercy of its "laws" . . .¹⁷

and from this remark, two points emerge. Firstly, that these laws do not really exist, they are merely an *illusion* born of the fetishism of commodities and the reification which results in the minds of men. And secondly, that the existence of these laws or "laws" confirms man's helplessness under capitalism and the depth of his alienation.

To throw some light on this question, let me begin with a few words about the historical significance of the "laws of nature". While it is perfectly true that the concept of "nature" played an important role in medieval and ancient philosophy, before the development of

¹⁶ *Communist Manifesto*, op. cit., p. 49.

¹⁷ *History and Class Consciousness*, op. cit., p. 135.

capitalism, no one yet spoke of the "laws of nature". It was the emergence of the market and the massive political upheavals which attended it that cast doubt on the ability of Kings or Princes (or God himself, for that matter) to control social events according to the *Will*: newly discovered laws at work in nature appeared to operate in the social realm as well. Now it is extremely important to note that this conception of natural laws constituted a powerful blow against arbitrary monarchs and despotic priests, for it pointed to the existence of a social and natural order outside the will of "authority" which *all* had to respect. The emerging science of political economy had the most radical implications, as can be seen from the 18th-century Frenchman, Du Pont, who bluntly told the authorities that

in this science you will discover the indissoluble chain with which He has bound your power and your wealth to the *observance* of the laws of the social order . . .¹⁸

a Deist God expressing his will through a law-governed universe allows *no one*, not even the Sovereign himself, to do as he likes.

Historically, then, the conviction that society was governed by natural laws—natural in the sense that these laws, whether social or not, operated independently of the wills of men—was not the product of *helplessness* but, on the contrary, of growing strength. The affirmation of natural laws played an important role in the ideological armoury of the rising bourgeoisie against their feudal and absolutist adversaries, as anyone who reads the work of Rousseau or even Tom Paine will readily see. The belief in *necessity*, the understanding that reaction was impotent in the face of those objective social laws which expressed themselves in the bourgeois epoch as the *inalienable* rights of man, strengthened the rising tide of revolution; it did not, as one might suppose from reading Lukacs, weaken it. Indeed, long before the 18th century, titanic thinkers like Hobbes and Bacon saw man's growing mastery over nature in terms of his understanding of its necessary laws. Freedom and necessity were indissolubly linked. Hobbes, who declared that liberty proceeds from necessity—"every act of man's will, and every desire and inclination proceedeth from some cause"¹⁹—argued in his *Leviathan* that, because man's activity was governed by laws of nature, the State was an *artifact* and therefore could be radically reconstructed in the light of the laws upon which it rested.

¹⁸ Cited by Norbert Elias, *The Break with Functionalism and the Origins of Sociology* (Photo-stat paper, Univ. of Leicester Libr.).

¹⁹ *Leviathan* (Pelican, 1968), p. 263.

This is not to say, as we shall see in a moment, that these earlier conceptions of natural law were not without their limitations; but it is important to remember how and why the ascending bourgeoisie, whom no one can accuse of passivity or helplessness, invoked the laws of reason and nature in their struggle with the old order. The understanding of natural laws was an integral part of revolutionary change. This point is crucial not merely because it throws into serious doubt Lukacs' argument that the existence of natural laws demonstrates man's impotence, but also because it is upon these very conceptions themselves which Marxism has built.

Marx was the first to acknowledge his indebtedness to the scientific political economy of the bourgeoisie and the natural laws of society it revealed.²⁰ What was erroneous, he argued, about these conceptions of natural law was not that they implied man's inability to control his own existence or that they were, as laws, merely alienated illusions: what was wrong with the laws of nature which the bourgeois economists claimed to discover, was that they were formulated in a way which metaphysically juxtaposed nature to history. They understood capitalism not as an historically determined mode of production, but rather as a timeless system which reflects a purely static human nature and whose laws of motion are therefore incapable of change. It was not the concept of law itself which was at fault, but rather an *ahistorical* interpretation of these laws which made it impossible to understand their genesis and development. In a letter critical of Proudhon, written to his friend Annenkov (28/12/1846), Marx makes this point clear. Proudhon, he says,

falls into the error of the bourgeois economists, who regard these economic categories as eternal and not as historical laws which are only laws for a particular historical development, for a definite development of the productive forces.²¹

And in a letter to Kugelmann (11/7/1868), he stresses that he is critical of Ricardo, not because Ricardo has discovered a law of value, but because he has inadequately demonstrated it. Noting also that the necessity of distributing social labour in definite proportions cannot be done away with by a particular form of social production, Marx adds:

no natural laws can be done away with. What can change in historically different circumstances is only the *form* in which these laws assert themselves.²²

²⁰ See e.g. his tribute to Ricardo in *Theories of Surplus Value*, II, p. 166.

²¹ *Selected Correspondence*, op. cit., p. 45.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 251.

This conception of a natural law—natural precisely because it is *historical*—lies at the heart of Marx's investigations in *Capital*, which is after all, as he himself said, his search to lay bare the basic economic law of motion in modern society. It is scarcely surprising that Marx should have referred his reader with some enthusiasm to his Russian critic in his second preface to the German edition of *Capital*, because the writer was only rephrasing what Marx himself had already said in the first. Marx could hardly be less ambiguous. Warning the Germans that because England had been used as the exemplar of his teachings they should not imagine themselves exempt from the same historical process, he declared in the first preface that

intrinsically it is not a question of the higher or lower degree of development of the social antagonisms that result from the natural laws of capitalist production. It is a question of these laws themselves, of these tendencies working with iron necessity towards inevitable results.²³

There is nothing illusory about these laws at all: these are as real and as concrete as the force of gravity itself.

The scientific discoveries of the bourgeois economists were not, then, rejected out of hand: they were deepened and developed in an historical and materialist manner, for the very conception of a natural law had after all been a revolutionary product of the progressive bourgeoisie.

Not surprisingly, then, as the bourgeoisie ceases to be progressive and its thinkers became cynical, pessimistic and irrationalist, so this conception of natural law was dissolved into subjectivist scepticism. This becomes evident in the "trashy positivism" of Auguste Comte (as Marx called it)²⁴ where, quite contrary to what some of the praxis theorists seem to imagine, laws of development were seen, not as laws of objective reality, but as simply the constructs of thought, the product of some kind of intellectual "genius" which put the social scientist in the position of a demi-god who breathed order into the chaos of the universe through the "laws" of his system.²⁵ The sceptical fixation with "appearances" which these so-called positive laws expressed corresponded precisely to what Marx correctly called *vulgar* theory, a theory which mindlessly worships only the *surface* of things; and writers like John Stuart Mill who continued the reactionary work of *dismantling* the rational heritage of the Enlightenment (rather than

²³ *Capital*, I, p. 8.

²⁴ *Selected Correspondence*, op. cit., p. 218.

²⁵ For the praxis version of positivism, see Goldmann, op. cit., p. 167.

developing it) always earned Marx's unqualified contempt. For it is precisely as capitalism moves into its moribund monopolistic and imperialistic phase that the helplessness and alienation about which Lukacs writes become so pervasive, and it is precisely in *this* period that the concept of law in bourgeois thinking—of causality, objective reason and scientific determinism—retreats before a rising tide of agnostic despair and irrationalist bewilderment. Once the passivity of "contemplation" with its mystifying absurdities comes to the fore in bourgeois thinking, one of the first concepts to go is the notion of a law of nature operating independently of the human will. For, as I shall show later, there is absolutely nothing passivist about the conception of law and determinism at all.

When it is suggested, therefore, that Marx and Engels regarded the natural laws of capitalism as an "illusion", the truth is turned precisely on its own head. What praxis thinkers like Lukacs think is the "appearance" of capitalism is, indeed, the reality; for the laws of nature under capitalism are perfectly real, and the anarchy and lawlessness of capitalism, which they take at its face value, is the "real illusion". Capitalism *appears* to be governed by nothing but its own chaos, but from amidst all the anarchy the voice of nature still speaks. The fact is, as Engels points out,

the production of commodities, like every other form of production, has its peculiar, inherent laws inseparable from it; and these laws work, despite anarchy, in and through anarchy.²⁶

This is why the society *appears* helpless: not because the laws which govern it are an illusion, but because they are so complex and contradictory that for those who have foresworn science for "hired prize-fighting", these laws are no longer intelligible. Scepticism, empiricism, phenomenism, positivism, pragmatism—in a word, the infinite varieties of subjective idealism—come to the fore, each asserting in its own specifically obscurantist manner that reality no longer exists and that the only laws we can discover are merely the constructs of our own mind.

But if, as I have argued, the history of capitalism points to the concept of an objective law of nature as a major intellectual breakthrough, cutting deeply into the theological prejudices of the past, a paradox still remains to be resolved: why should a scientific conception of *necessity* have created the intellectual preconditions for

²⁶ Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* (Progress Publ., 1970), p. 63.

the conscious activism of the rising bourgeoisie? Why should the determinist standpoint *facilitate* freedom when it would, on the appearance of things, in fact seem to stifle it?

To tackle this question, I may say a few words about

(ii) *The Dialectical Relationship between Freedom and Necessity*

Quoting one of the well-known passages in the *Communist Manifesto* dealing with the astonishing activism of the bourgeoisie, Avineri comments:

within the capitalist world two ideas dwell side by side: that man's world is nothing but his *praxis* and that man is impotent to act according to his knowledge.²⁷

This is a comment which is more illuminating than Avineri probably realises, for it suggests that the "revolutionary" concept of praxis—an activity in the abstract, a practice in and for itself—is dialectically linked to its opposite: man's tragic impotence to act according to his knowledge. Praxis and helplessness are two sides of the same coin, for each, in its own particular one-sided way, is catastrophically unable to make meaningful contact with the concrete world of reality. Both are products of a capitalist system which has nothing positive left to offer an exploited mankind.

The paradoxical unity of the praxical and the passive arises from the contradictory nature of capitalism itself, for it is capitalism's growing *mastery* over nature which increases its impotence. It is a system which chokes on its own creativity, producing that impossible situation in which, as the *Manifesto* says, "there is too much civilisation, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce". Capitalist man, like Midas of old, brings poverty through riches and scarcity through abundance. Small wonder that his understanding of practice should become hazy and remote as the consequences of this practice show themselves to be increasingly absurd. The idea of praxis seems to promise him the earth—a majestic if somewhat mystical potential for freedom which must tragically co-exist with the dismal reality of enslavement and helplessness.

The earlier conceptions of practice and freedom which thinkers like Hobbes and Bacon related to *necessity*, now appear to have been betrayed by this objective world. Even Ricardo and Adam Smith had

²⁷ Avineri, op. cit., p. 163.

noted rather pessimistically that advancing mechanisation crippled the human personality while the division of labour increased productivity rather than happiness. Taken as a whole, the ability of man to control society for his own benefit seemed to be slipping from his grasp. To the German Romantics at the end of the 18th century and early 19th, confined by their own circumstances to the role of speculating about the problems of other people's progress, a radical schizophrenia was setting in. Freedom and necessity tragically inhabited antithetical worlds. According to Kant, the world of experience remains governed by natural laws which operate independently of the human will, while the world of thought continues to embody all the potential freedom and self-creativity which capitalism can offer, but now in a self-encapsulated world of its own. A most remarkable combination of reason and metaphysics, of the mystical with the sane. . . .

whatever conception of the freedom of the will one may form in terms of metaphysics, the will's manifestations in the world of phenomena, i.e. human actions, are determined in accordance with natural laws, as in every other natural event.²⁸

Of course, the combination of this antithesis was not to last, for how do we *know* that the world is real and law-governed when our ideas themselves are manufactured in a metaphysical world all of their own? From the 1820s onwards—and it is no coincidence that this is the decade in which economic crisis begins to rock the system—the rationalism of the Enlightenment (with its central concept of the natural law) is pulverised into mysticism and despair—attitudes which *uncritically* reflect the fact that capitalism comes to increasingly deny in practice what it claims to offer in theory. Kantian agnosticism degenerates into a rampant subjectivism so that the principle of *activity* (once founded on a respect for natural laws) becomes, for Schopenhauer, the blind force of Will or, in the case of Carlyle, that wrathful God whose *abstract* labour is the creative force of the Conqueror and Hero. The *energy* of capitalism remains, but now it is the energy of despair, of nihilism, of sheer aggression—in short, the energy of a system whose practice has manifestly ceased to serve the cause of progress and has become openly destructive, divisive and militaristic in character.

It was Hegel, says Engels, who was one of the first to correctly state the true relationship between freedom and necessity, who described freedom as the *appreciation* of necessity. For

²⁸ Kant's *Political Writings*, ed. H. Reiss, p. 41.

freedom does not consist in the dream of independence from natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws, and in the possibility this gives of systematically making them work towards definite ends.²⁹

But this insight, which of course Hegel developed from the startling evidence presented under capitalism of man's technical mastery over nature, can only be preserved and extended if it is based firmly and squarely on a materialist footing. For Hegel's belief that civil society, with its division of labour and commodity production, could throw up a propertied democracy of "self-willed" individuals was to be shattered by subsequent events, thus feeding the growing pessimism about the "realisability" of freedom. To preserve the rationalism of the Enlightenment (which reached its high-point with Hegel), this rationalism has to be extended; and just as the concept of a natural law is to be reconstructed in an historically conscious way, so too must the concept of freedom under Marxism be shorn of all its abstract metaphysics. Hegel had already noted that freedom was itself the product of historical necessity, of a transformation in material production which, by abolishing chattel slavery, creates the practical possibility of thinking about freedom *for all*. But if Hegel was able to plausibly explain some of the "moments" of his philosophical system, he was hopelessly unable to account for its genesis *as a whole*, and hence his own notion of freedom (tied as it is to private property and exploitation) remains, in the last analysis, ahistorical and abstract. It comes into collision with that very historical necessity which it is supposed to "appreciate", so that even in Hegel there is *implicit* a dualistic despair. The fetishism of the commodity corrupts the work of even the greatest of the bourgeois philosophers, and the spiritual labours of the *Weltgeist* are simply the reflection of that human "abstract labour" which, as a commodity, offers man the form of freedom without its content: the abstract freedom of having nothing. The atomised worker of bourgeois society enjoys only the appearance of freedom and none of the reality. The two ideas dwell side by side: theoretical freedom and practical slavery, abstract *praxis* and a very real passivity.

How uncritical the praxis school really is of this mystified appearance of bourgeois freedom is evidenced both in the work of Sartre and Lukacs.

Sartre of course is convinced that freedom is the opposite of necessity and the deadly enemy of all determinism. He proceeds to tell an

²⁹ *Anti-Dühring*, op. cit., p. 157.

astonishing story in order to illustrate his point. A coloured member of an airport ground crew is prevented from becoming a pilot because he is black. As a protest against this humiliating discrimination he steals a plane and tries to fly it across the Channel. Of course, lacking any flight experience, he crashes the plane and dies. How should we philosophically evaluate his action?

According to Sartre, this act of tragic and desperate futility is "an emancipating act", and his death, says Sartre,

expresses at the same time the impossible revolt of his people, hence his actual relation with the colonizers, the radical totality of his fate and refusal, and finally, the inward project of this man—his choice of a brief, dazzling freedom, of a freedom to die.³⁰

A freedom to die! Life through death, salvation through suicide! The ghost of the despairing Kierkegaard walks again! For all this merely underlies the precise point which Sartre rejects: the simple truth that an abstract freedom which flies in the face of concrete reality is no freedom at all. *Real* freedom, as Engels stresses, must mean "the capacity to make decisions with knowledge of the subject", and of course it is precisely this "knowledge of the subject"—an understanding of history, of classes, of revolutionary politics—which the coloured pilot in Sartre's story so manifestly lacks. His hatred remains purely *subjective* and hence results in a failure born of despair, "the impossible revolt of his people". His abstract freedom turns into concrete slavery, chaining him to that world of necessity which, as Hegel puts it, "is blind only in so far as it is not understood". By trying to ignore these objective laws of motion, the tragic pilot simply ends up as their sacrificial victim. As Carlyle says of Nature:

answer her riddle, it is well with thee. Answer it not, pass on regarding it not, it will answer itself; the solution for thee is a thing of teeth and claws; Nature is a dumb lioness, deaf to thy pleadings, fiercely devouring. Thou are not now her victorious bridegroom; thou art her mangled victim, scattered on the precipices, as a slave found treacherous, recreant, ought to be and must.³¹

Determinism then is not, as the praxis writers think, the negation of freedom: it is freedom's basic precondition. Without an understanding of necessity, of what is *needed*, activity is impossible, and without purposive activity, how can we be free? The charge that determinism

³⁰ *Search for a Method*, op. cit., p. 109.

³¹ *Past and Present* (Everyman, 1960), p. 7.

leads to fatalism is precisely false, for determinism *alone* makes a meaningful commitment to change possible.

It is not surprising, then, if I may turn from Sartre briefly to Lukacs, that Lukacs himself was to stress the "overriding subjectivism" and "messianic utopianism" of *History and Class Consciousness* (a work usually praised for its mistakes), for the leftism of this work arises out of its inability to resolve dialectically the opposition between freedom and necessity. Though Lukacs concedes in the book that necessity must play a role in the proletarian struggle, thus presenting the workers with the opportunity to change society,

any transformation can only come about as the product of the—free—action of the proletariat itself.³²

A "freedom" which can only lead in practice to adventurism, despair and defeat! It was the quality of abstractness which Lenin singled out for criticism in his comment on Lukacs' article "On the Question of Parliamentarianism" published about the same time as *History and Class Consciousness*. G.L.'s article, writes Lenin,

is very Left-wing, and very poor. Its Marxism is purely verbal; its distinction between "defensive" and "offensive" tactics is artificial; it gives no concrete analysis of precise and definite historical situations; it takes no account of what is most essential (the need to take over and to learn to take over, all fields of work and all institutions in which the bourgeoisie exerts its influence over the masses, etc.).³³

It suffers, in short, from the same abstract distaste for the world of necessity which empties *History and Class Consciousness* of any real Marxist content: visions, "unities", "resolutions"—all these remain purely messianic yearnings which fail to translate themselves into anything concrete or programmatically specific. Hence the end-product of all praxical fervour is the very "fatalism" of which Marxist determinism stands accused. The vision of "unalienated Man" crumbles inexorably into "the God that failed".

In one of his early polemics against the Narodniks, Lenin pauses to "dwell a little on the attitude of Marxism to ethics", and refers to Engels' words on freedom and necessity. The subjectivist confusion between determinism and fatalism, with its concomitant belief that "freedom of will is a fact of our consciousness", can only end up in

³² Lukacs, op. cit., p. 208. His later reference to the "overriding subjectivism" occurs in the 1967 Preface, op. cit., p. xiv.

³³ Lukacs' article appeared in the Communist International's *Kommunismus* and Lenin's comment appears in *Collected Works*, 31, p. 165.

a utopia or a vapid morality which ignores the class struggle going on in society.³⁴

Lenin adds somewhat mischievously:

one cannot therefore deny the justice of Sombart's remark that "in Marxism itself there is not a grain of ethics from beginning to end"; theoretically, it subordinates the "ethical standpoint" to the "principle of causality"; in practice, it reduces it to the class struggle.³⁵

Communism cannot be conceived of as an ideal to which reality must adjust:

we call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things.³⁶

In other words, the only real standpoint of freedom is that of *necessity*, the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. Free will outside of necessity is simply "an absurd tale",³⁷ for it is only in terms of necessity that movement can take place. As Lenin expresses it pithily:

far from assuming fatalism, determinism in fact provides a basis for rational action.³⁸

Without determinism, such action would not be possible.

But is it really true that *even under communism* men will still be governed by necessity? This may have been Engels' idea, says Schmidt, but it was not Marx's. The dialectic of freedom and determinism held only for the past: as far as the future was concerned, the laws of nature would "*vanish* through being dissolved by the rational actions of liberated individuals";³⁹ and yet, of course, Marx actually said nothing of the kind. What he *did* say in a famous passage in *Capital III* is that the realm of freedom in which the human potentiality could be developed "for its own sake" "can only flourish upon that realm of necessity as its basis".⁴⁰ It is true that Marx does differentiate freedom from necessity just as he differentiates consciousness from being: but just as not *all* being is consciousness, so not *all* necessity is *freedom*. *Relatively* speaking,

³⁴ "The economic content of Narodism", *Collected Works*, I, op. cit., p. 420.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 420-421.

³⁶ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, op. cit., p. 47.

³⁷ Lenin, "What the 'Friends of the People' are", *Collected Works*, I, p. 159.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 420.

³⁹ Schmidt, op. cit., p. 208.

⁴⁰ *Capital*, III, op. cit., p. 820.

there is an acute difference between conscious freedom and blind necessity; but in *absolute* terms, freedom and necessity are identical, for freedom can never be anything more a humanly conscious, self-determinism: a creative respect for the laws of reality. A freedom which transcends necessity is simply metaphysical, i.e. it does not exist.

The impossibility of communism as a set of ideals to which reality must adjust becomes starkly obvious if we return to the basis of Marx's theory of society, human labour, itself the outcome of "nature's technology". Once it is understood that all things human must be *produced* (and not by God either!), whether it is human ideas, culture, the family, private property, the State, etc., then it must surely be clear that everything must develop from its own inner necessity, with historically higher forms of this necessity resting upon lower forms. The basis of the spiritual lies in the material world, in that realm of necessity where, in one form or another, men must continue producing in order to satisfy their needs—an historical act which is

a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life.⁴¹

It is not surprising that Schmidt's utopia of "vanishing" laws of nature "dissolved by the rational actions of liberated individuals" comes into collision with this "fundamental condition of all history", the basic premise of Marx's social theory. Schmidt quotes Marx's reference to useful labour as

a necessary condition, independent of all forms of society, for the existence of the human race; it is an eternal nature-imposed necessity, without which there can be no material exchanges between man and Nature, and therefore no life.⁴²

and asks anxiously, does not this sort of thinking lend a somewhat "ontological" dignity⁴³ to the metabolic relations between man and nature? If by "ontological" is simply meant *universal*, then, indeed, Schmidt's concern is well founded. For Marx never made the empiricist's mistake of trying to metaphysically separate the general from the particular, or the universal from the specific. Every society is different and yet it is linked: beneath its own quite specific natural laws there exists that "eternal nature-imposed necessity" which governs *all*

⁴¹ *German Ideology*, op. cit., p. 39.

⁴² *Capital*, I, op. cit., pp. 42-43.

⁴³ Schmidt, op. cit., p. 88.

societies without exception. The mistake of the bourgeois economists was not that they believed in an "eternal nature-imposed necessity", it was that they identified this necessity solely with capitalism. They confused, as Marx points out in the *Grundrisse*, the "necessity of the *objectification* of the powers of social labour", an *absolute* necessity, with the "necessity of their *alienation vis à vis* living labour"—a *conditional* necessity springing from "a specific historic point of departure".

Of course this does not mean that because we speak of material production as "an eternal nature-imposed necessity" of human society, this state of affairs can never change. It is absolute only in *relation* to the needs of society and only makes sense in this context. It is not therefore "metaphysical" or "ontological" to speak of metabolic relations between man and nature as an *eternal* nature-imposed necessity because this absolute, like all absolutes, is only meaningful in a specific historical context, in this case the society of mankind. The absolute and the relative, the unconditional and the conditional, "interpenetrate" as opposites, each only being intelligible in relation to the other. Hegel expressed the matter brilliantly when he wrote that "in essence, all things are relative", for that indeed is their *absolute* character. All things relate to the necessity which produces them, and the "eternal nature-imposed necessity" to which Marx refers, is itself, it goes without saying, the necessary product of a prior material evolution.

To assert then, as Shlomo Avineri does, that in "the new society"

man's relation to nature ceases to be determined by objective necessity: man, now conscious of his mastery over his own nature, creates it,⁴⁴

reduces creativity to some kind of mystical absurdity which immaculately derives from nothing. Alas, the Fool tells a rash King Lear who has just given away his kingdom, "nothing can come out of nothing" and that is not very much! Many centuries before Lucretius made the same point: if, as he put it, *things* were made out of nothing,

any species could spring from any source and nothing would require seed. Men could arise from the sea and scaly fish from the earth and birds could be hatched out of the sky.⁴⁵

What stands in the path of this crazy utopia, this empiricist nightmare? Necessity. The world is governed by real causes, by natural laws, and human creativity is only possible if it acknowledges the independent

⁴⁴ Avineri, op. cit., p. 227.

⁴⁵ *On the Nature of the Universe* (Penguin Classics, 1951), pp. 31-32.

existence of this universal necessity. It is true that men can transform necessity, but *only on its own terms*. One necessity can only be replaced by another, for creativity itself is only necessity at its most self-conscious. Avineri is right when he says that men create themselves and, indeed, they always have done. But they create themselves only as beings of *nature*, and their "praxis" only materialises when they create themselves in accordance with the laws of this wider being. Creation is only possible as a necessary process. Hence it is no paradox to observe that as men have become historically *more* creative, so they have come better to understand their dependence upon the laws of necessity. In the place of first a magical and then a religious version of necessity—an inverted, but by no means arbitrary necessity—they have gradually developed a clearer picture of necessity as it really is. The more we *appear* to make nature dependent upon man, the more in fact we become aware of our dependence on nature. The more we change nature, the more we become aware of its inner necessity. As Engels points out in the *Dialectics of Nature*, it is man's "victory" over nature which *compels* him to come to terms with the unforeseen results of his own productivity—a fact which the current environmental crisis has made increasingly acute—so that, at every step, writes Engels,

we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature, but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly.⁴⁶

The "new society" does not, as Avineri rather mystically supposes, transcend necessity: it makes man aware of it as never before. Capitalism, it is true, has already revealed to man the existence of natural laws—but it prevents him from understanding these laws *historically* and, like all its exploitative predecessors, the capitalist system must invert human creativity so that it cannot understand its own origins. In its moribund phase, all that remains of capitalist creativity is a subjectivist monster which insanely imagines that it can do "as it likes".

I conclude by returning once again to Avineri's ironic profundity. Under capitalism, *praxis* coexists with the impotence it necessarily implies: it can only be a matter of time before the praxical sorcerer is overpowered by his own spells, and that passivity, which is momentarily veiled by a feverish activism, becomes real. Praxis and

passivity are merely two sides of the same coin and both are the product of an anarchic, decadent society steadily choking itself to death.

It is ironic that praxis theory in explicitly embracing the one, must implicitly embrace the other: but it is tragic that, in doing so, it should present its "pauper's broth" as Marxism.

⁴⁶ *Dialectics of Nature*, op. cit., p. 183.