

LETTERS

Dietzgen

Dear Editors,

Adam Buick's striking and sympathetic account of Joseph Dietzgen (RP10) sheds light on what is surely one of the most shadowy areas of Marxist philosophy. Buick places us all in his debt and, moreover, demonstrates convincingly that Dietzgen well deserves to be rescued from his current neglect.

However, it seems to me that some of Buick's claims for his subject should be looked at closely. Dietzgen, he says, succeeded in backing up the materialist conception of history with a materialist philosophy, thereby providing an 'essential complement' to it and filling 'a gap' in socialist theory'. It is relevant to these claims to ask how Marx himself regarded Dietzgen's views.

In a letter to Kugelmann of 7 December 1867, Marx comments with reference to Dietzgen that 'the autodidactic philosophy' is indeed making 'great progress'. In a further letter to Kugelmann of 5 December 1868 Marx writes that Dietzgen's work, 'in spite of a certain confusion and of too frequent repetition, contains much that is excellent and - as the independent product of a working man - admirable.' This is not unqualified praise: to assert that, as the work of an autodidact, a particular piece of work is admirable is a far cry from regarding that work as an essential complement to one's own life's work. When Engels, in a letter to Marx of 6 November 1868, writes of Dietzgen in distinctly patronising terms, Marx defends the independence of Dietzgen's thought but adds: 'For the rest, I agree with everything you say'. It seems clear, then, that while Marx and Engels welcomed Dietzgen's presence in the ideological ranks they in fact regarded him (rightly or wrongly) as something less than an intellectual equal.

Buick's presentation of Dietzgen's views contains many points of interest, and I should like to take up a few of them. Dietzgen's position, as described by Buick, emerges as a sort of 'dialectical monism'. 'Matter' and 'mind' are both merely abstractions from the one comprehensive reality. (One is reminded of Spinoza, who likewise postulated one monistic substance with the twin attributes of 'Thought' and 'Extension'.) Dietzgen is said nevertheless to be a materialist since he believes that this monistic reality exists independently of its being known or perceived.

One does not have to be a Leninist to feel that this position amounts to something less (or more)

than materialism proper. There is, I think, a terminological confusion here - one to which, ironically enough, Lenin himself contributed. Buick, it seems to me, shows that Dietzgen is a 'realist': that is, Dietzgen believes that the reality we perceive exists independently of our perceiving it. A 'realist', however, may be either a 'materialist' (if he believes the independently existing reality to consist of body or 'matter') or an 'objective idealist' (if he believes that the independently existing reality consists of concepts, ideas, spirit or 'mind'). Now taking the terms in this sense, Dietzgen emerges on Buick's account as just as much an 'objective idealist' as a 'materialist'. Like Hegel (cf. Marx's comment: 'It is his hard luck that precisely Hegel he did not study...') Dietzgen seems willing to call his monistic reality 'God' or 'the Absolute'. Thus Lenin's suspicion that Dietzgen was not a consistent materialist seems justified.

Lenin himself, however, does not distinguish clearly between 'realism' and 'materialism', and seems to feel that in order to show the materialist character of a given philosophy it is enough to demonstrate that it is a species of realism. Of course, one can define the term 'materialism' as one likes - but if it is taken sometimes to mean 'materialism proper' and sometimes to mean merely 'realism', then confusion is bound to result.

So perhaps, on Buick's own account, Dietzgen emerges not as a materialist but rather as a realist, i.e. as one who believes that the perceived world, whatever its ultimate nature, exists independently of its being perceived. Even here, however, there are problems. Mind and matter are both aspects of reality and as such are alike 'parts of the world of observable phenomena'. But it is difficult to see how one can empirically observe 'mind' - or, at least, the doctrine that one can empirically observe 'mind' seems to raise more problems than it solves. (For example: is mind a 'queer kind of stuff', a sort of purely mental substance? How can mind, *qua* mind, affect our senses?...)

All this said, Buick's presentation of Dietzgen remains a stimulating account of a man who clearly deserves to be taken more seriously than he has been in the past. That Dietzgen still has relevance in contemporary debates on Marxist philosophy is clear from Bertell Ollman's discussion of his views relating to the philosophy of internal relations in his *Alienation*. Clearly, we must now read Dietzgen: and, by convincing us of this, Buick has done Joseph Dietzgen's reputation the greatest possible service.

Richard Gunn
Edinburgh

The Occult

Dear Editors,

I hadn't seen *Radical Philosophy* for some editions when I picked up number 9, so maybe I can give you some comments on the state of the thing as it seemed to me compared with earlier numbers.

Well, all this is very interesting and to the point about Swansea at the front of the magazine. And at the back, the pages of reviews and criticisms are as usual full of debate and ideas. However, your two main articles in the middle seem to me to be falling back into all the old complications that you once seemed to be trying to avoid.

'Understanding the Occult' disgusts me most. Not only is this incomprehensible jibberish, it is, self-confessedly, 'a general metaphysical argument, which ought to be placed more explicitly in relation to post-Kantian philosophy (in particular the views of Shopenhauer and Wittgenstein)...'. But, the author adds (in his Note 1), 'this would take me too far, and it would infringe on a study of the nature of God which I would like to undertake elsewhere.' Is this radical philosophy or radical theology?

I know that you have an open policy on what you publish, but it is surely one of the functions of *RP* to criticise metaphysics and idealist philosophies and not to propagate them.

Patrick Ainley
Walbottle

Reductionism

Dear Editors,

David Lamb has raised some very interesting points on my book *The Uniqueness of Man*. Perhaps I could take up one of these? The mistake of trying to explain thinking in terms of neural chemistry, or life in terms of molecular interactions, the 'category mistake', is not in the least a linguistic error or a matter of words. If I point out that the actual working of a steam engine has a description that belongs to itself as a functioning mechanism, which cannot be dealt with as such a mechanism in the terms of the behaviour of its parts as parts, still less of the molecules and their laws, I am stating a plain fact, not talking about words. The same is true of pain as a fact and the chemical or physiological facts responsible for it, these facts do not and never can include the equally concrete and empirical fact of pain, which is on a different level. Though dependent upon the diseased tooth it cannot be reduced to it. This is not a

linguistic error, it follows the metaphysical decision to insist on reducing all levels to the most general, to the final substantial essence of existence, which envisages all of nature, human and animate as well as non-organic in terms of the laws governing the behaviour of its least part. This is not a misuse of words but a metaphysical dogma, and a very bad one at that!

Yours sincerely,
John Lewis
London N10

Dead or Alive?

Dear Editors,

I enclose £2.00 for another year's sub. to RPJ, with many, many thanks to you for all the hard work and unpaid effort that makes it a consistently exciting read. Of course one of the exciting things about it is that one never quite knows how the story will turn out - who will win, radical philosophy or philosophical radicalism? Those who want to turn philosophy inside out are running neck-in-neck with those who are creating a serviceable philosophy of the revolution: the first sometimes in the name of the second, and vice-versa. I don't mean to be unduly facetious: all this is done in a stimulating manner and at the highest standard of intellectual rigour.

But it does point to serious difficulties in the RP movement with which you are yourselves familiar and always have been: difficulties which

pose for the RPJ not so much problems of editorship as such (it is always excellent) but problems of basic theoretical leanings and purposes. As a reader I am not always sure whether I am reading a journal of revolutionary theory or a journal of radicalism within a discipline. The latter I find, myself, infinitely less interesting than the first. I am not very interested in whether or not there is a future for moral philosophy as such, but I am interested in the contribution moral philosophy can make to revolutionary theory, and vice-versa; I see moral philosophy as coming alive by dying into praxis in order to re-animate the latter. At the same time I also see a manful attempt to equate some sort of progress within philosophical discussion itself with revolutionary aims and perspectives, as if, by addressing itself to the revolution, philosophy itself is revived. However, re-vivifying philosophy may be the longterm aim of the radical philosopher; it is not the aim of the philosophical radical. And in the end - if history is any guide - it may paradoxically be the latter who actually does revivify philosophy, endowing it with an existence it never had before. It was not F.H. Bradley who revived Hegel; it was Lenin. And that philosophical revival did not occur in university common rooms but on the streets of Petrograd. RPJ does not, on the whole, know whether or not it prefers the living philosophy of the streets of revolution to the cere-

bral philosophy of the university. I can't say I blame anyone for indecision on this point.

Meanwhile, RPJ is carrying out Mary Warnock's dictum that philosophy should follow the discussion wherever it leads. Ironically, since it was the RPG's vigorous response to Mrs Warnock's article in *New Society* which first got me interested in RPJ. In a sense, the price one pays for defeating Mary Warnock to one's own satisfaction is that of embodying, all too accurately, the gist of what she said. But here, outside and highly unphilosophical events may well come to the rescue and break the circle: I refer, of course, to the very real implications of the Huntington Affair and Swansea. RPJ has rightly been concerned about these matters, which, in turn, seem to have put RPJ's aims into sharper focus. There is nothing like the real world for concentrating the mind wonderfully. Meanwhile, it is not RPJ's fault if conditions are such that 'better' philosophy and revolutionary theory may not be precisely the same. And the tension between these two strains - reflected not only in the overall composition of each issue but right in the heart of many of the individual articles - continues, as I said, to make for an exciting read. The day when RPJ can no longer cope with this tension will also be the day when there are more exciting things to do.

A Reader
Bristol

REVIEWS

Literary Production

Pierre Macherey, *Pour une Théorie de la Production Littéraire*, Paris, Maspero, Fr.23.70

Macherey's first concern is to draw a distinction between two types of literary criticism which could be described as the artistic and the scientific. Criticism as literary appreciation (*l'école du goût*) and criticism as a form of knowledge (the 'science of literary production'). What differentiates these two methods is that whereas the former seeks identity with the literary work, the latter seeks a fundamental separation from it, for the essence of the scientific method is that science starts out from reality producing a distance between itself and its object. A scientific understanding (knowledge) of a text is not a translation, a process of recovering or reconstituting a latent meaning which is hidden or forgotten. Its function is to constitute a new knowledge. Thus it should be considered as a work (*un travail*) of transformation and not an instrument with which to contact a reality or a truth. Literary criticism as an art is com-

pletely determined by the previous existence of a body of works with which, in order to find the 'truth', it seeks to fuse. Literary criticism as a form of knowledge (a science), however, has an object (which is not its given but its product) which it seeks, not to imitate, but to transform. Between knowledge and its object there is a distance, a separation, not a conformity. If knowledge expresses itself as a discourse this discourse is by nature different from the object about which it 'speaks'. There is, thus, a radical difference between the discourse of the critic and the discourse of the writer, it can never be a question of two points of view of the same object for the work which is written by the writer is not exactly the work which the critic seeks to explicate, for writing and reading are not two equivalent or reversible operations; (they are distinct activities (*activités antagonistes*) and to confuse them reveals a profound misunderstanding of the nature of the work). While the work of the writer is not expressed in terms

of a knowledge, the activity of the writer can be the object of a knowledge. The function of literary criticism is not the description of a finished product, preparing the way for its consumption, but the elaboration (explication not description) of this product.

For Macherey the real critical question is not, 'What is literature?' i.e., what does one do when one writes (or when one reads)? But, what sort of necessity does a work reflect? Of what is it made, what gives it its reality? The real critical question turns upon the material out of which the work is produced and upon the methods of that production. Now, while the writer is 'the worker of his text' he does not produce the materials with which he works. The language 'spoken' by the writer is not exactly the same as the language of every day use but, and this point is crucial for Macherey, it is not a new language. 'Strictly speaking,' he says, 'there is only one language; it is the mark of an Hegelian aesthetic to take all forms of expression to be a language.' For Macherey, the