

# DIALECTIC: A REPLY TO KEAT AND DEWS

Roy Edgley

In an article in *Radical Philosophy* 15, 'Science, Social Science, and Socialist Science: Reason as Dialectic', I argued that one of the central doctrines of dialectical materialism, that there are contradictions in reality, and with it the claim that science can be critical of its real object, can be given a coherent and acceptable interpretation that involves the rejection of some of the basic dogmas of analytical philosophy and the modern philosophy of logic that underlies it: in particular the dogmas of anti-psychologism in logic, the autonomy of values, and natural science as a model for social science, all exemplified in a famous exponent of bourgeois philosophy, Popper. In 'Dialectic: the Contradiction of Colletti' (*Critique* 7) I showed that these dogmas were present in the rejection of dialectical materialism by a famous Marxist philosopher, Colletti (*New Left Review* 93). My RP15 article has been the target of a fairly brief critical comment by Russell Keat in RP16, and a full-length paper in RP18 by Peter Dews has attacked both articles. I'd like to reply.

## RUSSELL KEAT

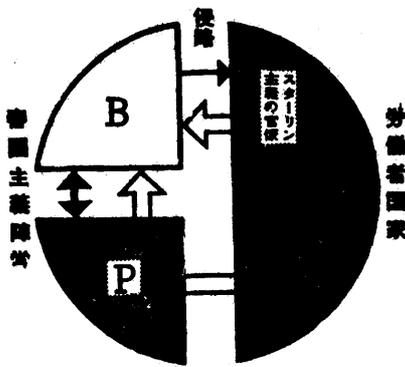
Russell's first and most general objection is that showing that social science can be critically opposed to real social contradictions doesn't amount to showing that social science can be socialist. I agree with this way of putting the point, so I must admit that my title was misleading. But in a number of places in the paper itself I emphasised that the specific problem of 'scientific socialism' in Marxism involves the more general problems of the relations between fact and value, theory and practice, and science and morality, and that my concern was with the intersection of that specific problem and these more general problems. Moreover, though I agree with the point as I've formulated it above, I would emphasise the second occurrence of the word 'showing'. It seems to me, in other words, that though I didn't show this to be the case, nevertheless it's true that a science that takes objective social contradictions as its target must be socialist: as materialist dialectic, science must comprehend the whole material structure of present capitalist society as a structure in contradiction, and it must oppose that contradictory structure and require its transformation. It must, therefore, take up the class position of the proletariat as the only class capable of understanding and eliminating those contradictions. When Russell says that 'criticism of contradictions does not exhaust the meaning of socialist criticism', I would therefore reply that though it doesn't do so explicitly it does so implicitly.

Russell's second objection is that, contrary to my argument, acceptance of the fact/value distinction doesn't commit socialists to ethical, reformist, or Utopian socialism; since a Weberian distinction between facts and values is compatible with recognising causal relations between modes of production

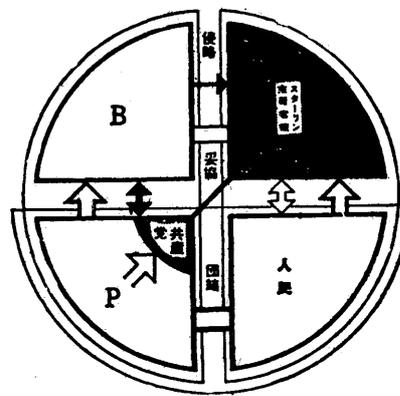
and patterns of distribution and thus with realising the futility of reformist political activity directed at redistribution. But that doesn't clinch the point. Having realised the futility of trying to reform distribution independently of production, a socialist accepting the 'Weberian distinction' could either give up his socialism or try to change the mode of production. Since my point was about what socialism is committed to, given the fact/value distinction, let's ask why reformism, as Russell correctly assumes, tends to restrict itself to distribution and not question the mode of production. My answer would be roughly that the mode of production is, as Marx shows, more basic than distribution: indeed, that it's the most basic aspect of the social structure, that changes there would affect the whole social order, and that reformism is too feeble and ineffective to tackle such a task. Fundamental change requires drastic methods: it must be revolutionary. The relevant contrasts here line themselves up about two axes, individual/class and morality/politics. Politics, it's said, is 'the art of the possible'. Less mealy-mouthed, Weber held that 'for politics the essential means is violence' ('Politics as a Vocation'). I would say: the method of class politics is power. In relation to that, individualism and morality are constraints, the 'humanist' constraints of tolerance, moderation and compromise. For the politics of a class already in power these 'constraints' are highly functional, since what they most constrain are radical changes in the status quo. Bourgeois class politics, its power firmly based in the economy and the State, both cloaks the nakedness of that power and helps to consolidate it with its liberal morality: indeed with capital, army, and police in the background, bourgeois society gives politics itself a moral form, the form of parliamentary democracy, with 'freedom of speech and opinion' institutionalised in the press and education, all of them dedicated to the principle that the only legitimate way of resolving conflict, i.e. the only legitimate method of change, is by 'dialogue', discussion, talk, by words rather than deeds. It's under these conditions that the 'politicisation' of economic affairs characteristic of modern liberal states, with their interventionist policies, represents in fact a way of extending these moral constraints to the economic base of political class conflict. The social contract draws the trade union movement, or at least its leaders, into political partnership with government and in the process seeks to replace the strike weapon by the 'moral' method of negotiation by democratically elected leaders. The parliamentary road to socialism is the explicit socialist form of this moralised politics, the sublimation of class conflict into dialogue.

The question is, what is the connection between the fact/value distinction and reformism? As I've suggested, the connection goes through the concept of morality itself, which according to this distinc-





Ideogrammatic representation of class struggle, according to Trotsky and the Japanese Communist Revolutionary League. The black arrows



represent antagonisms, the white arrows hypotheses on the sense of history. Fanist lines mean objective solidarity between separate sectors

### Criteria and Standards, Enlightenment and Otherwise

Russell's third and final objection is that 'although he succeeds in showing the critical practical function of scientific knowledge, he nowhere indicates how this affects the criteria of validity which should be applied to the theoretical knowledge upon which this critical activity is based. The characterisation of theoretical knowledge as consisting in description, explanation, and prediction is not explicitly challenged...' Russell here seems to assume a distinction that my whole article criticises: a distinction between 'theoretical knowledge' and 'the critical practical function of scientific knowledge'. It was precisely the point of my argument to challenge the characterisation of theoretical knowledge as descriptive, explanatory and predictive, by showing how 'theoretical knowledge' could be critical - critical not as something else but as 'theoretical knowledge'. The critical function is not something added to or conjoined with this theoretical knowledge, but an integral part of its unity. This unity is expressed in the central category of contradiction, since this category is both critical and explanatory, and in being both, or better, in conceiving explanation in the evaluative mode of criticism, as what Marx, in the subtitle of Capital, calls 'critical analysis', this dialectical conception of contradiction yields a type of prediction in the practical mode of intention: the intention of the working class, 'announced and justified in Marxism as the voice of the movement, to 'change the world' of capitalism into socialism. This is how Marx's dialectical materialism differs from traditional materialism and realism, e.g. Feuerbach's, with its key concepts of explanation and prediction shaped by its 'theoretical stance', by a relation between theory and real object that is one of 'contemplation' or 'internretation', and consequently by its failure to 'grasp the meaning of "revolutionary"', of "practical -critical" activity', a meaning more fully spelt out in terms of contradiction in Thesis 4.

Russell's objection concludes with the complaint: 'nor is it shown by what alternative, non-Enlightenment standards a Marxist science should be judged in its attempts to provide this knowledge'. My reply is that precisely in allowing the possibility of the contradictory structure of its real object and thus of standing in a relation not of correspondence but of critical opposition to that real object Marxist science embodies non-Enlightenment standards.

Enlightenment standards would rule out any such possibility as unscientific: for Enlightenment materialism and realism, there cannot be contradictions in reality and science must neutrally replicate that reality in thought. To be more specific, Marxist science, contrary to Enlightenment standards, is Critique. This means that like any other innovatory science Marxist theory is critical of ('contradicts') other theories about the same real object, in this case society; but it means much more than that. As social science in distinction from natural science it must comprehend those other theories as part of its real object, part of the social reality it seeks to understand. It does this by theorising their structural unity with the rest of society, i.e. by explaining their structure in terms of their material base. But it does not do this as 'sociology of knowledge', with its tendency towards the replacement of epistemological and logical relations by paradigmatically natural causal relations and thus towards sceptical relativism. On the contrary, Marxist critique, in criticising other theories for their 'cognitive' defects, in particular their contradictory structure, traces those defects back to the material base not as an otherwise neutral cause but as a cause having a similar contradictory structure, a structure that is thus 'reflected' in theory. In criticising other theory, therefore, Marxist science at the same time criticises the social basis of that theory and calls for its transformation in practice. Having explained religion and the holy family 'in terms of the inwardly riven and inwardly contradictory character

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of this secular basis', it recognises that the earthly family 'must therefore both be understood in its contradiction and revolutionized in practice ... destroyed in theory and in practice' (Fourth Thesis, Theses on Feuerbach). In this way, the materialist dialectic ensures that Marxist theory is not just a scientific revolution, in the Bachelardian or Kuhnian sense, but revolutionary science, in the socialist sense. If that possibility is not a 'non-Enlightenment standard', what is?

#### PETER DEWS

Anyone who has read my article with any care will see, I think, that much of Peter Dew's reply is irrelevant. For example, of Colletti's acceptance of the bourgeois doctrine that there are no contradictions in reality, he says '... the reason why Colletti does this is plain. Established science, the sciences of physics, biology, etc, which we already have, pays no attention whatever to dialectics' (p10). This might explain Colletti's view, but it can hardly justify it: on the one hand, the fact that something is established (especially in capitalist society) can't (especially for Marxists) show that it doesn't need changing; on the other, the question is whether social science should follow natural science. Further, on that issue, Dew's argument on page 11 is just a misunderstanding: I'm prepared to agree that natural science is not dialectical, my argument in RP15 p7 being that if we claim that natural science is dialectical we must recognise that it's not dialectical in the full sense in which social science can be.

The substance of Dew's criticism of my position is contained in two related claims, one in defence of Colletti, the other in contradiction of my own positive position. As he correctly points out, I do not 'dispute the "bourgeois philosophical" claim that there are no contradictions in reality in the sense in which that claim is intended' (p10), but that claim is ambiguous: it can mean either that no contradictory proposition is ever true of reality, or that people never contradict themselves and others. In defence of Colletti, Dew then asserts that 'No one, least of all Colletti, would wish to deny that people can contradict themselves and each other, or that thought and language are in some sense "part of reality"' (p11); and in attacking my positive position he accuses me of 'exploiting' the ambiguity by 'slipping from one meaning ... to the other. Once this manoeuvre has been exposed, the basis of Edgley's argument is removed' (p11).

This latter claim I simply deny, and challenge anyone to find, in my two articles or in Dew's paper, any evidence to the contrary. On the former I don't doubt that Colletti wouldn't deny that people contradict themselves, if it were put to him. But as I point out in Critique 7, pp50-51, in a passage that Dew entirely ignores, what Colletti says implies such a denial; it's not unknown for philosophers, or anybody else for that matter, to make assertions that imply things they 'would wish to deny'. In any case, this fact, together with Colletti's more obvious omission of any explicit reference to the second possibility for interpreting the idea of contradictions in reality, shows that he fails to understand the significance of this possibility for social science. Though I don't 'dispute the "bourgeois philosophical" claim that there are no contradictions in reality in the sense in which that claim is intended', I do dispute the view implicit in Colletti and bourgeois philosophy that this is the only intelligible or important sense that can be given to

the claim.

#### Forms of Materialism

It's evident that the blindness of much Marxism on this subject must be due to the pressure of some powerful influences. As my Critique article suggests, as my reply above to Russell Keat asserts, and as I've argued at length in a forthcoming paper, 'Marx's Revolutionary Science' (Issues in Marxist Philosophy, ed. by J. Mephram and D. Ruben) the chief intellectual source of this pressure is materialism. Marxism is materialist. But the question is, what is the nature of Marxist materialism? We can, I think, distinguish four types of materialism, though the four may overlap in various ways: first, a monistic ontology of substance; second, a theory of unified science in which all the sciences are reckoned in some sense reducible to physics; third, epistemological materialism, or what Colletti, distinguishing his materialism from Timpanaro's, calls 'gnoseological materialism' (Western Marxism: A Critical Reader, p327), i.e. realism; and Marx's materialism. Dew refers to '... "materialist" terms, that is ... terms which are ultimately reducible to the vocabulary of physical observation, if not that of physical science' (p11). He adds that no doubt I, like most other contemporary Marxists, would find 'totally alien this kind of empiricism and materialism, exemplified by reductionist positions within analytical philosophy...', and he asks 'what precisely do Marxist invocations of "material reality" commit us to?' He doesn't mention the (admittedly brief) paragraph in my Critique 7 article (pp51-52). I say more on this subject in my forthcoming paper 'Structures Don't Take to the Streets' (The Dialectic of Structure and History, ed. by I. Meszaros). In these arguments, I reject not only the reductionist materialism Dew refers to but also the type of materialism chiefly responsible for the failure of Marxists to consider the alternative conception of real contradiction that I outline: epistemological materialism. Of this version of the doctrine Colletti says simply and clearly that 'materialism presupposes non-contradiction - that reality is non-contradictory' (p337). In other words, this materialism is non-dialectical. This seems to me the dominant form of Marxist materialism at the moment in English philosophy (Bhaskar's Realist Theory of Science, Keat and Urry's Social Theory as Science, Ted Benton's Philosophical Foundations of the Three Sociologies, David Ruben's Marxism and Materialism, and Andrew Collier's 'In Defence of Epistemology' in Radical Philosophy 20), and it's not difficult to see why: we need a way out of the idealism and relativism into which the English-speaking philosophy of science has been led by Kuhn and Feyerabend, and against which, in the wake of analogous theoretical precedents in Bachelard, Continental Marxism has struggled, with what some regard as only qualified success, in the person of Althusser. It's this epistemological materialism that, starting like most post-Cartesian epistemology from propositional knowledge and thought, insists that reality, as the object known, is independent of and other than knowledge and thought about it, and that knowledge and thought relate to reality only by being true or false of it, i.e. by their success or failure in conforming or corresponding to it. Given this doctrine, we are under pressure to suppose that though there are contradictions in thought and ideas, the question whether there are contradictions in reality, which

is independent of and other than thought and ideas, can mean only 'Are contradictory propositions ever true of reality?'

This form of materialism, epistemological materialism, can, and in contemporary Marxism standardly does, repudiate empiricism, and with it an account of knowledge as passive in relation to perception. It provides for knowledge the active role of 'theoretical practice', conceptual innovation and theory production that imply a critical relation to existing theory and concepts, including those embodied in accepted perceptual judgments. Thus it retains the idealist insistence on knowledge as activity while avoiding the idealist myth of knowledge as active in constituting reality. It avoids this myth by claiming that though knowledge is not just a passive response to perception and reality but on the contrary needs to be actively produced, what is produced is only the knowledge, not the reality that the knowledge is of. However, though in relation to its real object knowledge is not passive in the sense of being a passive response, nor is it, as a finished product, active: though requiring to be actively produced, as a finished product its relation to its real object is, as knowledge, the passive, non-practical relation of correspondence or conformity, the descriptive relation, the relation of value-neutrality. This is what I reject. I too avoid the idealist myth that knowledge produces or constitutes reality; but I retain the conception of knowledge as active in relation to its real object by arguing that this relation is one of criticism or opposition, a relation in which knowledge does not produce reality but requires it to be changed. As I argue in 'Structures Don't Take to the Streets', this is what I take to be Marx's view in the Theses on Feuerbach, when he castigates traditional materialism for its 'theoretical stance', its posture of 'contemplation', its philosophy of 'interpreting the world' instead of changing it. What Marx proposes in replacement is a kind of materialism in which the real object of theory is practice and the relation between them not conformity or correspondence but the oppositional relation of 'revolutionary', ... 'practical-critical' activity', a relation analysed in the fourth thesis in terms of real contradiction. Though the word 'dialectic' is missing from the Theses, Marx is here developing, in opposition to traditional materialism, his own version of materialism, a materialism that is specifically dialectical.

It should be clear from this that Dews' claims that according to my view 'all social science is always already "dialectical" simply by virtue of its object' (p13) and "'Dialecticity" appears to be simply a question of subject-matter, rather than method' (p14) are simply mistakes. But they are mistakes not, in my view, because social science has a 'free choice' open to it of being dialectical or undialectical, or because dialecticity is a matter of method rather than subject-matter. I reject the exclusiveness of these contrasts, as anyone who has read my article with any care would recognise. In general, the method by which a science cognitively appropriates its real object must depend on the nature of that object. In particular, the relation between social science and its real object, society, is a relation of high interdependence. Contradictions in society are not just 'a question of subject-matter', as if all social science then needed to do was to relate to this object in the same general way that the natural sciences relate to their objects, descriptively, by correspondence. My argument

was (of course) that in virtue of this characteristic of its real object social science could, and to be adequate as science should, relate to that real object critically. Given this, the method of social science, unlike that of natural science, could, and to be adequate as science should, be the method that Marx calls 'Critique'. In Althusser's terms, though in opposition to his doctrine, even after his self-criticism, not only philosophy but in my view Marxist science also is 'class struggle at the level of theory'.

### Critique or Science: Marxism's Specificity

In Dews' opinion, all this is 'novel' and 'eccentric', terms that for him are clearly pejorative. This novelty and eccentricity, it seems, arise in the relation between my theories and the Marxist tradition, since my theories, according to Dews, don't fit neatly into either of the two pigeon-holes into which he divides that tradition. These pigeon-holes are 'Marxism as critique and Marxism as science', in other words "critical"/Hegelian and 'scientific'/anti-Hegelian versions of Marxism' (p13). However, Dews eventually decides that 'Edgley clearly belongs, if somewhat eccentrically, within' the former 'camp'. And this shows, he says, that my account 'fails to touch the deeper problem, since it shows that Edgley, rather than effecting a dialectical resolution, has already aligned himself on the side of the ideologiekritiker in the long-standing debate between Marxism as critique and Marxism as science' (p13). Well, I will say it again briefly here, though I can't expect to convince anyone who in this way refuses to see what I've said at length in my articles, that my argument was that critique can be, and in Marx is, science; and therefore that I do not align myself on the one side and against the other. Anyone who still thinks that critique and science are incompatible and exclusive categories I refer to the brief account above in my

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paragraphs replying to Russell Keat, especially the last two, and also to my 'Marx's Revolutionary Science'.

Having got me, however 'eccentrically', into the one pigeon-hole and against science, Dews then accuses me, partly through guilt by association with Marcuse, of offering a version of critique in which 'the concrete complexity of the social formation ceases to be in any meaningful sense the object of an analytical and explanatory understanding... revolutionary movements cannot live by criticism alone... They need concrete analyses of political, economic and social structures... It is not so much an alternative "dialectical" conception of scientific knowledge which revolutionaries need - it is rather that scientific knowledge itself' (p13); and finally, 'the science-critique dilemma will only be resolved - if at all, and if "resolved" is the right expression here - in the course of a Marxist revolutionary practice. Certainly no theoretical *Aufhebung* will do' (p14). All of this, I take it, is part of Dews' argument that what I say, even if true, 'would be inconsequential. It tells us nothing about the specificity of Marxism' (p13).

In these passages Dews contrives to suggest both that my philosophical account excludes 'concrete analyses of political, economic and social structures' and 'revolutionary practice', and that, these being exclusive, what we need is concrete analyses and revolutionary practice, not philosophical theories providing 'an alternative "dialectical" conception of scientific knowledge'.

Again I reject the alleged exclusiveness of these distinctions. I'd say that revolutionaries need both a scientific knowledge of economic, political, and social structures, and a dialectical conception of scientific knowledge - and that without one, they can't have the other. But this is perhaps too easy a reply. There's a sense in which these distinctions are not only exclusive, they fail as distinctions to recognise the positive overlap in such categories. The content of my articles itself shows how theoretical work, even if it's not specifically about politics, can be political and in particular part of 'revolutionary practice', of 'practical-critical activity'. The 'abstract' 'conceptual' distinctions I discuss and criticise are themselves socially real features of the formation of science and philosophy as they are practised in the education system. I don't in the least suppose that these formations can be changed simply by attacking them theoretically, by a 'theoretical *Aufhebung*'. But I do see this philosophical work as part of the 'revolutionary practice' needed, and an essential part: contrary to what Dews seems to imply (though of course, 'no one, least of all Dews, would wish to deny this'), 'revolutionary practice' not only does not exclude such theoretical work, it must include it.

Let me come finally, then, to Dews' claim that what I say 'tells us nothing about the specificity of Marxism'. It is of course true that my articles discuss some very general features of science, as they are theorised in epistemology and the philosophy of science; and it's clear that Dews thinks that the specificity of Marxism is a function solely of its (relatively) specific concepts, such as mode of production, surplus value, and so on, which I don't mention. But the question of the specificity of a body of theory is more complicated than that. The content of a concept is relatively specific, as opposed to relatively generic, if it distinguishes a relatively small class of objects by characterising

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them in their distinctiveness from other objects. Specificity is thus a measure of the distinctiveness of the class: the concept of a dog is more specific than that of an animal, and the concept of contradiction is less specific than that of contradictory mode of production. Clearly, then, there's a close relation between the specificity of the concepts of a theory and its ability to 'reproduce the concrete in thought'. The more specific the characterisation of something, the more concrete is the object so characterised; the less specific, the more abstract. But of course, Marx recognised and insisted on the need for abstraction in science, i.e. for concepts of relatively general application, and saw the reproduction of the concrete as achievable by the combination of these generic or abstract concepts, the concrete being 'the concentration of many determinations' (1857 *Introduction, Grundrisse*). A contradictory mode of production is a more concrete object than either a contradiction or a mode of production: it is the 'concentration' of these more abstract determinations. Thus if we talk of the specificity of a theory as a whole, it follows that the ability of a theory to reproduce the concrete, and thus its specificity in this sense, is perfectly compatible with a high degree of abstractness or generality in its concepts. But talk of the specificity of a theory as a whole has another sense, which calls on the connection between the specificity of the content of a concept and the distinctiveness of its object. The specificity of Marxism in this sense would be its distinctiveness, its character as Marxian in distinction from other bodies of theory; and in this sense also even a generic concept could have a high degree of specificity, i.e. it could be, as a general concept, very different from the general concepts employed in other theories.

In these senses, what I said tells us a lot about the specificity of Marxism, a lot about what distinguishes Marxism from other bodies of theory. In these terms, what I said implies that the specificity, that is distinctiveness, of Marxism is a function not only of the specificity of its specific concepts, such as mode of production, but also of the specificity of its more generic concepts such as contradiction, and with that the specificity of such other generic concepts as those of science, knowledge, and reason. I was arguing, in other words, for the specificity of Marxism at the philosophical and epistemological level. To the extent that Dews, in supporting Colletti, was denying this in favour of a conception of Marxist science modelled epistemologically on 'Established science', natural science, it was he, not I, who was obscuring the specificity of Marxism: its specificity as scientific *critique*, as revolutionary science.