

Was Marx a Positivist?

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Marx understood himself as a scientist of the social world (Cornforth, 1962: 142, Walker, 2001: 1); however, he arguably never left a 'clear and systematic exposition' of his methodology (Echeverría, 1989: 242). Due to this he has often been reinterpreted (McBride, 1977: 165) to fit the 'dominant model of science at the time' (Walker, 2001: 181). From this, commentators have stated that Marx was 'undoubtedly' a positivist (Acton, 1967: 30). This essay seeks to evaluate such claims against what Marx really said.

In order to establish whether or not Marx was a positivist, it is necessary to establish what positivism is, and therefore what requirements must be met in order to be considered a positivist. In defining positivism, it is important to consider that there have been debates within this school of thought and it is not therefore a monolithic tradition (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997: 24, 42), that:

'Positivism and its conception of science is neither a single viewpoint nor a static one, and defining a common core or setting parameters to the philosophy is by no means straightforward' (Walker, 2001: 106, 107).

Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a series of tenets associated with this philosophy of science. For instance, Walker lists some sixteen features that are common for positivists (Walker, 2001: 108, 109). However, for the purposes of brevity, this essay shall limit itself to a consideration of the central features listed by Halfpenny: the unity of science; empiricism; science as the only valid form of knowledge, and causal laws (quoted in Walker, 2001: 107). Rather than attempting to evaluate a more complete set of tenets, this essay shall examine fewer features in greater depth. Further studies should look into the features not discussed here; such as objectivity, deduction, and the purpose of science. By evaluating the extent to which Marx conforms to these tenets, it will be possible to determine whether we can consider him a positivist.

This essay will also compare the stances Marx takes on such issues with that of traditional positivists themselves, notably Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim. 'In the social sciences the first self-conscious proclamation of the positivist view came from Auguste Comte' (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997: 26), whereas Durkheim arguably represents 'what is the core of the positivist interpretation of social science' (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997: 40). Such a comparison will highlight the ways in which Marx's approach conforms or conflicts with positivism; whilst also bringing to the fore debates within the positivist conception of science.

Positivism argues for a unity of the sciences (Comte, 1877: 332, Durkheim, 1903: 178, Hughes and Sharrock, 1997: 3, Tant, 1999: 108, Walker 2001; 106), in that we should study and seek to understand the social world through the method of the natural sciences. In other words, 'the positive method of studying phenomena employed in the natural sciences must be extended to the study of social phenomena' (Lenzer, 1998: lxii). For example, Durkheim argued that our investigations into social facts should be essentially the same as natural phenomena (Durkheim, 1903: 195).

This essay argues that Marx self-consciously conforms to such a view. Evidence suggests he also believed the study of society should be understood as part of natural science (Cornforth, 1962: 15, Dupré, 1966: 125, Hughes and Sharrock, 1997: 27). For instance, we find references to a comparison of his method to that of the natural sciences throughout his works, such as understanding his conclusions to be 'determined with the precision of natural science' (Marx, 1904:44). Furthermore, he self-consciously adopts the methodology used to ascertain knowledge in the

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natural sciences to his object of study:

'The physicist either observes physical phenomena where they occur in their most typical form and freest from disturbing influence... In this work I have to examine the capitalist mode of production, and conditions of production and exchange, corresponding to that mode' (Marx, 1867: 135).

As Marx shares this interpretation of the unity of science, we can consider him to conform to the positivist view in this respect.

A second feature common to positivism is the focus on empiricism (Comte, 1877: 321, Hughes and Sharrock, 1997: 26, Walker, 2001: 24, Williams and May, 1996: 27), which 'hold[s] true knowledge to be obtainable via human sense experience alone' (Tant 1999: 107). Once again, we find there is evidence from Marx that suggests he shares this focus. He emphasized that all knowledge must begin from the empirical, material world (Dupré, 1966: 178, 214, Marx and Engels, 1846: 247, Marx quoted in Walker, 2001: 15, 21). Furthermore, Marx used this conception in ways which emulate the positivist understanding of empiricism, 'Marx thought that all human knowledge must be based upon sense experience' (Acton, 1967: 30), and applied this methodology to his own studies of the social world, stating that 'these premises must be verified in a purely empirical way' (Marx and Engels quoted in Sayer 1979: 3).

However, it has been argued that Marx's self-claimed empirical focus was not empiricist enough to be considered positivist (Walker, 2001: 139). Durkheim argued that Marx did not use empirical data sufficiently in his materialism, arguing that 'in order to demonstrate it, [Marx] is content to cite a few scattered and disjointed facts which together make up no methodological series' (Durkheim, 1897: 172). Even if one disagrees with Durkheim's conclusion, it is of interest to consider that Marx critiqued the 'unsophisticated and uncritical' use of 'crude empiricism' (quoted in Walker 2001: 42). Furthermore, for certain positivists, empiricism entails limiting study to that which can be observed (Comte, 1853: 73), whereas Marx sought to understand entities that were not always directly observable. This conflict will be discussed in greater detail further in this essay. Consequently, it is plausible to argue that whilst Marx did indeed share with positivism some focus on the empirical, his empiricism was limited in comparison with traditional positivists.

Positivists also commonly hold the view that science is the only valid form of knowledge (Lenzer, 1999: lxiii, Tant, 1999: 112, Walker, 2001: 1). Therefore, in studying the social world, 'religious, moral and aesthetic statements along with metaphysical ones [are] consigned to the dustbin of meaninglessness' (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997: 26). For instance, Comte rejected attempts to understand the social world using the theological or metaphysical, as 'it is a work too mighty for either of them' (Comte, 1853: 84). Whether or not Marx agreed is a matter of debate amongst commentators.

In support of the argument that Marx also shares this conception of knowledge, we find multiple examples where Marx critiques 'mysticism' (Marx, 1888: 245), 'speculation' (Marx and Engels 1846: 246), and 'idealist abstraction' (Walker 2001: 36). In *The German Ideology*, for instance, Marx and Engels argue at great lengths against the use of the speculative and philosophical (Sayer, 1979: 3). Callinicos (1843) highlights the 'almost Comtean ring to the passages of *The German Ideology* which denounce idealist metaphysics in the name of positive science' (Quoted in Walker, 2001: 47). For some, such critique demonstrates that 'intellectual or spiritual production is somehow secondary' (Acton, 1967: 42) to the material, or even take this as an outright 'rejection of idealism' (Dupré, 1966: 173). However, this essay will argue against such an interpretation.

Firstly, it is important to understand such critique in context. For instance, in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels were specifically arguing against the idealism of the Hegelians, whereas, in *The Economic Manuscripts*, Marx criticised Hegel not only for 'uncritical idealism' but also for uncritical positivism' (Walker, 2001: 139). It is plausible to argue that it would be unjust to give such weight to criticism alone.

To highlight this, we can demonstrate that although Marx critiqued the use of abstractions, he also utilised them in his own work (Dean et al, 2006: 23). We can find numerous examples in his thought, such as the 'abstract concept of competition' (Mephram, 1989: 229), or 'commodity fetishism' (Rosdolsky, 1977: 126). Furthermore, not only did Marx

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use abstraction himself, he recognised the necessity of doing so; for in social sciences 'neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both' (Marx, 1867: 134). This suggests we should be cautious to give undue weight to such criticisms.

However, of far greater significance is the argument that Marx could not conform with this positivist tenet, due to the importance he attributes to the role of ideas through his dialectical approach. We could plausibly interpret the above criticism as stressing the inadequacy of both materialism and idealism as separate spheres in themselves (Dean et al, 2006: 25). This interpretation is also consistent with the criticisms of empiricism discussed above. For instance, both are criticised in *The German Ideology*: 'a collection of dead facts, as it is with the empiricists... or an imagined activity of imagined subjects as with the idealists' (Marx and Engels, 1846: 248).

A number of commentators have emphasised the role of the dialectic for Marx (Cornforth, 1962: 80, 81, Tant 1999: 124, Williams and May, 1996: 119). According to Dupré, 'Marx's dialectical theory of man overcomes the dichotomy between idealism and materialism' (Dupré, 1966: 215). Therefore, Marx does not reject the role of ideas as positivists would; rather he seeks to create a unity of theory and practice (Walker, 2001: 39). This is evident in the importance he allocates to philosophy in the emancipation of the proletariat:

'the proletariat cannot be abolished without philosophy being made a reality... the *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*, its *heart* is the *proletariat*' (Marx, 1844: 266).

If this interpretation of Marx is correct then his views conflict with a fundamental tenet of positivism.

However, this alone does not entail that Marx could not be a positivist. For, as discussed earlier, there is debate within the positivist school of thought, and it is interesting that Durkheim's views on this issue resonate with Marx's. For Durkheim, as with Marx, 'the problem of sociology is to reconcile idealism with materialism' (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997: 39). Durkheim also saw an important role for philosophy (Durkheim, 1903: 206), such as viewing society itself as based upon a moral order (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997: 31). Furthermore, Durkheim argued that even Comte could not conform to this positivist tenet:

'because of its philosophical character, the sociology he constructed was in no position to satisfy any of the conditions which he himself demanded for positivist science' (Durkheim, 1903: 180).

Therefore it is necessary to consider this in relation to the other tenets of positivism, for both 'the empirical and the theoretical cannot be registered on a continuum' (Adorno, 1976: 70).

A fundamental feature of positivism is the belief that social science is able to ascertain natural laws that determine human behaviour (Dean et al, 2006: 5); with 'the aim of science...to produce generalisations or laws stating the causal relationships which held between phenomena' (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997: 57). Both Comte and Durkheim held this view (Durkheim, 1903: 195, 201), whilst Marx also claimed to have discovered such laws (McBride, 1977: 59). An example of this is competition, which he argued 'subordinates every individual capitalist to the immanent laws of capitalist production, as external and coercive laws' (Marx, 1988: 739). Thus suggesting that Marx shares this feature of positivism.

Despite this, it has been argued that the laws Marx puts forward are different from the positivist conception of a natural law (Walker, 2001: 142). Marx did not understand these laws as 'unquestionable truths' (McBride, 1977: 165); rather he emphasised their historical contingency, stating that 'the categories are no more eternal than the relations they express' (Marx, quoted in Dupré, 1966: 188). For Marx, it was important to recognise society as expressing a particular historical form (Marx, quoted in Acton, 1967: 47); 'its real history is part of what it is' (Ollman, 2001: 288). However, to argue that this is incompatible with a positivist understanding of laws results from a misconception of the positivist use of natural laws. Whilst Durkheim held that 'this conception is far from entailing some kind of materialism for which I have often been reproached' (Durkheim, 1908: 247), Comte's positivism also entailed historical change.

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There is, however, an important difference between the conceptions of causation underlying such laws. The positivist approach is based on the Humean view, whereby 'the constant concomitance of two factors is sufficient to establish a law' (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997: 36). Therefore, Comte describes his laws as 'invariable relations of succession' (Comte, 1853: 72). However, for Marx, constant conjunctions are not sufficient to establish cause, he searched for a deeper explanation (Walker, 2001: 171). This is apparent in Marx's criticism of Proudhon, for 'instead of explaining how these categories themselves have been produced historically, he merely puts them in a rational order of succession' (Dupré, 1966: 188). Furthermore this view is reflected in his methodological critique of economists in general: 'it is only the direct *form of manifestations* that is reflected in their brains and not their *inner connection*' (Marx, quoted in Sayer, 1979: 9). Therefore, Marx would critique the limited conception of cause underlying positivist natural laws as insufficient explanation. This would imply that he cannot be a positivist.

As stated earlier in this essay, some positivists argue that 'there can be no real knowledge but that which is based on observed facts' (Comte, 1953: 73). In contrast, Marx's conception of causation seeks to uncover phenomena that cannot be directly observed; the distinction between the observable appearance and underlying reality is 'undeniably important' for him (Tant 1999: 109). Again, 'Marx is consistently at pains to show that how the world immediately appears to us belies a deeper underlying reality' (Roberts 2006: 70), with apparent relations of 'equality and freedom' obscuring the reality of 'domination and subordination' (McBride, 1977: 69). If we understand the focus on the observable as a defining feature of positivism – which should be noted is certainly contestable (see Hughes and Sharrock, 1997: 29-48) – it would appear that Marx cannot be a positivist. For not only does he hold that 'essential relations need not be transparent to direct experience' (Sayer, 1979: 9), but as the above discussion demonstrates, this belief is core to his conception of the purpose of scientific explanation.

So far, this essay has demonstrated that Marx did share a number of methodological beliefs with positivism, however there are also important conflicts. To label Marx a positivist would therefore entail ignoring or undermining aspects crucial to Marx's thought. From this we should conclude that Marx was not a positivist. However, it could be argued that whilst incongruent with the positivist model, Marx was still scientific. His approach to the social world can be understood through a critical realist approach to science (Joseph: 2002: 13) 'without compromise' (Walker, 2001: 181), for critical realists 'adopt similar ontological, epistemological and methodological standpoints to that of Marxism' (Roberts, 1999: 66).

The similarities present between Marx's views and positivism are also evident in the critical realist approach. 'The view that the world exists independently of our knowledge of it... social phenomena do have causal powers and we can make causal statements' (Marsh, 1999: 328. 329). However, it is of great significance that, where Marx conflicts with positivist assumptions, critical realism can accommodate such views. For instance, like Marx's dialectic, critical realists 'reject any attempt to divorce the material and the ideational' (Dean et al, 2006: 3). Critical realism also accepts the existence of phenomena not directly observable, (Walker, 2001: 169), whereas there is a striking similarity in the conceptions of cause and the distinctions made between appearance and reality. For critical realism:

'there is a reality *behind* or *beneath* the actual and empirical, positivism... fails in remaining at the surface level of things, failing to ask what generates the regularities' (Dean et al, 2006: 10).

In conclusion, this essay has argued that Marx was not a positivist. Whilst on the surface Marx's approach to the unity of science, empiricism, and causal laws appear to fulfil the positivist criterion, even a modest list of positivist tenets highlights the fundamental differences between positivism and Marx. For Marx, ideas are crucial, the unobservable can be of great importance, and causation must go beyond the mere succession of events to establish the underlying essence of things. Those that incorrectly label Marx to be a positivist fail to fully 'appreciate the general philosophical position of Marx' (Walker, 2001: 179). Marx himself recognised that failure to understand his methodology can lead to such misinterpretations:

'that the method employed in *Das Kapital* has been little understood is shown by the various conceptions and contradictions to one another that have been formed of it' (Marx, 1867: 142).

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