

# PRACTICAL REFLEXIVITY IN MARX

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The aim of the present paper is to elucidate Marx's understanding of the relation between theory and practice. No claim is entered to the effect that Marx's conception of the theory/practice relation is original to him: rather – although space prevents a defence of this view here – I would argue that it originates with Hegel, who urges that *true theory* and *free (or mutually recognitive) practice* are internally linked.<sup>1</sup> If this is so, then Marx's reading of Hegel as an idealist who severs theory from practice, preparatory to reducing the latter to the former,<sup>2</sup> wholly misses its mark. So too does Marx's polemic against the Young Hegelians<sup>3</sup> who, it may be argued, carry forward Hegel's understanding of theory's relation to practice rather than succumbing to “idealism”, as Marx thinks. My concern in what follows is not, however, with the fairness or unfairness of Marx's criticisms but with the substantive view of the relation between theory and practice which Marx defends. To this view I turn.

## I

Marx develops his characteristic understanding of the relation between theory and practice in the course of polemics which, in the 1840s, mark successive stages in his break with his erstwhile Young Hegelian allies.<sup>4</sup> From his scattered comments and assertions both then and later, a rich and systematic conception of the relation between theory and practice emerges. The task of the present section is to make this

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1 Relevant passages by Hegel include his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford University Press 1977) pp. 44, 104 and (especially) 490-1; also his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* para. 382.

2 Cf. Marx/Engels *Collected Works* (Lawrence and Wishart 1975-) [henceforward: CW], 3, pp. 326-46.

3 See N. Lobkowitz *Theory and Practice* (Notre Dame 1973) Part III; D. McLellan *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx* (Macmillan 1979); L. S. Stepelevich (ed.) *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology* (Cambridge University Press 1983).

4 As my introductory comments indicate, I consider that Marx's interpretation of the Young Hegelians is open to question. When present paper refers to the Young Hegelians, this is generally to the Young Hegelians as seen through Marx's eyes.

conception clear.

Marx's anti-Young Hegelian polemics argue for both a *distinction between* and a *unity of* theory and practice. A key point of interest is how, in his view, the distinction and the unity are combined.

The thesis of the *distinction between* theory and practice is urged by Marx against Young Hegelianism which had, in his estimation, denied it. The Young Hegelians are said to postulate a 'mystical identity of practice and theory' which conflates the former with the latter: 'The act of transforming society is reduced to the cerebral activity of critical criticism' (CW, 4, pp. 193, 86; cf. 5, pp. 4, 30-1, 91, 379). 'Ideas can never lead beyond an old world order but only beyond the ideas of the old world order. In order to carry out ideas men are needed who can exert practical force' (CW, 4, p. 119). Marx's relatively straightforward distinction is, thus, between theory, which can change only ones own interpretation of the world, and practice, which is alone capable of changing the world itself: 'The real subject retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before; namely as long as the head's conduct is merely speculative, merely theoretical.'<sup>5</sup> Of course, a simple theory/practice distinction of this sort is not sufficient to establish what sort of practice is necessary to change social relations – this latter, of course, being Marx's central concern. For example, even if social relations are practical in the sense of constituting, at any given time, a distinctive 'mode of life [*Lebensweise*]' (CW, 5, p. 31), it might still be possible to change them not through the threat or exercise of force but through a practice of rational persuasion. (Insofar as rational persuasion effects changes in the world, it counts as 'practice' in terms of Marx's distinction.) For Marx, there is a presumption that in changing social relations force is directly or indirectly involved, theory itself becoming force (*Gewalt*) 'as soon as it has gripped the masses' (CW, 3, p. 182). This, however, is a function not of the theory/practice distinction as such but of an understanding of existing social relations as ones where issues of domination are at stake. Marx's view of his Young Hegelian erstwhile allies might be summarised by saying that Young Hegelianism is impotent as propaganda, and retreats into the idealist illusion, because existing power relations are such as to undermine the possibility of an effective public sphere. The suppression of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, edited by Marx in 1842-43, signals for him the end of the illusion that merely publicistic activity (as distinct from political organisation) is a sufficient lever of social change.

Besides social relations, ideological forms (which are, of course, bound up with social relations) fall, for Marx, on the side of what is changeable only through practice ('Theses on Feuerbach', IV: CW, 5, p. 4). Thus, for example, Marx criticises Max Stirner for destroying, not an ideological category 'itself' (which is to say, in its public or social existence), but only 'his emotional personal relation to it' (CW, 5, p.

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5 K. Marx *Grundrisse* (Penguin Books 1973) pp. 100-1; cf. CW, 4, p. 193. Further passages which deploy the theory/practice distinction against Young Hegelianism occur at CW, 3, pp. 181, 302, 313; 5, pp. 5, 24, 77-8, 126, 173, 237, 282, 286, 384.

36). There is, to be sure, an evident distinction between destroying a category's hold on oneself and destroying its hold on others; but there is, in addition, a further sense in which a turn to practice may be relevant here. For it may be the case that *even for oneself* the grip of a specific ideological category or form can be broken only through a practical change in social relations: ones 'emotional personal relation' to the category, or in other words the *grip upon one* of the category as "obvious common sense",<sup>6</sup> may survive a "scientific" refutation of it. A passage in *Capital* appears to be to this effect: Marx's contention is, apparently, that even a category which has been seen through by means of 'scientific discovery' may retain its grip upon someone who knows it to be misleading.<sup>7</sup> So to say, once the "scientist" leaves his or her study, and functions not as a theorist but as a family member or citizen, the ideological "hermeneutical atmosphere" of the society concerned asserts itself (or re-asserts itself) with full force.

According to Marx, it seems, ideological categories are not merely added to social reality like icing on a cake: they are rooted in social existence. Patterns of thinking are not, for Marx, merely bound up with social relations but form an essential part of what, in a given instance, "society" is. In order to follow through this line of thought, we may turn from Marx's thesis of a *distinction between* theory and practice to his thesis that theory and practice form a unity.

Marx urges the thesis of a *unity of theory and practice* by affirming both the necessity of theory to practice and the necessity of practice to theory. The necessity of theory to practice is implied in his 1844 view of revolutionary practice as involving a unity of philosophy and the proletariat and his 1845 view of revolutionary practice as "'practical-critical" activity' (CW, 3, p 187; 5, p. 3).<sup>8</sup> It is implied also in his characterisation of human as opposed to animal production both in the *1844 Manuscripts* – 'Man makes his life activity the object of his will and consciousness. He has conscious life activity' (CW, 3, p. 276) – and in *Capital*.<sup>9</sup> The necessity of practice to theory, on the other hand, is affirmed directly: 'Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious being, and the being of man is their natural life-

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6 I use the term "common sense", here, with the meaning here given it by Gramsci: see A. Gramsci *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Lawrence and Wishart 1971) pp. 134, 323ff.

7 K. Marx *Capital* Vol. 1 (Penguin Books 1976) p. 167. The qualification *apparently* is needful because, in the passage cited, 'scientific discovery' may possibly refer only to the view, shared by Marx and the "classical" political economists, that labour-time is the content of value – and not to the analysis of the form of value which Marx regarded as his own, novel, contribution (*ibid.* pp. 173-4). In this case, the circumstance that an ideological category retains its grip even in the face of scientific discovery and insight might be due to the incompleteness of the discovery concerned.

8 The distinction between the two passages is that, in 1844, Marx thinks of the unity of theory and practice in terms of, so to say, a "united front" between discrete social groups (namely, Left-Hegelian intellectuals and the working class) whereas, in 1845, a much closer integration (whatever its precise character) is envisaged both in conceptual and political terms.

9 *Capital*, Vol. I, pp. 283-4. A difference between these two passages, dating from 1844 and 1867 respectively, should be noted: the former invokes not merely consciousness in general but self-consciousness, and thereby points towards a notion of free self-determination, while the latter invokes only consciousness of purposively-addressed goals. The former implies that, as humans, we *choose our purposes* while the latter is compatible with, although it does not entail, the view that our purposes are predetermined. Are humans distinct from animals because we choose our purposes whereas they do not, or (surely a less plausible view) because we alone act in a purposive way?

process' (CW, 5, p. 36). The necessity of practice to theory is likewise implied when Marx tells us that 'scientific' activity is 'social' activity (CW, 3, p. 298) and also that 'All social life is essentially practical' ('Theses on Feuerbach', VIII: CW, 5, p. 5). For Marx, neither thoughts nor language form a 'realm of their own' but are, rather, 'only manifestations of actual life' (CW, 5, p. 447).<sup>10</sup> But, if theory and practice are thus mutually necessary and so form a unity, it remains to determine what form this unity has and how it is to be understood.

An answer to this question is suggested by two further passages. In one, Marx rejects the view – its exponents are unspecified – which 'does not include philosophy in the circle of German reality' (CW, 3, p. 180). In the other, he urges his point in the form of a rhetorical question: "'Can the [Young Hegelian] critic live in the society he criticises?'" It should be asked instead: must he not live in that society? Must he not be a manifestation of the life of that society?' (CW, 4, p. 160). In short, theory is socially real – it is located in society – but at the same time 'All social life is essentially practical' (CW, 5, p. 5). Thus it can be suggested that the best way to characterise Marx's view of the distinction between, and unity of, theory and practice is to say that, for him, theory is a real and necessary *moment* (or aspect) of society as a *totality* (or whole). Thus practice is *theory-inclusive* just as theory, for its part, is *practice-related* and subsists only on a practical terrain. Just such a view of theory as a moment of practice is expressed in the already-quoted phrase "'practical-critical" activity', 'critical' being understood here as indicating the theoretical moment in practice, or 'activity', taken as a theory-inclusive whole. Seen in this way, theory is neither external to practice (a 'realm' of its own: CW, 5, p. 447; cf. 'Theses on Feuerbach', IV) nor yet – as in Marx's view it was for the Young Hegelians – the sole and true form of practice, nor yet again something socially and practically inessential or unreal. Theory is *distinct from* practice in that it forms a moment (rather than the whole) of practice: there are things practice can do – e.g. 'changing the world' – which theory on its own cannot. And theory is *in unity with* practice since that of which it is a moment is a practical whole.

Thus the theses of the *distinction between* and *unity of* theory and practice – which at first sight might seem mutually exclusive – elegantly and lucidly combine. Moreover, the view of theory as a moment in, and of, practice provides clarification of the sense in which the destruction *even for oneself* of an ideological practice may be accomplished only in social and practical terms. Borrowing Wittgenstein's terminology<sup>11</sup> one might say that, for Marx, changing (again, even for oneself) a form of language – or "theory" – involves changing, in practice, a form of social life.

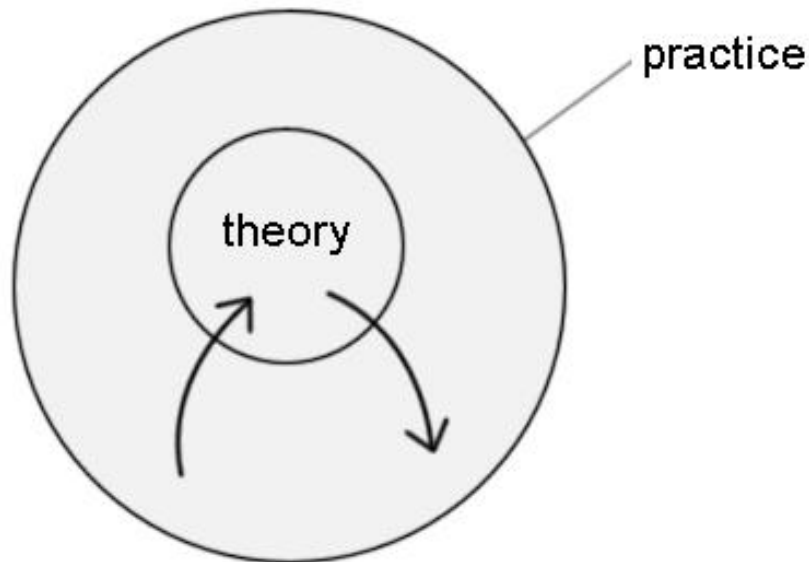
The conception of the theory/practice relationship here ascribed to Marx can be

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10 In Marx's view, theory's estrangement *from* practice – its understanding of itself, in the manner of traditional philosophy (CW, 3, p. 331), as a practice-independent 'realm of its own' – has its roots in contradictions and estrangements which obtain *within* practice itself. See 'Theses on Feuerbach', IV, and also CW, 5, p. 45 which signals this point by referring to the emergence of the distinction between mental and manual labour.

11 See L. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* (Basil Blackwell 1968) p. 8, para. 19.

summarised in the form of a diagram (the arrows indicating paths of reciprocal interaction as, over time, practice constitutes theory which in turn informs or guides practice):



The disadvantage of the diagram is that its shape derives from a logical theory of sets and subsets, and thereby fails to render clearly the notion of an *internal* relation – a relation of reciprocal mediation – between theory (as moment) and practice (as totality) which is central to Marx's account. In Hegel's terms, it belongs at the level of abstract 'understanding' and not at the level of dialectical 'reason'. Because of this, I should like the diagram to be seen on the model of a *Zen koan* rather than as a definitive version of what has been said. Once the point of the diagram has been appreciated, its form should be forgotten: the ladder should be cast away immediately it has been climbed.

## II

Some implications of the account just given of the theory/practice relationship can now be made clear. From what has been said it follows that, for Marx, there can be no question of viewing the thesis of the unity of theory and practice as a straightforward political ought-to-be. For in Marx's view theory already just is, *qua* theory, a moment of practice: the only question can be whether this unity, which already exists, has an adequate form. "Adequacy", here, refers to theory's mode of self-understanding.

Theory which understands itself as forming a practice-independent 'realm of its own' forms an *inadequate* unity with practice, since such a self-understanding is blind to – indeed, precludes awareness of – theory's practice-relatedness. Such relatedness obtains, although it is denied. Marx's rhetorical question – 'Must the critic not live in the society which he criticizes?' – suggests that an *adequate* unity exists only when theory grasps, or is at least capable of grasping, itself as a moment of a practical (“practical” in a theory-inclusive sense) whole. Marx takes the Young Hegelians to task for lacking just such a grasp of their theorising as practice-related: 'It has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection between German philosophy and German reality, the connection of their criticism with their own material surroundings' (*CW*, 5, p. 30). This passage imposes on theorising the requirement, not merely that it looks to its own practical effectiveness, but that it takes account of its constitution in and through practice, i.e., its inherence in a practical and social totality which is *present in* (and hence *constitutive of*) each of its moments or parts.<sup>12</sup>

We can summarise this by saying that Marx requires theorising to be *practically reflexive*. Theory is *reflexive* when it reflects upon the constitution, and hence the validity, of its own categorial terms or (what is the same thing) its truth-criteria. Theory is *practically reflexive* when it understands the constitution of its terms and truth-criteria to be a practical and social constitution, i.e., when it understands that practice and society impinge on theory at the level of the categorial system it employs and when, accordingly, it thematizes this practical constitution (or practice-relatedness) in the course of posing to itself the question of the validity of its terms.

To be sure, theory might reflect on its own practical preconditions without, at least explicitly, raising *in the course of this reflection* the question of its categorial validity. For example, it might ask after the conditions of its own possibility in a purely causal or “sociological” way. However, Marx's assertion that theoretical 'mysteries...find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice' (*CW*, 5, p. 5) implies a view of theory's practice-relatedness as impinging on its substantive validity. And it is certainly theory's categorial (as distinct from its merely “empirical” or first-order) validity which he has in mind when he claims, of Young Hegelianism, that 'Not only in its answers, [but] even in its questions there was mystification' (*CW*, 5, p. 28): mystification at the level of questions is mystification at the level of truth-criteria and categorial terms. The thrust of his polemic is to assert that practical reflexivity is needful in order to gain purchase on the question of the validity of categories and that, conversely, practical reflexivity brings the question of category-validation into theoretical view.

For Marx, the notion of practical reflexivity passes into the mainstream of all

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<sup>12</sup> This formulation endorses the notion, criticised by Althusser, of a totality as a unity which is present (wholly present) in each of its moments: see L. Althusser and E. Balibar *Reading Capital* (New Left Books 1970) p. 96 and *passim*. For reasons which it falls outside the present paper to discuss, I consider that Althusser's objection to the effect that such a conception of totality is reductionist misses its mark.

Marxism which is “non-vulgar” or, in other words, which articulates itself in a conceptually rigorous way. Habermas summarises a lengthy tradition of Marxist and 'critical' thinking when he refers (favourably) to theories which 'incorporate reflexively the fact that they themselves remain a moment of the objective context which, in their turn, subject to analysis'.<sup>13</sup> The theme of practical reflexivity is signalled, likewise, by Lukacs,<sup>14</sup> Gramsci,<sup>15</sup> Horkheimer,<sup>16</sup> Kojève<sup>17</sup> and Sartre.<sup>18</sup> The specific questions raised by these varying formulations of a common theme fall outside the bounds of this paper, which deals with the notion of practical reflexivity itself, generically, and with issues to which it gives rise. Why should practical reflexivity be needful, and what theoretical requirements does it entail?

### III

There is a difference between saying that theory's terms must be compatible with a reflexive grasp of itself as a moment of practice, and saying that such a grasp must actually be present in any given theoretical case. The latter is, as I understand it, Marx's claim at least where social or “human” theory is concerned. The need for actual – and not merely, so to say, potential – practical reflexivity is clearest in the case of social theory which is intended as *social critique* in an explicitly oppositional or “revolutionary” sense. This is so because failure explicitly to thematize practical reflexivity means that theory lacks the distance or detachment from its object which would enable its object to be called in question. That is, theory would lack the distance which enables its object's *claims about itself* – the “ideologies” or, as it were, the hermeneutical and categorial “atmosphere” which forms the socially real *theoretical moment* of a society as a *practical totality* – to be bracketted or, as it were, placed in quotes.

An object-lesson is once again provided by the Young Hegelians as pilloried by Marx. Lacking practical reflexivity and thus critical distance, the Young Hegelians merely 'recognize', and hence reinforce and confirm, the existing social world by means of a seemingly different interpretation of it; as a result the Young Hegelians 'in spite of their allegedly “world-shattering” phrases, are the staunchest conservatives' (*CW*, 5, p. 30; cf. pp. 293, 300, 304, 415, 432). Behind Stirner's allegedly utopian alternative to existing social relations (his proposal of an anarchic 'Association of Egoists'), the outlines of existing ideological categories and social relations can be discerned (*CW*, 5, pp. 392, 398, 406, 409, 411; cf. Engels in *CW*, 4, pp. 329, 564).

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13 See T. W. Adorno *et al.* *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (Heinemann 1976) p. 134; cf. p. 162.

14 G. Lukacs *History and Class Consciousness* (Merlin Press 1971) pp. 19-24.

15 *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* pp. 404-5, 436.

16 See note 22, below.

17 A. Kojève 'The Idea of Death in the Philosophy of Hegel' *Interpretation* Vol. 3 (1973) p. 115.

18 J.-P. Sartre *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (New Left Books 1976) p. 47.

The hermeneutical atmosphere of a society is functionally necessary (or at least advantageous) to the reproduction of the society through time; to breathe that atmosphere unthinkingly, and so reproduce its categories in one's allegedly oppositional works, is accordingly self-defeating because it contributes to the continuing maintenance of the social *status quo*. Lacking a sense of how practice constitutes theory – that is, failing to grasp 'the connection of their criticism with their own material surroundings' – the Young Hegelians are unable to address the issue of the practice to which, in its turn, their own theorising leads; these two failings go hand in hand, and 'conservatism' (a reinforcement of the *status quo*) is the outcome. Only if we reflect on the practical constitution of our theory's categories, or in other words on our place *as critics* in the society *we criticize*, can we *make a question* out of whether our theory's categories merely copy down, and thence reinforce, the social relations to which we stand opposed.

What of social theory which holds no overt brief for opposition but which aims, merely, to achieve truth? (Most "social science" is of course theory of this kind.) I propose that even theory of this non-oppositional sort must be practically reflexive, i.e., must pose to itself, explicitly, the question of the practical and social constitution of the terms which it employs.

The object-lesson, here, is supplied in Marx's critique of political economy. Marx's later work makes it clear that explicit practical reflexivity is needful in order that description of structures of social practice should not merely reproduce – as, for example, does 'vulgar' political economy<sup>19</sup> – 'appearances', that is, the ideological claims as to its own nature which form a real part of society and which society makes about itself. Such 'appearances' are the theoretical moment of society as a practical structure or whole: in other words, a society's mode of self-presentation is, itself, a real part of that society (in the sense that practice "includes" theory).

The point is that appearances may be systematically misleading as to the character of the practice (the social structure) in which they inhere. In other words, they may mediate to itself a social reality which exists in a perverted and mystificatory form. This, in Marx's view, is the case with the way in which capitalist society presents itself, or "spontaneously" appears. The sphere of exchange gives rise to the ideologies of individualism – 'freedom, equality, property and Bentham', as Marx has it<sup>20</sup> – and these ideologies make up a realm of appearance (a realm of functionally necessary mediation) directly contradicted by the structure of the capitalist production process – which structure is in Marx's view decisive for the character of capitalist social relations (and hence practice) taken as a whole. The sphere of exchange is for Marx a 'surface process, beneath which, however, in the depths, entirely different processes go on, in which...apparent individuality and liberty disappear'; when we explore the process of production we find that 'exchange turns into its opposite and

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19 See e.g. *Capital*, Vol. I, pp. 174-5; also K. Marx *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part Two (Lawrence and Wishart 1969) pp. 266-7.

20 *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 280; cf. *Grundrisse* pp. 239ff.



the laws of private property – liberty, equality, property – turn into the worker's propertylessness and the dispossession of his labour'.<sup>21</sup> The “vulgar” economist merely copies down the appearances of liberty, equality, etc, and takes them at their face value; only a critique of political economy can pose the question of the reliability of these appearances as accounts of the social practice which they mediate and help to perpetuate and within which they stand. The vulgar economist lacks the practical reflexivity which allows Marx himself to pose (and to answer in the negative) the question of whether capitalism's appearance-ideologies are indeed trustworthy theoretical guides.

Of course, Marx's stance vis-a-vis capitalism is oppositional: sarcasm, anger, mockery and vitriolic wit are *Capital's* ever-recurring motifs. But the above sketch of his interrogation of the ideologies of 'freedom, equality, property and Bentham' shows that it is not merely his stance of opposition which brings the theme of practical reflexivity to the fore. For the *very possibility* that social appearances may be misleading – that society's theoretical moment may conceal, and contradict, the nature of social practice – is sufficient to make a “bracketing” of these appearances (of society's “hermeneutical atmosphere”) incumbent on any social theorist who aims to present a true account of the nature of the social practice concerned. And from this it follows that social theory which *aims at truth*, and not merely social theory which *aims at opposition*, must be practically reflexive; for only a practically reflexive theory (a theory which construes the social theorist as him or herself socially situated) can make a question out of the way in which society as it were “spontaneously” presents itself to theorist and non-theorist alike. Accordingly all social theory, and not merely oppositional theory, abandons the requirement of practical reflexivity at its peril.

Horkheimer makes this point when he condemns theory for which 'subject and object are kept strictly apart... If we think of the object of the theory in separation from the theory, we fall into quietism or conformism'.<sup>22</sup> The theorising 'subject' must grasp, reflexively, his or her presence in theory's subject-matter or 'object', viz. society as a practical totality, if 'quietism or conformism' (or in other words an unquestioning endorsement of extant ideological categories) is to be avoided. Certainly, the severe term 'quietism' underscores Horkheimer's oppositional stance; but the 'conformism' which is also to be avoided is a conformism inimical to the interests of truth itself. To be sure, it *may so happen* that social 'appearances' turn out to be reliable guides to the nature of social practice: by definition, this would be so only in an 'emancipated' society where alienation and estrangement no longer prevailed. But the theorist (or indeed the citizen) can never know *in advance* whether this is so: hence 'critical' consciousness – “critical” in the sense of “interrogative” and not necessary in the sense of “oppositional” – is always needful. Critique indeed *must become* (it must lead to) opposition if it turns out that benign appearances conceal, and inhere in,

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21 *Grundrisse* pp. 247, 674.

22 M. Horkheimer 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in his *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (Seabury Press n.d.) p. 229.

oppressive and dehumanising practice: but what is, in the first place, needful is the interrogative stance whose possibility practical reflexivity supplies. And this interrogative stance (therefore, practical reflexivity also) remains needful *in all possible social formations whatever* – and so, too, in a society where emancipation prevails. For society can know that it is emancipated – it can guard against regression, distortion and the re-emergence of estrangement – only if interrogative and practically reflexive consciousness are in play. It can know that it is emancipated only if interrogative and practically reflexive modes of consciousness are part of its *sensus communis* or, in Gramsci's meaning of the term (which is also the classical one), its “common sense”. Far from it being the case that emancipation abolishes the need for practical reflexivity, an emancipated society is one where practical reflexivity and its implications come into their own.

In sum: practical reflexivity is needful for all social theory because it is not the case that “spontaneously” common-sensical ideas come out of nowhere. They come from practice or, rather, they inhere always-already in society as a practical totality; they form the theoretical moment in and through which a specific practice secures a conviction of its legitimacy and so reproduces itself. In this sense *society* (the totality) is present *in them* (in society's theoretical moment). *All* social theory is thus required to be on guard against false obviousness. It is so required because this obviousness – the seemingly self-evident and self-explanatory character of categories like *individuality* and *rationality* – may possibly be “mystificatory” or false: and the practice-constitution of theory penetrates, without remainder, all theory whatsoever – even theorising of the most rarified and conceptually esoteric kind. No theory forms a practice-independent 'realm of its own'. But if all theory must be practically reflexive, the requirement of practical reflexivity applies to *oppositional* theory with a redoubled force. For not only must such theory (like all theory) aim at truth; in addition, it must inform and guide a practice which *differs from* that which carries forward, and so reproduces, the *status quo*. And it can do this only if it loosens the grip – the 'mental cramp', in Wittgenstein's phrase – of those categories, and ideologies, which ensure that practice flows in socially approved channels and in those alone. What remains valid in Lenin once once the suspect notion of a “vanguard party” is rejected is his insistence that, without a theory which calls in question received appearances, the possibility of a revolutionary movement cannot be entertained.<sup>23</sup>

#### IV

What, for theory, does the requirement of practical reflexivity entail? I suggest that, with good reason, this question admits of being answered only in the most general terms. For what practical reflexivity does is to *place at issue*, without remainder, the

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23 V. I. Lenin *Selected Works* (Lawrence and Wishart n.d.), Vol. 2, p. 47; cf. the critique of “spontaneism” - in bourgeois society, spontaneity will be spontaneity conditioned by bourgeois ideology – at p. 62.

categorial framework which a given body of theory employs; and this means that the terms in which practical reflexivity goes forward must, themselves, be placed at issue if theory is to be on guard against taking ideological categories at their face value at the very moment when, reflexively, it interrogates itself. Thus, categorially, nothing is (or can be) *given in advance* of the interrogation of truth-criteria which practical reflexivity mounts. There is therefore no one set of terms which count (in advance) as constituting “valid practical reflexivity”. In other words practical reflexivity is the opposite of a “method” or “methodology” which can be established prior to, and independently of, a project of social inquiry in any given case. Practical reflexivity is thus an approach rather than a method: but it is an approach which changes everything. To see the point of practical reflexivity is to accomplish a “Gestalt-shift” after which nothing in social theorising can ever look the same.

Practical reflexivity is not a method which can be “applied”; or, rather, if we are to talk of its “application” then we must say that it is to be applied *inter alia* to itself. How is this possible, without vicious circularity or, as Hegel expresses it, without attempting 'to know before you know'?<sup>24</sup> The answer to this question lies in the unique relation between first-order *theory* and second-order *metatheory* which practical reflexivity involves.

We have seen how the requirement of practical reflexivity comes into view whenever theory asks after the validity of its truth-criteria or categorial terms. Traditionally, reflection on truth-criteria is seen as going forward at a metatheoretical level *distinct from* that of first-order theorising, for vicious circularity seemingly results if categorial validity is made a topic for first-order theorising itself. Thus, for example, vicious circularity is certainly in play when Althusser declares that '*theoretical practice* [or 'science'] is...its own criterion, and contains in itself definite protocols with which to *validate* the quality of its product, i.e., the criteria of the products of scientific practice'; for the application of this thesis is restricted (as it must be if it is to be plausible) to sciences 'once they are truly constituted and developed' whereas, of course, the real question is that of what the criteria for identifying a 'truly constituted' science might be.<sup>25</sup> The ascent to a meta-level of theoretical reflection is supposed to (and indeed succeeds in) avoiding this vicious circularity by distinguishing between *theory* and *theory which reflects on theory* – much in the fashion of Russell's theory of logical types.<sup>26</sup> But, if the danger of vicious circularity is averted, a further danger – that of an infinite regression of meta-levels – looms; for a *theory which reflects* on the *theory which reflects* on theory would be needful to establish this latter's categorial validity...and so on, without hope of halt.

Practical reflexivity avoids both vicious circularity and infinite regress by showing

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24 *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* para. 41.

25 *Reading Capital* p. 59.

26 The classic statement is the third essay in B. Russell *Logic and Knowledge* (Allen and Unwin 1956). The line of argument sketched in the remainder of this paper is indebted to G. E. Davie's interrogation of Russell in his *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* (Polygon Books 1986), Part 3.

how reflection on a theory's categorial validity can go forward within the first-order theory itself. So to say, *the same body of practically reflexive first-order theory* can play both “metatheoretical” and “theoretical” roles. That there is no division between discrete “metatheoretical” and “theoretical” roles is entailed by the notion of practically reflexive social theory because to ask after the social and practical constitution of ones categories *just is* to develop, already, a first-order social theory; and, conversely, to develop a first-order social theory *just is* to arrive at results which can, and must, be applied “in the first person” to ones own theoretical self. For this reason, the requirement of practical reflexivity does not merely impinge *at the start* of ones social theorising – as, so to say, the first “methodological” chapter of ones thesis or book – but rather accompanies one's theorising throughout and, indeed, just is one's theorising seen from a different (a reflexive) point of view. Non-practical reflexivity admits of construal or theorising at a distinct meta-level; specifically practical reflexivity admits of no such construal because it locates the theorist, and the constitution of his or her categories, within the social world which the first-order theorist explores.

Hence the infinite regress of ascent through meta levels is halted or, rather, never gets started or comes into play. But what of the vicious circularity of knowing (categorially) 'before you know'? Vicious circularity would indeed be entailed if practical reflexivity amounted to the recommendation that social theory be conducted heedless of questions pertaining to truth-criteria, those questions being in some way “automatically” answered by simple inference from first-order theorising itself. Such a recommendation is, in effect, Althusser's. It also seems to be Marx's when, in one of his weakest passages, he claims that 'One has to “leave philosophy aside” ..., one has to leap out of it and devote oneself like an ordinary man to the study of actuality'.<sup>27</sup> But the recommendation entailed by our earlier discussion is, rather, that first-order theorising be imbued throughout, and at every stage, with a practically reflexive awareness or attitude. Ones practical reflexivity and ones social theorising develop, as it were, together and hand in hand. Each – practical reflexivity and social theorising – *just is* the other (so that infinite regress is avoided); but also each is the other *seen in a different light* and so the vicious circularity entailed by an “Althusserian” approach is overcome. First-order social theorising, when informed by practical reflexivity, does not “automatically” answer categorial questions: rather, it is developed *with an eye to these questions* and with a view to showing how they might be resolved. Vicious circularity is avoided because practical reflexivity affects the first-order results at which first-order theorising arrives. This might seem

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27 CW, 5, p. 236. The passage is weak because refusing to philosophise in no way resolves the problems, including that of categorial validation, which philosophy has traditionally addressed. And if a problem is badly formulated this is not shown by choosing to ignore it. Arguably, Marx lapses into this mistake by taking philosophy to address theorising on the latter's own, allegedly practice-independent, terms and concluding that a break with philosophy *tout court* and a more 'empirical' mode of theorising (CW, 5, pp. 331, 37) becomes needful (as supposedly practice-independent) is to be theoretically assessed. However, a more promising account of the implications of the thesis of the unity of theory and practice for philosophy – one more in keeping with the eighth of the 'Theses on Feurbach' as construed in the final paragraph of the present paper – is sketched at CW, 3, p. 181: philosophy can only be transcended by actualising it in practice. Here, echoes of Hegel's linking of truth to mutual recognition sound.

like a dogmatic an *a priori* theoretical closure; on the contrary, however, bringing practical reflexivity into play represents a categorial openness superior to any other just because it refuses to take the the validity of any categories whatever simply as read. Precisely here, we should stress again that practical reflexivity presupposes, not an oppositional, but an interrogative theoretical stance: it *leads to* opposition where it turns out that theoretical 'appearances' contradict the practical reality of which they form a mediating part (i.e. where alienation prevails). No oppositional commitment is *presupposed*. Were an oppositional commitment presupposed then, in effect, we should be claiming to know *in advance of knowing* the results to which one's theorising would lead. *Either* vicious circularity would be entailed *or* one's first-order theorising could never gain purchase on the categorial validity of the theory informing one's oppositional stance – and so the infinite regression to higher and higher levels of metatheory would be unleashed.

The claims raised in the present section of this paper require, of course, a discussion that is a good deal more extensive than, here, I have been able to attempt. The general conception offered is that of a theorising which advances, simultaneously and in the same movement, on a reflexive (categorially interrogative) and a first-order front. An analogy and point of reference for such theorising might be found in Scottish eighteenth-century “common sense” philosophy, which locates a capacity to address issues of categorial validity (a capacity, in other words, for “critical theory”) within the first-order experience and self-awareness of , so to say, everyman rather than in the privileged meta-awareness of a philosophical elite.<sup>28</sup> In sum, practical reflexivity amounts to more than being on guard against categorial error and ideological delusion. It also offers, programmatically, an approach to the question of how claims as to the validity of one's categories and truth-criteria might be discursively redeemed. As we have seen, Marx casts practical reflexivity in precisely this categorially redemptive role when he declares, in the eighth of his 'Theses on Feuerbach', that 'theoretical mysteries' – by which I understand *inter alia* the 'mystery' of category-validation – can find their solution 'in human practice and in the [reflexive] comprehension of this practice' (CW, 5, p. 5). The following through of this programmatic statement lies outwith this paper's bounds. All that we have established, here, is that practical reflexivity *provides purchase* on the manner in which, minus infinite regress and vicious circularity, the question of category-validation might be addressed. And, indirectly, this proposal returns us to Hegel and the unity between true theory and mutually recognitive practice.<sup>29</sup> For it may be – and

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28 See G. E. Davie *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* ch. 10; also his *The Social Significance of the Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (Dow Lecture, University of Dundee, 1973) and his 'Berkeley, Hume, and the Central Problem of Scottish Philosophy' *McGill Hume Studies* (1981).

29 Hegelian theory is, without doubt, practically reflexive. In the sixth chapter of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel tells the story of the history in which – or, rather, at the end of which – he himself stands. His eighth chapter, on absolute knowledge, states explicitly that 'until spirit has completed itself...as world-spirit [i.e. until it has completed itself historically] it cannot reach its completion as self-conscious [i.e. truthfully self-aware] spirit' (*Phenomenology of Spirit* p. 488). Thus Hegelian truth has *practical preconditions*, viz., the appearance at the end of history of a mutually recognitive audience who, as free, are capable of acknowledging it. Truth thus appears when its post-historical 'time' has come – and when it can exist in, and for, a mutually recognitive 'public' (*ibid.*, pp. 3-4, 44). On this condition, it 'is at once exoteric, comprehensible, and capable of being learned and appropriated by all' (*ibid.*, p.

here the allusion is to “consensus” accounts of truth<sup>30</sup> – that the 'human practice' which a practically reflexive account of redeemed truth-criteria must invoke is the practice of an emancipated society – in other words, the practice of mutually recognitive freedom itself.

In order to have purchase on the issue of validating categories, the “common sense” of everyman must needs be the public and interactive *sensus communis* of an emancipatory and non-alienated social world.

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7). Thus the *Phenomenology* reflects on the emergence, at the end of history, of the practical totality (that of mutual recognition) of which it itself, as true, forms the theoretical moment; in doing so, it reflects on its own categorial validity as well.

30 See e.g. T. McCarthy *The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas* (Polity Press 1984) pp. 291-310; M. Hesse *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Harvester Press 1980) ch. 9; also the remarks on 'objective', or categorially valid, theorising in relation to 'universal' subjectivity in Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 445.