

MARXISM AND CONTRADICTION

Richard Gunn

[Published in *Common Sense* No. 15 (1994)]

Under the rubric of 'Marxism' there flourish two species of social theory which have virtually nothing in common except the name. On the one hand, there flourishes Marxism as a *theory of society*: the image here is of a theorist who observes or reports upon society in some more or less scientific way. The theorist *qua theorist* (though not of course *qua* political actor or citizen or human subject) stands over against his or her theoretical object, viz. "society", construing it as an entity concerning which truthful or fallacious judgements can be made. Here belong traditional historical materialism and contemporary conjunctural analysis (as in fordism/post-fordism). The notion of theory as "theory of" remains, in this tradition, unproblematised. The main claim made is to the effect that Marxism is a more accurate, or searching, "theory of" society than its bourgeois rivals. Theory as "theory of" remains common ground between Marxist and bourgeois theorists alike.

On the other hand, there is a long-standing tradition within Marxism which places the notion of theory as "theory of" – a *theory of society*, for instance – in question. According to this tradition Marxism, if it is a "theory of" anything, is a *theory of contradiction*: but, as we shall see, within the notion of *theory of contradiction* the notion of theory as "theory of" is detonated. The heroes of this tradition – most of them, as it turns out, unfaithful heroes – are Marx, Luxemburg, Lukacs, Bloch, Adorno, Negri and Debord.

Two definitions are needful to clarify the above distinction. First, by "theory of" I understand any theory which seeks to map concepts on to objects. Such theory confronts, at once, two problems: (i) it separates the theorising subject from the theorised object (since otherwise the notion of "mapping" would be unintelligible) thus running the risk of *reifying* the object concerned. In the case of a *theory of nature* this risk is relatively trivial, inasmuch as nature does indeed seem to consist of "things" which we can eat, fall over or be poisoned by as the case may be. In the case of a *theory of society* the risk is overwhelming because it is not in the least clear that

there exists an entity termed “society” about which theoretical remarks can be made. A *particular* view of “society” is accordingly inscribed within the general notion of a “theory of” society, of whatever kind. Need “society” be always an entity (a “something”) which externally confronts and conditions us? Hegel, Marx and a host of others reply to this question:

No. The risk run by Marxism as a theory of society is accordingly that of becoming complicit in the alienation to which it is officially opposed.

And (ii): how can we evaluate whether a mapping as between concepts and objects is accurate (valid) or not? The problem here concerns the categories through which, so to say, like spectacle-lenses, theory looks. Microscopes (I mean this point only analogically) are supposed to clarify the truth of their objects whereas sun-glasses distort and discolour it. What is required, accordingly, is a *metatheory* or *methodology* which will tell us that we are wearing lenses appropriate to their task. But then how are the categories *of the metatheory* to be justified? Only by a further metatheory...and so on. In other words, we are passed up a metatheoretical ladder leading from first-order to second-order to third-order theorisation without hope of halt. *Infinite regress* is therefore the further danger which theory as “theory of” runs. Attempts to halt the regress by contending, say, that first-order theory can categorially validate itself (Althusser) or that metatheory can serve solely as an 'underlabourer' (Bhaskar) substitute the danger of vicious circularity for the danger of infinite regress. Either, it seems, we must (as “theorists of”) pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps or we must be elevated from on high.

And now my second definition: by “contradiction”, I understand any affirmation to the effect that $A = \text{not-}A$. This may seem an uncontroversial definition, but in fact there have been numerous attempts to argue that “dialectical” and “formal” contradictions are species of contradiction which are distinct (e.g. Cornforth, Gunn in a misguided early article, and Lawrence Wilde¹). I see no virtue in such harmonising discriminations. From the works of Hegel and Marx it is clear enough that both accept the possibility of A existing as not- A , i.e., as existing *in the mode of being denied*. The concept of 'alienation', say, in the early Marx declares for nothing else: to be alienated means to exist *as other* than oneself.

The standpoint of contradiction generates formulations such as the following: the social theorist *is and is not* inside (or indeed outside) the society which he or she reports. Society *does and does not* exist. Were the theorist solely “in” society then nothing but a conformist social theory would be possible. Were the theorist solely “outside” society then *either* social theory would be impossible *per se* (because the meaning of the term “society” is, after all, a social meaning) *or* it would count as just one more positivist confirmation (because how we observe society, however detachedly, remains a function of society itself). Only if we say that the theorist *is*

1 Lawrence Wilde *Marx and Contradiction* (Avebury 1989).

and is not inside/outside society does a place for *critical* theory appear. Similarly, if we say that society sheerly *does* exist then we fall victim to the positivism of accepting – for the purposes of constructing a “theory of society” – only inferences drawn from society as it has existed so far. Alternative possibilities are precluded (or, stated conversely, “theory of” precludes the possibility, signalled by Dubord and Adorno, that *societies themselves* – and not just the theories of them – can for their part be “true” or false”). On the other hand, if we say that society sheerly *does not* exist then we join up with methodological individualism, Thatcherism and the speculations of Rational Choice: with purely *instrumental* reason, in the end. Society exists all too vigorously. Out of the night can come a policeman's truncheon (a social object) no less than can a natural object we stumble over in the dark. Hence society *does and does not* exist. Perhaps society is social existence existing – to return to an earlier phrase – in the mode of being denied.

This is why Marxism as a theory of contradiction detonates the notion of Marxism as “theory of”: the former projects the theorisation and the destruction of the latter's object. It announces itself as a social theory (all aspects of our lives being social, including the theoretical aspects) while, at the same time, refusing to sign up for “theory of society” as the designation to be placed against its name.

The remainder of this short paper offers some remarks and inferences on the basis of what has been averred. In addition, it offers some thoughts on *how to read* (and *how not to read*) Marx.

(i) “Marxist sociologies” are contradictions in terms. Books with titles of this kind need to be consigned to the flames in the manner which – with metaphysical books in mind, but not nearly with so good a reason – David Hume recommended. By “sociology” I understand any *theory of* society whatever, whether it be action-oriented or structuralist or Marxist or bourgeois. Marx enunciates a critique of sociology in the same movement as he enunciates a critique of philosophy (understood as pure metatheory) and a critique of political economy.

(ii) If this is so then *Marx cannot have been a historical materialist*. Admittedly he occasionally advertises himself as such (although not by name) in passages of *The German Ideology* and in his Preface of 1859. Just such passages have to be construed as unmarxist, to the extent that contradiction predominates in Marx's thinking. Historical materialism – maybe the least original of all aspects of Marxist reflection – is a “theory of” society not only because it attempts a general reckoning with all hitherto existing modes of production but because, even when conjunctural, it attempts a mapping of concepts on to an object which is none other than (in Althusserian terminology) the 'society-effect'.

(iii) Whoever talks about “society” as the object of his or her theorising risks blinkering him or herself. Society is an artifact, and not at all the more noble if it can

be shown (the *sotto voce* purpose of all social contract theories) that it is an artifact of a natural kind. Society is that which we reproduce: I intend this definition as the opposite of a functionalism according to which our reproduction is societal. 'All social life is practical', says Marx, to the same anti-sociological effect. Blinkering comes in in the same movement as one methodologically endorses "society". Marx wrote at a time when everyone with a few letters behind their name construed commodity production as eternal. In the twentieth century, "society" stands where "commodity production" once stood: even the Rational Choice theorists who officially deny its existence seek to recompose it through notions of equilibria and unintended consequences. The ontology forced upon us – cosmological ontologies having been whipped from under our feet – is sociological.

Foreclosing upon the possibility of a non-societal social existence (and pinning itself on the horns of the dilemma of *either* a society without social agents *or* social agents without a society: structuralism and/or Rational Choice, respectively), contemporary social theory amounts to a *fetishism of society* – of existing society – parallel to the fetishism of commodities against which Marx declared. *Almost all* strands within 1980s Marxism took adumbrations of the future (e.g. postfordism) at their face value and attempted only to follow them through. The span of these schools ranges from outright technological determinism (the C.P.G.B.'s last programme) to determinism-in-the-last-instance (Jessop *et al.*). A dash of voluntarism (at most determinism's other side) gets shot into the cocktail. The determinism of such theories is not accidental: whoever defines his or her theoretical object by the canons of existing reality perforce derives theoretical landmarks from the relation of the present to its past.

The relation of the present to its future is what contradiction brings to light. *I am and am not myself*: there is no way of thinking through such utterances unless we determine that our future can be radically different from our past. (Our present is merely a transit station.) Writers like Ernst Bloch celebrate the notion of existence not as a coincidence with oneself in a present which the past can always-already recapture but, instead, as an ek-static stance towards a future which *is not-yet* but which might yet become. The danger is, of course, that such a celebration can become all-too-romantic. For instead of the causalism of a present captured and determined by what lies behind it we have the sheer and open beauty of a present no less captured by what lies before. Voluntarism – action-oriented sociologies, for instance, pitted against structuralist ones – was always determinism's last court of appeal. Our programme is one of deconstructing fetishism. But to effect this deconstruction we have to escape past- and future-oriented *theories of society* at the same time.

Here is how to do it: read Marx. Especially, read his 1857 Introduction to the *Grundrisse*: almost the only true words Althusser wrote were to the effect that this Introduction (for which, fatefully, the 1859 Preface was substituted) amounts to Marx's 'discourse on method'. The Introduction is *entirely* devoted to a seemingly academic topic, viz., the role of *abstraction* in social theory. *Abstracting from what*

has hitherto existed, says Marx, only reifies it (or reifies it once more): theory places its blessing upon the positivity of the facts it happens to find. Critique suffocates. The lungs of critique regain fresh air when (and only when) *abstraction in* replaces abstraction from. “Abstraction in” is abstraction which exists socially and practically – abstract labour being Marx's example – as distinct from abstraction which has a function of a merely theoretical sort. Abstract labour has practical existence for whoever sets out to sell the use of his or her labour-power. The abstraction of our communal existence – the state – has practical existence for anyone whose head and a policeman's truncheon make common play. Marx was the first and only social theorist to make “abstraction in” (otherwise: determinate or substantive abstraction) the sole coin of his own theoretical work. By doing so, he remains faithful to – and deepens – the notion of the theorist who stands inside *and* outside society (or better still: in and against society) which his earlier writings on the relation between theory and practice proclaim. *Minus* the notion of contradiction, the idea of “abstraction in” is surely incoherent – since a “mapping” of theory on to its object becomes tautologous should the object contain the parameters of the theory itself. Marx here sidesteps tautology by abandoning, not the presence of theory in its object (and *vice versa*) but “mapping”. And from here on the strength of my alternative (“on the other hand”) tradition of Marxism evident. Only if abstractions are *abstractions in* can we judge social existences, and not merely their theorisations, true or false.

A social existence subsisting in and through abstraction is a social existence run through with alienation like a cheese whose inside has been scooped out by mice. The concrete exists solely *qua* abstract and *vice versa*. The particular exists only *qua* abstract (the individual labourer exists only as labour-power) and *vice versa*. Each moment of such a social existence exists only as alienated, i.e., as other than itself and in the mode of being denied. Readers of Hegel will recognize here, in Marx's description of the mode of motion of capital, Hegel's characterisation in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* of sociality within the pre-French Revolutionary *ancien regime*. There is no *society* but only contradiction. Nothing exists but everything exists (although contradictorily). Social structures are – to employ the crucial phrase once more – social struggles in the mode of being denied. Capitalism is the first really existing non-existing society. *Everything* in Marx is to this effect, from his early writings onwards. For example, 'alienation' is far from being a passive or complete state, or condition: it is contradiction. Thus, in 1844, Marx reports that alienated labour (the active category) is the key to private property (the social institution) rather than the reverse. Alienation divides us not just against society but, since we are social beings, against ourselves; alienation is shot through – it shoots us through – with recognition. Or, better, alienation is Marx's first-off sketch of the movement of contradiction itself.

If society *is*, thus, a field of contradiction then (a) we can never escape from it, not even as theorists-of, and (b) it doesn't exist. That is to say – taking the second point first – whenever we say that it exists we have to add that (unlike an “entity” or a something) it is non-existent too. Social theory has to problematise the truth or falsity

of the object which sociological theory attempts to enfold, or map. The first point, here, is to the effect that behind the back of the sociological theorist, and with vicious circularity and infinite regress as its weapons, the abnegation of contradiction demands blood. The only way to avoid either one of these weapons without succumbing to the other is to enunciate a theory which is neither first-order or higher-order but *both at the same time*. And this Marxism does. In the first place, we learn from Marx (setting aside the worst lapses of *The German Ideology* and the 1859 Preface) that theorisation's reflection on the appropriateness of its own categorial lenses is social reflection itself: reflexivity is *practical* reflexivity, in Marx. If reflexivity is practical reflexivity ('All social life is essentially practical') then metatheory and first-order research have to go forward together. They have to advance on the same front. More precisely: first-order theory higher-order metatheory are not two bodies of theory with a single face but rather one and the same body of (active) theorisation competent to face in two ways. Secondly: only if theory's abstractions are construed as abstractions-in rather than as abstractions-from can practical reflexivity's programme be made good. For, then, theory which reflects on social existence reflects, in the same movement, on its own categories and abstractions; and *vice versa*. In other words the conceptions of Marxism as practically reflexive and as a theory of contradiction entail one another, at any rate in terms of the resources which either of these descriptions supply.

And from here breaks out mayhem so far as sociological Marxism is concerned. No longer can it be said that one thing is that thing itself and not another; for the very category of thinghood becomes suspect. Society, for instance, equals asocial or non-social existence. The demonic version of this thesis is the taking in of each other's washing which goes forward between structuralism and Rational Choice: contradiction has to be denied at all costs. The more (from a revolutionary point of view) blessed version of the same reflection explores the ways in which contradiction need not immediately explode, or detonate, but can move. (On the idea of "movement of a contradiction", see the chapter on money in Marx's *Capital* and discussion of the same topic *a propos* the *Grundrisse* in Negri's *Marx beyond Marx*.) The crucial terms needful in reporting such a movement are 'mediation' and 'form'. When used loosely and eclectically, the term *form* sometimes means merely *species* and the term *mediation* means merely what interrelates two pre-existing terms. In the left-Marxist tradition which this paper explores, these loose meanings are set aside and 'mediation' and 'form' mean much the same thing. The convergent meaning of the terms is *mode of existence*. The form of value is for example exchange-value, in and through which value obtains. The mediation of exchange-value is money, which (in its developed form) is the only way value can subsist. Value (in the sense of what Negri and the Autonomists call self- or auto-value) can exist only contradictorily as exchange-value, however; and exchange-value can exist only contradictorily as money, as each of the world's debtor crises makes plain. Hence, *mode of existence* cannot be theorised *minus* the category of existence in the mode of being denied. Contradiction, again: value is not exchange-value nor is exchange-value money. But money can exist only as exchange-value and exchange-value only as value (the presence of

labour within capital). The difficulty regarding these circuits concerns not their absurdity but their substance. Marx, renouncing moralising socialism, throws himself into these circuits in more than just a scholarly way. He places his theorising at the mercy of the world's determinate abstractions, counting upon their movement. Nothing in the world suggests that the contradictions he signalled have ceased to move.

The above presentation can be summarised in a few very simple theses: capital *is and is not* labour; theory *is and is not* practice; we are *and we are not* divided in and against ourselves. Society exists, not as the solution to the problem (should we ever to be able to map it clearly) but as the problem to be solved. Maybe our our critique of society as a reification – it is all too dangerous – threatens us with a dualism between revolutionary subject and static object which reifies society once more. If so, this reification has its point. Sociology in its bleaker moments sometimes captures it. Society is the presence of devilment. Read Adorno in his *Negative Dialectics*: 'There is no universal history which leads from primitive communism to emancipatory humanity, but there is one which leads from the slingshot to the atom bomb'.