

CHAPTER TWO

CRITIQUE AND METHOD

Marx's Method of Critique: False and True Criticism

Many commentators acknowledge that Marx offered many “critiques” (“critique” appears in many of his works’ titles), though usually in terms of his criticism of traditional political economy, of exploitation, of capital, of modern society, and so on (McCarthy 1988; Murray 1988; Oakley 1983, 1985; D. Sayer 1979). As Postone (2009: 307) astutely observes: “the *object* of Marx’s critique ... has frequently been taken as the *standpoint* of that critique.” Though Marx’s categories for “scientific criticism” sometime receive attention, it is usually in reference to his criticism of specific theorists’ positions and/or of social conditions (e.g., see Dupré 1983; Arnold 1990) more so than the philosophy of science and its relation to social practice. This question receives attention, no doubt, though too little such that it has yet to be fully investigated. If, as Teeple (1984: 19) points out, “Marx makes no systematic presentation of his method of critique, thereby obliging those interested in his method to ‘uncover’ it”, then we need a systematic analysis of the analytical principles Marx subjects to scientific criticism (and his alternatives) as well as an explanation of how these critiques (and Marx’s alternatives) apply to various social scientific approaches as well as the political fallout to which he points.¹

Given that “Reason ... [is] not always in a reasonable form” (Marx 1975l: 143), Marx (1975c: 91) tells us to avoid “vulgar” criticism (i.e., dogmatic and thus false) and that “true” criticism examines the “inner” and “specific” logic of theoretical positions. In true criticism, negative (principles to reject) and positive (principles to adopt) critiques assist self-clarification of investigative priorities. Though Marx (1985d: 33) writes that because Proudhon “never grasped really scientific dialectics

¹ In the following pages, several elements of Marx’s criticisms toward political economy and other thinkers require attention by necessity. However, the goal here is less to analyze, for example, his criticism of Adam Smith’s theories specifically but more to demonstrate that Marx’s criticism of Smith tells us something about all theories that work with similar assumptions.

he never got further than sophistry”, we lack a systematic work on “scientific dialectics” from him. Many of his thoughts on criticism’s service to method are scattered across his texts but also, importantly, his letters and essays for less popular works. As piecing together Marx’s moments of critique tells us a great deal about his philosophy of science, locating the categories of critique—i.e., false, true/negative, true/positive—Marx designates in order to organize principles he *subjects to* criticism is a valuable exercise in reconstructing his research method and clarifying some of the connections he sees between science and politics.

True Criticism: Negative Critique

Sometimes Marx’s negative critique relates to general scientific practice. In an 1846 letter to Pavel Vasilyevich Annenkov, he warns against “dogmatic” or “doctrinaire” approaches (Marx 1982b: 100, 103). This was equally true for the 1845 critique of the Young Hegelians in *The Holy Family*. To Weydemeyer, in 1851, Marx (1982a: 402) advises him to estimate a theory based on its “substance” rather than “casting suspicions on [an author’s] civil character.” These principles provide entry into those specific to Marx’s scientific dialectics and his criticisms of other approaches, which include mysticism (as found in metaphysics, ahistoricism, and false universalization), inversion (as found in idealism and reductionism), speculative philosophy and *a priori* conceptualizations, and imprecision (obscurantism, incommensurability, and tautology).

I must note two things before continuing. First, the broadest umbrella under which to couch Marx’s method of critique is as a way for him to distinguish and analyze the differences between appearance and essence, where a proper scientific dialectic allows him to penetrate beyond the former and reach into the latter. Marxian scholarship as a whole generally acknowledges the issue of appearance/essence and thus reinvestigating it here can only be superfluous. The issues that do need elaboration, on the other hand, are the philosophy of science categories Marx mobilizes to accomplish the needed penetration and the alternatives he proposes to standard approaches. Second, the categories examined here at times overlap, as one leads to another or one or more share similar problems. Such analyses result in the occasional repetition of one concept in the elaboration of another