

CHAPTER SIX

MARX'S *POLITICAL SCIENCE*

As intellectual discourse participates in a series of exchanges across time and space, this chapter is this book's final salvo left for any audience it might enjoy. True scientific criticism, Marx tells us, must focus on the inner and specific logic of theoretical positions. This is a stance certainly all scientists can accept and one I hope my critics embrace. It is nevertheless perhaps proper to review and defend the positions this book has taken before my cross-examiners put my theses on the witness stand.

Evaluating claims about reality through systematic empirical analysis is one way science strives to overcome obstacles in producing valid knowledge. In systematically evaluating claims, a scientist should settle on and incorporate a set of logical analytical principles, concerns formal and dialectical logicians each endorse. The built-in limits to any knowledge in which we may have a level of certainty include its conceptual appropriateness for its subject matter and the extent that other forms of knowledge surpass it, e.g., Einsteinian physics encompassed and surpassed Newtonian models. With a concern over formal logic's limits (rather than inappropriateness) for social questions, dialecticians consider ways to positively supplement it (more than simply negate it) and thus advance our understanding of the world.

Material and historical social relations produce observable, regular results, knowledge of which must root our ontological assumptions and epistemological practices. Thus far in history social structure has been more determinative than individual or collective agency: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx 1978c: 595). Sociology's subject matter diminishes greatly were this untrue, an issue larger than only its object of study. This issue goes to the heart of the innerconnection between science and praxis. For Marx (and Engels), capitalism provides the first-best chance for individuals and, more importantly, working classes to break free from the determining forces over them, reverse the relationship, and create

their own history based on volition, reason, and knowledge.¹ Marx's 11th Thesis on Feuerbach attains its core meaning here: we do and must act in the world but, in doing so, we need sound knowledge upon which to base our actions.

When Marx's (1978d: 145) 11th Thesis on Feuerbach—which claims that “philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it” (emphases in the original)—receives attention, scholars focus mostly on the latter clause. What is the role of philosophy in his statement? Is Marx saying that philosophy is fundamentally not up to the task of informing action? When Marx criticizes “speculative philosophy” does he subsume all philosophy under a similar form of criticism? Though this is possible, even maybe probable, he clearly questions whether philosophy can provide the *positive* knowledge that true scientific investigation of real concrete conditions can. To the extent that philosophy does not require empirical inquiry to lead investigation, and to the extent it gravitates toward speculative, idealist, metaphysical, and/or *a priori* abstractions, it, in Marx's view, is not a sound basis upon which to ground knowledge and political action.² Nevertheless, it is true that all too often “Marxism” has become

¹ Postone (2009: 316–317) argues that “people create structures that dominate them. The form of domination underlying capitalism is reflexive, according to this analysis. Domination in capitalism, then, is not ultimately rooted in institutions of property and/or the state—as important as they are. Rather, it is rooted in quasi-objective structures of compulsion constituted by determinate modes of practice, expressed by the categories of commodity and capital. This form of domination is expressed most clearly by the dynamic of capital, by the existence of a dynamic that has properties of a historical logic. That is, when we talk about history in capitalism, we are actually talking about a very different process than if we are talking about historical developments in the ancient Mediterranean world, ancient South Asia, China, or anywhere else.

“Increasingly, this logic has become tighter and more global. It is, of course, very, very different from any notion of historical progress (although it provides the basis for the idea of historical progress), because to the degree to which a dynamic exists, to that degree agency is circumscribed and constrained. The greater the degree of human agency, the less one can speak of a historical logic. It seems to me that Marx analyzes capitalism as a society in which there is a great deal of individual agency and a great deal of historical structural constraint. The dynamic of capitalism, however, opens up the possibility of historical agency, even as it constrains its realization. I would argue that understanding this can help avoid some unexpected consequences of political action, that the consequences of political action are not completely random, and that not having an understanding of the constraints of capital dooms a lot of political projects to an unforeseen kind of failure or to becoming part of that which they themselves wanted to overcome.”

² Marx (1975l: 142) says, “we do not dogmatically anticipate the world, but only want to find the new world through criticism of the old one. Hitherto philosophers