A New Type of Generalisation

Before we deal with the practical implications of Marx’s critical investigation of existing bourgeois society, we shall discuss a strictly theoretical problem arising from the statements made in the preceding chapters regarding the main methodological principles of Marxian science. How does that emphasis on ‘specification’, which we have shown to be the very foundation of Marx’s materialistic criticism and research, conform to the equally fundamental demand for some degree of generalisation which is necessarily bound up with every attempt at a truly scientific statement? This question is certainly recognized by Marx.

As shown in the second and third chapters, Marx scornfully dismissed the superficial and arbitrary procedure of the bourgeois social scientists who described the various conditions of different historical stages in the terms of the same general concepts and thus ‘by a sleight of hand represented bourgeois conditions as unchangeable natural laws pertaining to society in abstracto’.1 He was equally critical of that complete abstention from all theoretical generalisation which is the idea vaguely aimed at by the historical school and other irrationalists. As against both, he worked out a new type of generalisation.

Here again, Marx took his departure from the work of the idealist philosopher Hegel. The latter had also rejected the abstractual procedure commonly applied by the social theorists as well as what he called the ‘conceptlessness’ underlying the historical trends of the early nineteenth century. In opposition to both, he had posed another principle: that of the ‘truly general’.2 The ‘general’ as it appears in the most developed forms of philosophical thought is, according to Hegel’s terminology, dialectically identical with the ‘particular’ and, indeed, with ‘individual existence’. Or, as this Hegelian principle has been most succinctly recapitulated in a single sentence: ‘Truth is concrete’.

Of course, with the idealist philosopher Hegel this highly paradoxical formula had not yet acquired that unequivocally realistic connotation which it was to assume later with Marx and such other dialectical materialists as Engels, Antonio Labriola, Georgi Plekhanov, and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. The new emphasis laid by Hegel on the subject-matter of human thought as against its mere form was not meant as a materialistic adherence to the given external

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1 See Marx and Engels 1931–2b, pp. 24 et seq.
facts, but rather served as a starting point for a new and more refined form of
the most daring philosophical abstraction. Philosophical thought, according to
Hegel, is no more to be regarded as being a mere reflection, in the mind of the
philosopher, of the concrete facts of an external world. It is, on the contrary,
understood to be the most concrete existence itself, and to comprise within
itself both the abstract concepts formed as a first approach to truth in ordinary
practical and theoretical human thought, and the equally ‘abstract’ forms of
externally given ‘concrete’ realities.

Hegel’s ‘concrete’, then, by no means coincides with the sensually concrete
of given experience and practical action. Factual knowledge was for him
a means rather than an end. A faithful acceptance of the empirical data of
nature and history was to prepare the ground for an idealist reconstruction of
the universe and thus to testify once more to the absolute precedence of the
conceptual form over all external existence.

Thus the real meaning of the Hegelian ‘concrete’ was somewhat one-sidedly
interpreted by that remarkable series of theoretical and practical leaders of the
revolutionary proletarian movement beginning with Lassalle and ending with
Lenin who looked at Hegel’s philosophy as an essentially empirical method
of thought. The irremovable ambiguity pervading the whole of Hegelian phi-
losophy affects also his apparently realistic approach to ‘the concrete’. If on the
one hand he conceived of the philosophical idea as something other than an
empty form and defined it as ‘that which is the concrete itself’, he was equally
ready to explain that he did not understand by the concrete ‘what is commonly
understood by this term’, but merely the speculative ‘concrete’ resulting from
idealist philosophical thought.

The theorists of abstraction proceeded to the formation of their general
concepts by starting from the concrete of common experience and getting rid
of its particular qualities by a method of successive elimination. The irrational-
ists believed that they could get hold of the concrete in an immediate manner.
Hegel fancied that in his philosophy he had reached the concrete truth of the
idea by starting from a first general concept and supplying the details by a suc-
cessive adoption of the particular results of scientific research and historical
development. Marx was the first to work out a rational type of generalisation,
different from the traditional conceptual procedures hitherto applied by the
various schools of social, historical and philosophical thought, and more akin
to the constructive procedures recently invented by the experimental scien-
tists. With him, as shown by the examples discussed in the second and third
chapters of this book, the ‘general’ of the concept is no longer set up against
concrete reality as another realm; but every ‘general’, even in its conceptual