CHAPTER 8

Critique of Some Marxist Conceptions of Knowledge

In his interpretation of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Sánchez Vázquez has already criticised explicitly two philosophical understandings of knowledge in general: on the one hand, an idealist conception, according to which theory carries its criterion of truth within itself, and on the other hand, a pragmatist or empiricist conception, according to which praxis constitutes the truth criterion for theory directly and immediately.²⁶³ As a first approach to the critique that the author makes of some Marxist conceptions of knowledge, we will cite here a passage in which he clarifies the border distinguishing two understandings of knowledge: the Marxist view, understood in the sense he supports, and the pragmatist view:

Knowledge is useful to the degree that it is true, but it is not true to the extent that it is useful as the pragmatists maintained. For Marxism, utility is not the basis or essence of truth, but its consequence; the pragmatists, on the other hand, subordinated truth to utility, or the efficacy or success of the actions of men, conceived as subjective, individual acts rather than as objective, material, transforming activity.

And a bit further on, Sánchez Vázquez writes, with regard to Marxism and pragmatism, of the

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The distinction between their respective criteria for truth. . . . Both, it is true, 
locate the law of truth in practice itself, but that apparent coincidence is 
given the lie by the very different understanding of practice character-
istic of one and the other. In the one case, practice is simply individual, 
subjective action designed to satisfy individual interests; in the other, it is 
objective, transforming activity responding to social interests which con-
sists, from the socio-historical point of view, not only in the production 
of a material reality, but in the creation and unfolding of a human world. 264

Within the theoretical development of Marxism, the author also critiques sev-
eral approaches to knowledge. This critique should be understood on the basis 
of his general position regarding Marxism’s various theoretical orientations, 
setting out from the central importance that it assigns to the concept of praxis.

a Critique of Certain Conceptions of Marxism in General

When Sánchez Vázquez called his first major work *The Philosophy of Praxis*, he 
did so somewhat in allusion to Gramsci, but with a degree of critical distance. 
Within Marxist debates, the concept of praxis has suffered various deforma-
tions, that is, erroneous analyses, whose foundation can be located in the con-
crete historical situation of each case. As two focal points in Marxist debates, 
Sánchez Vázquez presents the following with regard to Gramsci and Althusser:

Gramsci judges praxis to be the principal unifier of the various spheres of 
Marxism and as a central philosophical category. Thus, he opposed Second 
International Marxism (at the end of the nineteenth century), which, ‘impreg-
nated with scientistic, objectivist, and positivist conceptions’ left no space for 
revolutionary praxis, as well as materialist metaphysics in the style of Bukha-
rin, ‘which reinstates the old materialism, dressing it up with the dialectic’. 265

Gramsci, in any case, only manages to save (revolutionary) praxis at the expense 
of abandoning the reality that lay beyond that praxis and, simultaneously, the 
scientific analysis of social relations not in agreement with that praxis. Sánchez 
Vázquez characterises the implications of this concept of praxis, in Gramsci’s

264 Sánchez Vázquez 1977a, p. 171.
265 Sánchez Vázquez 1980b, p. 56 [these passages do not appear in the English translation – 
trans.]. Sánchez Vázquez cites Gramsci’s *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto 
Croce*, translated to English as *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (Sánchez 
Vázquez 1980b, p. 52), and also his ‘La rivoluzione contro il “Capitale”’ (Sánchez Vázquez 
1980b, p. 57).