CHAPTER 3

Reality as Activity: The Concept of Praxis in Soviet Philosophy

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In an effort to emphasise how their materialistic theory was different from all those that came before, the authors of The German Ideology called themselves ‘practical materialists’ (praktische Materialisten, i.e., Kommunisten). They argued that the substance and subject of world-history is labour, man’s practical transformation of external nature and of his own social relations. All of Marxism is built upon this axiom.

From the standpoint of common logic, however, this premise seems strange, given that labour is not a thing but an act, a process of human activity. Activity is the subject itself and things are its predicates – how is this possible? Idealist philosophers always stand on the idea that mind is a pure act that rules over the world. So, Marx asserted that ‘the active side [die tätige Seite] ... was developed abstractly by idealism’. All materialists regarded the body, the physical thing as the subject of any activity. Whereas Hegel rejected this logic within the physics itself, saying, ‘We are used to considering motion as predicate, as a mode; but actually it is a self-being, the subject as subject’.

Marx was the first materialist to give primacy to Action over Body. Everyone and everything in the history of mankind are modes of human labour. Marx felt that the main fault of all previous materialism was its lack of understanding of the objective reality ‘as sensuous human activity’, or ‘subjectively’, that is, an inability to understand reality as activity and the activity itself as the subject. For Marx, every human thing is nothing other than objectified labour – the condensed and hardened lava of Action. Furthermore, all of the material conditions of labour, including the living bodies of men, are only the prerequisites and ‘vanishing moments’ of the labour-process.

1 Thesen über Feuerbach, 1 (MEW 3, S. 5).
2 ‘Wir sind gewohnt, sie als Prädikat, Zustand anzusehen; aber sie ist in der Tat das Selbst, das Subjekt als Subjekt’ (Hegel 2000, § 261).
3 MEW 3, S. 5. The term ‘subjective’ here, of course, does not mean ‘mental’, but ‘active’ or ‘being carried out by some subject’.
Vadim Mezhuev, who was one of the pioneers of the ‘activity approach’ in Soviet philosophy, correctly defined Marx’s historical theory as a ‘phenomenology of labour’. Marx’s concept of labour replaced Hegel’s *Geist* as the substance and subject of world-history. In fact, human labour is the sole personage of *Capital*. Labour, both abstract and concrete, living and objectified (capital), necessary and surplus, waged and free, private and social – in other words, every line of this entire book – represents the great metamorphosis of Labour in the bourgeois age.

Marxists mainly apprehended the ‘active side’ of Marx’s teaching in terms of revolutionary calls to liberate the working class from capitalist exploitation. However, it was not Marx who invented them; at that time, such slogans were already on the tongues of communists and socialists of every stripe. Marx’s original philosophical principles, his *logic* of thought, remained unapprehended for a very long time.

Even Plekhanov and Lenin only had a superficial understanding of Marx’s philosophy. Among the major ideas of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, no single considerable idea was unfamiliar to materialists before Marx. Therefore, this book contains no proper Marxism, no practical materialism. In particular, I doubt whether Marx was in favour of Lenin’s notorious definition of matter as an objective reality given to man by sensations. It was just the kind of materialism that Marx described as ‘contemplative’ (*der anschauende Materialismus*), for it took reality ‘only in the form of object’. Like Lenin, English empiricists, French enlightenment thinkers and Feuerbach understood matter as a perceptible object – ‘all the previous materialism’ that was criticised in Marx’s ‘Theses’.

By means of ‘sensations’, one perceives not so much an objective reality as one’s own practical *subjectivity*, transforming the objective reality and, with this, all our sensations. Lenin’s definition of matter flatly lacked the ‘active side’; that is, the practical ground. It replaced the concept of matter with *inadequate empirical abstraction*. Sensation gives reality to man in an abstract and inadequate way, like it does to each animal capable of sensing.

Marx discovered that the real world is given to man practically, in the form of his own labour-activity. Or, to be more precise, objective reality is *not given, but seized* from nature by human labour, by the sweat of a man’s brow. Lenin’s definition of matter, on the other hand, included ‘sensations’ in place of ‘practice’,

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4 ‘Matter is a philosophical category denoting the objective reality which is given to man by his sensations, and which is copied, photographed, reflected by our sensations, while existing independently of them’ (Lenin 1968, 18, p. 131).