
Neopositivism or logical positivism was a self-conscious philosophical movement which blossomed in Vienna during the 1920s. Members of the school advocated, among other things, a “Verifiability Principle” which says, roughly, that the only (cognitively) meaningful statements are those which are scientifically testable. The logical positivists argued that both the subject matter and the content of philosophy should consist exclusively of statements which satisfy the Verifiability criterion and that philosophers should employ as their primary tools the powerful devices of modern science and mathematical logic. One of the earliest publications of the movement—a manifesto, “The Vienna Circle: Its Scientific Outlook” written by Carnap, Neurath and Hahn—listed the intellectual precursors of logical positivism. Marx was included because of his scientific approach to history, as was the physicist Mach, one of Lenin’s prime targets in Materialism and Empirio-Criticism.

Thus emerges the problem faced by Soviet critics of neopositivism. On the one hand there are grounds, and not merely the testimony of early logical positivists, for supposing that Marx’s historical and economic views contain a dose of positivism. On the other hand certain components of the Marxist-Leninist tradition of political action are clearly antipathetic to positivism. Boeselager’s central task is to characterize the Soviet critique and “to see if and how the encounter with neopositivism has made Soviet philosophers go beyond the naïve official doctrine of [dialectical materialism].” (p. 44).

According to Boeselager the critique of neopositivism coincided with—indeed is a major constituent of—a renewed interest in and liberation of philosophy between 1947 and 1967. Earlier in Stalin’s reign philosophy had been subjected to party control and eliminated as an independent discipline, and the history of this subordination forms the assumed framework of Boeselager’s discussion. He makes no serious attempt to substantiate this history, not even to remark on the irony that the alleged “liberation” of Soviet philosophy begins with one of the dreariest pseudo-philosophic episodes imaginable, namely the criticism of Alexandrov’s volume on West European philosophy. This is not meant as a criticism of Boeselager; his volume is primarily an “internal” history of philosophy, and his overall competence and command on the material make his assumptions, if not universally acceptable, at least tolerable.

Before turning to the Soviet critique, Boeselager provides a concise historical account of the two philosophical streams which flow into the controversy, namely positivism and the Marxist-Leninist tradition. The very brief survey of positivism and neopositivism (Chapter II) is usefully divided into three phases: first the early positivism of Comte and Mill, then the “empirio-criticism” of Mach and Avenarius; and finally the development of “neopositivism” beginning with the publication in 1921 of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Boeselager is clear about those problems which will be foci of his later discussions. For example, when presenting the philosophic doctrines of neopositivism, he emphasizes that logical positivists wielding the Verifiability Principle regarded much of traditional philosophy—especially metaphysics—as being cognitively meaningless. However, the presentation has its faults. On page 15 the author claims that the logical positivists “presented their own philosophic views with absolute self-assurance and with enthusiastic rejection of all other philosophies, past and present.” Two pages later we are told that “Carnap . . . himself always came up with the best arguments against his own previous views”; and that “dogmatism and obstinacy are remarkably absent from these discussions.” Yet there is no contradiction here; it is of course possible for there to be dogmatism against opponents and give-and-take among the like-minded. But since a significant portion of these
activities took place in print, it is somewhat difficult to reconcile Boeselager's two judg-
ments.

The author's description of the relevant portions of the Marxist-Leninist tradition
(Chapter III) is notable for two of its points. The first, made explicitly by Boeselager,
argues that although Marx and the positivists were both opponents of speculative theo-
ries, their positions had very different bases, and thus it is inaccurate to consider Marx a
positivist. According to Boeselager, the early positivists' rejection of speculative philos-
ophy was based on their "epistemological phenomenalism which involves an absolute re-
striction to what is directly given in the senses, and that excludes all ontological or
metaphysical considerations" (p. 24) In contrast, what Marx rejects is the Hegelian no-
tion of philosophy as the goal of history; for Marx "[h]istory proper . . . was 'actual'
and 'unphilosophical,' technical, economic and political history. The goal of history
could not, therefore be some sort of knowledge, or philosophy." (p. 22) Secondly, the discus-
sions by Engels, Lenin and Stalin indicated how little epistemological meat their
works contain. Engels embraced a simplistic positivism and scientism which denied phi-
losophy an independent status. Lenin, on the other hand, "more and more clearly re-
cognized an independent realm of philosophical activity" (p. 38) and fiercely attacked
positivism—all the while citing Marx and Engels for support. What Stalin said is far less
important than what he did, namely put the Party in control of the philosophical front
in 1931 and (allegedly) allowed a rejuvenation of philosophy in 1947.

Boeselager begins his examination of the Soviet attack on neopositivism (Chapter
IV) by distinguishing three periods. "Dogmatism and Polemics," 1947-56, is a period
marked by "wholesale vituperation against neopositivism." (p. 45) Here a "Leninist
method"—an aspect of partinost—predominates: philosophical arguments are seen as a
battleground in which the real motives and class interests of neopositivists are to be ex-
posed. Such tactics are much less prevalent after 1956. "Scrutiny," 1957-63, is a time
when positivism was more carefully presented—both by translations of full works and
by quotations—and criticised. "Elaboration," 1964-68, involved reworking and inte-
grating the critique with other subject matter.

By focusing primarily on three philosophers, I. S. Narskii, V. S. Shvyrev, and P. V.
Kopnin, Boeselager presents both the Soviet objections to neopositivism and their own
alternatives. The Soviet objections are similar—if not identical—to some of those voiced
by Western philosophers (including logical positivists themselves). Attempts to elucidate
the Verifiability Principle run into insuperable difficulties because, for example, the prin-
ciple seems to require types of statements for which there is no satisfactory epistemolog-
ical warrant, namely ones which indubitably report an empirical observation. Also the
status of theoretical statements in empirical science is jeopardized and a tenuous distinc-
tion between analytic and synthetic statements is presupposed. There is, in addition, the
following charge: the neopositivists' rejection of philosophy leaves the field open to
"irrational and religious answers to the important questions of life." (p. 104)

Soviet alternatives to positivism are in effect the subject matter of "dialectical logic,"
a broadly epistemological field which investigates "the laws of the development of the
content of science." (p. 105) Boeselager points out that various technical works by posi-
tivist philosophers—such as those in formal logic and semantics—are exempted from the
critique; thus these formal techniques can be incorporated into dialectical logic. But in
addition dialectical logic examines what perhaps could be called praxis, "the social na-
ture of knowledge and science": "While the real world is given to individual subjects
directly only in an empirical way, socially scientific knowledge has (ideal) contents
which transcend this." (p. 106) By moving to the social sphere, dialectical logic avoids
the charge of being merely a branch of individual psychology. While Boeselager con-
siders these ideas to be the most interesting ones of his authors, he is also careful to em-
phasise that attempts at elucidation usually presuppose rather than examine the issues.