

# Partisanship and Science

By Ann Levine and Paul Robertson

Marxists maintain that science cannot be neutral; all scientific work is partisan in terms of some class. It is further contended that working class partisanship leads to the fullest recognition of truth and the greatest development of science because the working class, unlike the bourgeoisie, has no reason for manipulating or hiding the truth as its aim is to abolish all exploitation.

Moreover, Marxists have developed a tool of social analysis which makes it possible to demonstrate how bourgeois class factors enter into and distort social science and natural science at various points.

While this view has merit, and has been of enormous assistance in the early development of the science of Marxism, we feel it is in need of modification. *Class factors are not the only variables which may lead to the distortion of science.* As we shall endeavor to demonstrate, malpractices in science stemming from *expediency, sectarianism and lack of democracy* may also affect the development of knowledge by the working-class movement, by Marxists.

The traditional presentation of

Marxist partisanship makes the implicit assumption that democracy will be an inevitable concomitant of Socialism and consequently this issue never arose.

In essence our thesis is that Marxists have failed to recognize how extra-scientific factors, other than class ideology, may affect scientific work and have therefore failed to apply Marxist social analysis (Sociology of Knowledge) to their own practice.

Let us now cite a few examples of malpractices arising from expediency and sectarianism.

## EXPEDIENCY OR PRAGMATISM

If an idea or theory was found to have negative implications for some aspect of working class or progressive development, the pragmatic tendency of the Left has often been to attack this idea as a *whole*, ignoring other elements in it and furthermore searching for "scientific" support for this attack.

There is little question that psychoanalysis, for example, has had adverse effects on numerous progressives, and many elements of its overall philosophy are reactionary,

but the phenomena the system refers to and the concepts it has developed cannot simply be rejected on these grounds. The data have to be carefully examined empirically and cannot simply be attacked because some of its consequences are anti-progressive.

Because the concept of "race" is used by reactionaries in connection with supremacist arguments, many progressives in the United States tended to reject the concept in its entirety and sought scientific evidence to substantiate their position. This view reached its culmination five years ago in Doxey Wilkerson's explicit rejection of the concept of race. Fortunately, an excellent discussion ensued and shortly afterward Wilkerson retracted his position (*Political Affairs*, Aug. 1952). However, while the discussion around Wilkerson's position was substantively excellent, there was, we feel, insufficient recognition of how this error arose, not so much with Wilkerson, as in the Left generally. Our point is that the concept of race tended to be rejected in the scientific sphere because of its misuse by reactionaries in the political arena. Scientific thinking was implicitly directed by tactics.

On the economic front there has been the tendency in Left circles (until about a year ago) to constantly predict crises and depressions, focusing on every weakness in the U.S. economy and typically overlooking any sign of resiliency or

maneuverability of capitalism. Thus scientific thinking was made subordinate to the pragmatic line of the Left. Instead of the tactical position being based on a scientific analysis of current trends in capitalism, the political line was developed first and then scientific evidence was sought to support it.

In a significant pioneering article in *Political Affairs* (June, 1956) Arnold Berman documents in detail the erroneous economic predictions made in the Left from 1946 to 1954. He states that:

Instead of an objective consideration of all the available facts, we tended to carry on an assiduous search for those data which would support our a priori expectations of imminent crisis, while ignoring or 'explaining away' contrary data. Instead of an open-minded materialist seeking of *all* the sources of the economic expansion we could not ignore, we fastened on the war economy as nearly the only, as well as the ever-present source. (p. 46)

#### POOR SCHOLARSHIP

This abuse, as we have already seen, is a corollary of the pragmatic error although it has other sources as well. In an effort to buttress arguments for a position essentially directed by expediency, Marxists have often overlooked other viewpoints and contradictory data. For example, Joseph Furst has written a book entitled *The Neurotic*, (Citadel Press, N.Y., 1954) which has as one of its objectives the annihilation of

all psychoanalytic conceptions, including those developed by the neo-Freudians, Horney, Fromm, *et al.* While Furst does an excellent job of criticizing some of the key weaknesses of these neo-Freudians, he fails completely to give them credit for their criticism of capitalism.

Even more disturbing is the fact that as a central thesis of his own book, Furst presents a theory of the social causes of neurosis which is remarkably similar to that of Karen Horney, while never mentioning her position. Horney indicated that one of the basic conflicts of our society decisively affecting the development of neurosis is the contradiction between cooperation and competition. To quote Horney:

The first contradiction to be mentioned is that between competition and success on the one hand, and brotherly love and humility on the other. (*Neurotic Personality of Our Time*: (Norton, N. Y., 1937, p. 288)

Compare this with Furst's thesis:

In terms of human relations . . . we participate, sometimes without realizing it, in a huge number of cooperative activities together. At the same time, we engage very intensively in another set of competitive activities together. . . . These conflicting activities are inevitably reflected, within our consciousness, in the shape of conflicting ideas, value judgements, motivations and emotions. They are the true source of the conflicts in 'human nature' as we ourselves experience it. (p. 16)

Furst spends a good deal of time

discussing "The Unconscious," "unconscious mental activity," but completely neglects to mention a classic non-Marxist book entitled *Unconsciousness*, by J. G. Miller (J. Wiley, N. Y., 1942) which summarizes the enormous experimental and clinical literature on unconscious activity.

Herbert Aptheker, generally one of the most serious of scholars, appears somewhat careless at one point in reviewing Riesman's work (*Masses and Mainstream*, Jan. 1955). He mentions Riesman's three personality types: tradition-directed, inner-directed and other-directed, and then states that, "The really progressive ones are those who understand the qualitative change, appreciate the 'revolution,' adjust to it, and are 'other-directed.'" (p. 6) Clearly implied is that this statement represents Riesman's views. This conclusion is misleading. Riesman is attempting to show that the "other directed" personality type is a negative product of modern society and that the other-directed *negatively* affects creativity and enjoyment. Aptheker may interpret Riesman differently and believe that underlying his explicit criticism of the other-directed person, Riesman actually favors this type, not the autonomous man. However, if this is the case it is not clear from the review and it would seem incumbent upon Aptheker to give his reasons for not accepting Riesman's avowed criticisms of the other-directed conformist. Non-Marxists reading Aptheker's

review were disturbed at what seemed to be a complete misunderstanding of Riesman's oft-stated explicit position on this matter.

Harry K. Wells,\* in attempting to show that Progressive Education was developed from its inception as a tool of monopoly capital overlooks: 1) Dewey's earlier pro-Soviet position; 2) the progressive stands on academic freedom and many other questions taken by the Progressive Education movement in the 1930's; 3) the stress on cooperation, group study, thinking and understanding so characteristic of this school of thought. Another striking illustration of Wells' careless scholarship as well as a highly sectarian approach is to be found in his use of quotations from the Soviet writer Goncharov on "American Education." Wells notes (in the index) that George Counts wrote a pamphlet answering Goncharov and, in fact, reprinted Goncharov's arguments in full! *The Counts article raises many serious questions concerning the scholarship and accuracy of Goncharov's position.* Wells makes no mention of these arguments and in no way answers them. He merely refers to the anti-Soviet slanders of Counts. While Counts' article contains a typically anti-Soviet position, it still raises questions which should be dealt with. Counts'

assertions have to be answered on their own ground, by critical scholarship. (cf. George Counts, *American Education Through the Soviet Looking Glass*, Teachers College, 1951.)

It should be unnecessary to state it, but nevertheless, in order to be certain there is no misunderstanding we will affirm *that our criticisms of Furst, Aptheker, and Wells, of course, do not imply agreement with the neo-Freudians, Riesman or Progressive Education.* Only the negative history of Left criticism makes such a statement necessary.

#### SECTARIANISM, DOGMATISM AND RIGIDITY

These abuses are expressed in a number of ways: failure to utilize work of non-Marxist scholars; inability to criticize, expand and revise Marxism; asserting positions rather than demonstrating them (phrase-mongering).

Many leading Marxist writers fail to utilize developments of modern non-Marxist sciences sufficiently. The same criticism can be levelled at Soviet scientists, and in fact this criticism has been made recently in the Soviet Union. Soviet psychology, for example, is predominantly Pavlovian and there seems to have been little awareness of developments in other areas of psychology. The rapid *unquestioned* acceptance of Pavlovian concepts by American Marxists is illustrated by the articles of Joseph Clayton and Milton Howard, ap-

\* Harry K. Wells, *Pragmatism, Philosophy of Imperialism*, Ch. VI, (International Publishers, N. Y., 1954). For a fairly comprehensive documentation of some of the progressive stands of the Progressive Education movement see Frederick Roloff's article in *Nation*, Oct. 8, 1955.

pearing in Marxist publications. Despite the positive features of Pavlovian theory, it would seem that its possible mechanistic and somatic reductionistic overtones require some discussion.

Another illustration of sectarianism was the failure of most Marxist scientists—an outstanding exception was J. B. S. Haldane—to publicly question the work of Lysenko, even though no "bourgeois" or Marxist scientist was able to duplicate his experiments with the same results. It is noteworthy that many Marxist scientists privately disagreed with the Lysenko position, but were strongly discouraged from publicly voicing their questions.

(Again let us be clear: we are not challenging some of the excellent theoretical conceptions concerning relations of environment and heredity implicit in Michurin-Lysenko thinking. We are stating that these conceptions should be subjected to scientific verification and not accepted simply because they appear to "fit" a Dialectical Materialist outlook.)

While there have been some excellent studies by Marxists in a number of areas, such as Aptheker's work on Negro history, Marxist science as a whole has remained relatively static over the past 30 years (since Lenin). With the exception of Stalin's *untested* theory of maximum profits, practically no significant developments have taken place in economic *theory* to account for the special phenomena of monopoly capi-

talism. Traditional Marxist doctrines such as the absolute impoverishment of the working class, which appears on the surface to be contradicted in the U.S., have not been thoroughly reexamined.

In the field of Dialectics, except for Mao Tse-tung's work, there has been surprisingly little development of new concepts. Some years ago *Science & Society* conducted a discussion in which McGill, Parry, Wells and Selsam participated, concerning the relationship of dialectics and logic. This type of discussion seems extremely necessary in order to clarify many questions and lead to the further development of dialectics. (Unfortunately many readers felt that the articles were quite obscure and overly complicated, a difficulty which frequently seems to beset discussions of dialectics.)

When we speak of *development* of dialectics we do not merely mean clarification or illumination. *Development implies new concepts and new propositions.* A good deal of Marxist scientific work, not only in the field of dialectics, consists in applying traditional Marxist theory to new situations or illuminating traditional Marxist concepts. But very little work indeed has been done in terms of developing new concepts and theory.

Perhaps even more crucial is the tendency to reject an *entire* system because it has idealist elements. By contrast it is interesting to note that Marx and Engels utilized concep-

tions taken from mechanists, idealists, and bourgeois theoreticians of all kinds: the labor theory of value from classical economics, dialectics from Hegel, Socialism from the Utopian Socialists.

### CAUSES OF MALPRACTICES

There are many reasons for the limitations of Marxist scientific work which we can only touch upon here. It is possible that Marxism, functioning at its best, is not sufficiently developed to handle many problems arising in natural science and psychology.

Another factor which probably played a role in inhibiting Marxist scientific practice is the class-conflict ridden world atmosphere. In a world which is not fully socialist, special conflicts are likely to erupt, as science is not unrelated to the "struggle for men's minds." This problem is strikingly illustrated in the Lysenko controversy which was certainly not treated in a thoroughly scientific democratic manner in socialist or capitalist sectors. To admit scientific error became ideological defeat.

We have already indicated that one of the most important causes of Marxists' inadequate work in science has been the failure to critically appraise the somewhat oversimplified notion of Marxist partisanship. Marxists have searched for the weaknesses in bourgeois science by analyzing class biases, but too often have been prone to assume that ex-

tra-scientific variables could not be affecting Marxist science negatively. Consequently there was a failure to be alert to factors which might limit the Marxist scientist.

Another crucial reason for the limitations of Marxist scientific work is the undemocratic climate in which it has been practiced. Marxists indicated that lack of democracy under capitalism inhibited the growth of science but they never questioned the existence of democracy in the Left. However, one must raise the question: Could the abuses of dogmatism, sectarianism, and pragmatism, have had such an all-pervasive influence in a democratic climate? No, they could not. How then, did this undemocratic atmosphere express itself?

Was there not a strong tendency to reject articles submitted to the major Left journals if they raised critical questions which were not in line with the existing "doctrinaire" approach? To those who are disposed to answer 'no' we must ask: Why then did so few articles of this type appear before the 20th Congress? Why then did the letters with fresh questions and criticism appearing in the *Daily Worker* not appear before the 20th Congress? If it is because these things were never thought of (and in some cases this may be true) then we must ask a further question: Why? Perhaps it was due to a powerful self-censorship imposed on our own thinking. If we ask, Why the self-censorship?, we are led back

to our first criticism—that original, critical thinking was discouraged, not encouraged.

This leads to a deeper question: Why should a movement oriented toward change, with its eyes on the future, discourage original critical thinking? We do not pretend to have a pat answer. We do suggest however (as one possible factor) that perhaps the fact that the Left, surrounded as it is by forces oriented toward its destruction, became overly afraid of being divided. Anything which threatened division was interpreted as a direct threat to the very existence of the Left movement. In so doing, the dependence of growth on conflict, on contradiction if you like, was overlooked.

The notion that criticism and self-criticism\*, said to be the basic law of socialist development, would automatically operate to correct errors arising in scientific as well as other areas of practice, is naive. Criticism and self-criticism themselves do not function in a vacuum. Basic *structural assurances* as well as traditions must be available before people even *think* about criticism, let alone actually submit criticisms.

Self-censorship has flourished in the socialist world not only because of the bureaucratic and undemocratic practices which have been predominant, but also because of the lack of institutional forms encourag-

ing and guaranteeing participation, including critical participation.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

1. Considerable discussion is needed with regard to the possible strength and weaknesses of Marxist partisanship. *The partisan orientation of Marx and Lenin seems to have played a valuable role in the development of the science of Marxism.* How did this operate? How did it differ from modern partisanship which appears pragmatic, narrow, and stultifying? Is partisanship applicable in the same way in the physical and natural sciences as in the social sciences? Can partisanship be useful in guiding Marxist research or is it largely restricted to uncovering weaknesses in bourgeois science? Is a dialectical materialist approach entirely partisan or can it be used, to some degree, by non-Marxists? If a theory has negative implications for the working class or the Negro people, does partisanship require that we reject this theory? These are some of the questions which we feel Marxists should consider anew, not quickly accepting traditional ready answers which we know all too well.

It is of some interest to note that Marx and Lenin *combined* scientific and political leadership. Perhaps when the two types of leadership are separated, difficulties are more likely to arise. In the modern world this separation seems more likely

\* Marxist concepts of criticism have not typically emphasized *external* criticism, that is criticism from non-Marxist scientists.

however. Thus we may not be able to generalize too easily from Marx' and Lenin's experience with partisanship.

2. The history of science should be reexamined in order to comprehend its contributions in terms of methods and traditions which must be absorbed by Marxists, and perhaps united with the valuable features of partisanship and dialectical materialism. The significance of democracy and open criticism in the development of science has to be thoroughly understood. It is probably no accident that philosophers like Locke, Hume, and Mill, who were so much concerned with problems of political democracy, were also influential in the development of scientific method. The thinking of these men should be carefully examined in order to shed more light on the connection between democracy and science.

3. As we have seen, Marxist partisanship is strongly bound up with a social analysis of knowledge (currently called the sociology of knowledge). Marx showed how class factors influenced various bourgeois ideologists and entered into science. This view enables us to be conscious of how extra-scientific variables effect science. It contradicts the bourgeois notion that the development of science proceeds largely from within, or from the creativity of individual scientists. However, partisanship has failed to recognize how social factors affect Marxists and

their scientific endeavors, other than to state very abstractly that because the working class aims to exploit no one it has nothing to hide or distort. As we have seen this is vastly oversimplified.

*What Marxists can learn from the Marxist sociology of knowledge, is to be constantly self conscious concerning the ways in which various factors in society are affecting them, not only the bourgeois scientists. This self awareness can be a first step to necessary correctives, thus limiting Marxist distortions and abuses of partisanship.*

4. We shall simply repeat here once more what has been stressed throughout the article, namely, the absolute necessity of re-appraising many aspects of Marxism in the light of current situations and findings. Marxism must be creatively developed and if necessary revised, even though this word has an unfortunate historic connotation. (Actually it should not be necessary to qualify the term "revision." The history of science is marked by constant change and revision as the theories of science come to approximate truth better and better.) The reappraisal must apply to Marx, Engels and Lenin, not merely to Stalin, which is the present vogue. Particularly in need of discussion are two mainstays of traditional Marxism: Dialectics and Democratic Centralism, the latter a key formulation of Lenin, not Stalin.

5. Together with the need to reap-

key problems imminent in, that is, demanded by, the particular scientific discipline. At times it is necessary that the selection of problems be directed by the specific character and stage of a science *rather than by partisan considerations functioning at their best.*

## CONCLUSION

We have attempted to show that Marxists have made serious errors in applying and developing Marxism as a science. Our scientific thinking has often been influenced by tactical considerations, there has been a limited use of non-Marxist work, criticism of non-Marxist scholars has often been careless and non-empirical, Marxism itself has failed to develop new concepts and propositions and has not sufficiently been applied to new problems, and there has been a lack of public discussion of Soviet scientific work.

We have further endeavored to demonstrate that the failure to critically analyze the Marxist concept of partisanship in science has been an important contributing factor to these inadequacies in Marxist scientific practice.

Briefly stated, Marxist partisanship in science avowedly maintains a "bias" toward the class of the future, the working class, and the solution of the future, Socialism.

Heretofore, Marxists have somewhat naively assumed that extra-

scientific factors led to distortions *only in "bourgeois science."* We have attempted to show how such factors as sectarianism, pragmatism, and an undemocratic atmosphere, among other things, have led to serious weaknesses in Marxists' contributions to science, and in their failure to creatively develop Marxism itself. In essence Marxists have failed to recognize how factors in the world situation may affect their own scientific work negatively.

We feel that as Marxists apply the Marxist sociology of knowledge to themselves they will be taking a very important first step in developing their scientific work.

Finally we have attempted to point out that Marxist partisanship has certain positive features. *Reevaluation does not mean rejection.* The contributions of Marx, Engels and Lenin directed as they were by explicit partisanship, call attention to its potential value. While Marxists have much to learn from the traditions and practices of science, we feel that they also have at least three significant contributions to make to the further development of science: 1) Dialectical Materialism; 2) Working-Class partisanship; 3) The Sociology of Knowledge.

All three of these potential contributions need *considerable* clarification and development before their effectiveness can be fully appreciated.