

Ruben, David-Hillel, 1977, *Marxism and Materialism: A Study in Marxist Theory of Knowledge*. Brighton, Harvester.

Introduction and Overview

In this analysis of Marx's theory of knowledge and subsequent Marxist developments, Ruben argues that Marx held a materialist ontology that was supported by a materialist epistemology, which necessarily involved a reflection (or correspondence) theory of knowledge [1]. This reflection theory was more fully articulated by Lenin in *Materialism and Empirico-Criticism*.

'The argument, put schematically, runs like this: Materialism asserts the essential independence of reality from all thought. On an interpretive theory of knowledge...every object in reality which is *known* has an essential relation to thought. Hence if we are to have any *knowledge* whatever of the reality to which materialism commits us (and hence the requirement is essentially *epistemological*), then a materialist must reject the interpretive theory of knowledge which I associate with Kant. What materialism needs then, epistemologically speaking, is a correspondence or reflection theory of knowledge on which the relationship between a belief or a thought and the objects or real states of affairs which the beliefs are about is a contingent relationship. If the theory of knowledge adopted does not preserve the contingency of the relationship between known objects and the knower, the credibility of materialism is undercut, since no known object could then be essentially independent of mind. There may be such objects but they would be unknowable.' (Ruben, 1977, p. 2-3)

Ruben argues that different Marxisms have distorted Marx's materialism in a variety of ways and that Lenin's systematic development of a materialist epistemology has been unjustifiably attacked for being the harbinger of a number of sins.

Distortions of Marx

a: Positivist distortions (of the 19th century), primarily in the Second International and German Social Democracy. This hinged on the connection between positivist methodology and inevitabilist doctrines of historical change. This led to political quiescence or reformism. [Ruben doesn't bother to discuss these]. One of the problems in this period of distortion was the tendency to 'assimilate Marxism to a form of reductive materialism'. Ruben attacks Bernstein for fostering this view of Marxism.

b: Idealist distortions (of the 20th century). These have arisen as a result of a disjuncture in a materialist approach. Materialism as ontology needs a materialist epistemology. Ruben argues that materialist epistemology is sometimes wedded to an idealist ontology (derived from Kant, Hegel or Mach); or conversely, an idealist epistemology is wedded to a materialist ontology. This latter approach is the key focus of the critique in the book. It leads to voluntarism.

Attacks on Lenin

Reflection theory has been accused of the following: Stalinism, political passivity, mechanical materialism, state capitalism, denial of dialectics, positivism.

Note on Terminology

Ruben equates 'Reflection theory' and 'Correspondence theory'. Reflection theory is a theory about knowledge, while conventionally correspondence theory is a theory about 'truth'. Ruben argues that as truth is a condition of knowledge the equation of reflection theory and correspondence theory is philosophically sound. For Ruben, essentially, a correspondence theory of truth presupposes a correspondence theory of (at least some) concepts to reality.

Ruben argues that while materialism and idealism are ambiguous terms and their meaning evolves out of the analysis, a pre-statement is necessary, thus, Ruben uses 'materialism' in the same sense as Lenin and Engels. For Lenin,

'the fundamental premise of materialism is the recognition of the external world, of the existence of *things* outside and independent of our mind...for materialism, the object exists independently of the subject and is reflected more or less adequately in the subject's mind...' (Lenin, V.I., 1970, *Materialism and Empirico-Criticism*, Progress Publishers, p. 100)

Ruben suggests that the denial of the reduction of the world to mental experience is usually called 'Realism'. Hence Ruben equates Marxist materialism with realism, both assert the existence of something other than the mind and its contents. This is not to be confused with reductive materialism that claims that everything, including the mind and its contents, can be reduced to matter, or the physical. [2]

Ruben argues that most philosophers take realism for granted.

'Not since the phenomenalism of the logical positivists died a welcome death some decades ago have many orthodox philosophers argued that external reality is mind-dependent...' (Ruben, 1977, p. 6)2

From Kant, through Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, the mind-dependence of things was a major (German) philosophical proposition. Marx attacked this tradition.

Kant

Kant faced a dilemma, according to Ruben. Suppose we could have knowledge of pre-conceptualised entities whose existence is essentially independent of interpretive thought. Then we would know without having synthesised experiences, etc. So knowledge would arise through something other than thought processes. Taken to its logical conclusion, Kant's thesis would then reduce to simple empiricism; knowledge comes from direct acquaintance with the objects of perception. Some knowledge, at least, reflects reality rather than arises from interpreting reality.

On the other hand, if all knowledge is synthetic, how can we know that which exists independently of thought? Ruben notes,

'When Kant discusses the thing-in-itself, he denies the possibility of *knowing* that it exists. However, when he mentions the pre-conceptualised intuitions, that second source of our knowledge, Kant speaks as if we could *know* that this second source existed. Yet the problem of the thing-in-itself and that of the pre-conceptualised intuitions raise substantially the same epistemological difficulty, namely the problem of how one could even *know* that such a thing exists, let alone what it is like. Since both are independent of the concepts of the understanding and

forms of intuition, there could be no possible experience or knowledge of either the one or the other.' (Ruben, 1977, p. 34)

In short, Ruben argues that one learns from Kant that for a realist ontology one needs a reflection theory of knowledge. A thesis that asserts an interpretive understanding of all thought is inconsistent.

Hegel and Feuerbach

Ruben discusses Hegel's and Feuerbach's opposing resolution of Kant's 'problem', selecting these rather than other philosophers because of their effect on Marx. He notes in conclusion:

'Feuerbach's insistence on the independence of the object, nature, from thought or idea, which we have been calling realism, is coupled with a rejection of the theory of knowledge implicit in the interpretive thought claim, a theory on which objects come to express or realise their concepts rather than their concepts correspond with their objects. Feuerbach's realism is complemented, then, with a correspondence theory of knowledge, and that is why I have claimed that Feuerbach resolved Kant's 'problem' in a way precisely opposite to that of Hegel. Instead of the Hegelian resolution in terms of interpretive thought and object dependence, one finds in Feuerbach object independence and a correspondence theory of knowledge. Feuerbach is not always faithful to that rejection of an idealist theory of knowledge and acceptance of a realist, correspondence theory, but this does not form the most important tendency in his theory of knowledge.' (Ruben, 1977, p. 58)

Ruben argues that Marx took Feuerbach's criticism of Kant and Hegel and Feuerbach's elaboration of his own alternative for granted. Marx adds and amplifies, but never rejects Feuerbach's critique of Hegel,

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Kant attempts to wed an idealist epistemology to a realist ontology. Hegel resolves the problem by adopting an idealist ontology. Independence of object world abandoned for an interpretive view of knowledge production. Feuerbach retained the realist ontology, the interpretation approach is abandoned in favour of the independence of nature. Marx retained a materialist ontology.

Review and update of terms:

'Materialism: objects exist independently of thought *and* mind. For Marx this distinction (thought and mind) is unnecessary as he talks in terms of thinking human beings. Thus, materialism (or realism) can be viewed as the assertion of the essential independence of the object, or nature, from the activity of real individuals.' (Ruben, 1977, p. 65).

Thus materialism (as used by Ruben) is a philosophy

'which holds that there is an objective realm, i.e. *some* objects essentially independent of all human activity, whether that activity is thinking, any other variety of mental activity, or the activity of producing use-values for meeting human needs.' (Ruben, 1977, p. 66)

However, all products of human praxis are mind dependent.

'Paintings, or science, or the state, are always materialised things, practices or institutions. What they are 'materialised in' is not mind-dependent.... The important point is that social things, or things under social descriptions, are essentially dependent on man and human activity.'
(Ruben, 1977, p. 66)

NOTES

1. The necessity of the reflection theory is a 'rational' necessity, not a logical one. Ruben suggests that there are logical alternatives. These are, however, implausible. (Ruben, 1977, p. 2)
2. Ruben admits that there is a view that Engels was partly responsible for the tendency for Marxism to be equated with reductive materialism. He reckons, however, that Engels' work as a whole does not support the reductive view. Engels, like Marx, attacked the reductive view. In 'Ludwig Feuerbach' Engels criticised Feuerbach for such reductivism. See also Weiss, D.D., 1977, 'The Philosophy of Engels Vindicated', *Monthly Review*, 28, no. 8, January, 1977, pp 15–30.

The work of Ruben is referred to in the entry [Reflection Theory](#)