Early Sociological and Marxist Positivism

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Perhaps it amounts to heresy to call Karl Marx a positivist. By the same token, with the execption of a few like Comte or Mach, no one ever claimed to be a Positivist, though Mill, Spencer, Durkheim Tarde, Wundt or Lundberg were all as posivists. This paper also does not make Marx into a positivist, it only attempts to point to the similarities between the Marxist methodology and those of the early sociologists, like Comte and Spencer, who were positivists.

No attempt is made here to denounce the dialectical basis of Marx's methodology. Nor is positivism posed against dialectics as is done by a number of German sociologists (see Adorno et. al. 1976 and Gellner 1985). This essay is not even directed at exploring the merits or demirits of positivism vis a vis dialectics, nor even to salvage positivism by anchoring it in the works of Marx. It is, however, expected here that a demonstration of parallelism between Marxist methodology and early sociology will go a long way to bridge the ever widening gap between

Marxist science of society and modern sociology and can benefit the latter immensely.

Over the period of one and a half centuries positivism has acquired various meanings and seen numerous shifts in the emphasis of its contents. Though its origin is intertwined with that of sociology and had the social sciences as its focus, much of the later development of positivism is attributed to the natural scientists and philosophers of science in general. The derogatory connotation associated with positivism may be imputed to the easy passage it provides towards empiricism or "scienticism," which have always remaind only a step beyond. Left within its bounds, positivism provides a strong foundation on which the social sciences, and sociology in particular, or at least the main stream of it, continue to build themselves.

Because of its chequered history, a unitary definition or even a simple explanation of positivism is difficult to attempt. According to Keat and Urry (1978) the main arguments of positivism are as follows. For the positivist, they say, science is an attempt to gain predictive and explanatory knowledge of the external world (1978 :4). Toward this end the positivist constructs theories, or highly generalized statements (laws) expressing the regular relationships that are found in the external world discovered through systematic observation and experimentations. To explain or to predict something is to show that it is an instance of these regularities. Statements expressing these regularities cannot be known by *a priori* means, nor are their truth a mtter of logical necessity, it is only contigently

so. All such statements must therefore be objectively tested through observation and experiments, which are the only source of sure and certain empirical knowledge. Science does not go 'behind' or 'beyond' the phenomena revealed to us through sensory experience to attain knowledge of the unobservable, essence or mechanisms that somehow necessitate these phenomena. For the positivist there is no necessary connections in nature, there are only regularities, meaning succession of phenomena which are systematically presented in terms of universal laws of scientific theory. The region beyond this is the realm of metaphysics. (Keat and Urry 1978 ; 4-5).

The positivist, thus, looks for regularities in the external world, persented in the form of sensory data. These are built into universal laws verified through observation and experimentations. No metaphysical speculation or search for the "essence" of phenomena is entertained. Such philosophical orientations and methodological requirements obviously relate to the domain of the natural sciences. But sociology, or part of it, has sought to emulate these standards since its inception. Thus the natural sciences became the model for sociology. Giddens (1978) identifies this "positivistic attitude" in sociology as comprising of (a) that the metholodogical procedures of natural science may be directly applied to sociology; (b) that the outcome or the end result of sociological investigations can be formulated in terms parallel to those of natural science—that is to formulate laws or law like generalizations ; and (c) the findings of sociological research do not carry any

logically given implications for practical policy or for the pursuit of values. (Giddens 1978 : 3-4). Giddens (1978) notes that acceptance of any one of these three suppositions do not necessarily entail the adoption of the other two. And as will be shown later, for the early sociologists like Comte in particular, attainment of sociological knowledge, as opposed to point (c) above, was directed to influence policy matters, to change society in a desired direction.

Similarly, von Wright (1976) suggests three 'basic tenets' of positivism : (a) Methodological monism, or the idea of the unity of scientific method against the diversity of subject matter. (b) The exact natural sciences, in particular mathematical physics, as setting a methodological ideal for all other sciences. And (c) causal scientific explanation which consists in subsumption of individual cases under hypothetically assumed general laws of nature.

Thus the positivist searches for regularities in the external world and builds them into varifiable generalizations in the from of laws or law like propositions. Method of this search is the same for all sciences to the extent that they all rely upon sensory data. All valid knowledge is based on sensory data while speculation or search for essence, purposes or hidden meaning, or data not varified through sensory experience, observation and experimentation, are unscientific or even meaningless. Positivism is directly opposed to such metaphysical thinking.

Indeed, the term positive was applied by Comte to distinguish his philosophy or methodology from

metaphysical thinking of his age which he considered as negative. Though not undisputed, as will be shown later, Comte is credited to be the founder of positivism. His rational for the founding of such a philosophy is grounded in his search for a way out of the chaotic situation in society and polity of the 19th century Europe, and France in particular. The brilliant successes made by the natural sciences appealed to Comte, as it did to a number of other thinkers, to adopt their methodology and apply it to understand the social phenomena. Comte argued that man's thinking, and the sciences themselves, pass through three distinguishable stages, the theological, the metaphysical and the positive. This last stage is dominated by knowledge varifiable through factual data, data that impinge on our senses directly. He felt that sciences such as astronomy, physics, chemistry and physiology (meaning biology) attained positive stage and in that order. But social thinking remains either in the theological or in the metaphysical stage and, therefore, fails to gain a true understanding of reality. He blames the social and political chaos in Europe on this lack of positive knowledge by the social thinkers. Thus, for Comte "positive philosophy offers the only solid basis" for social reorganization. Comte's positive philosophy is, therefore, not only the basis for a new science of society, called sociology, but also for attaining social order.

Emile Durkhein, considered as one of the founding fathers of sociology, credits Saint-Simon, and not Comte, as the the founder of positivism. Saint-Simon was

also the teacher of Comte for a while, and though Comte claimed originality of his thinking and accused his teacher of borrowing his ideas without acknowledgement and eventually broke the relationship, Durkheim seeks to prove that the original conception of positivism is to be traced in the works of Saint-Simon. (see Durkheim 1967). For Saint-Simon science was equivallent to knowledge. Philosophy was the general science of which the particular sciences were parts dealing with the various aspects of the reality. Saint-Siomon argued that since the fifteenth century the tendency of the human spirit was to base all its reasoning on the "observed and examined facts" and that in the process astronomy, physics and chemisrty had been organized "on this positive basis". But philosophy remains an imperfect science as long as parts of it, namely the knowledge of the organic world, physiology, of which science of man is a part, remains beyond the sphere of this positive basis. Thus for perfecting philosophy or the general science, all particular sciences must be based on positive method. He argues that since man is a part of nature, the science of man must necessarily follow the same method as that followed by the science of nature. The universe is one, and the same method must serve to explore it in all of its parts (See Durkheim 1967). Thus, Saint-Simon says, "one concludes necessarily that physiology, of which the science of man is part, will be treated by the method adopted for the other physical sciences" (Saint-Simon as quoted by Durkheim 1967 : 135).

Similarly for Herbert Spencer the science of society, sociology, is placed firmly within the bounds of the method of the natural sciences. He refuses to distinguish among various orders of the phenomena. He argues that there cannot be "one law for the rest of the universe and another law for the mankind" (Spencer 1961 :45) He is thus credited to have extended the idea of evolution to include not only the social world, beside the organicc world, but also to the whole of cosmos. For him, therefore, it is rather obvious that "the facts, simultaneous and successive, which societies present, heve a genesis no less natural than the genesis of facts of all other classes" (Spencer 1961 : 351) Sociology or the social sciences are for Spencer like the other sciences, dealing with its facts the way facts are dealt with in other sciences. He also defends the study of society in a scientific way against those who do not believe it possible by saying that the same was once thought of astronomy or physics in the past. Indeed, he argues that, such conservatism actually hinders the growth of science. Thus, he feels that, "there can be no complete acceptance of sociology as a science, so long as the belief in a social order not conforming to natural law, survives". (Spencer 1961 : 360).

The early positivists like Comte, Spencer or Saint-Simon were, thus, on the one hand, impressed by the prestige and success enjoyed by the natural sciences, while on the other hand, noted the pathetic plight of social thinking dominated by all kinds of metaphysical and negative attitudes. It was primarily in order to

liberate social thinking from the latter demise that these early positivists advocated social thinking in terms of the method of the natural sciences. They argued that the world of nature and the world of man cannot be separated since they are only different aspects of the same universe. Therefore, the method of inquiry which has succeeded so well in the explanation of the world of nature must, of necessity, be applied to the world of man to achieve valid knowledge of the letter. The method of the natural sciences are based on observation and experimentation with data that appeal directly to our senses. This, the early positivists concluded to be the only valid method of acquiring knowledge. Anything other than that, no matter how rationally thought out, or how expertly the essence, the purpose, or the hidden meaning of the phenomena have been exposed, unless they are varifiable through sense experience, do not count as scientific knowledge. Thus, knowledge, be they of the world of nature or of the world of man, to be termed scientific must follow the same method, be based on sensory experience alone. Science is positive knowledge. Science is positivism. And for a positivist like Saint-Simon there is but only one science, philosophy, and the particular sciences are merely parts of that general science. While for the others, there is only one method of science, the positive method.

It is within this context that the parallels between Marx's thinking and positivism will be sought. Like Saint-Simon, Comte and Spencer, Marx was a man of the 19th Century. He began his career, merely a

decade after Comte began his work on *The Positive Philosophy* and his life and work ended long before those of Spencer. And that he was thoroughly acquainted with the works of Saint-Simon is well attested by the numerous references Marx makes of this great thinker. Of course, living and working in the same century do not necessarily imply correspondence of thinking. It lies elsewhere, in their common concern for the social and political ills of the time. Saint-Simon, Comte and Marx were all disturbed by the social, political and economic situation of Europe and wanted to change them. They only differed perhaps, in the degree of the former and the modality of the latter. Correspondance of their thinking is also attributed to their frustration with the status of social thinking the eventual disgust, and the final disregard for the prevailing modes of explanation of the social.

Marx's frustration with social thinking and philosophy, particularly German Idealism is rather well known and it is not necessary to go into any detail discussion of that here. Even a cursory reading of Marx will surely bring to notice the sarcasm and the venom with which Marx treats such thinking. Philosophy of the German variety for Marx is devoid of any consideration for the reality. He notes in the essay on "Feuerbach" (with Engels 1966 : 6) that "it has not occured to any of these (German) philosophers to enquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality. . ." German philosophy "descends from heaven to earth", it sets out "from what men say, imagine, conceive" and not from the reality man

faces. Marx, thus, seeks to turn such philosophy 'head on foot' and attempts to "ascend from earth to heaven", to "set out from real, active men and on the basis of their real life process" (Marx and Engels 1966 : 14).

Coupled with this, like in the positivists such as Comte, is the immense respect that Marx has for the natural sciences, which leads him to build a system of knowledge firmly based on the principles of those sciences. His respect for the natural sciences is evidenced from the earliest of his writings, in the form of letters to his father to the pages of Capital, where he not only freely uses the theories of physics and chemistry but also quotes chemical equations to prove his points. The combined effect of his disregard for metaphysical speculations and the admiration for the natural sciences lead him to the same end as they did to Comte or Spencer, towards a positive science of society, grounded in the natural scientific method. Thus, in "Feurerbach" Marx (with Engels) declares that "where speculation ends—in real life—there real, *positive science* begins" (Marx and Engels 1966 : 15 emphasis mine). Note the use of the term "positive" to distinguish science from speculation.

The basic features of this positive science is clearly formulated in the pages of the "Feuerbach". In place of speculation this science begins with the realities of life, in the Marxist terminology the "material conditions" of existence. Thus, the premises from which Marx (with Engels) begins "*are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstractions can only be made in the imagination*" (Marx and

Engels 1966 : 6-7 emphasis mine). These real premise are the real individuals and their activity and the material conditions. And since they are real, "these premises can thus be *varified in a purely empirical way* (1966 : 7, emphasis mine). Discussing the origin of the family a few pages later they state that the family must be "*treated and analysed according to the existing empirical data, not according to "the concept of the family*" (1966 : 17, emphasis mine). The concept of empirical observation is further clarified in a similar contex where they seek to establish the connection between production and social and political relations. "Empirical observation", they note, "must in each separate instance bring out *empirically, and without any mystification and speculation*, the connection of the social and political structure with production" (1966 : 13, emphasis mine).

Many elements of positivism is noticeable in these statements made in "Feuerbach." But the relation of Marx's positive science with the natural science, is yet to be fully explored. This he accomplishes in the *Economic and philosophical Manuscripts* (Marx 1963). Here, the foundation of the science of man in the natural sciences and its unity with the latter, along with the role of sense experience as the basis of knowledge for both, are explored in greater details.

Marx, like the positivists, felt that the natural sciences have "developed a tremendous activity and have assembled an ever-growing mass of data" (1963: 163). But each has remained alien to the other. The desire for the "union" was there but the "power to

effect it" was lacking. In the course of history natural science has "penetrated all the more *practically* into human life through industry". It has transformed human life and has prepared the way for the emancipation of humanity. Thus for Marx "industry is the actual historical relationship of nature, and thus of natural science, to man" (1963:163). He therefore argues that "if industry is conceived as the *exoteric* manifestation of the essential human *faculties*, the *human* essence of nature and the *natural* essence of man can also be understood" (1963:163). Natural science will then abandon its abstract materialist, or the idealist orientation and "will become the basis of *human* science, just as it has already become ... the basis of actual human life" (1963:163- 64).

Developing his arguments thus, Marx also raises the same questions regarding the duality of method for the science of nature as opposed to the science of man as was voiced by Saint-Siomn and Spencer and noted above. He says, "one basis for life and another for science is *a priori* a falsehood" (1963:164). Nature and man are the same thing for him. Nature, he argues, as it develops in human history, in the act of genesis of human society "is the *actual* nature of man". And thus, "nature, as it develops through industry, ...is truly *anthropological* nature" (1963-164).

By establishing the unity of man with nature, Marx is now ready to unite the science of man with the science of nature. But for Marx, "sense experience must be the basis of all science" and "science is only genuine science when it proceeds from sense

experience . . . i.e. only when it proceed from nature" (1963: 164). Marx is, of course not referring to the five crude senses. Crude senses become human senses by becoming social. He argues that "the *senses* of the social man are different from those of non-social man" (1963 164). These are the senses like the musical ear or the eye to appreciate beauty. And for Marx, "the whole of history is a preperation for "man" to become and object of sense percepertion..." (1963: 164). And history itself is a "*real* part of *natural history*, of the development of nature into man" (1963:164).

Thus, man becomes "the direct object of natural science, because directly *perceptible nature* is for man directly human sense experience" in the from of other person who is presented in a sensuous way. But nature is also the "direct object of the science of man, because the first object for man is man himself, is nature. Therefore, "the *social* reality of nature and *human* natural science, or the *natural science of man*, are identical expressions" (1963:164). Social science and natural science are dealing with the same object, man as nature and nature as reflected in man. But Marx does not stop at this unity of the two froms of sciences, he hopes for this unity to be completed in the from of one science. "Natural science," he feels, "will one day incorporate the science of man, just as the science of man will incorporate natural sciences, there will be a *single* science" (1963:164).

It is, therefore, noted that all the basic tenets of positivism, in particular those found in the works of the

early positivists like Comte and Spencer, or even Saint-Simon, are clearly formulated in these works of Marx. Perhaps, because of their posthumous publication, these formulations received little publicity, and the positivistic trends in Marx's thought remains obscure or even unwanted. By the time these works were published during the 1920s and 30s, dialectics has already been establishd as the sole Marxist method, primarily by the effort of Engels. As a result, today dialectics is seen as opposed to positivism, as is evident in the debate among the German sociologists (Adorno et al. 1976). commenting on this Gellner (1985) recently remarked that "it is a curious but indisputable fact that every philosophical baby that is born alive is either a little positivist or a little Hegelian". That, even though Marx turned Hegel upside down, he was 'a little Hegelian" is well established. What is argued here and demonstrated above is that he may also have been "a little positivist". A happy combination of these two apperently diverse modes of thought, if it could be ever achieved, might possibly have come from as great a mind as that of Marx. And, I feel, it did.

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