



PERSONAL COGNITION ON POPPERIAN MARX

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Abstract: Karl Popper's criticisms of Marxism have continuous and serious effects among the philosophers? Some of the Popperian concepts like open society and historicism often from the background of any critical discussion on Marxism. The term "Popperian Marx" as has been used by me, indicates Popper's vision regarding theories propounded key Marx. I have also explained my two other terms personal and reflection. However reflection in my opinion is something that keeps it at a slight distance from what is usually known as scientific argumentation.

A question arises that why should we bother about a level of mental activity that may lead us to do error, or committing mistakes. This is only because this trespassing into that mental level of activity gives us an insight into the specific level, which can be gained in no other way. According to Karl Popper's autobiography first published in 1974, the "Intellectual Autobiography Untended Quest", he admits that his attitude of putting non-importance to the words and meanings that he failed to persuade. This attitude of Karl Popper led to anti-historicist position and gradually this helped him embarking on his criticism of Marx. The Popperian concept of self-exhortation of never to quarrel with words goes well with his emphasis on 'science'.

The concept of Popper's anti-essentialism gives us an important clue to his Marx-critique. Marx's interpretation about the capitalist mode of production and laws of motion of the societies was an area for us to understand the Popperian concept of anti-essentialism. Popper was however a proponent of an anti-authoritarian economy project which was based upon a tolerant attitude towards any other kind of economy that might exist.

Popper was in support of a 'piecemeal social engineering' system. Also my second observation is about the limitation of the piecemealing method. Piecemealing leads to small bits and allows us to conceive things only within narrow ranges. Finally I addressed the question of historicism as had been criticized by Marx. Also I have addressed what Popper called "scientific socialism". I have addressed the question whether such a calculation could at all be supported by "science". Popper in his analysis attempted to investigate whether Marxism can be called a science and finally he came to a conclusion what Marxism is not a

science and thus he has labeled as anti-Marxist. Finally my attempt is to respond to Popper's charge of historicism leveled against Marxism. Marxism seems to Popper as historicism. In fact to some of the thinkers, Marxism even appears as eschatology. My final conclusion is that Marx project remain outside the domain of Popperian methodology and this Popperian Marx fails to reach Marxian Marx.

Keywords: Open society, historicism, Popperian Marx, personal reflection, scientific argumentation, anti-essentialism, and obscurantist.

Karl Popper's criticism of Marxism is so well known that it reverberates even among the non-specialists. Some of Popper's ideas such as his use of open society and historicism often form the background of any critical discussion of Marx and Marxism. In that perspective one could either undertake an elaboration of Popper's critique or a reflection of it. Personally speaking, I think it is important to 'refute' Popper, but at the same time I also feel that it is as important to refute some varieties of this refutation, say for example, Maurice Cornforth's refutation of Popper as contained in his *Open Philosophy and Open Society*.

In this paper I am not going to undertake either of these tasks. Instead I am going to establish a kind of personal reflection on Popperian Marx. I will explain my terms. Popper, properly speaking, gives us his critique of Marxism, not so much of Marx as such; at least he does not make a sharp distinction between the two. But it is also true that the ideas and the arguments that Popper employs to mount his offensive against Marxism enables a cautious reader to form an outline of what may be called Popper's vision of Marx. This is what I call Popperian Marx.

To explain my two other terms – personal and reflection. I call these reflections personal for I do not claim any objective standpoint behind them. In fact, I should like to feel that most of our reflections are indeed personal that sense. The reflecting subject is doing his job as a concrete individual, in certain concrete political and economic circumstances and with a concrete emotional may also be taken to include even the prejudices, which are in any case no less veal.

By reflection I mean something which keeps it at a slight distance from what is usually known as 'scientific' argumentation. Argumentation needs to be closely reasoned, reinforced by evidences that should preferably be incontrovertible as far as possible. Thus my use of the term 'reflection' puts us onto a ground that is not made of granite, rather possibly made of clay. This use is very near the sense of 'apothegm', which should conjure up a mental situation that is less systematic than in the case of argumentation.

I think I should also add a note on my use of 'Marxism'. I use it in a sense in which it is of course somehow related to Marx, that is Marx's writings, but the relation is far from being straight forward or easily understood. I normally use the 'ism'-i.e., words in a way that they refer to what is being done on or with the pre-'ism' i.e., part of the word. Thus Marxism is to refer to what is done on Marx ('s writings), nationalism on nation (-al), socialism on/with social and capitalism on/with capital. The process that converts a category into the corresponding ism-category may very well be a social process. This often takes the form of a

conceptualization that may involve only an individual effort or a group effort, but then the conceptual category gets churned up through various kinds of social processes including political agitations and revolutionary upheavals.

We now need to draw a distinction between the prescientific and the scientific. Consider the following two sets of words: a) fad, fetish, idiosyncrasies, angularities, anxieties, concerns, prejudices, inclinations, predilections, preferences etc. and b) reason, rationality, systematization, formalization, organized thinking, premises, ad-hoc assumptions, conclusions, verifications, empirical evidences and so on. These are two different methodological worlds with differing attitudes and perspectives.

Common wisdom that anything listed in the first set must not have much to do with what is ordinarily known as science. Science is all about some or all of the items listed in the second set. Here I would like to argue that no one for sure would deny the influence of the items in the first set on our daily transactions, conversations, thinking and theorizations. But what one would deny in theory and wouldn't like to see implemented in practice is any role assigned to most of the first set items in matters relating to science. Science is too sanitized for them, it seems. My humble plea is for rethinking this dichotomy between the prescientific and the scientific. I am not arguing that there is no distinction between the ways in which our mind tends to work at these two levels. The nomenclatures 'prescientific' and 'scientific' may very well be regarded as conventional. But the difference in the nature of the mental processes involved is no less real for that. Let us recognize boldly that at one of these levels we are thinking more consciously and actively, engaged in a rule-following game, the rule being already pre-set before us. At the other level we are doing it all as though in a slumber. Our thoughts there are floating around like scattered clouds. Some of them may at times even seem to be gathering around a point to gravitate. But in contrast to the processes involved at the second level the thoughts (or one might even call it something else) at this first level do not find any concrete shape. Maybe they can only suggest a kind of vague indistinct contour.

One thing may be clearly noted here. The relation between the first and the second level 'thought' processes is not exactly clear. If there is any degree of certificate that a given kind of prescientific vision would lead to a certain kind of scientific structure. No, we are not arguing that the thrust of our argument is that in examining a particular scientific structure we should well if we could keep in mind the possible intrusion of the elements of prescientific vision. These elements are that we breathe; they impinge upon us almost as a natural process and hence often escape the detection of our conscious mind. The relations between the two levels are not such that we get it done first at one level and then more on to the next. The way we have conceived the prescientific level that is hardly possible. For at that level we are not really consciously engaged in theory making at all. At that level we are merely experiencing and possibly reacting in a mute manner. At this level they can at most be taken to give a certain amorphous shape to our attitude. This attitude may be the link between the two levels where one simply merges into the other. It is a kind of confluence of ideas, attitudes, propensities which all get moulded into a certain kind of theoretical shape as a result of our conscious scientific activity.

A question that now needs to be asked is why should we bother at all about a level of mental activity that is so shapeless, so uncertain, so floating and drifting that it may always lead us to error, to committing mistakes while grasping the significance of this or that particular element, to the dangers of hopeless subjectivity. I think the only reason why we should take the risk of trespassing into the dangerous and apparently (scientifically) prohibited zone is that this excursus may give us an insight into the 'scientific' level, which could be possibly gained in no other way. This is in fact why we should take interest in not only the internal history of science, but also in its external history. Otherwise I think it will be really different to get to know the setting in which, say Aristotle could think about slavery the way he did in the 'science' level of his thought.

In our anxiety to catch the spirit of the ambience we have to look for social history of the times in addition to the biographical and autobiographical material relating to the thinker. The man and his times become important precisely in this context. Fortunately, for Popper we have a good account of his intellectual development in his own perception as recorded in the Intellectual Autobiography *Untended Quest*, first published as *Autobiography of Karl Popper* in 1974. When Popper was writing these reflections on the process of development of his own thought almost throughout the 1960s, he could be taken to be in full possession of his intellectual powers and could be said to have attained a kind of fullness of his own ideas. They were no longer amorphous, now already taken articulate shape and carefully designed structure. These observations are important in that one must learn to take critically whatever may be written there in any autobiographical account. First hand statements are urgent material no doubt, but like any other source material they also need to be carefully and critically examined.

Popper admits that his first philosophical failure was in respect of a non-importance to be attached to words and meanings that he failed to persuade his father about. This was not really a position that he reached then, it was just an attitude he felt he should nurture and it struck him as important when he was reading certain passages in Strindberg's autobiography where the author seemed to be stressing words and their significance. This was too obscurantist to Popper. This attitude ultimately led him to an anti-historicist position and well before he embarked on his criticism of Marx.

Popper's self-exhortation of never to quarrel with words goes well with his emphasis on 'science'. The almost exhaustive cognitive value that Popper attributes to science seems adequate to exclude any reference to essence. The mature Popper was greatly concerned with science. Along with it take his concern for freedom and emancipation from authoritarianism and his insistence on objectively – all this should suggest that he keep himself at a safe distance from anything to do with 'essence'. His 'science' can only be concerned with 'phenomenon' and Popper elaborately outlined an account of the way this science may develop. His falsificationism is that account. Note the course that Popper charted for himself had nothing to derive from any possible 'knowledge' of the essence. Thus having nothing to do with essence he denied any knowledge claim to this level of discourse.

Popper's anti-essentialism gives us an important clue to his Marx-critique. For Marx's project, it may be argued an inquiry into the 'essence' is not simply quarrelling with words and their meanings, a task Popper was loathsome about since his early youth or even late adolescence. Marx was unveiling capitalist mode of production as part of his understanding of the laws of motion of societies, which in his major though unfinished work was reduced to understanding the laws of motion of capitalist societies. Here Marx must be kept separated from Marxism. Marx's business was to pursue the grand project, whereas Marxism central occupation was with capitalism which was to be and could be overthrown to establish socialism. Words like 'unveiling' and 'understanding' may incur Popper's wrath as obscurantist. But the great value of tolerance that one much cherishes to learn from Popper's anti-authoritarian project should induce us to be a little more tolerant about other systems, even about Marx's. Then it would become clear to what extent it was important and to what extent Marx was successful or not in extending our vision beyond market relation and only then one could examine the significance of Marx's departure from his classical predecessors, even Ricardo. The appellation, Marx, a minor Ricardian would seem so false in the course of such examination.

Once we come to the question of grand projects, we obviously need to look to Popper's counter position of 'piecemeal social engineering'. One should have no difficulty in sharing Popper's skepticism about grand historical systems. Such grand systems may very well harbor elements of authoritarianism. There could be external systemic pressure and this could have a homogenizing and to that extent a totalizing effect. Karl Popper can rightly take up arms against such effects. There is nothing wrong so far as it goes. And I do not think that Popper is entirely unjust in ascribing such a totalization to Marx, more so to Marxism. As against this Popper's prescription of 'piecemeal social engineering' may also be said to have a healthy therapeutic effect in that it may protect us from arrogating to ourselves the role of the 'almighty', may give us a sense of not being the chosen ones and thus it may instill humility in our selves. The messianic message that may be often involved in grand systems, especially trusted upon by the ones that find social application in practice may be shed by taking recourse to projects akin to Popper's 'piecemeal social engineering'.

So far so good. Popper's 'piecemealing' requires us to look small, do in bits, and be satisfied with things smaller than total emancipatory revolutionary upheavals. The sweep is narrower and to that extent healthier, for it prevents us from biting more than what we can chew. It makes us aware of our limitations. In this context I should like to make two observations. One is that Popper's reservations about grand systems are well taken, but this must also be noted that the 'dangers' associated with these systems are more pronounced in the case of the ones that are sought to be actualized in practice. Popper's reservations are, therefore, rightly directed against Marx, for his system supposedly forms the basis of a concrete socialist revolution, wherever that may mean. But then look, the target of the criticism is thus Marxism, not Marx as such. Marx really needs to be distinguished not only from Marxism, but also from Engels. This is why probably Antonio Gramsci spoke of a diplomatic edition of Marx. To equate Marx and Marxism and Marx and Engels is quite a

common practice in Marx-discourse. Even Popper succumbs to this equation. While criticizing Marx for 'his' dialectical materialism Popper cites Engels as on p.333 of *Conjectures and Refutations*: "Similarly, Engels writes: 'what therefore is the negation of the negation? An extremely general..... law of development of nature, history and thought, a law which..... holds good in the animal and plant kingdom, in geology, in mathematics, in history and in philosophy'"¹ It will be unfair if we stop quoting at this point. For Popper moves on to quote a parallel passage from Marx's *Capital I*: "The Capitalist mode of production..... is the first negation..... But Capitalism begets, with the inexorability of a law of Nature, its own negation. It is the negation of negation."² True that the expression 'with the inexorability of a law of Nature'³ appears in the quoted Marx passage, but one has also to take note of the fact that the chapter in which the passage occurs has the heading. Historical tending of Capitalist Accumulation. Now any careful student of Marx's theory would know the great emphasis that he would always put on 'tendency', which to him was a way of speculating about the courses that events may take. And these speculations were not absolute; they were relative to the premises of his theory. The 'inexorability' may also be interpreted along that time. In fact, Marx's *Capital* was a theoretical work formulated in terms of historical categories and it is not difficult to see the rationale behind this strategy. One has only to take note of Marx's method of political economy, for which there are Marx's direct testimony, which may not be very abundant, but not very scanty either. Reference may also be made in this connection to *Grundrisse*.

My second observation is about a limitation of the piecemealing method. Piecemealing confirms us to small bits and allows us to conceive things only within narrow ranges. Each individual bit thus remains isolated and there is no easy way to connect them to provide a fuller view. Now Popper might say that a search for this 'fuller' view is fraught with all the dangers that he conceives his piecemealing method to be a guard against. In response to this we would like to point out that such piecemealing without any possible insight from any kind of fuller view is in its turn fraught with another kind of danger where one is likely to fall prey to every possible kind of authoritarianism. Think of military discipline as an idea. These you respect your men to obey orders, do one's own bit allotted to him by another (usually higher) authority normally without caring to explain the reasons or motives behind particular jobs or orders. Any kind of 'full' view is not only not made available, but is found positively undesirable for it might lead to unacceptable questionings. So carried to extremes both these methods may be argued to have their associated dangers. It is critical rationalism itself that may suffer in a piecemealing regime.

Now finally to come to historicism. Popper's criticism of Marx was basically with regard to this aspect of Marx's work (or Marxism). In fact, even textually speaking Popper while writing his *Poverty of Historicism* had to digress on themes which ultimately grew into the two volumes of "The Open Society and its Enemies", and the famous enemies were, as everybody knows, Plato, Hegel and Marx. So historicism was basically what Popper was to criticize. What was this historicism? In Popper's language: The historicist "sees the individual as a pawn, as a somewhat insignificant instrument in the general development of mankind.

And he finds that the really important actors on the Stage of History are either the Great Nations and their Great Leaders, or perhaps the Great classes, or the Great Ideas. However, this may be, he will try to understand the meaning of the play which is performed on the Historical stage; he will try to understand the laws of historical development. If he succeeds in this, he will of course, be able to predict future developments. He might then put politics upon a solid basis, and give us practical advice by telling us which political actions are likely to succeed or likely to fail. This is the brief description of all attitudes which I call historicism.”⁴ (OSE, I, p.7-8)

Let us now recall something from Popper’s autobiographical account. At seventeen, “for about two or three months I regarded myself as a communist.”⁵ (UQ, p.33) But then he was soon to be disenchanted. An incident in his life then had turned him first against communism and then ‘led him away from Marxism altogether.’ “In Vienna, shooting broke out during a demonstration by unarmed young socialists who, instigated by the communists, tried to help some communists to escape who were under arrest in the Central police station in Vienna. Several young socialists and communist workers were killed, I was horrified and shocked by the brutality of the police, but also by myself. For I felt as a Marxist I bore part of the responsibility for the tragedy – at least in principle.”⁶ (UQ, p.33) This Marxist theory (or Marxism), felt Popper was ‘part of so-called “scientific socialism”. I now asked myself whether such a calculation could ever be supported by “science”.’ So now he embarked upon investigating science and gradually proceeded to his famous demarcation thesis.

My first observation here would be that in asking himself the question ‘whether such a calculation could ever be supported by “science”, Popper in fact was unduly privileging science. Supposing Popper’s answer to this question to be in the affirmative what would that mean really? If his “science” were such that it would support that brutality, was that brutality alright? That by that early age “science” was so sacrosanct to Popper is likely to have been the result of a prescientific cultural prejudice perhaps. If he were to belong to an age that new no “science” he would not have probably reacted the way, he did in respect of his search for “science”. This privileging of science is, therefore, prescientific and something that Popper had inherited, not developed. My second observation in this connection would be that at a point when Popper was investigating the proper character of science and was coming to the conclusion that Marxism was in that sense not a proper science, he had already turned anti-Marxist. Therefore, his mature ‘rational’ rejection of Marxism was preceded by a pre-rational disposition against it. It is because of such possibilities that I wanted to lay stress on the ‘prescientific’ and was suggesting that it often merges into the ‘scientific’.

Finally, I would like to respond to Popper’s change of historicism levelled against Marx (or Marxism). No wonder that Marxism appears to Popper as historicists. In fact, Marxism has appeared to some even as an eschatology and has been grouped with Plato, Vedantic Hinduism and Christianity (cf. Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, vol.3, p.413). This I think is largely a matter of how I choose to look at it. If would look for eschatological suggestions in Marx one, I think should get it. Similarly, if one would look for eschatology in Vedantic Hinduism one, as everybody knows, would certainly get it. But if one chooses not to

be over bothered by these eschatologies, these systems for that should not prove to be barren. One may have other rich insights in these systems. In this same spirit I would like to argue that if Popper would choose, as he in fact did, to look for historicism in Marx (or Marxism), he would get it, probably in ampler message in Marxism than in Marx. By this I do not deny that in Marx also one may easily find utterances that Popper could legitimately describe as historicist. But in Marx, not so much in Marxism, there are enough flexibilities and half pronouncements and qualifying conditions and contra-speculations. So much so that one could even choose not to lay much stress on its historicist character. In fact, there is a slight danger in our being too insistent on Marx's historicism, for in that case we might lose sight of another aspect of Marx's methodology is also associated with history. To distinguish it from historicism we might call it historism, or still better, historicity. Marx's project demands that the categories of his theory must be related to history in some way. This is important even when one is not engaged in predicting history. In order to gain an insight into history that can give us some meaning or some understanding of the processes that might otherwise appear to do so inscrutable, we need to relate our categories to history at least in a manner that the features defining or characterizing our category must be found somewhere in recorded history (existential criterion) and also that the features must not all be present always in history (differential criterion). Such a procedure would hopefully enable us to distinguish one stage of history from another. This is important for Marx, otherwise all that had happened in history would look alike when looked through the categories that may not satisfy the above two criteria. It is unfortunate that Popper while rejecting Marx for his historicism does not find any merit in his historicity.

In fact, in social sciences and in economics Popper seems to have a problem with history itself. I should suspect that his 'scientificity' leads him to lay stress only on the here and now that may be construed as the given 'external' to be 'explained' by his science. This is evident in his affiliation to marginalism in economics, which for all one can guess, may have something to do with his association with Hayek's seminars and also the intellectual ambience of the London School of Economics. A little more than that. Autobiographically speaking, coming back from New Zealand and having joined LSE Popper felt that now that he had "lots of open problem, in part purely logical, in part matters of method, including the method of the social sciences; and being now in a school of the social sciences, I felt that those latter problems had – for a time – a claim on me prior to problems of method in the natural sciences. Yet the social sciences never had for me the same attractions as the theoretical natural sciences. In fact, the only theoretical social science which appealed to me was economics."⁷ (UQ, p.121) It was just not that economics as such that appealed to him, it was economics of a particular kind that really appealed to him. 'The main point here (ie, The Poverty) "and later explained a little more fully in chapter 14 of The Open Society" was an attempt to generalize the method of economic theory (marginal utility theory) so as to become applicable to the other theoretical social sciences'.⁸ (UQ, p.117-18) In a sense here lies the crux of the matter. This appeal for the marginal method is more agreeable to a mind that is wedded to piecemealing, for the method of marginalism concentrates on changes in a local context. This affiliation to localism via marginalism nearly totally filters out considerations of evolutionary

history. The Marxian project thus easily becomes an unacceptable (in Popperian lexicon scientifically unviable) project. In fact, this will lead one to contrast every single aspect of Marx's theory with elements of the marginalist theory and to an outright rejection of the former. This lead one to question the 'absence' of a demand theory in Marx, as to almost a violent reaction against the nature of Marx's theory of value. These is a long history of these reactions from Eugene von Bohm-Bawerk down to MI chis Morishima and Ian Steedman. The interesting point here is to note that all these critics are not in favour of a total rejection of Marx. Some of them are so keen on retaining what they consider important in Marx that they are not hesitant even to abandon Marx's labour theory of value in order to rescue the vest. We may not care about personal Marx, but such proposals should prove anathema to Marx's project.

Now to conclude, may we not incidentally note that the Popperian idea of generalizing the marginal method of economic theory to other theoretical social sciences can turn out to be a kind of theoretical authoritarianism and result in a denial of autonomy to other disciplines? This is clearly not to preclude interaction between disciplines and foreclose the avenues of free importation of methods and ideas. But care must be taken to assess the nature of the projects involved and this call for a view fuller than what is implied in piecemeal approach. One must not be overawed by the possible latent dangers inherent in larger views. There is really no point in panicking and shrinking back. It may also be noted here that Popper's methodological individualism is a step forward in his ambitions outlook on marginalism. Marginal adjustment in economic theory is closely connected with optimizing behavior of individuals. So here all that matters are what appears to be important from the point of view of an individual. The basic justification of behavioural principles in this kind of economics is in terms of individual behavior. But that the individual behavior may not always be entirely shaped by individual motives alone, and can be crucially influenced by events and developments beyond the range of individual behavior cannot be captured by this methodology of individualism. And hence much of Marx's project remains outside the pale of this methodology and to that extent Popperian Marx fails to reach Marxian Marx.

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