

ESSAY REVIEW

A DIALOGUE WITH MARXISM

ANGELA CHEATER'S WORK deserves to be taken very seriously, both by Africanists and those who have a special interest in Zimbabwe, and also by those who have a particular interest in the social sciences.

Her output is prodigious. But it is not merely a question of quantity. This corpus is informed by rigorous theoretical understanding and a familiarity with a wide range of empirical data. Her own empirical work conveys the density and multi-dimensional breadth of descriptive analysis. Furthermore it is characterized by the degree of high moral seriousness with which she approaches the task of analysis and investigation. This moral seriousness is not reserved only for her attitude towards her own work and her profession. It spills over into her evident concern for her students and her desire to help them grasp the rigour of the discipline of anthropology and its relevance to contemporary life. Furthermore, it makes itself felt when she looks critically at questions of social policy and social engineering. For it is one of her beliefs that social anthropology has something important to offer in this realm.

Of the works under review, *Social Anthropology: An Alternative Introduction* stands head and shoulders above its older rivals in terms of contemporary relevance.¹ This is achieved by a steadfast focus upon themes of intrinsic interest to the contemporary world — those of work, production, and the relations and modes of production — in addition to the traditional focus on esoteric matters of kinship, witchcraft and order in acephalous societies.² A wide range of empirical data from over 100 different societies past and present in both the developed and the developing world is introduced to illustrate and demonstrate various theoretical problems.

For Cheater, the exotic past is of interest only in so far as it is relevant to our understanding of the contemporary world. It is, therefore, relevant in two ways: to theorizing and to social policy. The relevance to theory emerges when, for example, we try to model current knowledge of pre-class societies on Marxist lines — a mistake, according to Cheater. The relevance to social policy emerges in a different way. All societies in Africa are currently undergoing rapid social change and experiencing more or less desperate attempts at social engineering by national governments, aid organizations and international capital in order to modify the worst aspects of that social change (or, sometimes, to benefit from the confusion). But social policies which do not respect past modes of organization or historical and cultural beliefs which have survived into the twentieth century are, says Cheater, doomed to failure. Appropriateness and relevance consist, in part, of knowing and respecting people's customs, and to know people's customs one has to examine them.

¹ A. P. Cheater, *Social Anthropology: An Alternative Introduction* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1986), vii, 288 pp. Z\$5.80.

² See, for example, I. M. Lewis, *Social Anthropology in Perspective* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976); J. Beattie, *Other Cultures* (London, Routledge, 1965).

In *The Politics of Factory Organization and Idioms of Accumulation* Cheater presents two full-length monographs based upon anthropological work conducted by herself in the last ten years.³ The former is a study of a weaving mill in a small Zimbabwean town, the latter of small-scale commercial farmers in a Purchase Area. *The Production and Marketing of Fresh Produce among Blacks in Zimbabwe* examines one aspect of the data derived from her research on commercial farmers.⁴

ORTHODOX MARXISM AND NEO-MARXISM

The organizational device I have chosen for examining her work entails focusing on the ways in which Cheater can be said to be writing within the Marxist paradigm. Now this is, I must confess, a difficult question. What we call the Marxist corpus is characterized by a widely varying range of styles with different analytical emphases, each often claiming to be the only legitimate and authentic heir to Marx's own work. Moreover, it has often been noted that the twentieth century writes within the parameters set by the nineteenth: Darwin, Marx and Freud having formulated the terms of the language which we now use for our own scientific discourse. Perhaps Cheater's relationship with Marxist problematic is no stronger than this? But she conceives of her own stance as being positively located within the perimeter of a neo-Marxism challenging 'orthodox' Marxism (*Social Anthropology*, p. 16). She accepts, that is, the basic conceptual apparatus of Marxist thought as being at least heuristically useful for analytical purposes, just as other theoretical perspectives can be utilized in order to explain data (pp. 20-1).

Neo-Marxism can in general be characterized as a reformist response to perceived inadequacies within the 'orthodox' Marxist corpus. This reformism arises from a critique of Marxism as dogma, an openness to the possibility that at least some major Marxist concepts are inadequate and a willingness to accept non-Marxist theoretical elements (to flesh out, for example, inadequacies of traditional Marxism), together with a commitment to the ethical component of Marxism currently conceived as a commitment to emancipation.

For theoretical purists and 'conceptual hygienists' neo-Marxism is a puzzling phenomenon. It is often hard to see what basis remains for the claiming that such theorists are Marxist at all, for fundamentalists cannot see how Marxist concepts can be systematically challenged, shored up with concepts deriving from other perspectives or even used within the framework of other theoretical perspectives without this constituting an attack on the underlying paradigm.

And there is a point to the notion of 'conceptual hygiene' within social science. Conceptual hygienists believe that ultimately social theories are composed (however loosely) of interconnected and interdependent propositions

³ A. P. Cheater, *The Politics of Factory Organization: A Case Study in Independent Zimbabwe* (Gweru, Mambo Press, Zambeziana 18, 1986), xix, 156 pp, Z\$13.50; A. P. Cheater, *Idioms of Accumulation: Rural Development and Class Formation among Freeholders in Zimbabwe* (Gweru, Mambo Press, Zambeziana 16, 1984), xxii, 199 pp, Z\$9.00.

⁴ A. P. Cheater, *The Production and Marketing of Fresh Produce among Blacks in Zimbabwe* (Salisbury, Univ. of Rhodesia, Supplement to *Zambezia*, 1979), v, 41 pp, Z\$2.88.

which stand or fall as a whole. They comprise, that is, a framework for a coherent world view which makes possible the activity of explanation by providing a single lens through which the social world can be viewed and mapped. While conceptual hygiene may be unappealingly fastidious the point which it emphasizes is, I think, a good one. For it is the lack of a central agreed theoretical paradigm within the social sciences which is the single weakest factor in their claim to disciplinary seriousness. It is this lack which gives rise to eclecticism. Yet eclecticism remains unattractive, for *ad hoc* strategies are unlikely to lead to the construction of a unified body of theory with at least some of the characteristics of theory in the natural sciences. This is particularly problematic when different theoretical perspectives constitute realms of discourse which differ not merely in scale and emphasis but also in kind at the level of formality, normative commitment and methodological assumptions. Concepts borrowed from theoretical frameworks which are essentially incompatible may lead to conceptual confusion.

Furthermore, there is no clear point at which such strategies can be distinguished from the ordinary common-sense explanations of mundane actors during the course of their daily experiences. Ethnomethodologists point out that such 'ethno-methods' of explication derive from explanatory 'recipes' which are culturally constructed and, therefore, part of the very social phenomenon that it is the task of sociology and anthropology to explain. If social analysts cannot work within the clear parameters of unified theory then there is little to distinguish their efforts from those of the 'naïve agents' whose activities they describe, and thus little point in the social sciences at all.

With this introduction it becomes clear that Cheater's adherence to an eclectic neo-Marxism is of interest for two reasons: firstly, in relation to mainstream Marxism and its use in analysing social data and, secondly, in relation to social theorizing in general. And the point of the whole discussion is not the trivial one of adjudicating Cheater's commitment to a particular theoretical perspective but of testing the claim that social science can proceed *as science* under the programme which she is currently advocating.

THE EMANCIPATORY AIM AND CRITICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE

According to Habermas, there are three different types of interest which direct and constitute the quest for knowledge. The empirical-positivistic sciences are informed by an interest in control (in particular, the control of nature and of other human beings). Hermeneutic disciplines are characterized by an interest in understanding, the paradigm case of which is intersubjective communication.

Critical social science (a code-name for Marxist social science), however, is characterized by an interest in emancipation. This interest is expressed in the desire to return humans to their authentic autonomous state, through self-reflection and self-understanding, by freeing us from those systematically distorted forms of action and understanding which keep us uncritical prisoners of social reality. What this presupposes, therefore, is that, prior to critique, social reality itself is ideologically experienced as an alien force which dominates and oppresses us.

[The critical social sciences] are critical by constitution; it is this which distinguishes them from the empirical-analytical sciences of the social order, as well as from the historical-hermeneutic sciences . . . The task of the critical social sciences is to discern, beneath the regularities observed by the empirical social sciences, those 'ideologically frozen' relations of dependence which can be transformed only through critique. Thus the critical approach is governed by the interest in emancipation, which Habermas also calls *self-reflection*.⁵

Critical social science must expose the ideological character of reality.⁶

A necessary preliminary step towards this exposure of reality is, of course, an examination of the instruments with which we approach such reality. Critique requires reflection on the very instruments of critique—methodological as well as theoretical. Critical theorists say that positivism, whether of the bourgeois or Marxist variety, has an interest in control and domination. It cannot, therefore, be an instrument of emancipation. The interest in emancipation and autonomy must necessarily work within a non-positivistic Marxist framework which engenders self-critique or self-reflection while at the same time allowing for a critique of social reality.

Habermas's theory of knowledge—constitutive interests has been challenged,⁷ but is, nevertheless, useful for my present purposes, which are to situate the four books under review. It is clear from her works that Cheater is motivated by an interest in emancipation, an interest which, at the least, coincides with the general framework of critical theory. This interest displays itself in its passionate respect for the subjective rationality and autonomy of ordinary agents, the strategies which they take up in order to secure or defend their interests and the essentially reasonable nature of those strategies. Together with these beliefs goes a corresponding hatred of domination and injustice, whether the source of that domination is racist, colonialist or sexist, and whether the bureaucratic organs of domination are 'private' or 'public'. It is thus at the level of phenomenologically expressed subjectivity and intersubjectivity that, for her, authentic agency emerges. But it is also clear that her temper is empiricist, by which I mean, neutrally, to indicate the belief that knowledge of the social world is ultimately dependent upon empirical observational statements. Her type of neo-Marxism, therefore, diverges both from the emancipatory interest of Western Marxism, in that it is empiricist, and from orthodox Marxism in the ways described below.

THE ADEQUACY OF MARXIST THEORY

Now, to what extent and in what manner can one subject Marxist analytical tools to critique and still be said to be operating within a Marxist framework? We make a start on these questions by considering Cheater's own brand of realism and empiricism.

For Cheater, theory and description confront each other in mutual challenge.

⁵ P. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. J. B. Thompson (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), 82.

⁶ J. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. J. J. Shapiro (London, Heinemann, 2nd edn., 1978).

⁷ R. Koat, *The Politics of Social Theory* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1981).

Theories which cannot account for specific data must cede to other perspectives which appear to have more explanatory power. Somewhat dismissive of Levi-Strauss (*Social Anthropology*, p. 20) she is, nevertheless, open-minded about many different theoretical perspectives, an eclecticism which allows her to accept the importance of exploring microprocesses (*Idioms*, p. 176) transactionalism, social dynamics at face-to-face level and even to play with the idea of ethnomethodology and phenomenology (*Social Anthropology*, p. 25). Her most important theoretical problem, however, concerns her dialogue with Marxism. In every case her choice of theory is governed by the pragmatic question: to what extent does this theory help us to better understand the data? This suggests that she believes that, at least to some extent, data — or description — is 'innocent' or theory-free. If it were not, there would be no possibility of the confrontation between theory and data ever taking place. As an empiricist, data is, for her, the basis of theorizing and is therefore epistemologically prior to theory, whether it be the data of subjective experience or that gleaned from her observations, reports, calculations and measurements, newspaper reports or archival research. Theory is measured to the extent to which it proves adequate to the data, in true empiricist and realist fashion. 'The very layout of this text reflects my concern to "domesticate" Marxist perspectives' (*Social Anthropology*, p. v). By this she means to do two things: firstly, by working from within Marxist theory, to bring these perspectives 'home', to make them familiar tools for analysis and thus help us understand our own situation with greater clarity. The second aim is clearly subversive. By 'domesticating' Marxist perspectives we tame them and put them to use. To apply critical instruments is at the same time to test their usefulness. Often, according to Cheater, we find these instruments inadequate for the critical task for which they were created.

Cheater's critique of the instruments of analysis is not reserved for Marxism alone, nor does it emerge from a functionalist standpoint defending itself against Marxism. On the contrary, she points out the essential similarities between Marxist and functionalist methods of analysis: 'far from being mutually antagonistic, then, Marxist and structural-functionalist approaches may be entirely compatible and even complementary, for functionalism especially is holistic' (*Social Anthropology*, p. 15). She notes, quite rightly, that the functionalist perspective is neither necessarily conservative (p. 11) (though it may be inadequate) nor incapable of dealing with social change. Theory is the means by which we achieve an understanding of the empirical world but, for Cheater, the success of theory depends upon the extent to which it can capture a pre-existing reality. What we must here note, however, is that functionalism, as positivistic social method, is compatible with Marxism only when the latter, too, is positivistic.

In *Social Anthropology* she criticizes Marx's 'evolutionism' (pp. 12, 48, 201). She demonstrates that the theory of pre-class societies is over-simplified in a number of ways. 'The demise of orthodox Marxism is related mainly to its limited ability to explain societal data in non-western systems' (p. 17). Firstly, in pre-class societies, the 'base' in the relations of production is often not 'economic': economic activities are organized on the 'ideological' basis of kinship and marriage (p. 13). Similarly, the 'ideological superstructure' often provides the conditions necessary for the economic base: i.e. the relationship of dependence between base and superstructure should, she suggests, be inverted (p. 214).

Secondly, Engels's (hopeful) notion that in pre-class societies relations between sexes in marriage (p. 144) and other social relations (p. 140) are characterized by equality cannot be sustained by ethnographic description of such societies. Thirdly, the characterization of pre-class societies as being based on 'communal ownership' is too crude, for it masks the fact that land in such societies was often 'owned' by individuals or families, if we accept that rights of usufruct are contained in the notion of ownership (pp. 48-9). Lastly, the notion that the state necessarily represents the interests of the ruling class has been undermined by studies of societies which have a 'state' but not a formal 'ruling class' (p. 174).

Turning her attention to applications of Marxism in contemporary class societies, Cheater notes that there are major problems in using Marxist concepts in the whole sphere of worker consciousness, class consciousness and false consciousness (pp. 95-7, 241, 259). She notes that the analysis of religion as an ideological manifestation of man's alienation from himself fails to explain how, in some circumstances, religion is not necessarily quietist in form but may become the vehicle of political protest (p. 240). She points out that not all forms of inequality derive from social classes created in the relations of production, since the major form of inequality — that of gender — is not based on class (p. 98). She suggests (p. 169) that emergent classes in Africa may be more accurately conceptualized as Weberian 'status groups' rather than Marxist 'classes'. Furthermore, in the political sphere, she notes (p. 95) that structural relationships between independent governments, labour and capital, are more complex than is usually admitted in Marxist theory.

It is clear that the very skill of its structure and immediacy of its appeal and relevance is dependent on the way in which this text is organized around the Marxist concepts of modes and relations of production and its focus on Marxist theoretical problems. Reading through the text one finds in microcosm an introduction to almost every significant Marxist theoretical problem and, of course, to a lot more besides. Thus, for example, on the concept of ideology she outlines the Marxist theoretical problem of whether ideologies belong, conceptually, to the economic base or the ideological superstructure. She examines the Hindu caste system which provides, as gender does, an 'ideological basis for allocating roles in production and society' (p. 218). After discussing the legitimation and generative mechanisms of ideologies she turns to the relationship between ideologies and social structure among the Kalabari of the Niger delta and comments:

the belief system *as a whole* went beyond simple refraction to conceptualise limited alternatives to the existing social order. These alternatives were strictly controlled. They did not seek to replace so much as to maintain this unitary system, by providing safety-valves to release dangerous pressure on it (p. 227).

There is, of course, more to religious and cosmological beliefs than this. Such beliefs attempt not only to explain the misfortunes and irregularities of social life by answering the essentially causal question 'Why?', they also (according to functionalist theory) represent ethno-theories about the cosmos. New religions are formed when traditional cosmologies can no longer relate to a changed social order. An extended discussion of the Cargo Cults follows, bringing us back to the question of why 'ideological mystification so often chooses a religious

idiom' (p. 234). This question highlights one of the difficulties of functionalist and Marxist analysis. For, if religious beliefs are merely epiphenomenal reflections of other elements of the base (or superstructure) how can we account for their content as specifically *religious* experiences and, furthermore, how can we account for the force of the belief? To pursue this line of argument is, of course, to threaten the whole fabric of the base/superstructure distinction together with the epistemological priority of the economic sphere, as Cheater points out. For, if religion is to be seen merely as false consciousness:

We need to ask ourselves whether the concept of false consciousness is useful . . . This is a major problem area for social anthropology, for most of our theoretical approaches assume that, below the surface of individual consciousness and motivation, lies a deeper analytical reality. We should take care not to assume that such reality renders our surface consciousness false by definition (p. 259).

In *The Politics of Factory Organization* two of the three objectives of her study unfold from within Marxist theory. These are: to study the 'contradictions' emerging from the relationships between labour, capital and the state in contemporary Zimbabwe; and secondly, to examine the data for the evidence of the growth of 'class consciousness' among the urban proletariat of Zimbabwe at a particular period of time and within the context of micro-political conflict: 'This issue — indeed, all of the material presented here — should, therefore, be seen against the broader background of crises of capitalism and Zimbabwe's attempted transition to socialism' (p. 142).

It is to be noted that in all of these works Cheater pointedly refuses to use the 'normal anthropological preferences for the "ethnographic present"' (p. xiv) and makes it clear that her findings do not extend in time and space beyond the period and context of her actual research. In this factory, then, as was the case throughout Zimbabwe after Independence, a Workers' Committee designed on the Gramscian model was established by the state with the intention of replacing 'non-political' trade unions. The new Workers' Committee, however, found itself in competition and conflict with a number of other organizations designed to protect labour. This, in addition to institutionalized practices of management (including racial prejudice, organizational inefficiency and financial incompetence) in the context of the changing economic circumstances which Cheater characterizes as crises of capitalism and the phenomenon of dependency, provided the context for the conflict between labour and management.

Power struggles played out within the work situation are of particular interest to Marxists, for it is in this context of conflict that the conditions for the breeding of class consciousness and class action are said to exist. If, therefore, classical Marxist theory is correct, conflict between managers (or owners of capital) and workers ought to generate class consciousness among the workers, manifested, at least, by a solidarity amongst workers.

Political conflict within the workplace can, however, also be seen in Weberian terms as a conflict, not over the means of production, but over consumption and status. From this perspective, conflict is not a prerequisite (a necessary and sufficient condition) for the breeding of class consciousness, but is characterized by individualistic strategies in jockeying for improvements to conditions of work, pay, hours, housing, and so on.

She shows that the conflict was resolved with the agreement of the workforce and the government agencies involved, by laying off 80 men out of a workforce of 540 (p. 135), rather than by a show of solidarity amongst labour. The irony of this is that the state and its agencies, despite their overt commitment to the protection of labour, ultimately supported both management and the status quo against labour, thereby contributing to the latter's fragmentation.

What does this have to say about class consciousness? Cheater suggests two things. Firstly, this study provides no evidence for the development of class consciousness at this time of crisis, contrary to findings elsewhere (and particularly in Zambia) (p. 144). Does this mean that crises of capitalism do not (necessarily) lead to class consciousness? Cheater is non-committal on this score, pointing out that these textile workers were reacting to, rather than initiating, the crisis. Her own pragmatic explanation is that workers robbed of initiative (p. 145) may be more likely to resort to individualistic strategies to protect themselves rather than present a unified face to management.

Secondly, it is clear that there was an internal conflict between socialism as a means of development and socialism as the representative of labour. This conflict expresses itself in practical terms as follows. Under socialism the state has a duty to protect labour against exploitation by capital. Yet under 'African socialism', too, the state is economically dependent upon the success of capital, for wages can be paid — in the private and the public sector — only if profit is generated, thus generating the basis for taxation. In a conflict, therefore, between capital and labour the state may decide not to bite the hand that feeds it, and to support the interests of capital rather than labour. Emasculation of an independent trade union which, though 'non-political', is not an agent of the state, can be conceived of as a pre-condition for the emasculation of the labour movement itself.⁸ This suggests two readings, one from within Marxism, one from without. Either the State deludes itself by believing that it can promote socialism, for according to Marxist theory, universal emancipation is predicated upon the destruction of the State. Or Marxist theory is wrong, for conflict between labour and management does not give rise to class solidarity.

In her *Idioms of Accumulation* Cheater comments:

In a very real sense, economic development is the vehicle of class formation. Equality in poverty is not really equality at all. As wealth is generated through production, so class differentials emerge, in part through patterns of appropriation of the product itself (p. 135).

We cannot understand this process of class formation at the national level, without knowing in detail how it operates in local societies, and how these two levels interlock. My aim here is to show how economic, social and political processes in Msengezi not only shape this local society but are equally part of shaping the collectivities and their interrelationships in Zimbabwe (p. xxi).

In this work the paradox of Cheater's attitude becomes clearer. Working within familiar Marxist terms (relations and modes of production) and, as in all her works, providing depth to these concepts with others borrowed from main-

⁸ See *South African Labour Bulletin* (1987), XII, vi-vii.

stream social anthropology (kinship networks, family relationships in the division of labour, ethnic groupings) she draws in dense and rigorous detail a lucid picture of the two main ways in which these small-scale capitalist farmers have managed to become successful accumulators. Cheater uses the metaphor 'idioms' of accumulation to indicate that one of the features of the language of self-perception is that it provides us with ways of conceptualizing strategies open to us. For the farmers of Msengezi, two alternative strategies were, theoretically, open: the 'traditional' idiom of accumulation, via the mechanism of polygyny, and the 'modern' idiom, modelled upon the White capitalist farming peer group with whom the Msengezi farmers interacted. In Marxist analysis the mode of production (and therefore of accumulation) is intimately interdependent with the relations of production. Successful accumulators could choose to accumulate through polygynous marriage, using wives and children as a source of cheap labour (where labour power is the source of value and therefore of profit). Or they could choose the (more difficult, but more prestigious) method of hiring labour, often using non-agricultural sources of income for original capitalization of the farm and relying upon 'modern' methods of planting and fertilizing to accumulate high yields. Cheater shows that the most successful farmers tended to use the 'traditional' rather than the 'modern' idiom, but points out that the success of this strategy depended to a large extent on the farmer having previously dislocated himself from those aspects of 'tradition' which would require him to redistribute any surplus. Accumulation depends in the first instance, among both types of farmers, on the strategies seized to shrug off 'extended family' obligations.

As a result of this research Cheater claims that there is a great deal more class differentiation within Black rural areas than Marxists would have us believe. The class structure of a country like Zimbabwe cannot legitimately be said to be simply superimposed on the racial structure. Nor can it be said that rural farmers could or would present a united alliance with the proletariat. Purchase Area farmers explicitly see their class interests as capitalist in nature.

From these considerations emerges the following conclusion: 'Farmers in the Purchase Lands may be Black, and they may be undercapitalized, but in my opinion they are part of the capitalist class in Zimbabwe. From the material that I have examined, I do not see how any other conclusion may be drawn' (p. 176). And, as part of the capitalist class they contribute to the generation of wealth as well as to the process of class differentiation.

In *The Production and Marketing of Fresh Produce among Blacks in Zimbabwe*, Cheater challenges Davies's Marxist analysis of the informal sector⁹ from the point of view of the data which she collected during her research on Msengezi. The main points at issue are whether the 'informal sector' is a product of 'formal sector' capitalist practices, if the two can indeed be analytically separated, and what policies a socialist government should adopt towards 'integrating' the former into a socialist economy. Cheater says that the two cannot

⁹ R. Davies, *The Informal Sector: A Solution to Unemployment?* (Gwelo, Mambo Press; London, Catholic Institute for International Relations, From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe 5, 1978).

be analytically separated, since the same individuals practise both kinds of economic activity, that the 'informal' is not a consequence of the 'formal' and, lastly, that no government, socialist or otherwise, could incorporate (i.e. control) the informal sector. 'My own view is that we need a new kind of analysis, one that can handle the analytical question of how *indigenous* . . . economic activity articulates with industrial production more satisfactorily than simply relegating it to the non-capitalist periphery . . .' (p. 30).

Core Marxist Concepts

To consider which (if any) of Marx's concepts are 'core' and which are not would be fruitless, for this matter is quite possibly one that can be determined only by fiat, according to one's intellectual tastes. Some points of relevance can, however, be raised. One is that many Marxists have had difficulties with the concepts criticized by Cheater.

It has been denied, for instance, that the base/superstructural problem (at least, when conceived as economic determinism) and the idea of historical determinism are part of Marx's thought, let alone central to them. It has also been denied that Marx's 'materialism' involves the same dichotomy (but this time inverted) as Hegel's dichotomy between materialism and idealism: it is the dichotomizing tendency itself which is the source of the error and this error has been imported by his epigones into Marx's own works.

In addition, it has been claimed that Marx, in emphasizing the importance of concrete historical investigation, would not have pre-empted investigation by postulating *a priori* what kinds of structures and relationships one would find in each particular society and epoch. As far as the problem of consciousness is concerned, Lukács — and many other Marxists writing in Europe — find great and ultimately insoluble theoretical difficulties with the whole problem of consciousness, subjectivity and objectivity in Marxism.¹⁰ Cheater is, therefore, in good (Marxist) company by being satisfied with relatively few Marxist concepts. One of these is that complex of propositions called 'the labour theory of value', which she utilizes in *Idioms of Accumulation*. This cluster of concepts, too, has been heavily criticized both within and outside the Marxist corpus. She does not focus (critically or uncritically) upon what many take to be a core concept of the Marxist critique of social reality: the concept of alienation. Nor does she directly allude to her interest in emancipation. Yet she consistently adheres, throughout these works, to the notion of production, underpinned by the idea of relations of production as analytically central to the understanding of social reality.

It is this adherence to a minimalist Marxist conceptual apparatus, together with her critical acceptance of the Marxist theoretical problem, which entitles Cheater to describe herself as a neo-Marxist. But we must agree that this is a neo-Marxism so attenuated as to be almost invisible. It also renders problematic her empiricism and pragmatism, as I shall now show.

¹⁰ J. Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985); A. Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971), esp. 22 ff; L. Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 3 vols., 1978), esp. Vol. II.

THEORY, DESCRIPTION AND THE STATUS OF THE EMPIRICALLY OBSERVABLE

Marxist realist materialism transcends what is scornfully called 'simple-minded behaviourism' in that it makes allowances for the existence of at least three types of entities which are not observable apart from this method. These are ideas, customs, and beliefs which are not necessarily reducible to physical things, although they are the material products of man's labour and material forces in the social world; the entirely theoretical constructs of false consciousness and ideology; and structures and forces.

Enormous problems now arise for the Marxist undertaking empirical research. For the Marxist materialist must, in addition to conducting empirical inquiries, investigate the gap between appearance and reality. The problem is how to study empirically and respect theoretically concrete social reality while at the same time making the distinction between appearance and reality and between true and false consciousness which Marxist theory itself demands as a crucial methodological distinction.

The ordinary empiricist, of course, has no difficulty with this. All substantial knowledge, for the empiricist, derives from experience. Advances in scientific knowledge must, therefore, be predicated upon observation, and statements which cannot in principle be related to observational statements are simply unintelligible.

Marxists, but not only Marxists, would be unhappy with this as a conclusive statement of method for it leaves no room either for theorizing about a reality behind ideologically distorted appearance or for analytically grounding the concepts of ideology and false consciousness and nor, therefore, for a more tough-minded theory of emancipation than that available to the non-Marxist humanist. The appearance/reality distinction entails that emancipation is necessary precisely because authentic autonomy exists only in potentiality and not in actuality. Human actions can be considered rational and autonomous only when the potentiality coincides with the conditions necessary for its expression. Mere empiricism cannot handle a potentiality within which reality is to be located, especially since theory locates this reality as quite external to our actual experience.

If this is so then it is very difficult to undertake empirical sociological and anthropological work as a Marxist, for one has to obey at the same time two contradictory methodological precepts. The first is that the material world marks the limits of reality. The second is that the material world is composed of appearance and is thus itself a mask of reality. Interesting consequences follow this conflict. Firstly, our ability to accept as true people's subjective understanding of themselves or of the world is undermined. Secondly, in proportion as appearance is severed from reality, so diminishes the possibility of any non-trivial discoveries being made in the social sciences. If there is no way in which an empirical observation can falsify any single Marxist proposition, when the empirical is conceived as the world of appearances, there is equally no way in which empirical observations can lead to new discoveries. If theory is free to choose its own terms of reference then Marxist observations of the world are

incorrigible to the extent that they describe a world already pre-given by Marxist theory.

The Empirical Status of Consciousness

Cheater discusses this fundamental problem in 'Contradictions in modelling "consciousness": Zimbabwean proletarians in the making?'¹¹ In this important article, she points out that the notion that (subjective) consciousness is essentially flawed can be taken to much more radical lengths than Marxists are prepared to go, while still retaining faith in the essentially rational and autonomous nature of concrete actions and beliefs. For we do not have to stop, with the Marxists, at the notion that only certain kinds of consciousness (non-revolutionary or non-class among the working class and all 'petty bourgeois' consciousness) is flawed. We can deny altogether that there is one reality and thus that there is only one (privileged) way of characterizing it.

By denying that there is a reality (usually conceived of as sets of structural relations or functional systemic needs) which lies beneath and generates appearances we gain a number of advantages and at least one loss. The first advantage is that to deny the ontological basis not only of the Marxist paradigm but of all 'grand theory' as well is to deny the epistemic as well as ontological primacy of the base, however characterized. The second is to admit that subjective experience may be partial and correspondingly flawed, but it is not for that reason either irrational or the epiphenomenal product of underlying generative mechanisms or forces. This leads to a further possibility, which Cheater embraces, which is that it is people who generate ideologies through interaction, rational processes and beliefs and that ideology itself does not merely rationally reflect but also actually produces that reality. The humanist advantage of this move is that it protects our intuitive beliefs in the rationality of everyday agents by locating the generative source of ideology in human agency rather than in disembodied structural relations. In addition, of course, it legitimates the primacy of empirical description and observation.

But, most importantly, it makes possible the notion that reality is essentially relative to some particular point of view and therefore essentially contestable. And this is an objective reality which it is the task of social science to describe and explain. Not only may the views of ordinary agents, whether politicians or peasants, be conceived as relative to their particular position, but also may the views of the researcher/observer/theorist herself.

Cheater returns to her argument in *The Politics of Factory Organization* to illustrate the problem. She points out that workers' strategies were informed by beliefs about the nature of the social reality, beliefs which were entirely rational and which were generated by the workers' perceptions of themselves and their antagonists. Their understanding of their relationship with one another, management, labour representatives and with the state were complex, cutting across official versions of the state's commitment to socialist objectives; but the state itself presented, created and generated contradictory views of what that

¹¹ A. P. Cheater, 'Contradictions in modelling "Consciousness": Zimbabwean proletarians in the making?', *Journal of Southern African Studies* (1987-8), XIV, 291-303.

commitment entailed and demanded of the workers (p. 298-9). Such situational social construction of reality (and, of course, of consciousness) has consequences on the possibilities and nature of political control (p. 299) and also of legal control.

The theoretical problem is not so much that the class model is crude, but that it could be made responsive after refinement. Cheater's critique suggests that the model is congenitally inadequate for it cannot account, by virtue of its flawed notion of subjective consciousness, for the situational way in which interests are perceived, created and developed by rational agents. This is to say that the Marxist model of consciousness largely misses the mark by postulating an underlying generative reality instead of locating reality as a construct of people's consciousness.

Cheater then proceeds truly to set the cat among the pigeons by suggesting that observer consciousness is similarly situational and thus similarly partial, although by the same token similarly rational (p. 303). It is at this point that the theoretical gains of relativism reveal their price, and that price is nothing less than the justification and validation of social science itself. For one does not have to be a positivist to realize that science must make some kind of claim to objective truth in order to count as science at all. Perspectivalism and relativism may seem to provide a solution, not the least because contemporary philosophers of science like Feyerabend and Kuhn embrace it,¹² and because the practice of physics, at least, justifies both the view that nature can only be understood relative to one's position and the view that the observer is essentially implicated in the nature and conclusion of the observation.

But the intellectual problem *vis-à-vis* Marxism remains. For we cannot consistently on the one hand say that all points of view are relative and thus probably equally true (or false) and on the other hand ride roughshod over Marxist work. Nor can we criticize Marxism for idealism while at the same time maintain an essentially idealistic and even solipsistic theory of knowledge. The corollary of this statement is equally true: no Marxist (or any other theorist) can accept the reality-appearance distinction without also being forced to accept the essential relativism, and thus partiality, of his own view (not the least when it is a question of consciousness, true or false).¹³

The proposition that all reality is socially constructed either undermines itself or is pointless. For if we want to use that proposition in order to demonstrate the falsity of a set of views — for example, that common sense and subjective needs are of no theoretical importance — we cannot do so, since the truth of that proposition is itself implicated in a relativist and thus essentially partial or subjective point of view and carries no conviction. The proposition thus acknowledges its own ideological character. If, however, we merely want to express the view that all knowledge is relative, then we deny the possibility of scientific knowledge and render our own attempt at sociological or anthropological work useless.

This stance does not, therefore, undermine only social science's claim to

¹² P. K. Feyerabend, *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2 vols., 1981); T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 2nd edn., 1970).

¹³ See Kotakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, for versions of 'revisionary' Marxism.

scientificity and also its justification for involvement in matters of social policy: it fundamentally undermines the possibility of social science as critique by failing to provide any kind of solid theoretical ground from which critique can proceed. Habermas's intuition that the interest which constitutes our knowledge-seeking activities is relative to our purposes is significant here. For Habermas does not doubt that there are, underlying the relativity of our scientific interests and activities, truths about capitalist society — truths upon which agreement is possible and which we need to know in order to emancipate ourselves from 'ideologically frozen relations'.

The Empirical Status of Marxist Reality

In my view, the fundamental problem of Marxist theory is how to characterize the status of the empirical and to ground the 'reality' underlying appearances, independently of the theory which posits this reality. If we cannot ground it independently, then such a reality is theoretically vacuous since we possess no criteria which help us to know, for example, at what points reality coincides with appearance, and at which other points it does not. It is clear that Cheater herself grapples with this problem throughout her work. It is equally clear that her intellectual preferences lead her to grant priority to empirical data. Yet she cannot use empirical observations to disprove or challenge Marxist propositions, for no amount of empirical evidence can prove Marxism wrong.

This is true for two reasons. Firstly, Marxism itself forbids it by characterizing crucial aspects of the empirical world, viz. consciousness and belief, as appearance (in so far as they are false or ideological or, in Gramsci's works, the result of hegemonic control). Secondly and in general, it is widely held by philosophers of science that theory is necessarily underdetermined by data.¹⁴ What this means is that no single proposition can be proved true or false with reference to empirical evidence. This is partly because no proposition, not even the most apparently straightforward description, is 'theory-free', just as no perception is untheoretical. Secondly, because no observational statement exhausts the phenomena, for phenomena can always be characterized in a different way by an observational statement coming from a different theoretical perspective. Lastly, because the unit to be tested by the evidence is not, and cannot be, one statement but must be 'the whole of science'. This is, if true, nothing but bad news for empiricists, but it is also, in my view, bad news for theory, which then becomes necessarily idealist and, therefore, immune to the lessons of experience and observation.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

I have several times pointed out in this essay Cheater's interests in the sphere of social policy. In *Idioms of Accumulation*, she challenges policy which ignores the complexity of class formation in the countryside, by stressing that the rural capitalist class should not be absorbed into the peasantry, administratively, for wealth generation ultimately depends upon the growth of class. In *The Politics of Factory Organization*, she condemns state intervention and the destruction of the

¹⁴ J. Dancy, *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1985), chs. 6 and 7.

trade union on the grounds that such steps weaken labour and its bargaining power. In *The Production and Marketing of Fresh Produce among Blacks in Zimbabwe*, she objects to the notion that the informal sector could, or should, be incorporated in a socialist Zimbabwe. Her introductory text is full of lively criticisms of socialist or quasi-socialist policy, starting with the critique of land reform undertaken in various African countries, particularly in Tanzania.

I have also noted that she believes that one of the tasks of anthropology is to help guide policy-makers. This can be done by helping to provide them with the knowledge of how the societies in which we live actually work, how rights and duties are organized and distributed, and what the ecological and political consequences are of attempting to alter this existing mode of organization.

Her approach demands, however, that we grant priority to descriptive analysis over Marxist theory. Reality, however characterized, has, for her, an irreducible obdurate character ('Contradictions in modelling "consciousness"', p. 303) and is thus the necessary basis and *sine qua non* for all theorizing. Her concern with obdurate reality is fundamental to her whole method and theoretical stance. Throughout her works she suggests that if we take the trouble to document the social world in scrupulous, clear-sighted and dispassionate detail, we are less likely to make ignorant blunders about its character and the types of policy we create for it. Basically, Cheater is saying that arm-chair Marxism is no substitute for trying to find out what people actually do, think and believe. And in this I agree that she is correct, although it is hard to find a good philosophical basis for defending this view, for it is difficult to see how we can separate 'reality' from our description of it (which is not quite the same as saying that reality is, therefore, necessarily relative).

The second conflict between her approach and those of Marxist policy-makers emerges from the positivism which often goes hand-in-hand with empiricism in differentiating between questions of value and questions of fact. The task of social theory, according to this view, is exhausted by the extent to which it can answer the question, 'What is there?' The answer to this question cannot lead us to determine what ought to be, much less how we can bring the latter about. There are traces of this positivism to be found in Cheater's work, particularly when she draws distinctions between the data itself and the interpretation of data. Questions of value, in this view, are radically external to social theory.

Yet Marxism insists that social analysis, at the same time as it is analysis, is also critique which has direct normative implications and which must shape our actions.¹⁵ It may be true that social analysis necessarily involves critique and thus has normative implications, but I am not convinced that the connections between critique and remedial action can be clearly drawn. The intuition of positivism, if not its justification for this intuition, is, I believe, correct. In critical respects, the hiatus between theory and action cannot be bridged, either because the empirical world is too rich or because it is too indeterminate to be captured by any one theory, however powerful. To fail to see this is to allow ourselves to be blinded by

¹⁵ But see also M. Weber, 'Science as a vocation', in H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber* (London, Routledge, 1948), 129-56.

ideological beliefs, to be deceived by those theories which we hope will and it is dangerous to deceive ourselves wilfully.

of Cheater's thesis that it is inappropriate and perhaps even ory to use socialism as a vehicle both for generating social wealth and at time for promoting equality (*The Politics of Factory Organization*, This is a compelling critique because it derives its strength from the otion that the mode of production is analytically central. A State which ent upon the capitalist mode of production for its own economic cannot overthrow either modes or relations of production: socialist ng, therefore, cannot be a function of the State in these circumstances. So e socialist state overthrow the capitalist mode of production and turn to ive production? In *Idioms of Accumulation*, Cheater sees this as a ntradiction: an equality in poverty can scarcely be a rational goal for a olicy, and class formation is necessary to accumulation. If this double- ique of Marxism as a vehicle for social transformation holds good, then pivots of the appeal of Marxism falls away, for it is central to that appeal ism can provide a way out for the Third World from its dependence on ive capitalist and imperialist West.

interest in social control and the interest in emancipation run dangerously rixism, as a social theory which is both holistic and normative, can be eather goal, but it is more likely to be used for social control, while eading as emancipation. Marxists have, therefore, to be particularly ensure that the one goal is not transmuted into the other. It is the virtue er's work that she helps us maintain that vigilance.

CONCLUSION

essay I have used as a heuristic organizational device the question of s commitment to a neo-Marxist perspective. What has emerged during rse of this discussion is a commitment which is itself a sophisticated evice for organizing anthropological material (as in *Social Anthro-* or which is used to browbeat Marxists less knowledgeable about aphic data than she herself is, as well as to confront socialist policy- with its own inner contradictions. Hence Cheater's wry confession, which a number of different levels, to her own 'heresy' (ibid., p. vii). But there elements in her work which lead her further and further away from the paradigm, at least in its most doctrinaire form. Cheater's intellectual nces, presented in 'Contradictions in modelling "consciousness"', are guiding her towards the small-scale interactionist perspective which casts oublet on the ability of grand theory to provide explanations at any serious ophistication, while respecting the autonomy of living rational agents e complexity of empirical data. Interactionism or, more properly, ectionalism is, of course, compatible with the Marxist problematic and so, as shown above, is the radically relativistic stance which she embraces in her rticle.

it is also clear that this relativistic stance brings its own problems which to xtent duplicate rather than solve the problems which Marxism poses for ts. Thus what also emerges from Cheater's work, at a level of general

seriousness, are the following questions. How much more mileage can be wrung out of the Marxist paradigm, especially if social theorists wish to make themselves available to fresh insights about the social world? Is the foray into relativism a necessary move and does it solve the problem which Marxism presents? If not, how are social scientists to resolve their general anxiety over the inadequacies of social theory and the relationship between theory and empirical description? My own view, still in embryonic form, is that social science must emerge from a relativistic and idealistic stance which robs it of all claims to truth and, therefore, of the possibility of argument, discussion and comparison. How this is to be done is the main problem. But social scientists should take courage from the fact that relativism, as a philosophical position, is only one of several attempts to characterize the conceptual nature of our enterprises, not necessarily a true description of them. Cheater's works highlight all these problems. If, in the end, she places priority on empirical description, we can only be grateful for the vigour and quality of the new ethnographic material about our much under-described society which is represented in this collection.

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