

Marxism and the doctrine of internal relations

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Abstract

Marx's dialectical method is based upon a Hegelian philosophy of 'internal relations'. This was the subject of an extensive dispute between F. H. Bradley and other neo-Hegelians and some of the main founders of analytical philosophy, including G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell. Similar arguments have recently been used in defence of analytical Marxism by G. A. Cohen. In this paper, I defend the dialectical approach and show how it implies a profound critique of the analytical approach. A bibliography of the earlier dispute is included.

Keywords

Marxism, dialectic, analytical philosophy, G. A. Cohen, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore

Introduction

A fundamental aspect of dialectic – the philosophy of Marxism – is the view that the world is a unity and that things within it are what they are because of their place in the whole. This is captured in the 'doctrine of internal relations',¹ the theory that all the relations of a thing, event or 'term' are internal or necessary to it, in the sense that if its relations are altered, the thing, event or term will itself be altered.

This is a controversial theory. It was introduced by F. H. Bradley, the British neo-Hegelian, to express his monistic philosophy. The rejection of this philosophy by G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell in the early years of the twentieth century played an important role in the foundation of analytic philosophy.² Moore and Russell argued that the world consists of a number of different, self-subsistent things. These are related only

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externally, in the sense that if some particular thing changes, others will be unaltered. Bradley calls this the philosophy of 'pluralism'.

This history has been repeated within Marxism in recent times. The Hegelian, dialectical aspects of Marxism have been rejected by analytical Marxists. One of the best thought out versions of analytical Marxism is that of G. A. Cohen in his *Karl Marx's Theory of History*. Cohen applies it specifically to the categories of historical materialism. He explicitly bases his account of Marxism on the doctrine of external relations (though he does not refer to it in this way). He interprets historical materialism within a framework which involves the rigorous separation of terms and relations, and the insistence that things are self-subsistent and retain their identities regardless of their relations.

According to Cohen, society is composed of people and productive forces. These are the things, the material elements that make it up – its constituent 'terms'; and these are connected together by social relations. 'People and productive forces comprise [society's] *material content*, a content endowed by production relations with *social form*' (Cohen 1978: 89, emphasis added). These relations are external to the terms related: 'the terms bound by relations do not belong to the structure those relations constitute' (Cohen 1978: 35). Thus, according to Cohen, the means of production in bourgeois society – capital and labour, machinery and people – are not affected by the social relations in which they are located.

By contrast, Marxism is based on a dialectical approach which involves the philosophy of internal relations. The productive forces and the relations of production are essentially (i.e. internally) related. A mere person, a mere machine, is not *as such* a productive force. These things are productive forces only in the context of particular social relations in which they are deployed socially *as* productive forces.

Marx says, 'A negro is a negro. He only becomes a slave in certain relations. A cotton-spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. It becomes capital only in certain relations. Torn from these relationships it is no more capital than gold itself is money' (Marx, 'Wage labour and capital', cited in Cohen 1978: 88).

Commenting on this passage, Cohen writes:

Being capital and being a slave are ... relational properties of means of production and of men. More specifically they are social relational properties, whereas being means of production and being a man are not. The latter are possessed independently of the social form. Remove the social form in thought experiment and those properties persist. (Cohen 1978: 90)

The term 'relational properties' was introduced by G. E. Moore (1922). Relational properties are external properties. According to Cohen, being capital or being a slave are properties that particular things have only in virtue of their relations. These properties are contrasted with internal or intrinsic properties, properties that a term has whatever its relations. Thus this concept presupposes that some relations are external. For example, according to this view, a spinning jenny is intrinsically and essentially a means of production, a machine for spinning cotton. Only accidentally, when it is in certain social relations, is it capital. Similarly, only in certain relations is a person a slave.

Marxism, as a dialectical philosophy, must question these views. It holds that machines and people are productive forces only in the context of the appropriate relations of

production. In the absence of these they are mere objects. In Marx's day, a spinning jenny was a machine for spinning cotton; but it is no longer used in the cotton industry, its place now is in a museum. It is no longer a means of production. Likewise, a human being is a productive force only when participating in the appropriate relations of production. Wage labourers and slaves are productive forces; the idle rich and the unemployed are not.

In this way, historical materialism presupposes the philosophy of internal relations, and it must be interpreted in terms of this philosophy if to be properly understood. Cohen's attempt to impose a rigid separation of forces and relations of production falsifies historical materialism. And this in turn leads to his seeing relations between the forces and relations of production as external and mechanical.³

However, the doctrine of internal relations is not concerned only with historical materialism: it is a much wider philosophy. It is a metaphysical theory about the nature of the world in general. It is, its philosophical defenders assert, a universal philosophy, applying to *all* relations between all things and events. What position does Marxism take on this metaphysical doctrine?

Some will no doubt argue that Marxism is a social, economic, and political theory and has nothing to do with such metaphysical ideas. For practical purposes, these wider philosophical questions are of no concern to it. Marxism can go about its business without interesting itself in such abstract, metaphysical issues, and Marx himself does not do so (as far as I am aware).

However, these wider metaphysical questions inevitably arise in the discussion of Marxism, and they need to be answered. They are raised by Cohen's interpretation of historical materialism, as we have just seen. In his account of historical materialism, Cohen explicitly invokes the general, metaphysical doctrine of external relations and the associated concept of relational properties. In doing so, Cohen is presupposing the opposite metaphysical theory: the theory of pluralism. In order to respond fully to Cohen, therefore, it is necessary to address these metaphysical issues and to show that Marxism ultimately requires metaphysical foundations of the sort provided by the philosophy of internal relations.

This cannot be done by responding to Cohen's arguments, for he gives none, whether in defence of his general metaphysical position or of the concept of 'relational properties' he invokes – he simply asserts these. Nor does he criticise the Hegelian dialectical account of historical materialism: he simply rejects it. However, as regards the philosophy of internal relations, he is repeating the views of Moore and Russell. They both repudiate this philosophy on the grounds that it flies in the face of 'common sense' and what seems immediately 'obvious'.

According to Moore (1922: 289), 'it seems quite obvious that in the case of many relational properties which things have, the fact that they have them is *a mere matter of fact*: that the things in question *might* have existed without them' (emphasis in original). As an example, Moore (1922: 290) offers the following: 'though Edward VII was in fact father of George V, he might have existed without being father of George V'.

It may be true that there is no immediately apparent necessity here. But that is not the point. The philosophy of internal relations is not about what is immediately apparent. What it says is that the more we go beyond what seems immediately evident, the more

we learn about a thing or event, the more we come to see its necessity. A complete understanding of things would reveal their full necessity, the internal nature of their connections with all other things. This is what the philosophy of internal relations maintains. As William James (1897: 216) puts it:

It is a common platitude that a complete acquaintance with any one thing, however small, would require a knowledge of the entire universe. Not a sparrow falls to the ground but some of the remote conditions of his fall are to be found in the Milky Way.⁴

Moore repeatedly brands the philosophy of internal relations a 'dogma'. This is a grotesque misrepresentation. If anything is a dogma here, it is the mere appeal to 'common sense' and to what seems 'obvious' that we find in both Moore and Russell. By contrast, the philosophy of internal relations is defended at length, and with a great variety of arguments by its main supporters at the time: Bradley (1969: 512-24), Joachim (1906: ch. II), and subsequently by Blanshard (1939: vol. 2, ch. 32; 1967). Moreover, it is a central aspect of the monistic philosophies of Spinoza (1996) and Hegel (1969).

I do not have space here to go into these arguments at any length. However, one of the main ones is suggested by William James in the passage just quoted. He is too glib when he calls the position he describes, 'a common platitude': it needs to be explained and argued for. One argument for it is set out at length by Blanshard (1939: vol. 2, ch. 32). In seeking to understand and explain the world, we are looking for ways in which some particular fact or event that we have identified is necessarily related to others. In doing this, we must presuppose that these facts or events are necessarily related, though for the present, we do not understand how. When we seek further knowledge, we extend this presupposition – and we assume that it can be extended indefinitely. The assumption we are making is that the world is a rationally ordered whole, that all things and events are necessarily connected – internally related – within the unity of a single whole. This is the presupposition that we bring to all our attempts to understand the world. We have no guarantee that it will be vindicated; but this is, and arguably must be, the presupposition we work with;⁵ and therefore it is rational to see the world in this way, as a whole in which things are necessarily and internally related (Sayers 1985: ch. 11).

Like Moore, Russell also appeals to 'common sense' and immediate appearances to reject the doctrine of internal relations. 'It is common sense ... that there are people – say in China – with whom our relations are so indirect and trivial that we cannot infer anything important as to them from any facts about ourselves' (Russell 1926: 19).

Perhaps Russell is right about how the world seems to our current, partial and limited, understanding – or, at any rate, how it seemed to him at the time he wrote this. But the philosophy of internal relations is not about that. It concerns the way things would appear if we had a 'complete' knowledge of them (as James puts it).

In any case, what is 'common sense' to Russell and Moore is the very opposite of what James suggests is a 'common platitude'. That simply shows how unreliable is the appeal to 'common sense' and suchlike notions. The way things appear to 'common sense' is a historical and changeable matter. When, Spinoza was writing in the 17th century, and even when Russell was writing 100 years ago, relations between people in China and in

Europe were, as Russell says, almost entirely 'indirect and trivial' (though not non-existent). Since then, the development of capitalism and the creation of the world market have brought China and the rest of the world into increasingly direct and close economic and social connection.

This has given concrete historical reality to what was previously a relatively abstract and purely metaphysical truth. That is not to say that it has created a relation where none existed before; but it has given what was previously an abstract connection a more concrete and developed social and economic form.

I am reminded of a remark that Marx makes about the way in which the concept of labour in the theory of economic value developed by Adam Smith in the 18th century reflects concrete historical changes. The idea of labour as such, the universal and general concept of labour, as Marx says, is 'immeasurably old'. 'Nevertheless, when it is economically conceived in this simplicity, "labour" is as modern a category as are the relations which create this simple abstraction' (Marx 1973: 103). Marx adds:

This example of labour shows strikingly how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity – precisely because of their abstractness – for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within these relations. (Marx 1973: 105)

Something similar is true of the notion of internal relations and idea of unity or totality that goes with it. This idea, too, is very ancient (its emergence in Western philosophy may perhaps be associated with the development of monotheism, as Collingwood (1939: ch. XX) suggests). However, the increasing global integration of modern conditions of life is now a palpable fact. No one today would imagine, as Russell did 100 years ago, that there is no discernible connection between people in China and Britain, when so much of what we buy and use has 'Made in China' stamped upon it, and when our lives are so bound up with theirs through the mechanisms of the world market. And this gives the concept of the internal relation of people, their global interconnection, a new and more concrete meaning.

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Endnotes

1. For an account of Marxism in these terms, see Ollman (1971), Chap. 3.
2. There was an extensive debate about internal relations between neo-Hegelian philosophers and their opponents in the early years of the 20th century. A partial bibliography is appended to this paper.
3. For further discussion, see Sayers (1984), where these claims are explained and defended at length.
4. James goes on to criticise this philosophy and argue for external relations.
5. It is what Kant (1929) calls a 'regulative principle'.

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