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Worldview and Marxism (original edition in 1931, translated from German by Alan Scott)

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Abstract

This essay by Otto Neurath, titled "Worldview and Marxism," was originally published in 1931, and has been translated for the first time from German by Alan Scott.

Der Kampf, Vienna, 1931[1]

Is Marxism itself a worldview (does it rest on a specific philosophy?) or is it compatible with the teachings of various philosophical systems?

This question quietly assumes that besides scientific claims other meaningful utterances — of a "philosophical" nature or as a "worldview" — exist with which scientific claims can be meaningfully linked. This assumption is *false*. Besides science there are no meaningful propositions in philosophical systems. *Marxism as a science is neither reliant on a specific philosophical foundation nor can we sensibly ask whether it is in agreement with various worldviews*.

It is particularly the "Vienna Circle" around Schlick and Carnap that we have to thank for demonstrating that, besides the propositions of science, only pseudo propositions can be formulated. Without going into the details of the proof here, its basic idea will be briefly set out.

By science we understand here a system of formulations that enable us to make *predictions* concerning specific events. Only those predictions are admissible where one can specify *how*

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1. [*Trans. note*] "Weltanschauung und Marxismus." First published in *Der Kampf*, *24*(10), Vienna, 1931, pp. 447–451. Reprinted in Haller & Rutte (1981, pp. 407–412).

they can be demonstrated or falsified. For example, if we predict good weather we must be able to specify which control evidence the weather stations must receive in order for the prediction to count as confirmed.

To arrive at a prediction, available observable evidence is collected — evidence concerning rain and temperature, air pressure, and humidity — until we arrive at *laws* (process of induction) that make it possible, via the appropriate combination of correlations, to make predictions that can, on the basis of control evidence (at location A it rained; at location B the sun shone), be tested. Science strives to create a system of evidence and laws that are compatible with each other. If a new claim is made we have to see how it can be incorporated, whether as a reality claim or as a hallucinatory claim, or as a falsehood. *A claim that is incompatible with the whole system is excluded as a falsehood* unless one decides to change the entire system in order to make room for the relevant claim.

One cannot always make predictions about individual events, sometimes only about *groups of events*. One can with sufficient exactitude make predictions about the death rate for an entire population over the next years, but not about whether a particular individual will die within that period. (Statistical prediction).

Scientific language is so organized that observational claims can be replaced by claims about a unified *order*. All scientific claims specify when and where something will occur, whereby the claims of a blind person who is deaf and a deaf person who is blind will be expressed identically. In place of the words "periodic occurrence of light and dark" or the words, which express the same event, "periodic occurrence of sound and silence" (when, for example, a blind person can, with the assistance of a telephone and selenium cells, perceive light events) emerges a common formulation that expresses the periodic fluctuation with its other properties in the same way that one speaks of a "cube" irrespective whether once sees or touches it. This common language, which is equally valid for all senses and all people, is the *unified language of science*. It is "intersubjective" and "intersensory." Physics has developed this language in its most perfect form. It is the task of *physicalism* to extend this language to other disciplines. It founds the *unified science* with its treasure of laws, which are all so formulated that any one of them can be combined with any other. If, for example, one wants to predict how a tribe will behave in a thunderstorm, one must know the laws of sociology just as one must know the laws of thunderstorms. There are, of course, laws of an individual science that one can select from those of unified science, but one cannot assign each prediction to a particular science.

The effort is made to develop the physicalist unified language of the unified science in such a way that pseudo propositions are excluded from the start. A mechanical calculator does not allow red to be multiplied by 5 or virtue to be squared. But our language allows us to speak of a "neighbour without a neighbour," a "son who never had a mother or father." It is of course easy to see that these are senseless concepts. But many people are attached to concepts like "categorical imperative," and resist acknowledging that that is a senseless word combination. A claim about a demon that one can encounter at midnight in the form of a vaporous vertebrate and who issues commands can be tested observationally, which should produce a negative result. In contrast, one cannot test via observation the claim that an invisible celestial God issues commands. This claim is no more testable if one leaves God out and now speaks only of the command. A command is a spatiotemporal change that consists of movements of air or of drawn inscriptions that act on people as a stimulus. A well-developed scientific language possesses a *syntax* that makes pseudo proposition — such as "*Nichts, das nichtet*"" (Heidegger)[2]

2. [*Trans. note*] "*Das Nichts selbst nichtet*" (Heidegger, 1969, p. 36). "The nothing itself noths" or "The nothing

— impossible from the start.

This *exclusion of pseudo propositions* is very important. But propositions that then remain, which can in principle be tested through observation, can still be *false*. All the propositions of primitive magic, for example, are worldly and clearly testable through observation, but still very few of them are to be found in our scientific systems. The same is true of astrology and other claims. We require quite different means to demonstrate that a claim that is in principle observably testable is invalid.

That people are attached to pseudo and false propositions that a scientifically trained person quickly rebuts usually has to do with the fact that these are very old habits. Often effects of the kind that poetry creates must also be stirred. In this way, philosophy is allied with music and poetry. A rousing sequence of notes is not a true statement. Much time is spent on pseudo propositions and those that lack an adequate scientific basis; on fruitless concept formations that lead to no generalizations. And it is a liberation for many young people when they discover that *a philosophical foundation is no longer required* in order to pursue science, but simply an education in the formulation of scientific predictions and laws.

The efforts to develop a unified science with the help of the physicalist unified language of course contradicts the view that there are two distinct types of science deploying fundamentally different methods: the natural sciences and the *Geisteswissenschaften*.[3] The representatives of this dualism, which can be traced back to the theological division of the world into earthly and heavenly, seek to distinguish between two kinds of "being" [*Sein*], and thus between two essentially different forms of science. We should also note here that debates about the "being" and about the "essence" of things are only possible with the help of pseudo propositions because predictions can be made exclusively with the help of statements concerning correlations. Our scientific task is complete when we have discovered all the correlations that are required in order for us to make reliable predictions within a spatiotemporal order.

Analyses from the unified science show that everything concerning "spiritual" [*seelisch*] and "intellectual" [*geistig*] human beings must also be formulated in physicalist terms if one wishes to make testable predictions. If you say that, due to particular circumstances, you can deduce that Hans will be angry tomorrow, one can demand a report the next day on his behaviour; on his expression; his bearing; his pulse rate; his words. His report that he feels angry is just as indeterminate as someone saying that there is thunder without being able to give further information. One can perhaps get Hans to talk about sensations in his muscles; about vaguely specified feelings of pressure, etc. — that is to say, about changes in his body. Hans' "experiential statements" are just as much preparatory formulations as statements about bright colours or deep sounds. In the end, everything finds its way into a system of physicalist formulations, which do not have to be more complex in themselves than our other common formulations. Such a physicalist language exactly corresponds to that which children attempt before they are too strongly influenced by adults.

Thus physicalist language also describes human *behaviour* in the broadest terms. Following

itself nothings." There is no such verb as "*zu nichten*" in German, just as "to noth" or "to nothing" are not verbs in English. A year after the publication of this article by Neurath, Carnap took this statement to be indicative of the meaninglessness of metaphysical propositions (1932, p. 229).

3. [*Trans. note*] I have left "*Geistenwissenschaft(en)*" in German because (i) the term is well-known; (ii) in the narrow sense the "*Geisteswissenschaften*" are the arts and humanities, but beyond that the term also implies a methodological/philosophical orientation — i.e. that which Neurath rejects as metaphysical; one associated with phenomenology, hermeneutics, and interpretive sociology that denies the unity of science hypothesis at the heart of logical empiricism and sharply distinguishes between explanation and understanding.

the quite distinct teachings of the "behaviourists" (behaviour = *Verhalten*), one might broadly characterize this representation of human behaviour as *behaviourism*. Here it does not matter whether the contingent formulations of Watson (USA) or Pavlov (USSR), who belong to this framework, exhaust the richness of behaviourist problems in a broad sense, or whether they make certain incorrect individual claims. Many teachings of traditional psychology can be translated into the language of behaviourism, some of these will of course then be exposed as pseudo propositions. In any case, for the unified science there is only "*psychology in the physicalist language*."

If the behaviour of individuals is described in individual behaviourism, then the *social behaviourism* of empirical sociology describes the behaviour of groups that are bound to each other by stimuli. Human groups are examined in exactly the same way as ant communities. Metaphysicians like Sombart clearly want to place the study of human communities in a quite different scientific category from that of ant communities because, in the case of human groups, there is "understanding" [*Verstehen*]. It can be shown that everything that is meant by this can be traced back to a spatiotemporal order such that the *monism* of physicalism remains intact.

If you wish to retain the term "*Geisteswissenschaften*" and simply translate it into "social sciences" you end up in a dilemma: how to deal in the *Geisteswissenschaften* with the study of slavery, livestock breeding, arable farming, and conduct of war among the ants?

For empirical sociology the study of the state, for example, is the study of soldiers, judges, citizens, farmers, etc. with their telephones, streets, houses, prisons, law books, etc. Political economy [*Nationalökonomie*] is the study of the relationship between the social order and the distribution of life circumstances [*Lebenslagenverteilung*].

In this sense, *Marxism* is *empirical sociology*. Whoever as a Marxist seeks correlations between individual social processes requires no philosophical foundation. One makes predictions about the onset of crises, revolutions, wars; about the relative life circumstances [*Lebenslagenverhältnisse*] among individual classes! A Marxist approach shows itself in the correlations that are assumed. One highlights certain processes as "superstructure" [*Überbau*] and establishes how their emergence is related to certain processes in the "base" [*Unterbau*] production order. The Marxist will pay particular attention to the fact that all scientific formulations, including his own, are to be viewed as a superstructure dependent upon the base. That is to say, he will expect that particular theories will only appear once social transformations are underway. He will thus hope that the reorganization of the social order will alter theoretical claims. On the other hand, theory as a physicalist structure is not only a symptom of particular changes in the life order, but is itself a factor in the latter's transformation. In this way, one changes the order through the dissemination of particular teachings and thus creates a new basis for theory building. Thus, in Marxism, theory and praxis — both spatiotemporal structures — are intimately connected. With this the bourgeois teaching of the "neutral" scholar who studies the course of events "from the outside" vanishes.

It is remarkable that Marx & Engels — here too, way before their time — used the, often metaphysically coloured, language of their milieu to advance towards modern formulations that are in many respects close to behaviourism (*German Ideology*):

> Empty phrases about consciousness cease (...). *With the representation of reality autonomous philosophy loses its means of existence* [Neurath's emphasis] (p. 27). (...) "Spirit" is from the start cursed by being "bound" to matter that here appears in the guise of vibrating layers of air, sounds; in brief, language. (...) *Language is practical real consciousness — which exists for others, and thus also for myself* [Neurath's

emphasis] [p. 30]. (1978, pp. 27–30)[4]

Whoever respects the tradition of empiricism and reminds themselves that it is the materialists who prepare the teaching sketched here, will call it *materialism*. Whoever shies away from this because the Church condemned materialism, the bourgeoisie despises it; or whoever shies away because the old materialists, cleaving, not without occasional metaphysical digressions, to a mechanistic position, adopted a standpoint that created obstacles to the dynamic historical view of Marxism will prefer the more neutral term "*physicalism*."

Marxism as science makes meaningful predictions and eschews all pseudo propositions. It has nothing either positively or negatively to do with the pseudo propositions of philosophers, however they are formulated. In order to retain historical connections, the concern with philosophical teaching may be very useful, but if out of this consideration one turns to the study of worldviews then scrutiny of theology is more important because it has exercised and continues to exercise the greater influence, and because *the whole of idealist philosophy is diluted theology*.

This *complete separation between Marxism and worldview* says absolutely nothing yet about how a Marxist who is active in the workers' movement should conduct himself towards representatives within the movement of pseudo propositions that stem from a worldview, or towards representatives of worldviews outside the movement. The workers' movement brings together people with a common class outlook. Its aim is to take seriously particular class-struggle related behaviour and it is in principle quite tolerant towards individual preferences between worldviews. It is precisely a bourgeois tactic to emphasize the diverse worldviews within the workers' movement in order to splinter the class front. Matters are clearly different where a religious community is simultaneously a political anti-proletarian community. But here too free thinkers schooled in Marxism do not adhere to the un-Marxist view that much can be achieved through enlightenment. Rather they are content to gather those without religious faith and only to prevent children being once more, from youth on, exposed to a religious education that is very commonly exploited for anti-proletarian purposes. Idealist philosophers also often serve, if unwittingly, as tools of anti-proletarian powers and may need to be combatted in the interest of proletarian advancement. Within workers' education the tolerance of idealist philosophy can sometimes bring young people even closer to bourgeois ideology than would have anyway been the case given the conditions of the time. But these are separate problems whose answer is determined by the circumstances of class struggle, not however through *the theoretical insight that Marxism as science has nothing to do with a worldview, neither positively nor negatively*.

Translated by Alan Scott

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4. [*Trans. note*] Neurath runs these two separate quotations together.

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