

VALUE-FREEDOM AND SOCIALIST THEORY*

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In the previous chapter (Chapter 1) I defined the doctrine of value-freedom in terms of two main elements. First, the criteria of validity for scientific theories are logically independent of the acceptance or rejection of normative commitments of a moral or political kind. Second, it is not possible to establish such normative positions solely by reference to scientific knowledge. My main aim in this chapter is to elaborate these claims, defend them against various objections, and show that certain consequences often thought to follow from them in fact do not. In doing so, I will also be trying to demonstrate the possibility of social theory that is constructed from a critical, socialist standpoint, but which is nonetheless ‘value-free’. Hopefully, the apparent implausibility of such a position will be removed in what follows.

The first two sections deal with the two elements in the doctrine of value-freedom noted above. In section 3, I discuss the concept of ‘significance’ in social theory, and show how this can be used to identify the distinctive character of a socialist social theory. In the final section, I defend my account of the relations between science and values from the objection that it entails unacceptable forms of political practice.

1. The logical independence of scientific criteria of validity from normative judgments

It is an obvious feature of the vocabulary used to describe social phenomena that much of it has definite normative implications. This is true both of ordinary language, and of many of the central theoretical terms in the social sciences, such as ‘alienation’ and ‘anomie’ in the writings of Marx and Durkheim, respectively. It seems that we typically characterize features of social reality - from individual actions to the general structures of social relationships - in ways that at least implicitly

* [Added 2013] Published as Chapter 2 of *The Politics of Social Theory: Habermas, Freud and the Critique of Positivism*, Basil Blackwell/University of Chicago Press 1981, pp. 38-65; citations should be to this. No changes have been made to the original text, apart from typographical corrections and the addition of bibliographical information. References in the text to other chapters in the book have been retained: chapter 3 (‘Knowledge, Objects and Interests’), chapter 4 (‘Psychoanalysis and Human Emancipation’), chapter 5 (‘Theory and Practice in Psychotherapy’), and the Introduction, are also available at www.russellkeat.net; so, too, is an earlier version of chapter 1 (‘The Critique of Positivism’). The argument presented here builds on the discussion in R. Keat and J. Urry, *Social Theory as Science*, Routledge 1975/1982, chapter 9, ‘Values, Theory and Reality’, also available at www.russellkeat.net

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indicate our political or ethical attitudes.

Many advocates of 'value-freedom' have believed that these normative elements must be expunged from the concepts of social science, in order that its criteria of validity may be properly scientific. But this, I think, is a mistake. It is possible to maintain that these criteria are independent of normative commitments, without insisting upon the use of a value-free vocabulary; and there is no reason, therefore, why the political or ethical standpoints of social scientists should not be expressed through the concepts they employ, as well as through more explicit normative judgments contained in their work. What matters instead is that, whether or not the concepts used in making descriptive or explanatory claims express such attitudes, it is possible to assess these claims by reference to scientific criteria of validity that are logically independent of any specific moral or political commitments.

Some examples may help to illustrate the view I am proposing here. Consider the claim that a change in the political system of a particular society resulted from the injustice of its economic structure. Now the concept of social justice is clearly a disputed one, in that there are a number of different and mutually incompatible accounts of what justice consists in. Each of these typically involves advocacy of certain principles that should govern the distribution of social goods such as property, income, rights, power and so on. Amongst such principles are equality; level of contribution; needs; or the operation of legal transactions in a market economy.¹ I shall not try to indicate the kinds of arguments that can be used in supporting these principles, but I believe it can be shown that they do not turn exclusively on scientifically establishable claims, whilst not lacking a genuine degree of rationality.

If the concept of justice is to be used in the kind of explanatory claim mentioned above, two requirements must be satisfied. First, which of these competing principles is meant must be specified. Second, it must be possible to determine whether a particular distribution of social goods actually conforms to this principle independently of one's acceptance of this as providing the normatively preferable conception of justice. If these requirements are met (and I see no reason why they cannot be), the explanatory claim involving this concept of justice can be assessed in a value-free manner.

A similar analysis could be provided for many other central political concepts and their place in social theories, such as domination, freedom and exploitation. The last of these, for instance, has a well-defined meaning within Marx's political economy, in terms of the labour theory of value, and appears in a number of theorems concerning the relations between the rate of exploitation and the ratio of constant to variable capital, and so on. At the same time, its employment by Marx has definite normative implications. But acceptance of these is logically irrelevant to the truth or falsity of the

explanations of social phenomena that make use of it.

My position here is very similar to Ernest Nagel's, in his defence of the possibility of value-free social science.² Nagel introduces a distinction between 'characterizing' and 'appraising' value-judgments. He illustrates this initially by reference to the use of the concept of anaemia in physiology. Nagel argues that considered as a characterizing judgment, whether an organism is anaemic depends upon determining the number of red blood cells that are present; and various different standards may be chosen, involving different definitions of anaemia. However, for any specific definition the degree of anaemia present in the organism is scientifically determinable. At the same time, though, the judgment that an organism is anaemic may also be an appraising one, indicating that this is to be seen as an undesirable or pathological condition, on the grounds that an anaemic organism will be unable to perform certain functions that are themselves necessary or desirable in relation to the norms of survival, reproductive fitness and so on. But acceptance of this appraising judgment is not presupposed by the truth of the characterizing judgment that the organism is anaemic. Nagel then goes on to argue that the same analysis can be given for many concepts employed in the social sciences: for instance, the judgments that certain attitudes or actions are mercenary, deceitful, cruel and such like.

However, although Nagel's distinction between characterizing and appraising judgments is a useful one, it is important to recognize that in practice, the use of concepts such as justice, exploitation, freedom, will typically be understood to imply that both kinds of judgment are being made. Thus even if the explanatory claim that, say, a certain historical phenomenon was due to the injustice of an economic system is correct, those who reject the normative appraisal implicit in this will quite reasonably tend to indicate this disagreement in the way they express their acceptance of the explanation. They will wish, in effect, to make some normative disclaimer. This can be done in a variety of ways, such as the use of scare-quotes, or of some different term altogether which lacks the normative implications from which they want to dissociate themselves.

So, for instance, defenders of market capitalism may employ the term 'exploitation' only in scare-quotes whilst commenting upon the adequacy as an explanatory theory of Marx's political economy. But this does not mean that its adequacy depends upon whether the normative implications of this concept are accepted by those who assess the theory. Equally, there is no reason why those who accept these implications should, in order to display their commitment to a value-free social theory, avoid using the concept of exploitation without such disclaimers. For the requirement that social theories can be assessed by value-independent criteria of validity does not entail the absence of normative concepts in the presentation of such theories.

In this respect, then, my view of the place of values in social theory departs from Weber's. For he seems to have believed that the requirement of 'objectivity' could be met only by purging the social sciences of all normatively loaded concepts. He also argued that it was wrong for social scientists to 'add' to their work any explicit value-judgments, even when these were made quite separately from its strictly scientific elements. But he was at pains to point out that this prohibition was itself a value-judgment, which could not be supported solely by epistemological or methodological arguments. There are, I think, good reasons for rejecting this judgment; but in doing so, as Weber recognized, one is not rejecting his epistemological claims.³ Weber also believed that political and ethical values could not be rationally justified. But it must be emphasized that this view is in no way entailed by the conception of value-freedom I am supporting here.⁴ Nor should the question of their rationality be thought to depend on whether they can be established on the basis of scientific knowledge: to believe this would involve acceptance of scientism, as I argued in the previous chapter.

Having now elaborated this view of the logical independence of scientific criteria of validity from normative commitments, I will consider an objection to it, which raises some highly problematic issues. It might be argued that the view must be mistaken, since it implies something that is impossible: namely the existence of a descriptive vocabulary that is 'value-neutral', free from any normative elements whatsoever. For if it is possible to assess the claims of a social theory by value-independent criteria, despite the fact that they employ concepts that are not value-neutral, it must also be possible to re-state these claims with concepts that have had these normative elements removed. Yet, the objection continues, such a value-neutral reconstruction of the claims of a social theory cannot be achieved.

Whilst this argument has considerable force, I think it can be met in a way that, without providing a completely adequate reply, goes far enough to disarm it. I suggest that, for any concept that appears to express or presuppose a particular normative attitude, it is always possible to replace it by one that does not do this. In other words, in any situation where the statements of a social theory seem objectionable on normative grounds, from a particular moral or political standpoint, it is possible to reconstruct them in a way that removes the normatively problematic element, and thus enables their truth or falsity to be assessed by non-normatively dependent criteria of validity.⁵

By calling this a 'suggestion', I mean that I cannot offer any proof that this is so. Rather, I am claiming that wherever I have tried to do this, I have produced a reconstruction that seems to me satisfactory. It may of course be that I am too easily satisfied; or that I have not considered the kinds of cases that would be impossible to deal with in this way. But consider the following example. Suppose that someone claims that there is a relationship between the degree of 'industrial unrest' and the 'alienating' character of the work involved in a certain kind of society. Some people might object

to the phrase 'industrial unrest' on the grounds that it indicates a standpoint which values order and discipline, and is thus implicitly critical of the activities to which it refers. To meet this I would propose replacing 'degree of industrial unrest' by something like 'the number of strikes and level of absenteeism'; and if the latter part of this new description were found objectionable, for rather similar reasons, it might be replaced by 'the number of days un-worked but not due to illness or injury' - and so on. Others might object to the term 'alienating' because it expresses a negative judgment based on an unacceptable ideal of human labour. In which case, I would propose an alternative such as 'the lack of control exercised by workers over economic production', and so on.

By these kinds of reconstruction of the initial statement, I suggest, it is possible to make its scientific assessment independent of potentially challengeable normative claims. And if this is so, the force of this objection is considerably weakened. So I turn now to the second main element in my account of value-freedom: that political and moral judgments cannot be justified solely on the basis of scientifically establishable claims.

2. Can normative judgments be derived from social theories?

I shall discuss this issue mainly by examining some objections that have been made to the claim that normative judgments cannot be derived from social theories. But first it must be noted that it does not follow from this claim that the truth or falsity of scientific statements is (always) *irrelevant* to accepting or rejecting such judgments. Scientific statements can be, and often are, logically relevant to, without actually entailing, normative judgments.

This relevance can take at least three forms. First, many of these judgments depend upon the truth of various singular statements of a scientific kind. For instance, the judgment that someone has acted honestly, requires the truth of the psychological claim that he or she did not, in acting, profess beliefs that he or she regarded as false. Similarly, the judgment that one class exploits another requires the truth of various sociological claims about, amongst other things, the character of the economic relationships between the two, such as the distribution of control over the means of production. Nonetheless, the concepts of honesty and exploitation also have normative elements, such that the truth of these descriptive statements, whilst necessary for acceptance of the normative judgments involving them, are not sufficient. So whilst the falsity of these descriptive statements would entail the rejection of the normative judgments, the truth of the former would not entail the acceptance of the latter (at least if these are understood as appraising, rather than purely characterizing, judgments).

Second, any general theory of the basis of normative judgments that takes account of the consequences of actions will assign an important role to scientific claims. The most obvious example here is utilitarianism, according to which the right action is to be determined by calculating its likely

consequences, and comparing these with the likely consequences of others. Here one must be able to make conditional predictions about the consequences of various courses of action; and such predictions normally require knowledge of at least limitedly universal relationships or laws. However, utilitarianism does not assert a direct entailment between predictions of consequences and normative judgments: all such judgments depend also upon acceptance of the principle of utility itself. But the truth or falsity of scientific statements is nonetheless relevant to these judgments; and for anyone who accepts the principle, they will indeed be the only relevant statements for assessing particular judgments.

Third, there is a widely accepted principle that normative judgments should be restricted to actions or situations that are *possible*: that 'ought implies can'. If this is accepted, then it follows that a special kind of conditional prediction will often be important in assessing normative judgments: namely, that there are no possible circumstances in which a certain otherwise desirable state of affairs could be realized.

Two points should be noted about this principle. First, according to one view about the character of scientific laws (adopted by many theoretical realists),⁶ these are to be regarded as statements of what is possible or impossible (e.g. 'nothing can travel faster than the speed of light'). If this view is correct then, if there were any genuine laws in the social sciences, they would be highly relevant to normative arguments. Second, one must distinguish between statements of 'absolute' and 'relative' impossibility. In the former, it is claimed that there is *no* set of circumstances in which the specified state of affairs could obtain; whereas, in statements of relative possibility, it is claimed that this is impossible *given* certain conditions (that is, taking these as fixed). Clearly, it is only statements of absolute impossibility that could directly refute normative judgments. At the same time, statements of relative possibility are often highly significant in that they may be sufficient to 'practically' refute some such judgments, by showing that the realization of the advocated state of affairs would require changes of conditions that may, for a variety of reasons, be regarded as impractical or undesirable. For instance it may be a reasonable requirement of a critical social theory that its analyses are guided by values that are actually realizable in a particular historical situation. This requirement is exemplified in the way Marxist theorists have tried to show what it is within the capitalist mode of production that makes possible its transformation towards socialism, and have been opposed to 'Utopian' critiques that are not grounded in this way.

However, claims about what is or is not possible (either absolutely or relatively) need to be treated with considerable caution. For they may often involve concealed normative judgments rather than being, as they are presented to be, scientific 'permitters' or 'disqualifiers' of such judgments. Consider for example the claim that a socialist organization of society is impossible since one cannot

prevent individuals from accumulating income and using it for profitable purposes involving payments to others for their labour. An obvious reply to this might be that ‘cannot’ in effect means ‘can only be achieved by certain (supposedly) undesirable means’, such as controls over the employment of wage-labour;⁷ and the judgment that such control would be unacceptable, itself involves challengeable normative assumptions. Indeed, it seems that the attempt to conceal such assumptions under the guise of purely scientific statements of impossibility, is one of the most frequent ways in which what can be called a ‘scientistic mystification of normative standpoints’ is practiced; and many claims about ‘human nature’ involve versions of this.⁸

With these general comments in mind, I will now examine some objections to the claim that normative judgments cannot be derived from scientific theories. The first is designed to show that social science is necessarily potentially critical of its ‘objects’, and that it is a mistake to distinguish ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ in a way that assigns science to the former and normative judgments to the latter, with no logical connections between them.⁹

The argument for this is as follows. The objects of a social theory include the practices of human agents, which are based in various ways upon their beliefs; and it may often be possible to discover the social determinants of these. But scientific theories are intended to consist of true beliefs; and in the social sciences, many of these will be about the same things as are the beliefs held by those who are the objects of scientific enquiry. It is therefore possible that there will be incompatibilities between these two sets of beliefs: that is, scientific and ‘lay’ beliefs may conflict. Now, if one regards a certain statement as true, one must also regard it as ‘wrong’ to hold a belief that is incompatible with it. Therefore, scientific theories are necessarily potentially critical of social reality, to the extent that the latter involves beliefs that can be shown scientifically to be false, internally inconsistent, and so on. In addition, if these defective beliefs can be explained by reference to other features of social reality, these too are to be criticized; and activity aimed at the removal of these features, and thus also of defective beliefs and activities based upon them, is thereby shown to be desirable.

This argument, then, attempts to demonstrate how scientific social theories can and indeed must be potentially critical of their object-domains, in a normative, ‘practical’, manner. And this in effect gives us a version of the traditional theme in Marxism that social theory involves a ‘critique of ideology’, a critique that also supports actions aimed at the realization of an ideology-free society. However, I do not believe the argument successfully undermines my view of the relations between social theory and normative judgments; and neither does it show how such a theory is not merely ‘critical’, but critical in a distinctively socialist manner. I shall take these two points in turn.

I have already argued that it is possible for scientific statements to be logically relevant to the assessment of normative judgments, without the latter being derivable from the former. Much of this objection can be seen as showing how this kind of relevance arises, but without refuting the claim that normative judgments cannot be supported by scientific knowledge alone. For instance, if a course of action or type of practice is justified by social agents on the grounds that this will have certain specific consequences, then clearly it may be possible, scientifically, to show that this belief about consequences is false. But it does not follow from this that the justification of such actions or practices lies exclusively in beliefs whose truth or falsity can be scientifically determined.

For example, the practices involved in a capitalist market economy are sometimes supported by the claim that this system maximizes economic growth. And it may be that this claim can be shown to be false. But even were it to be true, there remains an important further kind of possible criticism that focuses upon the belief that growth is a (primary) desirable feature of economic systems; and this belief remains unchallenged by the scientific critique of the claim that growth is indeed maximized by a capitalist market economy. Thus, whilst I accept that scientific statements can be critical in the sense of challenging some kinds of assumptions involved in social practices, this does not undermine my view of the relations between social theory and normative judgments.

However, there is a further feature of this argument for the intrinsically normative character of social theories that is not dealt with by the comments just presented. This is the suggestion that there is a necessary link between the practice of social theory, and the acceptance of a substantive political ideal: namely, that social relationships should be 'ideology free', and that relationships which require for their existence and reproduction the presence of ideological beliefs are *ipso facto* to be rejected, normatively, and eliminated through an appropriate political practice.

Though I accept this political ideal, I have several reservations both about the justification here provided for it, and about its significance as the basis for a distinctively socialist conception of critical social theory. My scepticism on the former point starts from the following, perhaps naïve queries. Is it not possible to adopt as a social ideal the exclusive use of scientific knowledge by an élite that maintains its power by, amongst other means, the production of ideological consciousness? And is it not true that many people seem to think it positively undesirable to 'enquire too deeply' into, or be too 'critical' of, the beliefs which their practices are based upon? The point of both these questions is to suggest that the founding of social practices upon (scientifically) true beliefs expresses a distinct and by no means unchallengeable value, which cannot itself be established by scientific knowledge alone. It is only if such an ideal is already accepted, and justified on some other basis, that the results produced by scientific enquiry will have normative implications.

However, it might be argued that whilst what is discovered through scientific procedures cannot establish the ideal of a society that is free from false beliefs, it is nonetheless the case that to actually engage in the practice of (social) scientific enquiry must involve a commitment to this social ideal. This, I think, is an argument of some significance. But I will leave it aside here, since a particular version of it will be examined much later, in chapter 6, where I discuss Habermas's attempts to provide a rational foundation for normative judgments. Instead, I will consider briefly the adequacy of ideology-freedom as the standpoint of a distinctively socialist form of critical social theory.

Whilst it is true that for socialists, societies should be ideology-free in the sense of there at least being no need in them for false beliefs to be disseminated and accepted, it seems that the realization of this ideal is compatible with the absence of several other central socialist principles: for instance, an egalitarian distribution of social goods, and the elimination of private ownership of the means of production. And acceptance of these principles in no way follows from commitment to 'the end of ideological consciousness' (where ideological beliefs are those that can be scientifically refuted). Social practices may be based upon (scientifically) correct beliefs, yet display characteristics that significantly depart from socialist principles. And it follows from this that a socialist critique of non-socialist societies cannot be confined to revealing the falsity of the beliefs upon which they in various ways depend. For it is both logically permissible, and common in practice, for people to accept the ideal of freedom from ideology, yet reject other major socialist principles.

I turn now to examine some claims made by Charles Taylor in an influential attack on the idea of value-freedom in social theory.¹⁰ His main concern is to show that political science can have significant implications for political philosophy, on the grounds that the theoretical frameworks developed in the former typically support or undermine various ideals or values proposed within the latter. Taylor's argument depends on two basic propositions: that such theoretical frameworks have definite consequences as to what kinds of political organization are possible or impossible; and that normative judgments can be established by reference to the extent of satisfaction of human wants or needs. This first premiss, if correct, would not constitute any challenge to the position I am defending. The second involves a modified version of ethical naturalism; and it is, I believe, open to the objection that, like utilitarianism, it cannot deal adequately with political issues than concern the proper *distribution* of want-satisfaction.¹¹ But I will not pursue this criticism here. Instead, I want to focus on another major claim made by Taylor which has received little critical attention, but raises important issues about the place of values in social theory.

Taylor argues that if the normative judgments implied by a particular theoretical framework are rejected, then it must follow that the framework itself is also rejected. This, he says, is because theoretical frameworks involve claims about what are the *significant* variables affecting political

systems; and, likewise, normative positions also make claims about the significance for humans of the satisfaction of various wants and needs. That is, normative judgments (in this case about the desirability of possible forms of political organization) are interpreted by Taylor as based on claims about the extent to which wants and needs regarded as 'significant' are satisfied. So suppose, for instance, that it follows from a theoretical framework that it is only in a society with a particular form of political organization that certain wants and needs can be satisfied. Then, according to Taylor, we could only deny the desirability of that form of organization if we denied the significance of those wants and needs. But - and this is the part of the argument with which I am concerned - if we deny this, and advocate some alternative set of wants and needs as (more) significant, we must then also deny the adequacy of the initial theoretical framework. For it, like normative standpoints, involves claims about the significance of (amongst other variables) some particular sets of wants and needs.¹²

If Taylor were right about this, it would follow that the first claim in my account of value-free social theory was mistaken: for he would have shown that the criteria of validity for social theories are logically dependent on the acceptance of normative standpoints. I will argue in the next section that his argument rests on a confusion between different kinds of 'significance'. But before doing that I will comment on the relations between this claim and the second one, that normative judgments cannot be derived from social theories. For it might be thought that if the latter is rejected (as it is by Taylor), then the former must also be rejected. That is, if it is accepted that normative judgments can be established by the scientific statements of a social theory, then it may appear to follow that the criteria of validity for the latter cannot be value-independent, since the rejection of a normative judgment would entail rejection of the scientific statements from which it had been derived. But this appearance is misleading. To show this, a partial formalization of the relevant arguments will now be given.

I will refer to the claim that scientific criteria of validity are value-independent as (1); and the claim that normative judgments cannot be derived from scientific statements as (2). Let us represent normative judgments by 'N', and scientific ones by 'S'. Then (2) is represented by $\neg(S \rightarrow N)$, and its denial, $\neg\neg(S \rightarrow N)$, by $(S \rightarrow N)$. Now, if $(S \rightarrow N)$ is true, it follows that $(\neg N \rightarrow \neg S)$, by contraposition. This means that one could argue from the falsity of a normative judgment to the falsity of the scientific statement which entails that normative judgment. But if this is so, it might seem that if (2) is rejected then (1) must be abandoned, since we have here the denial of a normative judgment leading to the denial of a scientific statement; and this appears to contradict (1), since (1) maintains that the acceptance or rejection of scientific statements can be determined independently of the acceptance or rejection of normative standpoints. Thus it appears that (1) and (2) are logically related, in that the rejection of (2) entails the rejection of (1).

However, this is misleading. For whilst it is undeniable that, from $(S \rightarrow N)$, it follows that $(\neg N \rightarrow \neg S)$, it is essential to keep in mind what is the possible basis for the denial of N. According to those who reject (2), this consists in scientific statements. Thus the justification for the denial of N must be the truth of some scientific statement that entails $\neg N$. Let us call this statement S^1 . Then the argument for the denial of N must involve the following premisses: that $(S^1 \rightarrow \neg N)$, and that S^1 is true. But if $(S^1 \rightarrow \neg N)$ is true, and if S^1 is true; and if our initial scientific statement, S, entails N, then it follows that S must be false. For, if $(S \rightarrow N)$, and $(S^1 \rightarrow \neg N)$, then $\neg (S \& S^1)$, i.e. S and S^1 cannot both be true; and if S^1 is true (and thus N false), then S must be false. In other words, what actually shows S to be false is not the falsity of N, but the truth of some further scientific statements S^1 , from which $\neg N$ follows, and which is incompatible with the truth of S. Thus, even if (2) is false, because normative judgments can be derived from scientific statements, it would not follow that (1) is false.

Putting this argument less formally: if normative judgments are entailed by scientific statements, this does not undermine the objectivity of science, but simply gives (scientific) objectivity to norms. So whatever the merits of Taylor's version of ethical naturalism, or of the argument examined earlier on that social theories are intrinsically normative in their implications, the claim that scientific criteria of validity are value-independent is not thereby refuted. However, it remains to examine Taylor's specific objection to this, which does not depend solely on his ethical naturalism, but also on his use of the (problematic) concept of significance.

3. The concept of significance in social theory

Weber argued that any investigation in the social sciences must involve the adoption of some overall criteria of significance, or value, which serve to define the 'essential' characteristics of the object of enquiry. Thus the significance of various social phenomena cannot be seen purely as an objective, value-independent feature of them, but is instead ascribed to them by the social theorist. And he maintained that such ascriptions must be understood as expressive of normative standpoints that cannot be validated by the scientifically establishable claims of a social theory.¹³

I believe Weber was right about this, and that his position here adds a major element to a proper analysis of the place of values in social theory. However, the concept of significance is potentially confusing, and it is one of the several virtues of Weber's methodological work that it contains a useful clarification of this. Roughly speaking, he distinguished three forms of significance, which I will call 'normative', 'explanatory', and 'epistemic'.¹⁴ The last of these is a somewhat heterogeneous category, including both the significance of items due to their function as evidence that is relevant to the assessment of scientific claims, and that of items which operate as useful illustrations or exemplifications of some type or kind of social phenomenon. Explanatory significance, by contrast, is ascribable to those items which, according to a particular social theory, contribute to the explanation

of the objects of enquiry - for instance, to the forces and relations of production in historical materialism. Any such theory must be aimed at explaining specifiable features of social reality; and it was Weber's view, which I support, that the significance of these *explananda*, what it is that makes them important phenomena to explain, must ultimately be decided by reference to normative criteria. I use the term 'ultimately' to take account of the fact that theories may be designed to explain phenomena whose immediate significance is given by their explanatory function in relation to others, and so on - but not *ad infinitum*. There must be a 'stopping-point' at which significance is ascribed by reference not to explanatory (or epistemic) criteria, but to normative ones.

Thus, whilst epistemic and explanatory significance are scientifically determinable, normative significance is not; but it is an ineliminable feature of the construction of any social theory. It may be helpful here to adopt (or adapt) Popper's terminology of 'problems' and 'solutions' and put the point like this: theories are designed to solve problems, and the significance of these problems, which must ultimately be determined by normative criteria, is distinct from the adequacy of their proposed solutions, which in this case consists in providing explanations supported by evidence.

Both this and Weber's account have the further merit of directing our attention to the question of what precisely it is that a particular social theory is designed to explain, to what problem it is addressed. For it seems a frequent defect of much theoretical work that this is left insufficiently specified. For instance, in contemporary debates about the adequacy of Marxist theory to explain the nature of the relationships between men and women in various kinds of society, it is frequently unclear just which characteristics of those relationships are at issue, and why it is that significance is attached to explaining these rather than others. But without such specifications of the *explanandum*, theoretical debates risk the well-known phenomenon of people talking past one another: apparent disagreements about explanatory adequacy may instead reflect divergent characterizations of the object of enquiry, and so involve no direct incompatibility between theories.

Further, such divergences may be concealed by the apparently competing theorists using the same terms to describe the *explanandum*, whilst the specific senses of these terms in fact differ. For example, I think the explanations for the historical emergence of capitalism in Western Europe proposed by Marx and Weber display this feature to some extent. For it is arguable that what they take to be the 'essential' characteristics of 'capitalism' differ in a way that ultimately expresses their differing criteria of normative significance. Thus, whereas for Marx the central characteristic of capitalism was the class relationship between capital and labour, for Weber it was the rational organization of production.¹⁵ And although this divergence may partly be due to scientifically resolvable disagreements about the explanatory significance of these characteristics, I think it could be shown that this would not provide a complete account. Instead, we should look to the distinct

normative standpoints expressed, respectively, in their concepts of alienation and disenchantment, to understand their divergent characterizations of the ‘essential’ features of ‘capitalism’. And if this is so, it would follow that their theoretical explanations are not directly comparable, being aimed at partly differing *explananda*.

The above analysis of the concept of significance in social theory enables us to distinguish two quite different reasons for which a particular theory may be rejected: that it fails to explain adequately the phenomena taken as its *explananda*, or that the normative criteria in terms of which these phenomena gain their significance is unacceptable. That is, we can distinguish between claiming that a theory fails to deal with the problems to which it is addressed, and criticizing the normative standpoint which constitutes these as significant problems. And we are now in a position to consider Taylor’s argument that a normative rejection of the political implications of a particular theoretical framework must lead to a rejection of that framework. He provides the following example to illustrate this argument, commenting upon S. M. Lipset’s professedly ‘scientific’ analysis of democracy.¹⁶

[according to Lipset] stable democracies are judged better than stable oligarchies, since the latter can only exist where the majority is so uneducated and tradition-bound or narrowed that it has not yet learned to demand its rights. But suppose we tried to upset this judgment by holding that under-development is good for men, that they are happier when they are led by some unquestioned norms, don’t have to think for themselves, and so on? One would then be reversing the value-judgment. But at the same time one would be changing the framework. For we are introducing a notion of anomie here, *and we cannot suppose this factor to exist without having some important effect on the working of political society.*¹⁷ [My italics]

Let us accept that the kind of possible normative challenge Taylor outlines expresses the ideals of social existence involved in the Durkheimian concept of anomie.¹⁸ But what precisely is meant by the last, italicized sentence in this passage? To claim that anomie ‘exists’, or that certain social relationships are anomic, is typically both to make a normative judgment from the standpoint of these ideals, and also to assert that these relationships display certain features such as the absence of conventionally reinforced social norms and stable expectations. Anomic relationships, thus understood, may be taken either as explanatory of certain other social phenomena, such as rates of suicide, or as themselves ‘significant’ objects of explanation: for instance, the question of what kind of economic system tends to increase or reduce the degree of anomie may be explored.

Thus the concept of anomie serves both to express a normative standpoint, and to characterize a form of social relationships that may be taken as an *explanandum*, or be referred to in the explanation of other phenomena. But to judge that a particular political system, in this case ‘democracy’, displays

anomic social relationships does not by itself entail rejection of a social theory such as Lipset's, according to which certain conditions are necessary or sufficient for the existence of a democratic system. For it could well be that the explanatory claims made by this theory are correct, despite the fact that democratic political systems display features that are deemed to be anomic.

Thus the normative challenge described by Taylor need not require the 'rejection' of the theoretical framework, in the sense of claiming that it provides incorrect explanations. And whether or not anomic relationships are themselves explanatorily significant is independent of one's acceptance of the ideal of an anomie-free society. However, the theoretical framework might be 'rejected' for the quite different reason that it fails to analyze various features of a political system that are normatively significant from the standpoint of a concern with anomie. In this case, we would have a normative criticism of the problems to which that framework was addressed, as distinct from a scientific criticism of its ability to deal with the problems it was intended to. It seems that Taylor's argument fails to differentiate these two kinds of criticism, and thereby fails to undermine the account I have given of the relations between scientific criteria of validity and normative judgments.

So far, I have said little about how this account can be applied to the place of specifically socialist values in a critical social theory. This is partly because, according to the position I am advocating, there is nothing epistemologically distinctive about this particular case. That is, I am opposed to those critical theorists who claim that the 'critical' character of their social theories requires that value-independent criteria of validity be rejected, and replaced by some alternative conception of the relations between science and values. But I will now give a brief description of what a socialist social theory consistent with my account of value-freedom would be like, before going on in the next section to defend this against the claim that it has certain unacceptable consequences for political practice.

There are, I believe, a number of normative principles which taken together define a distinctively socialist political philosophy. These include ideals such as the elimination of private ownership of the means of production, the equal distribution of social goods, the absence of dominative relations between groups and individuals, and the democratization of decision-making processes. In saying this, I do not imply the absence of legitimate disputes and disagreements between socialists about the nature of these ideals, about their relative significance, and about their adequacy to define a set of principles that deals with all normatively significant aspects of social existence. For instance, there are important disagreements about the place and character of individual, legally enforceable, rights in a socialist society; about the significance of direct workers' control of production, as against centralized State planning; and about the adequacy of socialist principles for specifying the character of acceptable social relationships between men and women. However, I do not think these issues, and

therefore also the precise character of the critique of non-socialist principles and practices, can be resolved or replaced solely by the construction of social theories which operate, as they should, with value-independent criteria of validity. Socialism is not, in this sense, scientific.

It should be a major aim of socialist social theorists to investigate and explain those features of non-socialist societies that are significant from the standpoint of socialist values. The concepts employed in such theories will be expressive of this specific critical standpoint; nor is there any epistemological barrier against the inclusion within a socialist theoretical work of explicit normative critique and argument. And it will be an important concern of such theorists to determine the presence (or absence) within non-socialist societies of existent and developing possibilities for their transformation towards socialism.

For instance, it is a claim of Marx's political economy that these possibilities do develop within the capitalist mode of production and can, under certain circumstances, be realized. At the same time, it is a consequence of my position that whether these possibilities exist, to what they are due, under what circumstances they can be realized, and whether these will obtain, are issues that must be determined independently of the acceptance of socialist values. Pessimism is, unfortunately, a possible outcome of the scientific investigation of capitalism: and only a form of non-scientific teleology concerning the inevitable development of the historical process towards some ideal condition (such as 'the realization of the human essence') can sustain an *a priori* - and thoroughly specious - optimism.

4. Socialist practice and the separation of science and values

The kind of account I have given of the relations between social theory and normative commitments has frequently been criticized within the Marxist tradition on the grounds that it leads to the adoption of unacceptable forms of political practice. In particular it has been said to support 'reformism', the non-revolutionary attempt to gradually alter or transform capitalist societies through existing political institutions;¹⁹ and also 'moralism', the belief that moral exhortation and reasoning are the primary means by which socialism should be achieved. I will argue that neither of these criticisms is justifiable, concentrating mainly on the former. I will examine this through some of the issues involved in the debates between 'orthodox Marxists' (such as Karl Kautsky) and 'revisionists' (such as Edward Bernstein) in the Second International.²⁰

It is often claimed that Bernstein's revisionism was influenced by the late nineteenth-century revival of Kantian philosophy, an important element of this being the separation of science from values.²¹ Bernstein's acceptance of this, it is then argued, is logically related to the reformist character of his evolutionary socialism, with its emphasis upon short-term improvements in the position of the working class, and upon parliamentary activity as the major way of achieving these. For instance,

Karl Korsch declared that:

It was not only such overtly anti-Marxist and un-Marxist philosophizing socialists as Bernstein and Koigen, but also most of the philosophizing Marxists (Kantian, Dietzgenian and Machian Marxists) who since then have shown, in word and deed, that they have not really passed the standpoint of bourgeois society. This applies not only to their philosophy, but by necessary extension also to their political theory and practice. There is no need to provide examples of the bourgeois-reformist character of Kantian Marxism, as it can hardly be doubted.²²

To assess this kind of claim about Bernstein's revisionism, it is necessary to distinguish several elements in his overall position.²³ First, there was his view that Marx's historical materialism and political economy, considered as scientific theories, were in some important respects defective. He argued that the actual development of capitalism in Germany was inconsistent with predictions derivable from these theories, and regarded this as requiring their modification. I think this argument depended on too simple a view of the relationship between theories and predictions,²⁴ but this is not relevant here. Second, Bernstein opposed those formulations of Marxist theory which presented the collapse of capitalism and its replacement by socialism as events that would result inevitably from the internal contradictions of capitalist forces and relations of production, and which ascribed no significant role to forms of political activity which were themselves partly influenced by normative commitments. To Bernstein, this was one important reason why the 'scientific socialism' of Kautsky and others was unacceptable. Third, he argued that the circumstances and attitudes of the German workers' movement were such that - taken together with the necessary revisions of Marxist science, and the error of a deterministic scientific socialism - neither revolutionary nor quietistic tactics were appropriate in an effective struggle for socialism.

But Bernstein had a further set of objections to the idea of scientific socialism. He argued that science alone cannot determine what is ethically desirable; that science must itself be free from values; and that socialism must be understood primarily in terms of its normative demands. Socialism, he said, is 'a piece of the beyond... It is something that ought to be, or a movement toward something that ought to be.'²⁵ This does not mean, he argued, that science is irrelevant to socialism. For it provides us with knowledge of existing conditions and developments, which can guide political action; and it enables us to avoid forms of Utopianism that are not grounded in real possibilities.

It is interesting to compare some of these elements in Bernstein's revisionism with another, much more recent, attack upon scientific socialism. This time, it is Louis Althusser's anti-humanist Marxism that is the target,²⁶ and E. P. Thompson the critic.²⁷ Insisting on the significance of what he

calls 'affective and moral consciousness', both as a partial determinant of past historical developments and as a necessary element in contemporary political practice, Thompson declares:

This is, exactly, not to argue that 'morality' is some 'autonomous region' of human desire and will, arising independently of the historical process. Such a view of morality has never been materialist enough, and hence it has often reduced that formidable inertia - and sometimes formidable revolutionary force - into a wishful idealist fiction. It is to say, on the contrary, that every contradiction is a conflict of value as well as a conflict of interest; that inside every 'need' there is an affect, or 'want', on its way to becoming an 'ought' (and vice versa); that every class struggle is at the same time a struggle over values; and that the project of Socialism is guaranteed *BY NOTHING* - certainly not by 'Science' or by Marxism- Leninism - but can find its own guarantees only by reason and through an open *choice of values*.²⁸

Thompson is opposed to those Marxists who regard a distinctively normative critique of capitalism as 'unscientific' and *ipso facto* to be abandoned, and who wish to replace this kind of critique with a science that, to the extent that it is critical, is confined to the criticism of ideological thought and practices, where 'ideology' is defined by contrast with genuine scientific knowledge. He asserts that such knowledge does not exhaust the realm of what is rationally justifiable; that normative discourse is subject to its own standards of argumentation and rationality; and that this discourse, typically intertwined with action and experience, is an essential feature of the historical process. It is part of the task of socialist historians to explore the complex and changing relationships between these normatively impregnated forms of experience and the systemic features of the class relations of particular 'modes of production'. Such explorations are not to be guided by an *a priori* belief that human history is governed by some teleological principle that guarantees the eventual actualization of a 'human essence'. But they may reveal, in a manner governed by objective standards of evidence and argumentation, actual movements towards the (at least partial) realization of a specific normative conception of social existence, of what Thompson calls an 'empirical *potentia*'.²⁹

To study history from this standpoint, he argues, undoubtedly involves a choice of values by the historian; and different values would involve a focus upon different possibilities. But the *potentia* defining the primary object of socialist historians remains 'empirical' in the sense that its existence and development are open to investigations governed by objective criteria. For instance, Thompson makes the following comments about the labour movement and the post-war British government:

It can be seen that the reforms of '1945' embodied a socialist *potentia*, which was not only nourished by ideal influences (the thought of Marx, of Morris, and of socialist utopians; the strategies of British socialist and communist parties) but whose partial realization was fleshed

by actually existent socialist values and practices within the working-class community, at variance with those individualist values and practices of the capitalist system within which, in the final analysis, these reforms were contained. Hence this socialist *potentia* may be seen simultaneously as immanent actuality and as aspiration; that is, it is not to be seen only as a theoretical aspiration, expressed in a passage of Marx's writings; it is an aspiration which requires *both* logical *and* historical examination. Moreover, the defeat of this aspiration, its failure to come to its full realization, may be dealt with not only in terms of its theoretical inadequacy (as, indeed, its characteristic 'reformist' or social-democratic theoretical expression was sadly inadequate) but also in terms of the actual contradictions of social life - the cancellation of socialist meanings within a totality whose meaning and logic of process was capitalist.³⁰

Thompson's position on these issues is, I think, quite close to the conception of the relationship between science and values that I have been proposing, and also to Bernstein's view of this. It is significant, therefore, that we find Thompson apparently well able to criticize reformist or social-democratic political strategies, partly on the basis of historical investigations of their employment and outcomes; and this may suggest that there is no inconsistency between such a view of science and values, and the rejection of reformism.

However, proofs or disproofs of logical relationships cannot rest upon the discovery that, in particular writers, certain views are or are not co-present; nor, upon the fact that these writers believe that one is supported by another. (Indeed Lichtheim points out that the markedly anti-reformist Karl Liebknecht, 'was philosophically an adherent of the neo-Kantian school: a circumstance deplored by his political friends'.³¹ So much for proofs of the links between epistemology and politics based on this kind of 'argument'.) What matters is whether the supposed logical relationships do in fact exist. So let us now explore this question, in the case of Bernstein's revisionism.

It seems to me that Bernstein's support for evolutionary socialism is independent of his view of the relationship between science and values, and that this view is itself consistent with a quite different conception of political practice. The major elements in his arguments for reformist politics derive from his specific claims about the defects of Marxist science, his assessment of the contemporary political and economic circumstances and his normative judgment that, in political activity, the character of the means employed must themselves express the ideals that define the overall goal of bringing about a socialist society, rather than being assessed solely in terms of their likelihood of achieving this. This normative principle is, of course, challengeable, as are the other elements just mentioned; but none of them follow from his epistemological views. Thus I would reject even the highly qualified judgment of the significance of Bernstein's philosophical position for his reformism

by Peter Gay:

Philosophical questions were not as significant for Revisionism as the analysis of economic and political developments. But whatever the impact of philosophy on the movement, its stress was on ethics and the striving for limited, obtainable goals. It strongly supported the other Revisionist arguments against revolution and in favour of parliamentary gradualism.³²

However, we need to be clear about what precisely is meant by ‘philosophy’, here - just as, in the earlier quotation from Korsch, we need to be clear what ‘Kantian’ means. For ‘philosophy’ may well include advocacy of specific, substantive normative standpoints, which can have significant implications for the character of political practice; and Kant’s philosophy is a case in point. My claim that the separation of science and values does not imply political reformism, together with the fact that this separation was itself one feature of Kantian philosophy, must not be taken to mean that no other elements in that philosophy have such implications. Kantian ethics involves, for instance, a radical non-consequentialism (and thus anti-utilitarianism) about the assessment of actions; a requirement of ‘respect for persons as ends, not means’; a view of ethical norms as universal and eternal; and so on. These clearly have consequences for political practice (though I doubt whether ‘the striving for limited, attainable goals’ is one of them); but nothing I have said suggests otherwise.

Turning now to the other ‘non-revolutionary’ form of political practice mentioned earlier, moralism, it can be shown that this too does not follow from the conception of value-freedom I have been defending, despite claims to the contrary.³³ To argue, as I have, that scientific criteria of validity are independent of normative standpoints; that socialist values cannot be established by social theory; and that a distinctively normative critique is a legitimate and desirable component of the practice of socialist theorists, in no way entails that engagement in such a critique should constitute the sole or primary form of socialist politics, that exhortation or argument are the only acceptable, rational, activities. For it is a misconception of ‘reason’ to believe that the only rational form of practice is reasoning, and to assume that the dichotomy between ‘words’ (or ‘thought’) and ‘action’ mirrors that between rationality and irrationality.³⁴ (And incidentally the former dichotomy is itself suspect if one analyses communication in terms of a theory of speech-acts, which has the consequence that speaking is a type of social *action*.³⁵) The acceptance of socialist values may justify many kinds of (rational) action, of which arguing with people is but one. Strikes, ‘violence’, or the construction of alternative forms of social relationships are others. The justification of these practices must include, I believe, normative claims (together with their rationales), and cannot be supported solely by reference to social theory. Thus the ‘critique’ of capitalism cannot be exclusively scientific. But equally, attempts to realize in practice a normative critique need not be limited to public argument and persuasion.

Thus, for example, a normative critique of the unjust distribution of social goods in capitalist societies may motivate the construction of a social theory aimed at explaining this. Such a theory might show that it results from the class-distribution of the means of production, and that it cannot be radically altered - though some of its worst effects could be ameliorated - without a transformation of the capitalist mode of production. Further, it might also be shown that some kinds of political practice aimed at achieving this are less likely to succeed than others: in particular, that 'moralism' is by itself an ineffectual strategy. But these theoretical claims can be assessed independently of commitment to the values in terms of which the initial critique was made; and these values are not themselves scientifically establishable. So there is no inconsistency between this separation of science and values and the rejection of a moralistic politics.

Thus neither moralism nor reformism are entailed by my view of the place of values in social theory. But it is important to emphasize that in arguing for this claim I am not thereby accepting that if they were thus entailed, this would constitute a refutation of that epistemological position. This is for two reasons. First, my argument does not assume that there is something definitely wrong with these conceptions of political practice: it operates quite independently of this question. (As a matter of fact, I believe there are many situations in which both of these can form at least important components in a legitimate socialist politics.) Second, I am generally sceptical about attempts to reject epistemological positions on the basis of their supposed political consequences. This is partly because I have not yet come across what seems to be a good argument for such a connection. But it is partly also because, if such a connection were established, one might claim that this provided grounds for accepting the form of political practice, rather than for rejecting the epistemology - unless, of course, it could be shown that no independent justifications for epistemological positions can be provided, which I doubt.

I have mainly been concerned in this chapter to elaborate and defend the conception of value-freedom which, in the previous chapter, was identified as one of the various 'positivist' doctrines rejected by critical theorists. I argued there that this was not only distinct from, but in many ways antithetical to, another of these, the scientization of politics, a version of which is itself an important element in the idea of scientific socialism. And I also argued that this view of the relation between social theory and values could be accepted without being thereby committed to either scientism, or a positivist conception of social theory.

However, the arguments advanced in these two chapters make no attempt to deal with the critique of positivism involved in Habermas's theory of knowledge-constitutive interests. For his critique is intended to show the normative presuppositions of philosophical accounts of scientific knowledge itself (such as the positivist view of science), as distinct from the norms presupposed or entailed by particular social theories that may operate with the same general epistemological assumptions. It thus

addresses the question of the relations between science and values at a significantly different level of analysis from the one I have so far explored.

Notes and references

1 See D. Miller, *Social Justice*, Oxford University Press 1976, chs 2-4, for an examination of these and other principles of social justice.

2 E. Nagel, *The Structure of Science*, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1961, pp. 491-4.

3 See R. Keat and J. Urry, *Social Theory as Science*, Routledge 1975, pp. 196-204, for a fuller discussion of Weber and some of his critics.

4 Nagel, *Structure of Science*, p. 493, footnote 38, makes a similar point about his own position.

5 This reply is partly similar to an argument in Hare, 'Descriptivism', pp. 241-7, in W. Hudson ed., *The Is-Ought Question*, Macmillan 1969, pp. 240-58. It is also analogous to the treatment of the problem of theory-neutrality in Keat and Urry, *Social Theory as Science*, pp. 50-4.

6 E.g. R. Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, 2nd edn, Harvester Press 1978; and A. Sloman, *The Computer Revolution in Philosophy*, Harvester Press 1978, ch. 2.

7 See, e.g. R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Basil Blackwell 1974, ch. 8.

8 See also ch. 6, sec. 3, below.

9 My account of this objection is based on its presentation in R. Edgley, 'Reason as Dialectic', *Radical Philosophy* 15, 1976, pp. 2-7, and in R. Bhaskar, 'Scientific Explanation and Human Emancipation', *Radical Philosophy* 26, 1980, pp. 16-28. See also R. Edgley, 'Dialectic: A Reply to Keat and Dews', *Radical Philosophy* 21, 1979, pp. 29-34, and R. Keat, 'Scientific Socialism – A Positivist Delusion?', *Radical Philosophy* 23, 1979, pp. 21-23 [available at www.russellkeat.net].

10 C. Taylor, 'Neutrality in Political Science'. in P. Laslett and W. Runciman eds, *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Basil Blackwell 1967, pp. 25-57.

11 See, e.g. M. Lessnoff, *The Structure of Social Science*, Allen & Unwin 1974, pp.136-41. For a criticism of ethical naturalism which is generally consistent with my standpoint in this chapter, see D. Z. Philips and H. O. Mounce, 'On Morality's Having a Point', in W. Hudson ed., *The Is-Ought Question*, Macmillan 1969, pp. 228-39.

12 Taylor, 'Neutrality in Political Science', pp. 39-42.

13 M. Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. E. Shils and H. Finch, Free Press 1949, especially pp. 67-85.

14 *Ibid.*, pp.131-63; but my classification is slightly different from Weber's.

15 See, e.g., A. Giddens, 'Marx, Weber, and the Development of Capitalism', *Sociology* 4, 1970, pp. 289-310.

16 S. M. Lipset, *Political Man*, Heinemann 1960.

17 Taylor, 'Neutrality in Political Science', p.41.

18 See, e.g., S. Lukes, 'Alienation and Anomie', in P. Laslett and W. Runciman eds, *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Basil Blackwell 1967, pp. 134-56.

19 The definition of 'reformism' is of course highly problematic: see, e.g., the discussion in R. Miliband,

Marxism and Politics, Oxford University Press 1977, ch. 6.

20 See, e.g. the accounts of these debates in P. Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, Collier-Macmillan 1962; and G. Lichtheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study*, 2nd edn, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1965, Part Five.

21 Cf. ch. 1, sec. 4, above.

22 K. Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans, F. Halliday, New Left Books 1970, p.33, footnote 7.

23 See E. Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, Schocken Books 1961.

24 See the discussion of this in ch. 5, sec. 1, below.

25 Quoted in Gay, *Democratic Socialism*, p.158.

26 See especially L. Althusser, *For Marx*, Penguin Books 1969.

27 E. P. Thompson, 'The Poverty of Theory', in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin Books 1978, pp. 193-399.

28 *Ibid.*, p.363.

29 E. P. Thompson, 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski', pp.131-56, in *The Poverty of Theory*, pp. 92-192.

30 *Ibid.*, p.146.

31 Lichtheim, *Marxism*, p.292, footnote 2.

32 Gay, *Democratic Socialism*, p.165.

33 E.g. by Edgley, 'Reason as Dialectic', p.7.

34 Here I follow the excellent analysis in R. Edgley, 'Reason and Violence', *Radical Philosophy* 4, 1973, pp. 18-25.

35 See, e.g. J. Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press 1969. The relevance of this to Habermas's theory of truth is discussed in ch. 6, sec. 2, below.