

ON THE FRINGES OF THE HEALTH CRISIS: FOR A MARXIST CRITIQUE OF SCIENCE



"Woe to us if we present (the real facts, editor's note) as bourgeois science presents them; no socialism would emerge from this, but only an apology for the eternity of bourgeois society. So let us raise the cry that perplexes all those who are blinded by the power of putrid commonplaces: Down with science!"¹

"The idolatry of science and technology is nothing more than one of the last miserable palliatives of the era of Progress in survival, of democratism, of little men all equal in mediocrity..."²

The so-called health crisis has also established itself as an integrated spectacle, with its designated villains, its alleged "conspiracies", its secrets; it's very real political wheeling and dealing, and.... its new stars. Among the latter, "**scientific experts**" of all stripes have taken pride in the various polarizations. Most of the time, this is done in the name of "THE" science, bearer of "THE" truth, like a new modern religion. Since, for us, "truth" is first and foremost a question of class point of view, and since, moreover, we are not "scientists" at all, but rather "**doctors of nothing**", we will argue this sketch of contribution using materialist dialectics and workers' experience.

"The era of capitalism is more loaded with superstitions than all those that preceded it. Revolutionary history will define it not as the age of rationality, but as the age of junk. Of all the idols known to man, it is the idol of modern technological progress that will fall from the altars with the greatest crash." A. Bordiga : Politique et construction, Prometheus, 1952, in Espèce humaine et croûte terrestre, p.101.102 Payot, Paris, 1978.

1) Science and technique subsumed under capital

All the separate categories of capital, economics, politics, science, philosophy, art, etc., are totally (in fact) subsumed under the C.P.M. These separate spheres, increasingly specialized and compartmentalized, are not simply "used" by capital. They have no existence in themselves, no end in themselves, indeterminate, independent of history, as the "Marxist" vulgate has misrepresented for decades. As Marx's critique³, communism does not mean another utilization of the same machine by a "workers' power", but the total transformation/recreation of this machine and of the techniques that sustain it, born and produced by and for capital. There is no neutral technology, just as the productive forces are

¹ "Il Programma Comunista", n° 20, 1962 ; <http://www.sinistra.net/lib/pro/producoinf.html>

² J-L Moinet : Fin de la science, p.122, Les joueurs de non-A, Paris, 1974.

³ This criticism has been continued by Lewis Mumford, among others: The Myth of the Machine; Technology and Human Development, Éditions de L'Encyclopédie des Nuisances, Paris, 2019.

the productive forces of a particular mode of production: capitalism. Like labor, which is also incorporated into capital, machinery, science and techniques are the product of its immanent laws and its constant search for greater profits. *"Machinery only benefits capital to the extent that it increases the surplus labor time of the workers employed on the machines."* K. Marx: Grundrisse T.2, Éditions sociales, p.319, Paris, 1980. This characteristic, accelerated by the real subsumption of labor under capital, implies the complete inclusion of science and technology in capital as one of the essential vectors of the valorization process. We can thus speak with Marx of the *"penetration of scientific forces into the labor process,"* of the complete *"scientization" of the valorization process of capital.* This is what Marx calls the *"specifically capitalist" mode of production.*

"On this basis - and on this basis alone - the relations of production develop in accordance with the capitalist process of production between the various agents of production, in particular between capitalists and wage-workers. As they develop, the forces of production in society, or the productive forces of labor, are socialized and become directly social (collective) through cooperation. The division of labor within the workshop, the use of machinery and, in general, the transformations that the production process undergoes thanks to the conscious use of natural sciences, mechanics, chemistry, etc., applied to specific technological ends, and thanks to everything related to work done on a large scale, etc., contributes to the socialization of the production process." K. Marx: An unpublished chapter of Capital, 10/18, presented and translated by R. Dangeville, p199-200, Paris, 1970.

It is therefore a serious mistake to consider science and technology as separate spheres of knowledge, as trans-historical domains that would be the work of the continuous "progress" of human history. It is enough, then, to cleanse them of their capitalist dross. This falsely critical vision is typical of the fetishistic nature of all commodities and also has its great defenders: scientists, moralists, doctors, experts and engineers, obsessed by the sacred nature of their own "field of specialization" capable of miraculously resolving all the catastrophes produced by the CPM: ecological, economic, demographic, sanitary, etc.

"There is no bullshit, however vast, that modern technology is not ready to endorse and cover with virginal plastic, when it corresponds to the irresistible pressure of capital and its sinister appetites." A. Bordiga: Politics and Construction, Prometheus, 1952, Human Species and Earth's Crust, p. 76 Payot, Paris, 1978.

On the contrary, as B. Coriat explains, *"If C.P.M. is indeed first and foremost an activity of valorization of capital, it is by examining the contribution that the different types of inventions bring to capital in its process of self-valorization that we will be able to bring to light the social causes that determine the incorporation or rejection of the different inventions available. It is, therefore, in the process of value formation itself, and more specifically in the contribution of inventions to the extraction (or not) of surplus-value, that we must look, examining how, from this point of view, the different types of inventions come into play: machines, new raw materials and new products."* B. Coriat: Science, Technique et Capital, p. 137, Seuil, Paris, 1976.

Moreover, it is methodologically impossible to dissociate science from ideology, since not only is the former completely impregnated by it, but epistemology (the critical study of science and scientific knowledge) is also ultimately determined by the prevailing mode of production, without which nothing could exist as production and, therefore, not as knowledge production either. The critique of this ideological impregnation is the work of living Marxism.

As K. Korsch: *"The reason for this insurmountable difficulty for bourgeois epistemology is that Marxism cannot be considered a "science," even if we give this term the broadest bourgeois sense, including even the most speculative philosophy."* K. Korsch : *Marxisme et Philosophie*, p.135/136, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1968.

It was the social democratic tradition (Kautsky, Bernstein, Plekhanov...) that accelerated and reinforced the scientistic deviation already widely present among the utopian socialists (Owen, Proudhon...). The Stalinist counter-revolution (Marxism-Leninism) was then constructed as an ontologically superior "proletarian science", capable of resolving all questions. This is the most flagrant negation of Marx's critical method; as far as economics is concerned, he has always worked on the critique of political economy without ever finding a new "scientifically superior" economy. This interpretation/falsification was the work of vulgar materialism, based in part on certain aspects of the scientistic positivism of Engels' works in particular (*Dialectics of Nature*), as well as on certain more than ambiguous formulas ("Scientific Socialism"). Contrary to what a superficial and popular reading of the pamphlet might suggest, *"Utopian Socialism and Scientific Socialism"* (excerpted from the chapters of the critical work *The Anti-Düring* by F. Engels) is not at all an apology of "science" against the utopian ideal, but rather a frontal opposition of method.

The **method** of the utopians, whatever their distinctive tendencies and contributions, consists in elaborating the most positive possible project of society, then spreading it everywhere to proselytize, and finally entrusting to the new converts the task of putting their model into practice, whatever the adversities, like the Fourierists' phalansteries, for example. On the contrary, the Marx-Engels method consists in criticizing reality as it is, as rigorously and ruthlessly as possible, without necessarily proposing any positive alternative other than the negation⁴ of the **totality** of what is happening before our eyes. It is also true that Marx and Engels were passionate about certain scientific discoveries of their time and about authors such as Darwin, Joule, Morgan, Justus von Liebig, Thomas Huxley... It should be noted that this is a passion for knowledge and its evolution and that this in no way falls into an uncritical apology.

"The history of science is the history of the gradual elimination of this nonsense or of its replacement by new, but less and less absurd, nonsense. The people who deal with this in turn belong to particular spheres of the division of labor and imagine themselves to be working on an independent ground." F. Engels: Letter to C. Schmidt, October 27, 1890, in *Letters on the Natural Sciences*, Éditions Sociales, Paris, 1974.

Similarly, Marx was to reassess his assessment of Darwin and criticize the anthropomorphic view induced in his *"Origin of Species"* (1859). He wrote: *"It is remarkable how Darwin rediscovers, among the beasts and plants, the society of England with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, 'inventions' and Malthusian 'struggle for existence'. It is Hobbes' bellum omnium contra omnes and is reminiscent of Hegel's Phenomenology, in which civil society figures as an 'intellectual animal kingdom', whereas, in Darwin, the animal kingdom figures as civil society."*⁵ Karl Marx, letter to Friedrich Engels, June 18, 1862.

⁴In fact, the "positive" aspect of the materialist dialectic corresponds to the "negation of the negation". We will return soon to these "philosophical" questions.

⁵Marx, Engels, Correspondence, Volume 7 (1862-64), Éditions sociales, Paris, 1979, letter 24, pp. 50-52.

With the proliferation of new variants (today, omicron is in the lead) and the waves of the pandemic, almost all the "experts" are blatantly out of date. (There is already a talk of the sixth⁶!) The capitalist future seems increasingly "uncertain" and catastrophic. Their "forecasts" have proven to be nothing more than the expression of their ideological predicates. The personifications of this "science of inaccuracy" are now the all-too-famous "experts", whose positions cover the whole range of ideological possibilities, from the spectacular buffoonery of D. Raoult (Macron went all the way to Marseilles to greet him, because you never know, especially in election time) to the Medical Council (les médecins de l'Ordre?).

The microbiology professor has made so many delusional and self-promoting statements that he could give negative credence to the existence of an unspectacular, rational and "honest" science. However, he is nothing but the latest caricature of scientific discourse that, like a new "Doctor Strangelove"⁷ because the "scientist" can say and do everything and its opposite, up to the catastrophic destruction of the planet. Once again, our critique is ineffective on this ground, but one has only to look at the **political** positioning of the "Professor of Gilet-Yaunist Demagoguery" and his official support for Onfray's "Popular Front" electoral movement and his left-right populist friends such as Jean-Claude Michéa and Philippe de Villiers-Zemmour, to see his role as a conduit from the popular and sovereigntist "left" to the more nationalist and xenophobic right. Onfray's recurrent reference to Proudhon is not neutral either, since Proudhon has always played a very specific role in the genesis of fascism.⁸ Like the scripts of TV series, the next season should be exciting to justify the strengthening of the State and who knows, as X-Files already proclaimed, anticipating all conspiracies: "The truth is elsewhere"⁹. Far from the professor's media frenzy, "honest" scientists continue to promote science based on more mature work. They see themselves as representing serious, independent science.

The myth of an independent¹⁰ science operating outside of capitalist constraints has been exposed once again with this so-called health crisis. In his study of the crisis Mike Davis has shown that scientific studies have made it possible certainly to know the risks of the appearance of various coronaviruses, the risks linked to the burning of tropical forests and deforestation, the proliferation of industrial livestock, the explosion of shantytowns, etc. But once these observations were made, science had no capacity to bring about changes in the system of production. Of course, capitalist science has its own successes and advances. But it is incapable of moving in any direction other than the logic of profit. In this case, nothing has been done to combat the deterioration of health systems. No action has been taken to anticipate and invest in the needs associated with a possible pandemic (production of antivirals, new generation antibiotics and universal vaccines).

⁶On the website: https://fr.news.yahoo.com/covid-19-sixieme-vague-les-signaux-qui-inquietent-153953770.html?guccounter=1&gucereferer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlMmNvbS8&gucereferer_sig=AQAAAD2qq6IrYubv0_f9mPkoEoRDEw_h5-h-fEQL_WTr-qOdJzPRUkShTuy

⁷On the website: <https://www.lemagducine.fr/cinema/films-classiques/docteur-folamour-film-stanley-kubrick-critique-22807>

⁸This is true of the "Cercle Proudhon" at the beginning of the 20th century, which emerged from Maurras' Action Française, as it is today with the clique around Onfray and Thibault Isabel: <https://lignesdeforce.wordpress.com/2017/04/25/michel-onfray-se-rapproche-de-lextreme-droite-sous-le-patronage-de-proudhon/> Historian Zeev Sternhell analyzed this shift, which remains rooted in anti-Semitism and patriotism, in: "The Revolutionary Right: The French Origins of Fascism, 1815-1914," Seuil, Paris, 1978.

⁹On the website: <https://www.linternaute.com/television/serie-x-files-aux-frontieres-du-reel-p3116031/la-verite-est-ailleurs-e-3404936/>

¹⁰ Mike Davis: The Monster Among Us: Pandemics and Other Plagues of Capitalism, Éditions divergences, Paris, 2021.

"At the Casale Monferrato meeting, where we took up the critique of Russian development and the history of modes of production, there was talk of the fetishes of technique and science. Unfortunately, there is no detailed account of this. We criticized the false admiration for three centuries of bourgeois science that Russophile "communists" gloat about when they fuss about "spatial" successes. We have criticized specialization, the mania of the modern technician, which creates closed and intolerant circles of sold-out handymen, incapable of any vision of the real natural and social world. We have criticized the bourgeois myth of progress by evoking high civilizations which have disappeared and which, in this sense, are superior to Christian and bourgeois civilization. We have asserted that science, if it is to be secure and "exact," must start from historical politics and not from physics. Today's pundits and academics depend on corporate economics, speculation and plunder. When it comes to fanaticism, these people are as good as yesterday's priests, who are still alive and kicking. The academic and mercantile pharisaism of today is more despicable than the obscurantism of the past, mocked in the name of a progress that was a lie." Programme du communisme intégral et théorie marxiste de la connaissance: II Programma Comunista, n° 20, 1962; <http://www.sinistra.net/lib/pro/producoinf.html>.

2) Class truth or “scientific truths”

The same is true for truth as for morality. It was Trotsky who developed this interesting question through the example of a slave and his master. The lived truth of the slave is his legitimacy to do everything possible to rebel and escape, even at the cost of supposedly immoral methods. That of his master, equally legitimate in the eyes of the slave mode of production, is to do everything possible to preserve his property, even to the point of destroying it because it is his wealth. These two class views are antinomian and correspond to two equally antagonistic truths. Ultimately, only the relation of forces between the classes can decide which of these truths will be realized in practice. The scientist, for his part, will limit himself to rigorously analyzing the metallic qualities of the chain attached to the slave and the "progress" in the evolution of imprisonment techniques.

"Let no despicable enunciator argue that the slaveholder who, with cunning and violence, chains a slave is, in moral terms, equal to the slave who, with cunning and violence, breaks his chains!" L. Trotsky : Leur morale et la nôtre, p.73/74, Jean-Jacques Pauvert éditeur, Paris, 1972.

"Truths", including "scientific truths", are strictly determined by existing social and class relations. They find their reality in practice and in the consciousness of that practice. The question was already resolved in 1845, in Thesis II on Feuerbach: *"The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-sidedness [Diesseitigkeit] of his thinking, in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question."* K. Marx: Ad Feuerbach.¹¹ The search for truth poses another problem: it implies that the struggle against capital, even more so in a period of counter-revolution, is reduced to a struggle of ideas: truth against all false consciousness. All religions are founded on an eternal truth without history and have imposed it to perpetuate the superiority of the ruling classes. But this does not mean that all truths are relative. There is a limit that distinguishes dialectical materialism from relativism.

"Dialectics-as Hegel in his time explained-contains an element of relativism, of negation, of scepticism, but is not reducible to relativism. The materialist dialectics of Marx and Engels certainly

¹¹ On the website: <https://www.marxists.org/francais/marx/works/1845/00/kmfe18450001.htm>

does contain relativism, but is not reducible to relativism, that is, it recognises the relativity of all our knowledge, not in the sense of denying objective truth, but in the sense that the limits of approximation of our knowledge to this truth are historically conditional." Lenin: Materialism and of Empirio-criticism, p.180, Éditions du progrès, Moscou, 1970.

This differentiation is also found in the relativist affirmation that "there is no absolute truth" that does not contain its own contradiction, because if it is true, it must therefore apply to itself. This is the limit of relativism, which does not conceive, like revolutionary Marxism, of **ultimate determination and verification by praxis**. All struggles over ideas not validated by objectified facts thus fall into fideism, which has mostly served the dominant ideology, among others with the revisionists and other negationists. According to them, it is enough to discover a "lie" of any kind to overthrow the whole system, as if it were a mere construct of the mind. It is this grave error of method that has led them to the worst political errors. If these people had kept to the narrow terrain of the workers' struggle and their historical experiences, perhaps they would not have fallen so far. For us, the only truth is the historical truth of the lived experience and revolutionary praxis of the proletariat. This truth is that of the working class as an exploited and revolutionary class and, in case of victory, it will also have to disappear. Until then, the truth of our defeats will also be the defeat of our truths.

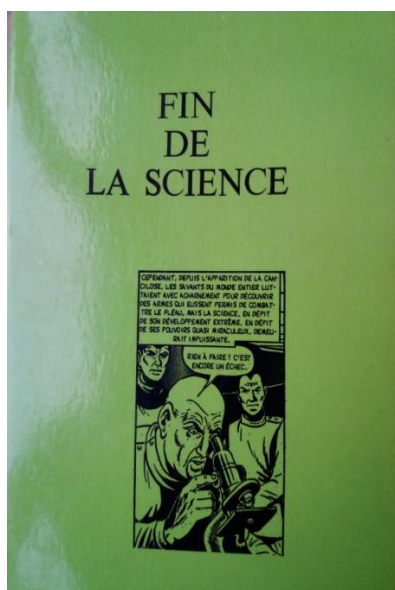
"Our nightmare, and that of all those who do not accept to be rescued indefinitely to restore appearances, will last as long as the acquiescent voices of those who repeatedly beg "Never again" and pray to be rid of the evils whose causes they obstinately wish for domination." R. Riesel : Progress in Domestication, p.77, Éditions de l'Encyclopédie des Nuisances, Paris, 2003.

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Translated by IsaCR.

Appendix to be read on our website: <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/nos-lecteurs>

Correspondence with a scientist: J.



J-L Moinet : Fin de la science

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