

On the Problem of Practice

by Predrag Vranicki

Productive life is, however, species-life. It is life creating life. In the type of life activity resides the whole character of a species, its species character; and free, conscious activity is the species character of human beings.

Karl Marx

It is quite natural and understandable that each epoch of human thought is constricted by corresponding historical and thought traditions. Just as the traditions of the generations that have gone are imprinted upon the consciousness of the living in all fields of life, so are they too in all branches of thought. When we consider our existence, and its meaning, the whole intelligent effort of mankind seems spread before us as a very complex, often somewhat opaque, history of man's consciousness, of his theories concerning himself and concerning being in general.

His consciousness, thought and theory seem at first to be something separate from man's historical and material being. This is expressed in various theses concerning, an assessment of, problems such as: the relation of theory and practice, the reflection of practice in theory, the lagging of theory behind practice, the primacy of one rather than the other.

Certain differentiations of thought also fall into certain traditions. Though further analysis may show this to be conditional or untenable.

Thus, for example, the distinction between being and thought is a historical distinction. If the category of being should by etymology and philosophical use denote something that is, or that something is, then that categorial designation belongs as much to reality in the sense of nature or history, as to thought. To identify nature or reality "outside myself" with the category of being, to place it in opposition to the categories consciousness, thought – is utterly inadequate.

It is quite understandable that the category of "being" can be, as indeed it has been, *very* variously determined, given very different content and even confined, for example, to the natural or the historical. But if only this last is acknowledged as being, then it is a logical inference that thought and consciousness do not exist. This faces us with a problem which is, it seems to me, insoluble on this basis.

The problem we are here trying to consider from this angle, the problem of practice or praxis – is also greatly burdened by tradition. Even the formulation of the problem given above shows the partial position from which many proceed. Just as a whole series of limited, partial occurrences of a simple "practical" action, seem to us quite devoid of any theory, so too do many theoretical preoccupations seem to be unconnected with "practice," seem even to be severed from, or opposed to it.

This is how things appear if we simplify this complex material which we are investigating – the history of mankind, – man's historical life. In single, simplified examples there seem to be many cases when we have practice without theory, when these two seem to be disconnected or in a one-way relationship. Historical reality is, however, much more complex, and the category "practice" also shows very great complexity.

What then we wish here to examine is not any particular practical activity *but practice as the basis of humanity, the philosophical characteristic of man.*

In this sense, following Marx, we see man as par excellence a being of practice, a being who freely and consciously transforms his own life. Practice is an *eo ipso*, polyvalent category for it embraces *all* sides of man's being. We do not need here to repeat what has been said so many times since Marx, and what it is the precondition of all speculation: that man exists and develops only by transforming his natural and social reality and that in this way he transforms himself also.

What interests us here is the structure of the concept of practice in relation to theory, and the structure of the real relations of man as expressed by the category practice.

“Practice” is something which essentially determines the character of man's existence. Here lies his ontological-anthropological meaning. If we did not consider *history* as a lasting laborious conscious-unconscious process, sometimes with, sometimes without perspective in each epoch more radically and deeply transforming natural and historical being – then we should deny any possible rational approach to an explanation of our origins, of the mainstream and the tributaries of life.

Animals too “change” the world, but only in proportion to their relatively un-changeable structure. That is, unconsciously, unfreely, without aiming at development, in a fixed, unplanned, unconsidered, non-revolutionary way. In such “change” there is no historical process, there is a propensity to repetition, “temporality” is seen only as biological growth and ageing, as biological changes, not as historical actions – creations.

Man changes the world, in conformity with his own structure, however not only in conformity with his physical and biological structure, but also with the historical. His transformation of reality means at the same time the transformation of his power over individual and historical structure. *His changing of the world is not a circle but a process.*

And just for this reason man is the only creative being. *So much is he a creature being that his very being and essence are subject to his creation.*

If we embrace the whole of this creativity of man by the concept of practice, then we must conclude that man creates his own history, his historical life, according to the possibilities of his own practice.

And these possibilities are always and only historically given: as the real instruments of production, as the level of technical and scientific development, of social organization, of the technical and cultural profile of individuals, of international relations and influences, etc. Thus, if we turn to the existentialist formula that existence precedes essence, we can perfectly easily reverse it, and say that at the same time essence precedes existence. For man is not just an individual being creating himself independently of the historical structures and processes of which he is a component part. He is to just as great an extent created by all those relations which are historically given.

Practice involves all sides of a man's life so that man is essentially a “practical being.” In his childish games, at work, in family relations, in scientific experiments, in artistic creation, or in his historical acts, man is always in a practical, immediately sensuous relationship to his object (nature, other men, etc.), and not simply in a contemplative relationship.

If practice is essentially conscious, to a greater or lesser extent free, and planned, creation, transformation of a reality which is not only reality of thought, but above all reality of the medium of man's being, that is, natural historical reality then, we repeat, this concept

embraces man in his totality in his family, as a producer, in his political, artistic and scholarly work etc.

In all these practical relations men conduct themselves more or less explicitly, and consciously also in a theoretical way. Man cannot be in any kind of practical relationship towards the world, not even on a very primary and simple level, without some kind of “theory,” without certain purposes, attitudes, concepts, ideas.

However practical man’s life may in essence be it shows itself as such *only* by being at the same time theoretical. The concept of practice shows in this way its three essential sides: the sensuous-concrete the theoretical-abstract, and the emotional-experiencing. Practice is not possible without some definite, emotional attitude in the sense that it must satisfy some kind of need; nor is it possible if it does not sensuously change and create objects and reality; and finally sensuous changing of objects is *not* possible if it is not conscious, planned, theoretical and free.

“A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee in the construction of her cells puts to shame many an architect. But what distinguishes the worst architects from the best of bees is this, that the architect arises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour process we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He does not only effect a change of form in the material in which he works, but also realizes a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi*, and to which he must subordinate his will.” (Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, ch. 5)

The defining of man as a practical being is only possible if practice is understood as a unity of the sensuous and the theoretical activity. The functioning of a machine, (and, even of the simplest tool) is theory put into operation, or the realization of theory. Just as theory (even the simplest) is the sublimation of a certain human creativity, sensuous and theoretical.

In practice the relationship of these two elements is mutual, functional, they condition each other. The relative independence of abstract thought makes it possible for it to lag behind or to anticipate concrete-sensuous activity. In the same way the complexity and spontaneity of man’s sensuous activity (in the first place his productive and historical activity) make it very difficult to produce a simultaneous theoretical view of all these processes.

As the concept of practice embraces the sensuous and the theoretical – it is inadequate to oppose theory and practice, as if they were two things which should be a unity; practice itself, understood as a fundamental function of man, contains both in itself.

To separate them would be to allow the possibility of a kind of practice which did not include consciousness, hypotheses and theory: as if a theory were possible which did not involve the total experience of man’s sensuous activity.

Practice of this kind would be animal practice, and such a theory would be nonsense. It is understandable that there will be nuances of degree here. *There may be various discrepancies of level in what, in the supreme creative moment of practice, is a basic unity. In the same way theoretical activity may be separated out, if we consider individuals who engage in it (in connection with the historical division of labour) but not in reference to history as a totality, in reference to the creation of history as a unified and total act or process.*

To consider the two side by side would mean that man was not a total being, nor was his history a total creation, but that he created various independent and parallel histories, – of technics, physics, science, law, philosophy etc.

Although there is relative independence in all these fields of activity because of division of labour as it has existed up to now, the above mentioned division would destroy the dialectical unity of man as a being of practice, as an individual- and a historical being.

History as the unified life of man, is thus a unified history of the way man has changed the world and created new historical structures: if by this we understand also natural-historical reality, man himself and his highly varied creations (artistic, philosophic etc.).

From this it follows, as more detailed investigation of various epochs would show, that any great discrepancy between man's sensuous and theoretical activity (which is what discrepancy between theory and practice is usually called) never existed nor can possibly exist.

Every one of man's historically determined levels, every level of his practice, is constructed then of a corresponding level of sensuous, and theoretical action. Man's material, social and theoretical practice are found to have indivisible relations with and effects upon one another.

History is the unified work of man. Not one of man's activities exists by itself and for itself alone. Not one can be understood without taking into account whole historical epochs, man's historical existence as a whole, the integrity and polyvalence of his fundamental existence as a being of praxis.

Marx gave plastic expression not only to the thesis of the existence of one single science – history, but also to the thesis that fetish consciousness is an expression of a definite, low level of sensuous existence. "The extent to which the solution of a theoretical problem is a task of practice, and is accomplished through practice, and the extent to which correct practice is the condition of a true and positive theory is shown, for example, in the case of *fetishism*. The sense perception of a fetishist differs from that of a Greek because his sensuous existence is different. The abstract hostility between sense and spirit is inevitable so long as the human sense, for nature, or the human meaning of nature, and consequently the *natural* sense of *man* has not been produced through man's own labor" (E. Fromm., *Marx's Concept of Man. With a Translation from Marx's Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* by T. B. Bottomore, New York 1961, pp. 148-149).

This thesis concerning the united character of human "practicality" or concerning history as the development of human practice – regardless of whether, in the social division of labour, some function more as "theoreticians" and others as "manual workers" – should be adopted as fundamental to analyses and explanations of history.

If the fetishism of primitive people can be explained by the low level of development of their sensuous transformation of reality – which only tells us that, including this fetish consciousness, the level of their practice is low – one can demonstrate the same for every other consciousness and historical being.

In the Europe of antiquity the development of crafts, navigation, warfare and other actions which mean some kind of transformation – had reached a level which, in consideration of the sensuous-transformatory and theoretical-explanatory was much higher than that of the fetish conscious society. But even this level of historical practice in antiquity had its very clearly defined limits: in the whole development of productivity and technique, in social structure and

organization and also in conceptions. The level of man's transformation of the world at that time and his practical experience could only result in the conception of laws, of various kinds of causality and in abstract thought which made itself the object of investigation and which evokes permanent wonder at the great intellect of antiquity. But the level of control of natural processes (which is the counterpart of transformation of reality) was still low, still largely conditioned by an exterior-perceptive relationship towards the problems of reality. That is why their principles have a sense character: air, fire, water etc., atoms and molecules being also given on the basis of perception and thus conceived – in the same way their social thinking is only an expression of one kind of social existence which is that of the *polis*, and the structure of *polis* and tribes have clearly defined bounds.

There is no need here to repeat the example of modern history with its development of concepts of mechanics and mechanisation. We shall only call attention here to this: that only on that historical level of the development of practice where the working class started becoming not only a conscious subject, but also the real creator of history – and this meant that the development of human practice had reached a point where hired labour, that is the proletariat, was possible – was the rounding off of a conception of history made possible in which the sensuous-transformative, economic-productive moment in human practice got its proper place.

As long as the main creators of history were classes or groups which were not closely bound up with production – the economic moment and economic production could not essentially enter into theoretical calculations. The given consciousness of given historical being, of given historical practice had to lay emphasis mainly on what formed the existence of “higher” forms of human activity. Overestimation of ideas, of consciousness and other spiritual demiurges – was the inevitable consequence of a given practical-historical existence.

Contemporary historical practice, with its very high level of transformation of reality, and with it a high level of technics and science is increasingly creating a hitherto unknown unity in our world, and with it mutual dependence, and thus also on the theoretical, and social level concepts which correspond to this level of our “sensuous existence.” Concepts of substance, teleology, various other mystic and pragmatic ideas are disappearing. New conceptions of laws and objects take their place, new ideas of interpersonal relationships, of coexistence etc.

Regardless, then, of to what extent and how the historical division of labour leads one group of people more to sensuous and another more to theoretical activity – a certain level of historical practice includes a certain realization of sensuous and theoretical action.

And the most abstract philosophical thought basically contains in itself the complete natural-historical transformatory and creative activity of man. Man's practice, that is his own history, his work has these two main sides which are the correlatives of each other.

The opposite of practice is not therefore theory, since practice in fact includes theory. The opposite of practice is only “theory” which has no connection with practice, the simple imaginings of a limited consciousness.

In the same way, in so far as the essence of man's existence and development is practice, that is, constant, tireless, laborious, free and creative transformation of the reality in which man is moored – the verification of man's hypotheses cannot be anything else than that practice, that work, that human life which is an endless confrontation of his thoughts and actions, a unity of the sensuous and the theoretical activity.

Wherever we have creativity, free production – we have practice. If theory were unilaterally determined by sensuous action and reduced to being simply a reflection then man would not be a free, creative being, a being of practice. For practice involves the directive moment, foresight, projecting, planning, control etc. Just because theoretical thinking is both a creation and a material and sensuous transformation of things we find in it only the other side of the unified practice of man.

It is here that we have the most profound definition of consciousness as conscious being. Consciousness is the moment of man's sensuous transformation of the world, and that transformation is only made possible by consciousness. One proceeds from the other, one conditions the other. That is why the level of human practice basically corresponds to the level of his given historical consciousness and *vice versa*. That is why essentially historical consciousness, the consciousness of definite historical generations, can never be in advance of their existence, their historical being. The consciousness of each generation is the consciousness of its historical being, for if this were not so – historical practice would be impossible. A certain contradiction, disagreement etc. between historical consciousness and sensuous existence may and must always occur in given epochs. This is for the simple reason that man will never be content with his existence, that the development of new forces (material and spiritual) gives rise to new views, desires, and efforts. But this cannot lead to complete discrepancy, for if it did it would mean the dissolution of man's practice itself. In such a situation there would be no perspective, no way out. Up to now there have only been isolated examples of this – historically it is unimaginable.

If we have seen that man's generic life is free, conscious action which is synonymous with practice, then the wholeness, the totality of man is to be found in the unity of all these moments.

In other words man is a "physical" and a "spiritual" being, and it is only the necessary, and up to a certain level, progressive historical division of labour that has led individuals or groups to one activity or the other.

The fragmentation and crippling of the personality and a whole series of other consequences which result from this division of labour are well known phenomena in man's development.

The situation in which men find themselves be they tethered to a machine or absorbed in advanced specialisation means that they lose some of their important characteristics as beings of practice, width, versatility, theoretical powers, and also some of their sensitivity in a multifaceted relationship not only towards history but towards other men.

Such fragmentation of personality has always been, and always will be the best instrument for various inhuman deeds in the interests of various situations which are to be forced on man.

That is why today, along with the essential task of transforming human practice as it has been up to now, the practice of class domination and of domination over man in general – priority must simultaneously be given to the reintegration of man as a being of practice.

Source: Predrag Vranicki, On the problem of practice, Praxis, 1965,1, pp. 41-48.