



THEORY, CONCEPTS, ANALYSIS and the BANDWAGON

What follows is in the nature of interested comment only. I have noticed the repetitive flaws that a number of analyses of the South African social formation have shown, particularly in their incompleteness, and secondarily in a tendency to enslavement to jargon. This seems to operate in the context of a false dichotomy often posited between 'theory' and 'fact', and has led me to want to examine a methodological misconception which partially underlies some of the above.

It would be pretty well redundant to enter in detail into the grounds of the argument against polarising 'theory' and 'the real world'. Briefly, the position is this: there is no reality unstructured by perception of it. If we pretend this is the case, then we are imposing, unjustified and unexamined, a framework of perception on whatever mug is foolish enough to accept such analysis on its own terms. The elucidation of 'theory' consists in the attempt to specify the framework of perception and subject it to testing. This testing is both of its own internal consistency and of its effectiveness in encompassing and interpreting that which it was designed to interpret.

This is a summary of a position in a debate with wide-ranging implications that has a long and articulate history. More immediately interesting to me is its place in the misuse of various concepts within a body of theory. Cases in point are the notions of 'mode of production' and 'hegemony', both of which have recently been enjoying widespread vogue. This is mildly surprising only inasmuch as they have been around for about a century and half a century respectively.

My impression of the way that these and other concepts have been employed in a number of analyses of the South African social formation relates to an attitude toward theory. Perhaps in turn this attitude relates to the context in which analysis is so often undertaken: the 'separation of disciplines', in which the historian leaves philosophy to the philosophers, the political scientist leaves economy to the economists, the sociologist leaves history to the historian, and so forth, perhaps drawing on certain aspects of their otherwise engaged colleagues' work at need.

This habit of grabbing a notion from another discipline seems paralleled by the way that an explanatory concept is snatched by the busy empirical researcher from a body of theory, or more usually at second hand from some prior work in the field, and thrust among the facts to do its work.

Unfortunately, concepts don't work that way. In the first place, where they have their place in a painstakingly composed and complex body of theory, they are subject to methodological rules laid down in that body of theory, which give them their structure and meaning. In the second place, they are related and also reliant for their meaning on other concepts with which they were formulated, and, used out of context of at least some understanding of how they were derived and what part they play in an explanatory system can result in some weird misconceptions and serve no explanatory function. In the third place, the concepts are not explanatory in themselves. They are tools of perception, not a magic catalyst. Thus it is confusing and impermissible to assemble a body of evidence according to unknown criteria, then attempt to throw in, for example, 'hegemony' as an explanatory coup de grace. The concepts as a whole indicate dynamics to be noted for their relevance, their absence or presence in the field or period under consideration. Their explanatory function is inseparable from their place in the body of theory as a whole, which structures an approach with its interlinking epistemological and methodological basis and the concepts which derive from them.

The proliferation of jargon which conceals meaning rather than elucidates it stems in part from this 'smash and grab' approach to theory. Where one's framework is an integral part of the analytical structure being constructed, any given point can be expressed in several ways, in words of one syllable if necessary. It is when concepts are uneasily superimposed and their distance from the 'facts' more evident than their relevance, that they can only be referred to in rigidly dogmatic terminology.

Equally, the theory itself is not rigid, being a tool and not a dogma. Certain aspects of it are basic, which if ignored render it useless; these in the main are methodological, although some concepts are basic. It is difficult to use the notion of hegemony outside of the premise of class struggle, for example, since it derives crucially from class struggle. This has almost been achieved by some analyses, though.

This is not to say that all social scientists must enter into the equally dubious area which pits concept against concept with no reference to historical analysis. Rather, that one must be aware that theory is integral to analysis, and ignorance of the grounds on which one has chosen to base one's analysis can deform it pathetically.

Since, at least with the science under discussion, historians cannot leave theory to philosophers, or vice versa. By the criteria of historical materialism, all must be scientists, in the sense of having a clear grasp of method and the entirety of the theory, as well as the field they interpret.

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