NOTES AND DISCUSSION

MARR, STALIN AND THE THEORY OF LANGUAGE

The aim of this note is to explore some non-linguistic aspects of the Marr episode in the U.S.S.R. There has been a tendency to examine Marr's work in linguistic terms only, although his speculations entered much wider fields. Where so narrow an examination is made the problem represented by his influence and dethronement is over-simplified: it would appear that a wholly irresponsible trend in a major discipline became dominant in some unaccountable fashion, threatening the very existence of the discipline until Stalin stepped in to rescue the profession. Such a view implies that the Soviet intellectual professions do not deserve that name, and assumptions of this kind should not be left implicit.

The difficulty of making out a coherent theoretical system from Marr's writing is notorious; but lies in part in an over-emphasis on his technical use of his theory, that is, the astonishing employment he makes of his four elements. If we leave on one side his phonological eccentricities, it is easier to understand the coherence of his thought.

His Japhetology seems to begin with his personal conviction that the notion of 'language-families' was not only metaphorical and non-descriptive, but essentially a false metaphor, as misleading in the study of language as, for example, Hesiod's divine families would be nowadays misleading in the study of the material universe. He, therefore, it appears, conceived his task as being an investigation into the actual, historical, non-metaphorical relations between languages and language-groups, and an attempt to describe these relations in a non-metaphorical terminology. The rejection of his attempt by non-Soviet linguists, and by Stalin on sociological grounds, suggests that the difficulty of discovering the coherence of his thought is not only due to his technical linguistic oddities, but also to his failure to meditate upon the conceptual conditions which any such attempt must satisfy.

The main concepts contained in Marr's later work are perhaps most conveniently summarized as follows: all known languages possess a common continuously productive factor: this factor is expressed in the 'elements' which represent the 'linguistic norms of human consciousness'; but the modes of production from this constant and common factor vary from stage to stage: the history of any linguistic continuum, therefore, lies in its achievement of new modal stages. There does not seem to be anything in Marr's later work which is not an attempt to work out this general notion in particular terms; and all the difficulties and eccentricities seem to be inherent in the notion itself, and a necessary result of its employment as a tool of analysis.

For example, the notion of human consciousness *tout pur* is an unhistorical absolute which Marr apparently imagined as a concept parallel to the Marxist concept of economic activity generalized throughout history: so that the idea of modal change in linguistic production was apparently intended to be

parallel to the notion of modal change in economic relations. A lack of meditation is plain here: economic activity is not a real absolute through time, it is a phrase which states the notion that it is possible to make comparisons between, and form general conclusions about, historically different methods of supplying human wants, *among which* metabolism and procreation in a gregarious species may for purposes of sociological (as distinct from biological and other physical) inquiry be regarded as constants. But it is not quite fair to accuse Marr of falling completely into this simple error: he made some attempt to refine his absolute concept in three ways: (1) by the hypothesis of the historical succession of gesture and spoken language, that is, the setting of a historical horizon to the emergence of specifically human consciousness; (2) by his placing of language in the 'superstructure', that is (as he understood the term), among the relatively deliberate intellectual or spiritual creations of humanity as distinct from those social phenomena which arise 'independent of their will'; and (3) by his various suggestions about successive modes of thought — totemic, cosmic-anthropomorphic, logical and so forth. These modes of thought seem to have been conceived as associated both with modes of economic activity on the one hand and modes of linguistic production on the other; and again a lack of meditation is plain: Marr seems to employ the unstated assumption that the economic mode is directly and automatically mirrored in the mode of thought, and this in mode of linguistic production from the 'elements'. This would imply not only that 'economic activity', 'human consciousness' and the 'linguistic norms' were real absolutes, but also that their relations of cause and effect were real constants, variety in result being due merely to the quantitative increase of knowledge in techniques of the production of material goods, in varying historical circumstances in the different linguistic continua.

Thus it would appear that in attempting the construction of non-metaphorical concepts, Marr found exactly the same difficulty as other linguists, the difficulty which is perhaps the central philosophical problem in the discipline: namely that there appear to be regularities of linguistic change which are 'independent of the will' of the speakers, yet speech always has its immediate cause in some kind of thought or consciousness. Marr seems to have attempted a solution which he believed was parallel to the Marxist solution of the similar problem in economics: that men's partially knowledgeable actions and aspirations find a social issue which was quite unforeseen and often contrary to their individual desires: the linguistic parallel would be that men's partially knowledgeable thought finds an issue in speech-communication which is a social activity unwatched and uncontrolled in its general regularities, and changing without reference to individual desires. But the two are not in fact analogous: in economic activity, however complex, man acts upon actual matter, whose laws he may use, but not abrogate, so that he is bound by them individually and socially; in thought and speech he is concerned directly with his fellows, and only through the thought proper to his culture, and so indirectly, with natural matter. (It is not necessary in this connection to discuss the physical limitations of the speech organs, since no language exhausts their possibilities; nor the physical limitations of the

brain, since these are unknown.) The laws of linguistic change, whether in sound or meaning, are not therefore lightly to be assumed to have the same mode of operation as the laws of material motion. That Marr did make this assumption is a fair inference from his 'norms of consciousness' — automatic productions of the brain, equivalent in his linguistic theory to the natural matter worked by man in economic activity; and from his wild speculation that in time the communication of thought would be freed from natural matter, just as the techniques of productive and economic activity will use natural laws so expertly that they may practically be said to abrogate them.

It is not difficult to see why Marr believed that he had created a Marxist theory of language, since he so closely imitated the Marxist theory of economic activity, and this imitation was not merely mechanical, but shows a certain mastery of Marxism imagined as an idiom of thought, with characteristic terms and associations. It is fairly plain that he imagined Marxism and other idioms of thought as being equally concerned with reality, and differing in their relations to reality in much the same way as languages do — in place or date rather than precision or capacity for analytical expression.[1] But such a superficial facility, even when combined with Marr's range of sympathy, is not sufficient equipment for the task which Marr set himself: it does not make possible an inquiry into the value of concepts as tools of analysis, or the isolation and discarding of assumptions; and it is plain that Marr never followed out the necessary implications of his notions. Consequently, although he shares his point of departure with many other linguists, he in practice used the name of Marxism to avoid — and, indeed, to declare war upon — such critical appraisals of concepts and ideas as are to be found in recent general linguistics.

Stalinist thought, and Soviet thought in general, regards what may here conveniently be called Marxism as an intellectual activity[2] in quite a different manner, using the name of Marxism to bring together, at any particular moment of our contemporary time, all methodical usages in all sciences and disciplines which have proved their capacity for the increase of knowledge, both as against their competitors, and, of course, as judged by those responsible in Soviet society. Two general consequences follow from this: that all such methodical usages, whatever their origins, are related (with or without critical modification) to the principles which have their roots in Marx's own

[1] When Marr speaks of linguistic capacity for analytical expression he seems in fact to be misusing the term, for in his exposition of his notion that flexion is a *system* of linguistic expression he implies that at the time when it was invented and adopted, it could be adopted as a system, independently of the vocabulary in which it was in fact found. But at such a date the phenomena associated with 'word-magic', in which the *name* is held to be an attribute of the object, not an invention by the subject, needs to be very fully borne in mind, and this Marr does not do – i.e. he does not in fact consider what analytical capacity involves, or its actual historical predecessors, but works on an unstated and unconscious assumption that it is a constant varying in result only according to the ignorance or knowledge of facts in the culture concerned.

[2] I am here using a distinction which Soviet thought regards as impermissible in principle, and unreal in effect. The distinction between intellectual and organizational activity is, in the Soviet view, neither a fact nor a legitimate ideal. But at the moment, the organizational side of the complex Marxist activity is not our concern, and the distinction is therefore convenient.

work, and so are brought in to the general constellation of ideas which goes by the name of Marxism; and that all methodical usages *in any field* which have proved less valuable are designated as non-Marxist.[3] In this situation it is inevitable that the basic principles brought out by Marx himself should be so restated and enlarged as to have the appearance of platitudes — and for some of the sciences, even outside the Soviet Union, they are in fact commonplaces: in the case of these sciences the difference between the Soviet and non-Soviet positions seems to lie mainly in the Soviet emphasis on consistent adherence to these principles, as contrasted with the non-Soviet wariness about a consistent rigidity of thought which might militate against a more naive accuracy of observation.[4] But this is in fact a question of emphasis within a problem which is essentially the same in both the Soviet and non-Soviet practices in the sciences concerned. In certain respects, therefore, and for certain departments of inquiry, the Soviet notion of 'Marxism' is closely parallel to the non-Soviet notion of 'scientific method'. But there is a very important difference of tradition and custom even within the sciences for which this parallel is valid: namely that during the last three generations, when Russian thought as a whole (and not merely Bolshevik thought) has been adopting the name and principles of Marxism — or, in superficial cases, its idiom and terminology — as the means of acquiring exact knowledge, non-Soviet thought in general has pursued the same end through concentrating on the logical and mathematical criticism and analysis of concepts. In a number of fields, this criticism and analysis is by now very refined, so that much Soviet thought seems extremely crude; but it remains a quite open question whether non-Soviet thought is not in danger of finding itself without the heavy tools required for certain basic intellectual tasks, and of these tasks the supersession of the family metaphor in linguistics may be one.

Marr's own war against the general linguistic tradition was not waged without heavy tools: but a moment's consideration shows that his notion of a factor which was continuously productive, but issuing in different modes, bears no relation whatever to Marxist thought; it is recognizably a version of the Aristotelian notions of Essence, Potentiality and Existence. It is likely that Marr himself was quite unaware of this, but his first specialization was the editing of mediæval Caucasian theological and other texts, and it seems probable that this work gave his thought its shape. It can hardly be denied that the move from a Hesiodic to an Aristotelian equipment of ideas was a very considerable intellectual achievement; but it is also undeniable that it is not enough of a movement to serve as the foundation for a modern 'scientific method' or 'Marxist teaching' in linguistic theory, as all Marr's detailed work, and the work of his disciples, has amply demonstrated. But the chief interest, in the upshot, of Marr's work lies not in the linguistic field as a specialist discipline at all, but in the fact that it has led to the completer fashioning of some heavy tools in the Marxist workshop of sociological inquiry.

[3] The acceptance of Pokrovsky's historical work at one time as Marxist and at another as non-Marxist is perhaps the most familiar example of this habit.

[4] I am not here concerned to elaborate the generally accepted fact that 'naive' observation actually employs methods and techniques rooted in consistent thought, so that the wariness mentioned is by no means complete.

Stalin's observations on linguistics are mainly concerned to insist that, since languages are social phenomena, the heavy tools required are those common to the other Soviet social studies (and socio-political practice), but that some elaboration of their traditional form is required before they can be set to use on the problem of linguistic theory. Stalin's first observation, on 'basis' and 'superstructure' in society, remains esoteric and almost irrelevant unless it is understood that the predications that any social phenomena 'belong to the basis' or 'belong to the superstructure' are regarded as both mental and extramental categories, and that the *meaning* of the mental category is found, not by conceptual analysis, but by inspection of the extramental phenomenon.[5] Stalin is therefore contending, in his first observation, that the mental categories 'basis' and 'superstructure' are not sufficiently numerous for an adequate description of the extramental categories actually found in society, and that linguistic theoretical work requires the creation of at least one more mental category. The contention forms a singularly instructive example of the nature of progress possible within Soviet Marxism, where concepts are kept so firmly glued to the extramental phenomena that their alteration is impossible unless the extramental phenomenon changes;[6] so that the new observation of a phenomenon (even though it may have been previously not only existent, but obvious) may require the creation — by methods well rooted in Marx's own work — of a new mental category. The example is also instructive as showing the irrelevance of much conceptual analytical work to the philosophical methodology permissible within Soviet Marxism: and the glueing together of the mental and extramental categories accounts both for the widespread feeling among those experienced in conceptual analysis that Soviet Marxist thought is cumbered with extraneous matter, and the feeling implicit in many Soviet critiques that western thought bears no consistently predictable relation to reality.

The particular example of the raising of the fact of production to the status of a category within society is also of historical interest, for while previous Marxist discussions of the social factors recognize the phenomenon of productive activity, even in 1938 Stalin still discusses the phenomenon as a fact merely,[7] and does not accord it categorical status. The philosophical development has therefore taken place in the years 1938-50, and coincides in time with the emergence of coexistent capitalist and socialist productive relations that form capitalist and socialist 'bases', resting on generally identical large-scale industrial productive techniques. The formation of the new category therefore implies a considerable modification of the rather mechanico-determinist view of the relations between productive techniques and productive relations in classical Marxism, and emphasizes the part played by human consciousness and will in the formation of human economic and social organ-

[5] Of course, this inspection is not regarded as naive observation, but is (ideally) to be performed in accordance with the principles of Marxist epistemology.

[6] The impossibility of alteration is held to come into force only when the process of observation and definition is complete, has passed through its 'ideological' stage (see *Soviet Studies*, vol. I, No. 3, p. 219, note 8). In the case of 'basis' and 'superstructure' the definition was completed by Marx himself.

[7] *CPSU (b)*, pp. 119ff (1939 edition).

izations. The relevance of this emphasis on consciousness in the social 'basis' to the future Marxist linguistic theory is, perhaps, likely to be great; but the exact use of the emphasis is a matter of detailed historical inquiry, into which Stalin does not enter.

In the first of his observations, therefore, Stalin creates, for the linguists in particular, and the Soviet social sciences in general, a new heavy tool, leaving to the specializations concerned the modifications necessary for particular jobs. In his second observation he contends that certain uses made by the linguists of the Marxist concepts of 'class' and 'society' do not conform to Marxist principles of thought. In the course of this exposition Stalin makes some statements about phenomena which are once more of considerable historical interest. He emphasizes again the already familiar statement that economic classes exist in socialist society, but that they are 'not antagonistic' to one another, i.e. that their interaction is constructively organized, not blindly destructive. This is the third stage in the development of Marx's own theory of 'class-struggle' as set forth in 1848; the second was due to Engels, when he altered 'All history is the history of class-struggle' to 'All *written* history is the history of class-struggle'. But Stalin moves forward, in this present passage, to a fourth stage, again away from the comparatively mechanico-determinist view of classical Marxism. This fourth stage is found in the statement that the 'class-struggle', even in its 'antagonistic' form, is conducted within societies; and that the classes concerned prefer to maintain their society rather than pursue their contentions blindly into a common ruin. Here again, as in the matter of productive techniques, the fact has long been existent and obvious: indeed Professor Carr has recently suggested[8] that such a more than class-consciousness was an immediate and inevitable consequence of Marx's own work. Whether this is so or not (and it is in some respects a persuasive suggestion), there is not much evidence that Marx noted it himself; yet in this country at least this more than class-consciousness has perhaps been the most fertile, as well as one of the less articulate, of the sources for opposition to classical Marxism. It is of the greatest interest that this fourth stage of the theory of 'class-struggle' has not been reached in those capitalist societies where such a more than class-consciousness is one of the most important political factors.

This fourth stage in the development of the notion of the 'class-struggle' necessarily implies that it is the society, and not its constituent classes, which is to be taken as the phenomenal unit. This is consistent with Stalin's own epistemological views as finally set out in 1938, and is a development inherent in the simplification of such originally Hegelian notions as Stalin has retained. Marr's speculations on the relations between language and class, on the other hand, belong to that trend of development which otherwise seems to be endemic in the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, of taking the class rather than the society, the *logical* category rather than the triad, as the *phenomenal* unit.[9]

[8] *The Bolshevik Revolution* 1917-23, vol. I, p. 42.

[9] This went so far in some of Marr's work that he explicitly spoke of 'classes' in 'pre-class society', which is again evidence that he regarded Marxism as an idiom of thought. His terminological difficulties seem to arise from his attempts to use a set of

Stalin's third observation, on the characteristic features of language, is a particular elaboration of this epistemological view of the phenomenal unit of sociology, and the abandonment of Marr's theory of linguistic leap necessarily follows from it: since what 'leaps' in general Marxist sociological theory is the relation of internal forces *within* the phenomenal unit, so that language can only be supposed to 'leap' strictly, if it is regarded as a property (as distinct from a product) of that relation, or more loosely, if it is seen as a property of one or more of the related forces, the classes.

The remainder of Stalin's observations are either explanatory or organizational, and need not concern us here.

The works of Marr and Stalin on the common ground between general Marxist sociology and specific linguistic theory are fascinating in the light they throw on the society which bred both men: and the comparison should not be limited to the contrast between Marr as an amateur sociologist and Stalin as an amateur linguist, but taken over the whole of the common ground of their subject matter. When such a comparison is made, it appears that Marr's heart — his sympathy and receptivity — and Stalin's head are both formidable organs, and that their society is such that in the matter of linguistic theory the state of Stalin's heart — his capacity for generosity — is irrelevant, but the uses to which Marr put his head have had considerable consequences. This unsentimental appearance is perhaps not wholly credible: but credible or not, it is a phenomenon for study.

Another and more general historical problem arises out of certain plain but as yet unstudied and undefined common factors between Stalin's developments of Marxist sociology, and a frequent rather inarticulate criticism of classical Marxism outside the U.S.S.R. We have noted the outstanding points in this connection covered by Stalin's recent observations, which amount to a more flexible approach than Marx's own to the problems of sociological causality and process. This flexibility is not, however, the result of an empirical approach such as we should take for granted in a western natural science; but has apparently developed, at least in Stalin's mind, through the use of those double mental and extramental categories already mentioned, and the enriching of their mental aspect by experience in handling their phenomenal aspects, which has been *made* to result in a greater simplicity and precision in the mental aspect, rather than *allowed* to blunt or wear away their conceptual form. This means of achieving flexibility is not characteristic of non-Soviet thought: yet the result is that Stalin has gone a considerable way to meet one of the important, if not very articulate, western criticisms of classical Marxism. We may then properly contrast Stalin's development of the original Hegelian-Marxist tradition (a development which discards the terminology but adheres strictly to the underlying conceptions of the constitution of a phenomenal unit), with Marr's generation of scientists and scholars, who revered the terminology but possessed no real grasp of the underlying conceptions. And we may also contrast the period of adoption and develop-

concepts which was hopelessly inadequate to the treatment of the material on which he worked. The wide variations in his definitions from one time to another display this confusion of thought, and receptivity to fact and feeling, very clearly.

ment up to the present of the double mental and extramental categories in Russia and the U.S.S.R. (in spite of their plainly rather rough-hewn relation to reality), with the development of the two traditions of conceptual analysis and wariness in face of a possible rigidity of thought which has taken place contemporaneously outside the Russian and Soviet areas, in spite of the plain dangers of preciosity and blindness. The more general historical problem that arises is, therefore, this: is there an element of truth worth further consideration in the suggestion that the Marxist and non-Marxist streams of thought during the first half of the twentieth century were so different, and so far apart, that contact between them tended to result in an amalgam of the worst in both; and if now some small identity of a conclusion is established between them, may a new and more fruitful period in their interaction be forming under our eyes?

M. MILLER