5 Marxist Realism in Sociology

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter sets out to show how the realist theory of science, as elucidated in Chapter 4, has become espoused as a methodological option within the sociological tradition. It indicates how the methodological principles which were explored with reference to Keat's argument in Chapter 4 have become advanced in (some of) the sociological literature. The literature which is referred to is clearly not meant to offer a portrayal of all of the proponents of a realist position within sociology. The aim is rather to portray how certain authors have elucidated the necessity for the adoption of this kind of methodological stance.

Following the structure of the book thus far, this chapter too will be laid out in terms of the four themes which have been isolated in the previous chapters.

5.2 THE DEFINITION OF SOCIOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

Various authors have specifically directed their attention towards considering the theme of sociological knowledge from a Marxist realist point of view. The intention of these authors is to show that the positivist theory of knowledge, which both inspires and justifies the mainstream of research in sociology, needs to be replaced by an alternative theory – which can be used to inspire and justify a different type of research tradition within sociology. Their argument is that in particular the findings of researchers working within the Marxist tradition should not be judged by utilising the positivist conception of what constitutes 'knowledge'.

McLennan, in his *Marxism and the Methodologies of History*, speaks of the 'new realists' who have all directed their efforts at outlining the principles of this alternative theory of scientific knowledge (1981:32). He notes that the 'new realist' position is based on the argument that
'concrete phenomena . . . do not themselves have any privileged status' and hence must be 'explained by causal and other sets of propositions' (1981:32). The 'new realist' position, according to McLennan, claims that:

Marxism postulates generative mechanisms at the level of the mode of production, which help to explain the nature and development of historical and empirical problems or phenomena. (1981:32)

In terms of McLennan's formulation, the new realist position provides the rationale for the investigation of the powers of the generative mechanisms operative within the different modes of production in society. The realist position thus makes provision for scientific attempts, both to uncover the causal mechanisms operating in the different modes of production and to indicate how the structure of these mechanisms leads to the generation of particular (concrete) phenomenal outcomes.²

The realist position is, like positivism, a conception of science which may be either more or less consciously (explicitly) formulated by sociological researchers engaged in specific investigations. Researchers undertaking investigations into social reality do not all explicitly refer to the model of research which underlies their investigation. Within the new realist tradition in sociology – just as within the positivist tradition – authors differ in their degree of attention devoted to outlining methodological principles. Some (more 'philosophically-inclined') authors devote their attention solely to outlining the methodological principles involved in attempts to arrive at scientific knowledge. Other authors are more 'research-inclined' – relying implicitly on a particular conception of scientific knowledge, but leaving the task of explicitly formulating this conception to 'the philosophers'. And yet others are researchers who at the same time take pains to indicate explicitly the methodological tenets underlying their research. The work of Erik Olin Wright provides an example of the last mentioned type of approach: Wright's research investigations are at the same time consciously and explicitly accounted for in terms of a particular (realist) model of scientific knowledge. His work thus serves as a useful indication of research work conducted in terms of realist principles.

5.2.1 Research in terms of realist principles: an example

In undertaking his investigation of the class structure of advanced capitalist societies, Wright asserts that the 'antagonistic' relationship