CHAPTER 31

PREDICTION IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

If we knew the constituents of social, economic, and political systems and were successful in discovering and measuring their functional connections, we would have genuine knowledge of how the systems operate. Given the initial conditions, we would be able to predict the state of the system at any future time. Marxism-Leninism makes claim of having attained this kind of knowledge about social reality. Its predictive power with respect to social, economic, and political phenomena provides, therefore, a crucial test of the validity of this claim. If it is true, Marxism-Leninism as an applied science should be able to make predictions of the behaviour in some specified set of circumstances of various groups and of the outcome of complex social processes.

The predictive power of the social sciences is, however, still very limited. Even economics or political economy (Marxist-Leninists use the latter term, associated with the classical political economy and the theory of Marx, and leave the former to the present-day followers of what Marx called ‘vulgar economy’), the most advanced among them, did not manage to become an applied science, that is, to predict fairly accurately the effects of alternative economic policies. An economist cannot be compared with a dam or bridge constructor who calculates with great precision the quantity and quality of materials required to carry out his work. Although political economy is apparently vastly superior to economics, it does not claim an advantage in predictive power over economics.

In spite of their lack of success in the most advanced of the social sciences, Marxist-Leninists contend that in social matters knowledge of the future is not beyond their power. Bukharin confidently stated that ‘prediction is possible in the domain of the social sciences as well as in that of the natural sciences’. He qualified this statement by the proviso that since Marxism-Leninism does not claim to know the ‘velocity of the social processes’, it cannot predict the time of their occurrence but only their direction. Otherwise he had no doubt that the predictive power of the Marxian and Marxist-Leninist doctrines has been fully confirmed by the whole subsequent course of events. Deborin was even more confident than Bukharin. In his view, Marx created an ‘absolutely new science’ characterised by its ability to ‘foresee the ways of future historical development’.

Popper defines historicism as an ‘approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their principal aim’. Popper’s definition applies perfectly to Schaff’s approach. ‘Historical prediction’, Schaff wrote, ‘is a component part of the science of history . . . . The laws of social development are not only objective, but also knowable. This is revealed by the practice of predicting social development, the prediction being based on the knowledge of historical laws’. It is clear from Schaff’s argument that in his opinion successful predictions concerning future social development were made in the past by applying
the laws of historical materialism to this effect and that these successful predic-
tions should be regarded as confirmation of the truth of historical materialism. There is a point in this argument which would win the support of numerous thinkers. The predictive success of a theory is widely considered as convincing evidence in its favour. The important condition to be satisfied is that the prediction has in fact been made by taking advantage of the theory in question. We should distinguish a lucky guess in foretelling the future from a forecast and from a prediction. A lucky guess is saying in advance what happens to come true; it is not a prediction, for it is not based on evidence. Clairvoyance, prophecy and anticipation fall into this category. They are the province of visionaries and dreamers, but also of politicians and men of action. The latter foretell, as an act of faith, the course of distant events or state that the future will display a certain trait and realise a desired possibility, discerned more or less dimly as one among many courses the events might take.

Notwithstanding his historical materialism, Marx was aware of the fact that ideas and beliefs may pave the way for social realities. For men are urged into action by what they think to be the case and by what does not necessarily have to be the case. It sometimes happens, therefore, that something actually occurs because people think and act as if it were bound to occur. 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences', stated the American sociologist W. I. Thomas. For the definition is in this case an integral part of the situation and consequently can influence the subsequent behaviour. Sociology has recently begun to study the effects of beliefs or acts of faith on the course of events and has reached the conclusion that they might be important causes as well as instruments of attaining long-range aims. They have been given the name of 'self-fulfilling prophecies'. A self-fulfilling prophecy ‘is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come true’⁷⁰. A sociological 'prophetic prediction' is itself a social fact, closely connected with action, and its power of creating what has been predicted is perhaps less mysterious than it might appear at first sight. This is even clearer in the case of a self-defeating prophecy, that is, of a prophecy which cannot be made without destroying the success of what is prophesied. The self-fulfilling and self-defeating prophecy clearly applies to what is within our control. However, the fact that it makes no difference whether anybody writes down a prediction of the sun's eclipse and that it might make a tremendous difference whether a sociological prophecy is made or not constitutes a puzzling problem when it is followed up and considered in detail.

Although a clairvoyant or a prophet or a man of action need not always be wrong, when he happens to be right he does not achieve anything more than a lucky guess. This is meant to indicate that no logical principle which implies what has been guessed is involved in foretelling the future.

A forecast is a conjectural estimate of future things, based on the analysis of a trend or a tendency. Meteorological or demographic forecasts provide the best examples of such conjectural estimates. They are genuine extrapolations based on the assumptions that certain specific initial conditions would persist. They