NEOPositivism, MarxIsm, and Idealization: Some Comments on Professor Nowak's Paper

Abstract. The paper is a discussion of the idealizational interpretation of the dialectical Marxist methodology of science which has been worked out and applied in a diversity of ways by L. Nowak and the other members of the so-called Poznań school. I examine the sense in which, and the extent to which, this methodology is or can be said to be dialectical. Subsequently, I discuss and criticize Nowak's claim that this methodology can function at the same time as a meta-methodology; I do this in connection with a corresponding and equally questionable claim put forward by I. Lakatos, and with one of Nowak's concrete examples, which is meant to show that certain developments in neopositivist methodology of science followed his (meta-)methodology. Lastly, I comment on the normative-descriptive character of Nowak's methodology, examine its adequacy as a comprehensive account of science, compare it with alternative accounts of the place and role of idealizations in science, and raise the question of whether Nowak's idealizational theory of socio-economic formation is a refutation or a dialectical negation of Marx's historical materialism.

1. Introduction

In an impressive series of publications, Professor Nowak (in part together with his collaborators) has worked out at once a novel interpretation of the dialectical method employed by Marx in Capital and, correspondingly, a particular conception of science in general and its essential method. His basic claim is that these methods coincide. They are construed by him as a method of idealization and concretization; in particular, he argues that the picture of scientific development implied by this methodological conception satisfies the requirements of his (categorial, as he calls it) interpretation of dialectics (p. 200).

Professor Nowak has employed his methodological proposal in a variety of ways. It is characteristic of his approach that he applies his methodology even to itself: he regards his account of the scientific method as well as his interpretation of the procedure followed by Marx as idealizational theories that will have to be further concretized (1980, pp. 106f). Thus, his methodology is supposed to be self-sufficient; it is meant to be at the same time its own meta-methodology. In his contribution to this volume (pp. 195–218), 'Marxism and Positivism, or, Dialectics in Books and Dialectics in Action',

he puts his methodology to yet other uses. After a comparison of his idealizational, or Marxian, view of science with the positivist or neopositivist view, he goes on to highlight a contrast, in terms of these views, between the neopositivist research practice and the Marxist and, especially, Marxist-Leninist research practice. He comes to the conclusion that (neo)positivism, despite its wrong idea of science,\(^3\) has developed in a Marxist, truly scientific manner, whereas Marxism, with its correct view of science, has in the period since Marx been proceeding in a positivistic, primitively cumulative fashion (p. 205). The question, especially as concerns Marxism, is, for Nowak, why this has been so. In his attempt at an answer, Professor Nowak restricts his discussion to historical materialism and its fate. He points out ambiguities in Marx's original conceptions and, employing again his methodological ideas, he outlines a coherent alternative theory which, as he says, dialectically negates Marxian historical materialism and which he uses for displaying in detail several theoretical incongruities contained in it. Finally, he offers a persuasive explanation (in terms of social interests) of why Marx's original, ambiguous and erroneous conceptions have been retained by Marxist-Leninists and why, therefore, they have developed historical materialism in an anti-Marxist manner.

I shall not be able to do full justice to Professor Nowak's philosophical work or even to his contribution to this issue. Thus, I shall have to leave a complete evaluation of his idealizational interpretation of Marx's own method, which will include its comparison with other interpretations,\(^5\) to Marxologists, and that of his analysis and constructive proposal concerning historical materialism to experts in that area. In the main I shall restrict myself to commenting on certain general aspects of the dialectical methodology of idealization, especially inasmuch as they are apparent in his present contribution, and on its relation to science and neopositivism. I shall first outline and discuss the idealizational methodology itself as well as the question of its dialectical character. Secondly, I shall investigate Nowak's problematic claim that his methodology is self-sufficient, or applicable to itself, and certain ramifications of that claim. I shall do this in comparison with other methodologies of science and by scrutinizing Nowak's example of a dialectical development in neopositivist methodology. Lastly, after some comments on the mixed, normative and descriptive, character of the idealizational methodology, I shall dwell on the question of its adequacy as an account of science, on the question of the role and nature of idealizations