

Ryle and Marx on Absurdities

Juraj Halas

Comenius University in Bratislava

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to show that Karl Marx's critique of political economy can be interpreted as a critique of what philosophers have termed "category-mistakes". Therefore, I first turn to the origins of this term in Gilbert Ryle's "Categories", to further developments in "Philosophical Arguments" and in P. F. Strawson, as well as to W. H. Walsh's approach to categories, to establish a workable meaning of the term "category-mistake". In the second part, I briefly discuss some of the previous uses of this term in exegeses of Marx. Based on Marx's writings and D. Sayer's work on Marx's methodology, I then explicate the meaning of Marx's term "economic category". Finally, I arrive at an interpretation of Marx's critique of economic theories as an analysis concerned with the improper use of theoretical concepts. By way of conclusion, I offer some general remarks on one important aspect of critique in Marx and in social science in general.

Keywords: categories, category-mistakes, critique in social science, critique of political economy.

1 Introduction

In their seminal (1977), Fay and Moon pose the intriguing question: "What is the role of critique [in social science]?" The following is an attempt to elaborate on just one of the facets of the answer to this question. In my view, any inquiry into the question could do much worse than take a particular enterprise in social science that is of sufficient scope and deems itself critical as an exemplification of critique and a starting-point of analysis. Therefore, I shall concentrate in this paper on a part of Marx's theoretical *œuvre* represented chiefly by the manuscripts of the three volumes of *Capital*, as well as the other so-called

“economic manuscripts”. As one of the major classical social theories, I believe it is wide enough in scope to provide ample material for methodological analysis. Moreover, it explicitly states its “critical” aims: the subtitle of *Capital* reads “A Critique of Political Economy”.¹

As I shall try to show, an important part of the “critique” in Marx’s *Capital* is a critique of specific kinds of defects in the claims of classical economic theory. These defects can be summarily characterized as “category-mistakes” because they result from the misuse of “categories”. Such mistakes, Marx thought, have the very unfortunate outcome for economic theories that they render them inconsistent or at least incapable of providing adequate, rational explanations of social phenomena. Marx’s goal was to provide a critique of these mistakes, that is, to identify them, think through their consequences, and attempt to remedy them by using “categories” properly.

If “critique” as it has been used in the philosophical and scientific tradition is an equivocal term, then much the same must be said of “category”. Thus before approaching Marx’s critique as a sort of a preoccupation with categories, one first has to explicate the latter term. However, let me first turn to a concept which, while apparently as unclear as the other two, is closely tied to one of the figures of 20th century analytic philosophy. In the first part, I deal with G. Ryle’s introduction of “category-mistakes” in his famous “Categories”, as well as with the subsequent developments and criticisms in P. F. Strawson and W. H. Walsh. This should provide the necessary background for the second part, in which I turn to Marx and the content of his “critique”.

2 Ryle on category-mistakes

As Strawson (2008, 119) would later remark, “The matter is introduced by Ryle [...] in a sufficiently striking way”. Ryle’s “Categories”, originally published in 1938, are actuated by the following claim:

Doctrines of categories and theories of types are explorations in the same field. [...] The matter is of some importance, for not only is it the case that category-propositions (namely assertions that terms

¹ In the original English translation, the German “Kritik der politischen Ökonomie” was translated as “A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production”. The more recent translation by Fowkes (cf. Marx 1976b) used here corrects this shortcoming.

belong to certain categories or types) are always philosophers' propositions, but, I believe, the converse is also true. (Ryle, 2009a, 178)

Hence investigations in "categories" are an essential part of doing philosophy. Ryle is concerned with the fundamentals of such scrutiny, and proceeds as follows. In a sentence-frame such as " ϕ is in bed", the gap-sign ϕ can be complemented with all kinds of terms to form a full sentence. Certain grammatical principles of the English language rule out terms like "wrote", "although" or "alas". On the other hand, "Sleeping Beauty", "a pillow" and "Saturday" all seem like valid candidates for substitution. The substitution of ϕ with "Saturday", while perfectly correct from the point of view of grammar, results in the sentence "Saturday is in bed", which strikes us as *prima facie* absurd. As a day of week, "Saturday" cannot be in bed in any meaningful way, unlike "Sleeping Beauty" or "a pillow". In this sense, "Saturday", "the State", "the Holy Spirit", and other terms form a group distinguishable from the group containing "Sleeping Beauty", "pillows", "pets" and still other terms.

Call these groups "categories" or "types", and the terms used for substitution "sentence-factors" or "proposition-factors". According to Ryle, the absurdity of a sentence or proposition such as "Saturday is in bed" is the result of improper use of categories, of a type-trespass. The proposition-factor "Saturday" cannot meaningfully complement the sentence-frame " ϕ is in bed", because it is of a different category or type than the frame requires.

The example of a sleepy Saturday is, of course, trivial. However, as Ryle says, it is ultimately of the same kind as more "insidious" type-trespases like "I am now lying" (Ryle 2009a, 188). While the absurdity of the former example is visible in plain sight, absurdities of the latter kind "manifest themselves in the generation of contradictions or vicious circles" (Ryle 2009a, 188). Such category-mistakes can go unnoticed, and for Ryle it is precisely the task of philosophy to prevent thought from falling into such traps: "Philosophy is the replacement of category-habits by category-disciplines" (Ryle 2009c, lxi).

The fundamental concern, then, is to explicate the criteria which enable one to discover such "type-heterogeneities", i.e. to delineate the categories of proposition-factors. As we shall see, Ryle's attempt to provide clear-cut criteria ultimately failed, but that did not prevent him from providing insights relevant to the present paper.

2.1 Delineating categories

Ryle makes it clear that his approach to categories differs significantly from the historical tradition. First of all, it is “pure myth”, he says, that there can be a “finite catalogue of types” or categories (Ryle 2009a, 187). Moreover, while much of both Aristotle’s and Kant’s intuitions on the subject can be helpful in the inquiry Ryle proposes, others lead to a dead end.

Apart from concentrating on just a subset of propositions, namely simple singular propositions – which leads to problems of its own – Aristotle “does not recognize that the types of factors control and are controlled by the logical form of the propositions into which they enter” (Ryle 2009a, 183). Thus, in Aristotle, “no connexion was established between the formal properties of propositions which render inferences embodying them possible or impossible and the formal properties or types of the terms or other factors in them” (Ryle 2009a, 183-184). Kant’s doctrine of categories, on the other hand, “contributes nothing to the technical problem how to exhibit or symbolize type-homogeneities and heterogeneities in abstraction from the concrete factors which exemplify them” nor does Kant “explain how they are established, save by recommending us to read traditional logic” (Ryle 2009a, 187).

The “logical form” of a proposition, neglected in both Aristotle and Kant, emerges in Ryle’s “Categories” as a path to solution. If the absurdity of category-mistakes leads to contradictions, vicious circles or antinomies, then, Ryle suggests, we should look no further than the “logical relations of a proposition”, i.e., “what it implies”, “what it is implied by”, “what it is compatible with” and “what it is incompatible with” (Ryle 2009a, 191) to trace the roots of its absurdity or significance. The “logical form” of a proposition, its “liaisons” (termed “logical powers” in his 2009b, 207), govern its categorial structure, so to speak. They determine which sorts of terms can meaningfully appear in it and which cannot. Therefore,

[t]o know all about the logical form of a proposition and to know all about the logical types of its factors are to know one and the same thing. (Ryle 2009a, 184)

The operation of extracting the type of a factor cannot exclude the operation of revealing the liaisons of propositions embodying it. *In essence they are one operation.* (Ryle 2009a, 192; emphasis mine)

Hence,

two propositions which are formally similar in all respects save that one factor in one is different in type from a partially corresponding factor in the other, will have liaisons [and hence forms, J. H.] which are correspondingly dissimilar. (Ryle 2009a, 191)

In other words, according to Ryle, the delineation of the category of a proposition-factor consists in mapping out the “liaisons” of propositions in which the factor appears.

Ryle’s usage of “logical form” obviously differs from the use prevalent in logic. As Strawson points out in his own “Categories” (Strawson 2008, 122), on the standard notion of logical form, any two exemplifications of the schemata $p \vee q$ and $p \wedge q$ will differ in logical form. If we disregard the connectives, there need be no difference between the types or categories of the proposition-factors embodied in those exemplifications. They may as well be identical. Not disregarding the connectives will not help, as “and” and “or” are surely of the same type if any two non-synonymous expressions are. Either way, there seems to be no direct correspondence between differences in logical form traditionally conceived and differences in categories.

Moreover, Strawson notes that the correspondence does not seem to work the other way around, either. While the propositions “There exists just one number which is both even and prime” and “There exists just one person who is both human and divine” share the same logical form, “surely some of their factors exhibit category-difference if any factors do” (Strawson 2008, 122). In short, Ryle’s concept of logical form is rather unusual.

2.2 Strawson on categorial predicates

A less sympathizing reader would add that Ryle does little to explicate this unusual concept. Shortly after pointing the way to the method of solving type-riddles by means of revealing liaisons and analyzing “logical form”, he concludes “Categories” abruptly by asking: “But what are the tests of absurdity?” (Ryle 2009a, 193). Unfortunately, there seems to be no clear answer in Ryle.

Before returning to Ryle, let me briefly sketch the path followed by Strawson. Building on his critique of Ryle’s notion of “logical form”, Strawson focuses on a subset of propositions, namely singular subject-

predicate propositions “in which some single item is somehow specified by the subject-expression (a definite singular term) and somehow characterized by the predicate-expression” (Strawson 2008, 130).

He further specifies this characterization by predicate-expression as “adequately identifying”. A designation is “adequately identifying” when it satisfies the sufficient condition that it “*completely specifies* the individual it designates”, i.e., when the essential properties (“character”) of the individual in question are “determinable *a priori* from the meaning of the designation” (Strawson 2008, 131). As examples of expressions which satisfy the sufficient condition of adequate identification, he lists “the proposition that snow is white”, “the number 5”, “justice”, “the colour blue”, “the number which, when multiplied by 12, yields 36”.

After responding to anticipated criticisms of this definition which I shall not reproduce here, Strawson returns to the problem at hand by defining “categorical predicate” as follows:

A categorical predicate is a predicate which satisfies the following two conditions: (1) it is *a priori* acceptable for at least some individuals under all adequately identifying designations of those individuals; (2) it is either *a priori* acceptable or *a priori* rejectable for any individual whatever under all adequately identifying designations of that individual.

Ryle’s concept of category-mistake or type-trespass, based on the unclear notion of “logical form”, can then be clarified thus:

A predicate is category-mismatched to an individual if and only if it implies a categorical predicate which is *a priori* rejectable for all adequately identifying designations of that individual. (Strawson 2008, 138)

To return to one of Ryle’s original examples: the spatial predicate of “in-bedness” can surely be predicated of Sleeping Beauty under all the adequately identifying designations of this individual. But no matter how we twist, turn and designate the sixth day of week, this particular spatial predicate (as in fact any other) will always be mismatched with that individual. In this sense, the proposition “Saturday is in bed” embodies a category-mistake.

As is noted by Strawson himself, any merits or defects of the theory of categories sketched above depend on the notion of “identifying des-

ignation". However, I shall not concern myself here with the technicalities of Strawson's solution. For my purposes it will suffice to note that, according to Strawson, category-mistakes or mismatches in a broad sense are conflicts with predication-rules or can be construed so, and that such errors are *a priori* discernible.

2.3 Further insights in Ryle

Ryle's and Strawson's accounts of categories and category-mistakes, any technical problems notwithstanding, provide useful insights into the inner workings of both philosophy and particular sciences.

First of all, even though their main preoccupation as regards categories is very wide-ranging – having to do not just with specific conceptual systems and their usage, but with language in general – I believe it can be adapted and fruitfully used to elucidate upon different, more specific problems in theories of specific disciplines. This seems to be justified by Ryle himself when he notes that the absurdity of propositions may be relative to fields of inquiry. The proposition "Numbers are eternal"

is nonsense when construed as an item of biology but true when interpreted as an application of the theory of logical types to arithmetical ideas. (Ryle 2009b, 213)

As I shall show in the third part, a necessary step in Marx's "critique" consists in setting out specific criteria of significance (adequacy, rationality) for propositions within political economy, and showing that some of the key claims of economic theory conflict with these criteria.

Second, if the focus has now shifted to theory, then the analysis can hardly be piecemeal, dealing with one isolated concept after another. As Ryle points out,

The problem, that is, is not to anatomize the solitary concept, say, of liberty, but to extract its logical powers as these bear on those of law, obedience, responsibility, loyalty, government and the rest. (Ryle 2009b, 211)

Indeed, we shall see that Marx does not target particular concepts, but the consequences of particular concepts for whole conceptual systems of politico-economic theories.

A third interesting moment in Ryle is his discussion of everyday, ordinary thought and knowledge as the origin of category-mistakes.

As we have seen, philosophy is for Ryle the systematic replacement of category-habits with category-disciplines. These category-habits can be seen as “workaday knowledge [...] without system and without checks”, “knowledge by wont and not knowledge by rules” (Ryle 2009b, 211). It just so happens in everyday life that

we are sure that some out of one family of propositions are true and that some out of another family are true, yet the truth of any from the one family seems flatly to contradict all out of the other. I see a bent stick and the stick is straight; I am to blame for an action, and the action issued from a character which my forebears bequeathed and my school moulded, and so on. (Ryle 2009a, 190-191)

In other words, on second thought we are often faced with contradictions and antinomies which have previously gone unnoticed in our everyday use of concepts.

However, even the stricter uses of language common in philosophy and science are not free from such pitfalls. As Ryle insists, “*any* uncharted concept is liable to generate antinomies, for ignorance of its chart is ignorance of some of the implications and compatibilities of the propositions containing it” (Ryle 2009a, 191). We shall see that Marx’s objections to political economy can easily be translated into the language of uncharted concepts and ignorance of implications or compatibilities.

Before turning to Marx, there is one more issue to be resolved. Strawson and (presumably, although not explicitly) Ryle argue that category-mistakes can be discerned *a priori*. We have seen that on Strawson’s definition, a category-predicate which mismatches an individual is supposed to be *a priori* rejectable. This claim, even in the wide context of natural language, is arguably not without its problems. I will, however, conveniently dodge the issue. For within Marx’s critique of economic theory, claims only become category-mistakes and absurdities against a background of presuppositions which are ultimately founded on empirical research. Therefore, in the next section, I briefly discuss yet another article of the same title.

2.4 Walsh’s approach to categories

Besides the two commonly recognized ways of “talking nonsense” – *formal* nonsense as in “ $p \wedge \neg p$ ” and *material* nonsense as in “The Earth is flat” – Walsh identifies in his (1954) a third way which, he argues,

while apparently close to the latter, deserves a distinct label. Consider the example he gives:

I am being driven by a friend in a motor-car when, without warning, the engine stops and the car comes to a standstill. I ask my friend what has happened. He replies that the car has stopped for no reason at all. [...] Trying not to appear impolite, I presently ask my friend whether he knows much about motor-cars, the implication being that his failure to look for the cause of the breakdown must be explained by his just not knowing how to set about the job. He takes my point at once and tells me that it is not a question of knowledge or ignorance; there just was no reason for the stoppage. [...] What sort of nonsense is talked by someone who asserts seriously that events sometimes happen for no reason at all [...]? (Walsh 1954, 275)

Walsh swiftly dismisses the idea that we are dealing here with nonsense of the formal kind. Of course, one could argue that events *by definition* happen for a reason, but “it should be plain that this subterfuge will not solve the problem [...] What we decide to call things makes no difference to what happens in the world” (Walsh 1954, 276). But neither does the friend talk material nonsense, for he is not “putting forward an empirical hypothesis to the effect that this or that suggested explanation was false; he was asserting that there just was no explanation” (Walsh 1954, 276). For Walsh, it is not just a (supposed) individual fact that is challenged by the friend’s utterance, but a whole “framework of facts” (Walsh 1954, 277):

The statements that nothing happens except for a reason and that nothing vanishes without trace in the unqualified sense of the phrase are, with the concepts which underlie them, of a higher logical order than are empirical statements and concepts; it is in terms of them that we present our empirical knowledge. (Walsh 1954, 277)

Hence, nonsense that challenges these higher-order statements differs from ordinary material nonsense which challenges individual facts. The former challenge is felt as far more serious and, indeed, absurd. This forms the basis for Walsh’s distinction of *categorial nonsense*. It ensues whenever high-order statements like “Nothing happens except for a reason” – so-called *categorial principles* – are challenged. The concepts underlying categorial principles are, for Walsh, *categories*.

Before proceeding, let me note an obvious but crucial difference between Walsh’s approach on the one hand, and Ryle’s and Strawson’s

on the other. The latter two are concerned with the kind of mismatch between a predicate and an individual in which the predicate can neither be affirmed nor denied of the individual. From this point of view, the propositions "Saturday is in bed" and "Saturday is not in bed" are equally absurd. In the latter case, it is not that Saturday fails to be in bed because, e. g., "it" is cooking dinner. There is just no meaningful way in which Saturday can be said not to be in bed.

Sommers would later elaborate this line of thought into a more formal theory of categories, in which predicates and individuals are represented in hierarchical trees.² If a predicate can be meaningfully affirmed or denied of a set of individuals, it is said to "span" that set. So "to be in bed" spans "Sleeping Beauty", pillows and pets, which can all be or not be in bed. On the other hand, these individuals are not spanned by the predicate "constitutional" which, in turn, spans laws, bills and actions. The individuals spanned by a predicate form a category. Briefly, a category-mistake in Sommers' sense of the term is the result of affirming or denying (whichever is the case) of an individual a predicate which does not span the individual.

Walsh's approach is rather different. In a Sommers tree, the predicate "happened for a reason" would clearly span events. *In this sense*, it is not a category-mistake to deny this predicate of a particular event, as in "The car stopped for no reason at all". *In the Walshian sense*, however, it is categorial nonsense because it conflicts with the categorial principle that "Nothing happens except for a reason". The two concepts of category-mistake clearly differ.

What about the requirement of *a priori* discernibility in case of the Walshian kind of category-mistakes? This, it seems, boils down to the question of the nature of categorial principles themselves. On that, Walsh is not entirely clear. On the one hand, categorial principles are "rather presuppositions of empirical truths than empirical truths themselves" (Walsh 1954, 278). They constitute "a priori frameworks" inside which we build our "empirical conceptual structures" (Walsh 1954, 282). As such, categorial principles are immune from falsification:

[...] functioning as they do as rules, there is no evidence which can definitively count against them. If a man wants to stick to such a principle, he will be logically justified in doing so no matter what happens. (Walsh 1954, 282)

² See Engelbretsen (2005) for an exposition of Sommers' theory of categories.

On the other hand, Walsh remarks, these frameworks are not absolute. Principles like “Nothing happens except for a reason” could, he notes, change “as empirical knowledge accumulates” in case it confronts us “increasingly with situations to which they are inappropriate” (Walsh 1954, 282).³ Clearly, what distinguishes categorical principles from very general empirical hypotheses is that they are shielded off from falsification. But if categorical principles are only dropped when pressed by mounting evidence, is that pressure not, in fact, the result of a myriad of falsifications?

An analogy that could lead us out of this apparent *impasse* suggests itself immediately: one with Kuhn’s paradigms or, even more poignantly, with Lakatos’ research programs, hard cores and protective belts. I shall abstain from exploring it any further, though. Walsh’s approach to categories and some of the insights from Ryle provide the sufficient background to understand how the term “category-mistake” can be used to understand better the inner workings of Marx’s critique.

3 Marx on absurdities

A peculiar feature of a great part of the criticisms that Marx directed at political economists is their ruthlessness. It is not as if a scholar was criticizing the errors of his fellow colleagues. Often, the target of critique is not this or that particular claim, but the theoretical underpinnings of whole sets of claims. And the accusation is not merely that certain statements or theories in political economy are factually false; rather, they are mercilessly labeled as “irrational” or “absurd”.

Consider this example from the manuscripts of what was to become Volume Three of *Capital*. When discussing the politico-economic treatment of rent (i.e., a form of monetary income which proceeds from renting out land and natural resources) which explains rent as the function of the fertility of land, Marx describes it in the following way:

The relation [...] is in itself absurd and irrational [...] as if one desired to speak of the relation of a five-pound note to the diameter of the earth. (Marx 1980, 914)

³ It is not inconceivable that the particular principle discussed be dropped in the face of, say, certain developments in quantum physics.

This is far from an isolated case. On the supposed relations between “rent” and “land”, “capital” and “profit”, and “labor” and “wages”, which I will go into some detail about below, Marx comments thus: “They have about the same relation to each other as lawyer’s fees, beet-root and music” (Marx 1980, 953). On the notion of wages as the “price of labor”, he remarks that it is “just as irrational as a yellow logarithm” (Marx 1980, 957).

The expression “yellow logarithm” is telling, for it would certainly qualify for being a category-mistake of the Rylean kind. The question is, then, in what sense – if any – can the propositions of political economy criticized by Marx be viewed as embodying category-mistakes.

3.1 “Category-mistakes” and interpretations of Marx

The idea itself is not novel at all. Several discussions of Marx see him dealing with category-mistakes. For example, in *The Logic of Marx’s Capital*, Tony Smith mentions Marx’s avoidance of “the category mistake of treating the nonsocial as social” (Smith 1990, 139), and elsewhere gives the example that even though “economic surplus can be extracted from inputs such as steel”, “it would be a crass category mistake to ask whether steel had control of the appropriated surplus” (Smith 1993, 107). As I shall argue below, this example *is* of the kind of category-mistakes that Marx indeed criticized. Unfortunately, Smith does not specify exactly why “treating the nonsocial as social” would in Marx’s – or anyone else’s – view constitute a category-mistake.

Outside of the context of Marxian exegesis, but clearly in a Marxian spirit, Roy Bhaskar discusses category-mistakes in *The Possibility of Naturalism*. He usefully relates the term to Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism and even declares Marx’s critique a “critique of consciousness [...] in which [Marx] shows that a certain set of categories is not properly applicable to experience at all” (Bhaskar 1998, 57). The “fundamental category mistakes” that Marx was concerned with are “the presentation of the social as natural in fetishism” (Bhaskar 1998, 76) or the reduction “of powers to their exercise, comparable to confusing machines with their use” (Bhaskar 1998, 57). In a passing note, Axel Honneth similarly relates commodity fetishism to the notion of category-mistake, when he describes the former as “a kind of permanent category mistake with regard to reality” which leads one to “perceive reality according to the scheme of thing-like entities” (Honneth 2007, 15).

As with Smith, these insights are, I think, valid. Marx's critique of fetishism can be construed as a critique of category-mistakes which involve, *inter alia*, the confusion of "nonsocial" and "social" or "social" and "natural". However, the discussions quoted above merely use the term "category-mistake" to describe what the critique is targeting, and do not explicate it. Nor do they relate it to its various uses in philosophy, such as those detailed in the first part of this paper.

One important exception, though, is Derek Sayer's (1983). This analysis of Marx's critique of political economy – although, in my view, lacking in certain respects – will form the basis of my own interpretation. According to Sayer, a crucial distinction that underpins Marx's entire critical project is that of "transhistorical" concepts on the one hand, and "historically specific" concepts on the other. Concepts referring to phenomena which have been present in all hitherto existing "modes of production" are of the former kind, while concepts referring to phenomena whose presence is contingent upon determinate socio-historical circumstances are of the latter kind. Thus, for example, conscious production of objects which satisfy human needs ("useful labor") is "a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society" (Marx 1976b, 133), while the offsetting of risk in commodity trade via derivatives is only known to take place in modern capitalist societies.

As Sayer argues, the thrust of Marx's critique is directed against two kinds of what he terms "transgressions of categorial boundaries" (1983, 147):⁴

The first is the more serious [...]. It consists in the subsumption of historical *explananda* under transhistorical *explanans*.

The second transgression is logically entailed in the first, but may also occur independently of it. It consists in the spurious generalisation of historical characteristics. (Sayer 1983, 147)

On Sayer's analysis, a statement like "Rent is the function of the fertility of land" can be seen as construed from both kinds of concepts, transhistorical (fertility of land) and historically specific (rent). The "irrationality" and "absurdity" to which we have seen Marx react above consists, briefly, in deriving rent purely from the natural properties of

⁴ However, Sayer does not note the relation of these transgressions to category-mistakes.

an ever-present condition of *all* production, land and natural resources. That way, the capacity to yield rent is projected onto “land in general” regardless of the presence of specific social relations (among others, private property) which make the extraction of rent possible in the first place. In other words, even though the fertility of land may play a role in determining the amount of rent, it is, in Marx’s view, incorrect to suppose it is the only determinant and the only *explanans* of the existence of rent. Other, historically specific concepts must also be involved in the explanation of rent for it to be adequate.⁵

In the following, I will develop Sayer’s argument and accommodate it into Walsh’s theory of categories, categorial principles, and categorial nonsense. In order to do that, some more general observations about the intent of Marx’s critique of political economy are necessary.

3.2 Marx’s categories

In a letter from the time when he was working on the first draft of *Capital*, Marx characterized his own work as

a Critique of Economic Categories or, *if you like*, a critical exposé of the system of the bourgeois economy. It is at once an exposé and, by the same token, a critique of the system. (Marx 1983, 270)

“Categories” feature prominently in Marx’s parlance, albeit in a different sense than in Ryle’s, Walsh’s or, say, Aristotle’s. In his economic manuscripts, Marx uses the term to refer to fundamental concepts of political economy which figure in explanations and definitions.⁶ As such, they are the elementary building blocks of politico-economic theories. The distinction of transhistorical and historically specific pointed out by Sayer pertains to categories thus defined. Of the basic concepts of political economy, some refer to phenomena common to different historical modes of production, while others denote the specific features of a particular mode of production.

According to Marx, the proper subject-matter of political economy as a science is a particular mode of production, namely, “modern bour-

⁵ See Sayer (1983, 49-53) for a concise statement of Marx’s own theory of rent which proceeds as described.

⁶ For example, Marx refers to capital, variable capital, constant capital, cost price, interest, money and commodity as categories.

geois production" (Marx 1986, 23). More specifically, a key task of the scientific analysis of capitalism is to analytically separate its specific features from "determinations which apply to production in general" in order to grasp its "essential difference" (Marx 1986, 23). The essential difference of capitalist production that is of interest to political economy as a social science consists primarily not in the technical aspects of production, but in the social relations in which production takes place. In other words, for Marx, political economy "is not technology" (Marx 1986, 23); it should only preoccupy itself with the material characteristics of production insofar as they bear on social relations.

Moreover, as a realist, Marx presupposes the correspondence of (economic) categories to "productive relations", of which the former are "but the theoretical expressions" (Marx 1976a, 165). Therefore, economic categories are, for Marx, theoretical concepts which, on the one hand, denote the very subject-matter of political economy, namely social relations specific to capitalist production, and on the other hand, concepts which refer to features of all forms of social production.

Let me summarize the above in the form of what I call Marx's *metatheoretical presuppositions* about the subject of political economy as a science:

1. Regardless of the kind of social relations that prevail in a given type of society, its members must engage in production in order to satisfy their needs.
2. The proper subject of political economy, however, is the specific features of the modern capitalist economy which differentiate it from previous types of societies.
3. From the point of view of political economy, these specific features consist chiefly in the social relations in which production is realized.

A critique of political economy, coterminous with the "critique of economic categories", is needed to put political economy on the right track, so to speak. According to Marx, the discipline failed in its chief task, which lies in grasping the historically specific – and transient – nature of the capitalist mode of production. The "irrationalities" and "absurdities" he identifies in political economy are invariantly cases of failure in this task. In effect, Marx's critique is directed at the de-historization that the subject-matter of political economy – i.e., capitalist production – undergoes at the hands of political economists. As I have

advertised, this critique can be restated in terms of criticism of categorial nonsense based, in turn, on categorial principles.

Sayer's distinction of transhistorical and historically specific categories is crucial for formulating the principles, but requires amendments. Consider the following example. When discussing Marx's critique of the purported relation between labor and wages (i.e. that wages as a form of income are the result of the productivity of labor), Sayer remarks:

As in the relation capital-interest we find here the same correlation of a material universal (useful labour) and a social particular (the wage). (Sayer 1983, 63)

According to Sayer, there is no fundamental difference between the politico-economic propositions that

1. "Rent is the result of the fertility of land."
2. "Interest is the result of the productivity of capital (i.e., means of production)."
3. "Wages are the result of the productivity of labor."

All of the three are, according to Sayer, "transgressions of categorial boundaries" in which a material, transhistorically present feature (land and its fertility, means of production, labor) is presented as accounting for a historically specific feature or social relation (rent, interest, wages). Leaving aside the problematic language of "universals" and "particulars", Sayer's interpretation of the third proposition leads to the conclusion that "labor" is "material" as opposed to "social". While the same conclusion is acceptable in the case of land, and even of means of production in the sense of palpable tools, raw materials, etc., it cannot hold for labor which, for Marx, is always a fundamentally social activity.⁷ Thus, while clearly a transhistorical phenomenon, labor cannot be defined as "material" in the sense of "non-social". To account for this difference between proposition 3 and the other two, I introduce a new distinction and a corresponding kind of "transgression of categorial boundaries".⁸

⁷ In Marx's view, human labor presupposes consciousness and language, which, in turn, only develop in "social individuals".

⁸ Moreover, Sayer apparently only defines transgressions of categorial boundaries with respect to explanation. However, I think it is equally

3.3 Marx's categorial principles

The distinction is one of concepts expressing “thing-like” or “natural” aspects of economic reality on the one hand, and of those expressing “social” relations on the other. Combining it with Sayer's distinction of transhistorical and historically specific concepts, and with his discussion of “transgressions of categorial boundaries”, one can formulate the following categorial principles:⁹

1. Explanations of phenomena specific to capitalist production and definitions of concepts for such phenomena must not rely solely on concepts expressing transhistorical features of production.
2. Explanations of social relations of production and definitions of concepts for such relations must not rely solely on concepts expressing “thing-like”, natural aspects of production.

On my interpretation, Marxian categories *in a strict sense* would be the concepts underlying these principles, namely, “historically specific”, “transhistorical”, “thing-like” and “social”. As previously noted, Marx uses “category” in a different way. All of what he terms “economic categories” (the basic theoretical concepts of political economy) would be members of one or two of the categories proper which underlie the categorial principles.

The two principles can be seen as guiding Marx in both criticizing political economy and constructing his own analysis. Based on them, the irrationalities and absurdities identified by Marx can be viewed as categorial nonsense or category-mistakes. Put simply, Marx labels

important to account for the meanings of individual terms appearing in explanations. Therefore, in the following, I extend Sayer's considerations to definitions.

⁹ In my previous (2012a) and (2012b), I demonstrate that the two distinctions can be both derived from and applied to Marx's explanation of the origin of surplus-value. That the distinctions are actually at work in Marx's theory can be justified by plenty of textual evidence. In the case of the first distinction, Marx accuses political economy of “regarding *economic* categories, such as being a *commodity* or *productive* labour, as qualities inherent in the material incarnations of these formal determinations or categories” (Marx 1976b, 1046). As regards the second distinction, Marx warns against the mistake of treating a social relation “as the natural form of social production” which leads one to “necessarily overlook” its “specificity” (Marx 1976b, 174).

politico-economic claims “absurd” because they are in conflict with the principles. Some of those claims only come in conflict with one of the principles. For example, the statement that wages, as a form of income, are a direct consequence exclusively of the productivity of labor, conflicts with the first principle, because “labor” as such – a transhistorical phenomenon present in all forms of production – is correlated with a form of income historically specific to capitalist production, in which the prevailing form of labor is wage labor.

Other claims conflict with both principles. Consider the following example from *Grundrisse*, which includes an illustrative commentary by Marx:

For example, no production is possible without an instrument of production, even if this instrument is simply the hand. [...] Capital is among other things also an instrument of production, also past, objectified labour. Consequently [modern economists say] capital is a universal and eternal relation given by nature – that is, *provided one omits precisely those specific factors* which turn the ‘instrument of production’ or ‘accumulated labour’ into capital. (Marx 1986, 24, emphasis mine)

The definition of capital as mere “means of production” correlates a transhistorical feature of all production with a historically specific social relation, and also defines a social relation only by concepts for thing-like features of production. In his alternative approach, Marx analyzes capital as a social relation of classes, detailing its historical origins and historically specific conditions which make it possible – i.e., in conformity with the principles stated above. However, further details of Marx’s own theory of capital are beyond the scope of this paper. More importantly, as I hope is obvious now, all examples or hints of category-mistakes in Smith, Bhaskar, Honneth and Sayer can be reconstructed as cases of conflict with one or both of the categorial principles.

3.4 The nature of Marx’s critique

Now I would like to return to some of the more general insights extracted from Ryle and others, and discuss their relevance to Marx’s critique of category-mistakes. First of all, it is clear that unlike general categorial principles of the Walshian kind, the principles which govern Marx’s critique are relative to a specific field, namely to the study of the

social relations of production. To paraphrase and adapt Walsh, they are principles in terms of which Marx presents empirical knowledge of a specific kind. As such, they impose limits on what can be meaningfully claimed about the nature of economic life.

The question arises, whence these principles? The criteria for discerning politico-economic category-mistakes are clearly not *a priori*. Ultimately, they are founded on comparative historical research into different modes of production, with which Marx concerned himself for a sizable part of his life. The instantiation of the first principle in the case of capital mentioned above, for example, is justified by the fact that while means of production were a precondition of production in ancient Rome just as they are today, the social context in which they were employed – i.e. whose property they were, who actually used them in production, how and to what purposes was this production organized – was very different. When capital is defined as mere means of production, this difference, ascertainable as a historical fact, is lost. The ultimate justification of Marx's categorial principles is thus empirical.

Since the principles govern the presentation of empirical knowledge, their impact resonates beyond the truth or falsity of particular factual claims. Conflicts with the principles, i.e. category-mistakes, have far-reaching consequences for the consistency and adequacy of politico-economic theories. Consider the example of labor and wage mentioned above. In classical political economy, wage is understood as the value or price of labor, and therefore as a form of income corresponding to the working class. What the worker earns (in wage) is the equivalent of her contribution (in labor) to production. I have already hinted at Marx's discussion of the problem of this conception: when wage is conceptualized as the result of labor pure and simple, the essential historical differences which turn labor into wage labor disappear.

Marx's critique does not stop here, though. Classical political economy also asserted the "law of value", i.e., that the value of commodities which governs their exchange ratios is determined by the amount of labor expended in their production. On the one hand, wage is thus understood as the price or value of labor; on the other hand, labor is posited as the source of all value. This leads to the paradoxical result that labor which creates value is itself supposed to have value, presumably determined again by labor, etc. *ad infinitum*. Hence,

[i]n the expression 'value of labour,' the concept of value is not only completely extinguished, but inverted, so that it becomes its contrary. It is an expression as imaginary as the value of the earth. (Marx 1976b, 677)

Moreover, the conception that the worker sells her labor to the capitalist for its value leads to irredeemable problems, Marx argues, in the explanation of the origin of profit. In other words, if the worker sells his labor, while only labor accounts for the value of the product, what is the contribution – and justification for remuneration – of the capitalist? Political economy is then pressed to derive profit from the productivity of the means of production, which, apart from being a category-mistake as discussed above, is in contradiction with the purported law of value. Apparently, Marx's critique confirms Ryle's suggestion that "uncharted concepts" are indeed liable to generate antinomies and paradoxes. Charting the concepts, in order to replace category-habits with category-discipline in political economy, is an inseparable part of Marx's project.

4 The significance of critique

As I have tried to show, it makes sense to view Marx's critique as targeting category-mistakes, provided that they are understood in a Walshian way as categorial nonsense. But apart from pointing out inconsistencies in politico-economic theories and providing an alternative account of modern production, what is the significance of the critique of political economy? More generally, what is the role of critique in social science?

Again, the germ of the answer can be found in Ryle. Category-mistakes or type-trespasses, he argues, originate in workaday knowledge ignorant of rules. It is the task of a specific theoretical enterprise – namely, philosophy – to outline these rules and shed light on the proper usage of categories. Similarly, Marx argues that "imaginary expressions", like that of "value of labor", arise "from the relations of production themselves" (Marx 1976b, 677). More precisely, they are the expressions in which economic agents, in their everyday economic life, realize and grasp their own economic agency within capitalist relations of production. Due to institutions like piece-wages and time-wages,

the wage indeed appears as the “price of labor”.¹⁰ Because differential rent is proportional to the fertility of land, it appears that fertility alone is responsible for rent. And because profit is proportional to the total amount of capital invested, regardless of the actual amount of labor commanded, it appears as if profit was the result of the productivity of capital itself, and not of (surplus abstract, i.e. historically specific) labor.

Importantly, these appearances do not necessarily affect successful practical agency. After all, it is irrelevant to an entrepreneur whether her profit actually originates from this or that particular source as long as the strategies she pursues bring about the desired profit. In a monetary system based on the gold standard, economic agents may well believe that the value of money results from the natural properties of gold itself, and still be able to efficiently use money in their intercourse.¹¹ In everyday practice, the consequences of category-mistakes may only seldom become clear.

According to Marx, political economy had been, for the most part, content with merely systematizing this workaday knowledge of economic agents. In the case of wages, for example, Marx suggests that “Classical political economy borrowed the category ‘price of labour’ from everyday life without further criticism” (1976b, 677-678). More generally, he asserts that

Vulgar economics actually does nothing more than interpret, systematize and turn into apologetics the notions of agents trapped within bourgeois relations of production. So it should not surprise us that precisely in the estranged form of appearance of economic relations that involves these *prima facie* absurd and complete contradictions [...] that precisely here vulgar economics feels completely at home, these relationships appearing all the more self-evident to it, the more their inner connections remain hidden, even though they are comprehensible to the popular mind. (Marx 1980, 956)

The same category-mistakes which characterize everyday reflections of economic life thus reappear in theoretical form in economic science. Therefore, Marx’s critique of political economy is not just a critique of the discipline, but of the “popular mind” as well. What it ultimately

¹⁰ See Marx’s discussion of time-wages and piece-wages in Chapters 20 and 21 of (1976b).

¹¹ “Anyone can use money as money without necessarily understanding what money is.” (Marx 1989, 348).

demonstrates is, in my view, as simple as enlightening: That which economic agents come to ascribe to Nature, or take as a transhistorical matter of course, is nothing but their own collective creation. The possibilities of practical social change that such critique opens are, I think, virtually endless.

Taking Marx's project as an exemplification of critique, the role of critique in social science, or, perhaps, all of science, can be seen as the systematic replacement of workaday knowledge – with its “uncharted concepts” and insidious type-trespasses – with a rational view of the world. As such, critique is a necessary component of the scientific enterprise, at least as long as we expect science to have any emancipatory potential in the broadest sense of the term.

Department of Logic and Methodology of Sciences
Faculty of Philosophy
Comenius University
Šafárikovo nám. 6
814 99 Bratislava
Slovak Republic
juraj@halas.tk

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