

OPEN LETTER

to MS S BROWN

In replying to Ms Brown's "Theory, Concepts, Analysis and the Bandwagon" (WIP, November 1977, 2) it is necessary to summarise the arguments, to refresh the readers' memories and for clarification.

The "methodological misconception" under review revolves around the relation between reality and perception. Ms Brown argues that reality only exists when perception breathes life into it. Theory constitutes the structural framework underlying perception, ostensibly guaranteeing an objectivity and adequacy to the process of perception. The realm of theory is composed of an integrated and interrelated series of concepts, each series specific to the sphere of reality requiring the life-giving force of perception. The language in which these concepts are expressed constitute the realm of jargon.

There are two types of incompetent social analysts on the contemporary South African scene. Firstly, those who analyse with no theoretical basis at all. Secondly, those dilettantes who eclectically misuse concepts specific for other disciplines. The roots of "the repetitive flaws" lie in the failure of the above categories of analysts to appreciate the nature of the relationship outlined above.

This view of Ms Brown requires close scrutiny. She reduces the inadequacy of the social analysts she anonymously refers to, to "methodological misconceptions". This obscures the true nature of any ineptness of the authors she bears in mind. This inadequacy can only be located in the material, that is, class position of the respective authors. The inability to be more specific on this fundamental issue is due to my ignorance of the particular authors and their works that the authoress has in mind. The authoress, nevertheless, expresses an unabashed subjectivist view of history which runs counter to any materialist conception of history. She suggests that all these anonymous authors have to do to rehabilitate themselves is to grab hold of a theory (any theory?), and to stop lifting concepts from disciplines beyond their ken. Not only will this reform validate

their analyses, but it will also create a change in the reality encompassed by their theories!!!

Such are the dangers of a romantic view of history, and a simplistic dabbling in weighty ontological problems.

In covering up the "repetitive flaws" of the phantom analysts, Ms Brown further avoids a confrontation with a theory of science, particularly a social science (of history, politics, etc.).

To contend that theory is the "attempt to specify the framework of perception and subject it to testing" is to court fundamental disagreement.

Society is not a laboratory (except perhaps to a seasoned cynic). One can not hypothesize about society, and then set up a laboratory experiment under ideal conditions to see if it holds. As in the physical sciences, theories derive from conscientious and scrupulous observation and collection of data. Unlike the physical sciences, which can be subject to controlled testing under ideal conditions, social theories are only tested retrospectively (ignoring for the moment the possibility of social prediction). These tests are not carried out in a laboratory, but in the real world, that is, on the battlefield of the class struggle. To suggest that a social theorist can test the validity of his theories under laboratory conditions is to commit an indecent act of academic arrogance of Poulantzian proportions.

I submit that Ms Brown has fallen into the self-same trap that her victims fell into. She makes use of jargon that helps to clarify her position not at all; in fact it serves to obscure the heresies in her own position. I wish Ms Brown a pleasant journey on the Bandwagon on which she clearly has become a fellow traveller.