

Study Guide to *Human Action* by Robert P. Murphy

Chapter III. Economics and the Revolt Against Reason

Chapter Summary

1. The Revolt Against Reason

Reason is the primary tool for acting man. The modern revolt against reason was not due to exaggerated claims by the rationalist philosophers. What really happened was that the socialist opponents of the classical economists could not defeat their arguments, and so instead challenged reason itself. Once the floodgates had been opened in this sphere, nihilism and skepticism spilled over into other branches of thought.

2. The Logical Aspect of Polylogism

Marxian polylogism claims that the bourgeois mind operates on different principles from the proletarian mind, while racial polylogism ascribes a different logical structure to the minds of various races. These doctrines fall apart in cases where a worker becomes a factory owner, or parents of different races produce mixed offspring.

It was not enough for the Marxists to dismiss the teachings of Ricardo and other classical economists by referring to their bourgeois minds; to be consistent, Marx and his followers would have had to specify the axioms of proletarian logic versus those of bourgeois logic, and to demonstrate why Ricardian economics was valid in the latter system but not in the former. Obviously no polylogist has ever attempted such a demonstration.

3. The Praxeological Aspect of Polylogism

Marxists use the term "ideology" to denote a doctrine that is faulty (using the correct, proletarian logic) but which nevertheless serves the interests of a particular class. Such a stance is untenable, though, for how could it ever be in a class's interest to believe false ideas?

Marx developed polylogism in order to discredit the economists' objections to socialism. Rather than refuting their arguments, he simply stated that their doctrines favored the bourgeoisie. Yet psychological motivations, even if base, do not affect the validity of a theory, which either stands or falls on its own merit.

4. Racial Polylogism

The claim that different races possess different logical structures of the mind overlooks the fact that reason works. If indeed other races possessed minds that could not grasp cause and effect, or which could not recognize a valid deduction, then natural selection would have weeded out those members who relied on their "minds." To the extent that other organisms have risen above the instinctive behavior of animals, they necessarily must share the (successful) logic enjoyed by the white race.

5. Polylogism and Understanding

A much milder version of polylogism simply asserts that various classes or races share similar value judgments and historical understanding. Yet even this weaker claim ignores the heterogeneity within classes and races. It also repeats the polylogist's mistake of thinking that it can ever be beneficial to hold an erroneous judgment.

6. The Case for Reason

Reason is an ultimate given, a nonrational fact; one cannot establish the validity of reason itself through logical argument. Yet it is man's foremost tool in action, and distinguishes man from other animals. There can be no such thing as an irrational mode of thinking. To renounce reason and return to guidance by "instinct" would destroy the foundations of civilization.

Why It Matters

Mises considers it crucial to demolish the Marxist notion of polylogism. Without tackling this idea directly, the entire body of praxeology would rest on quicksand. Regardless of the coherence of his demonstrations throughout the rest of the book, the critic could dismiss it all as based on "bourgeois logic."

Technical Notes

- (1) It is interesting that Mises's handling of Marxian polylogism illustrates his very points on the matter. Mises claims that the motivation for Marx to develop his doctrine was the need to challenge the classical economists (p. 78). Yet Mises's critique doesn't end there. He spends countless pages in *Human Action* detailing the defects of polylogism.
- (2) Marxian polylogism is a very strong doctrine and should not be confused with superficially similar attitudes. Mises does not deny that people with different backgrounds may "think differently" about some issues. What he does deny is that such people's minds operate according to different logical structures. Mises also is aware that certain groups can benefit from the perpetuation of faulty beliefs. But the true Marxist doesn't claim that the capitalists financed pamphlets on laissez-faire, knowing full well that the doctrines were wrong. On the contrary, the true Marxist must say that the capitalist mind was incapable of seeing the flaws in the doctrines, because to do so would be detrimental to his interests.
- (3) Mises affirms Hoppe's interpretation regarding synthetic a priori truths (though not in these terms) when he writes, "It is consequently incorrect to assert that aprioristic insight and pure reasoning do not convey any information about reality and the structure of the universe" (p. 86).

Study Questions

1. The Revolt Against Reason

- What does Mises mean by saying, "The revolt against reason was directed against another target. It did not aim at the natural sciences, but at economics"?
- Why is human reason "constitutionally unfitted" to find truth, according to Marx?

2. The Logical Aspect of Polylogism

- Give examples of some of Mises's "more serious objections" to the concepts of *social class* and *race* as applied by the polylogists.

3. The Praxeological Aspect of Polylogism

- Why is the "ideological" approach erroneous from the praxeological point of view?
- Why is the psychological background of its creator(s) not important for the examination of a theory?
- How does workers' competition among themselves relate to Marx's theory of the interests of the working class?
- Why can't we say that the rich have a particular interest in maintaining free competition?

Comment: "It is ideas that make history, and not history that makes ideas."

4. Racial Polylogism

- Why is Marxian polylogism irreconcilable with science and reason?
- Do different races have different logical structures of mind?
- Has anyone ever documented the different logical structures of the minds of people from different races?

5. Polylogism and Understanding

- What determines judgments of value and the choice of ends?
- Who originally said, "You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs"?

6. The Case for Reason

- Can we study a science of irrationality?
- What drives many intellectuals towards socialism?
- Can we demonstrate the validity of the a priori foundations of logic?