Heli Kaatrakoski 12th April 2015

IFI reading group

THE DEFINITION OF THE CONCRETE IN MARX

The transition from living contemplation to abstract thought (as in formal logic) is by no means the same thing as the movement 'from the concrete to the abstract'.

The concrete is:

- the unity of diverse aspects; unity is realised through differences and opposition not similarities of phenomena
- the concrete is a synonym of the real links between phenomena
- well developed, all-round, comprehensive knowledge; not important in what subjective psychological form this knowledge is 'experienced' by the subject
- series and interaction of all aspects and moments of the object of a notion or concept
- internally divided totality of a various forms of existence of the object
- a unique combination holding characteristics of the given object only
- the concrete expresses a universal form of development of nature, society, and thinking

The concrete is not:

- the concrete is not a synonym for the sensually given, immediately observed
- sensual-image form of reflection of reality in consciousness (created by the subject)

The abstract is:

- objective; objective interpretation of category of the abstract
- is simple, undeveloped, one-sided, fragmented, uncomplicated
- any one-sided, incomplete, lopsided reflection of the object in consciousness (knowledge)
- characterises real phenomena and relations existing outside consciousness, irrespective of whether they are reflected in consciousness or not
- Marx gives examples of abstract labour and gold

The abstract is not:

- is not synonym of a purely ideal, a product of mental activity, synonym subjective psychological phenomena occurring in man's brain only
- the abstract is not a specific characteristic of rational theoretical knowledge

Marx's dialectical meaning of the unity:

- dialectical interpretation of unity, diversity, and of their relationship
- unity is a connection, interconnection, interaction of different phenomena within a system
- unity is not abstract likeness of different phenomena

- understanding of unity differs from formal logic and also opposes it; in formal logic 'the abstract' is only a form of thought or rational cognition, whereas 'the concrete', a form of a sensually given image or the form of sensual cognition (e.g. signs and symbols)

The abstract and the concrete

- in formal logic the abstract and the concrete belong to different spheres of the psyche, to different objects. There is nothing abstract where there is something concrete, and vice versa
- in dialectical logic concrete is realised in thinking through the abstract, through its own opposite, and it is impossible without it
- the concrete and the abstract are categories of dialectics, science of universal forms of development of nature, society and thought

 "Of course, we cannot claim to offer an exhaustive solution to the problem of the abstract and the concrete at all the stages of the process of cognition in general, in all forms of reflection. The formation of the sensually perceived image of a thing involves its own dialectics of the abstract and the concrete, and a very complicated one, and that is even more true of the formation of the notion connected with speech, with words."

How these principles can be applied in empirical studies and in analysing data collected for purposes of research?

In my thesis I have tried to apply the principle of ascending from the abstract to the concrete when conceptualising customers in the public sector. I have not, however, 'produced' a concrete concept. Instead, I opened up the first steps towards such conceptualisation.

In my thesis the starting point in conceptualising the public sector customer was an abstract, simple and underdeveloped concept of customer introduced to the public sector by the New Public Management. I analysed annual reports (in four organisations) representing simple understanding of customers and simple introduction of customers. Aiming to ascend from the abstract to the concrete I analysed interviews (in four organisations). The interviews provided interpretations of the concept of customers and how customers were understood and encounters with customers experienced by employees. Thus more developed understanding of customer and various aspects of customers in 'real' world lead way toward concrete conceptualisation. I analysed conflicting situations and how they were described by the interviewees. I interpreted the contradiction between business logic and public sector ethos / principles of democracy initiating the identified conflicting situations. I did not find the totality or the unity of diverse aspects and relationships between phenomena.