

THE PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND OF MARX AND ENGELS

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I

ALTHOUGH the writer on Chinese philosophy who looked up first 'China' and then 'philosophy' in the encyclopaedia and proceeded to combine the information thus obtained can hardly be said to have followed an adequate method, there is something to be said, when one is investigating dialectical materialism and its antecedents, for considering materialism and dialectics separately and then seeing what happened when they came together. Materialism is a recurrent mood of human thinking on the pre-philosophical as well as on the philosophical level. When our existentialist contemporaries point out that a denial of God is more than a failure to work out a metaphysical syllogism, they are uttering what is in one sense a truism but in another may be grossly misleading. For the atheist or agnostic is blind precisely to the necessity by which any instance of being entails as its ultimate source the fullness of being; and this is a metaphysical inference, although it can be made inarticulately and needs in any case to be lived at the instinctive, as well as elaborated at the logical, level.

The mind which is, for whatever reason, thus metaphysically defective is confined in its search for explanation to factual correlations and temporal sequences within the world of experience. Instead of the world as a whole being seen as an overflow of infinite fullness, it becomes merely a pattern of material fragments building themselves up into such systems as we call organisms and collapsing again on the wheel of time. The spirit of materialism is essentially a contentment with proximate and partial explanations which leave the whole finally unexplained. The materialist cannot ask or answer the question why things should exist at all.

Yet materialism has its attractions. The specious humility which leaves ultimate questions aside as beyond a human answer often goes with a very real satisfaction in being the

highest product of evolution and having acquired so large a measure of control over the material environment from which we came. There is a certain intoxication in rejecting anything higher than man and his works. This reproach is of course addressed to a dogmatic materialism and not to the puzzled agnosticism to which so many worthy people have been reduced by the modern climate of opinion.

That the modern climate of opinion is favourable to materialism is a fact for which science is sometimes blamed. It is not really the fault of science, for an increased understanding of material causes is both in itself a benefit and in no way an indication that more ultimate explanations are otiose. It is true, however, that an exclusive preoccupation with the departmental explanations of the sciences may make a man less ready to look farther, and the greater development of the physical as compared with the biological and psychological sciences has made it easier to acquire a materialist bias. That, nevertheless, is the fault not of the sciences but of some of the men who study them.

The growth of the sciences in modern times has inevitably had an influence on philosophy, but this has not usually been in the direction of a dogmatic materialism. Philosophers have concerned themselves with the status of the facts which scientists investigate and of the methods by which they investigate them, but they have on the whole been careful to preserve their more comprehensive vision. The case is different when philosophy is cultivated no longer for its own sake but simply in order to provide a general framework within which scientific discoveries can be exhibited and exploited. Then the tendency towards materialism is obvious, and we shall see that this is the case with Marx and Engels.

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By a dialectic in the present context we mean an attempt to make history intelligible or to arrive at a philosophy of history. But philosophy of history can be understood in two ways. It may be an attempt to arrive at general laws of social change, and in that sense Plato and Aristotle were already contributing to the philosophy of history in their descriptions of the natural succession of political constitutions. Giambattista Vico at the beginning of the eighteenth century,

who is usually regarded as the fountain-head of modern philosophy of history, was largely concerned with such general laws of social change, for his new science was about the common nature of nations and civilisations; he aimed at establishing the *principi di una scienza nuova d'intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni*. Such an inquiry might equally well be said to belong to sociology or political theory in their dynamic or evolutionary aspect.

On the other hand, philosophy of history may be understood as an attempt to find meaning in history as a whole. In this sense it has no Hellenic parallel; the worlds of Plato and of Aristotle had neither beginning nor end and continued forever to manifest the same types of things. Even if the Stoics admitted a certain pattern of evolution, this was a pattern which was endlessly repeated in successive cycles. History as a whole acquired a meaning for the European mind only in terms of Jewish and Christian religious teaching. In the Christian centuries history was to be interpreted as a drama of creation, fall, redemption and judgment, and the first great effort to bring secular as well as biblical history under this conception was the *City of God* of St Augustine. This, of course, was not so much a philosophy as a theology of history, and the Christian must in consistency say that only a theology of history can be adequate to the facts as they are in the concrete.

Although the perception of pattern in history as a whole was thus a Christian contribution to European thought, it survived among thinkers who rejected Christianity or whose Christianity was at least other than the Christianity of tradition. Hegel was not content simply to propose his dialectical formula as a general principle for the interpretation of change; he essayed to exhibit the whole of history as the progressive manifestation and self-realisation of the Absolute Idea. It is easy to make fun, as Bertrand Russell most effectively does, with the details of the execution of Hegel's plan, but there remains something by no means unimpressive in the vast sweep of his effort of understanding.

It is a commonplace, but one which has to be repeated at this point, that the Jewish descent of Marx made him a Messianist although his Messianism was secularised. He was

inspired by a vision of human history as a whole leading up to the stage of the classless society. But he was determined to be no mere visionary or Utopian socialist; he wanted a firm theoretical foundation for his practical activity. He found this in a combination of materialism with the Hegelian dialectic. So far we have glanced at materialism and at historical dialectic each for itself; now we must try to fit them together in the pattern which they formed in Marx's mind.

III

When Marx came to the university of Berlin in 1836, Hegel had already been dead for five years, but the philosophical teaching was still wholly Hegelian. Marx himself read Hegel with admiration and became for a time a convert to his system. But, as Engels has described in his work on Feuerbach, Hegel's followers were dividing into two camps. If greater emphasis is placed on the rationality of the actually real, Hegelianism becomes, as it was for Hegel himself, a philosophy of conservatism. The right-wing Hegelians, who venerated the existing order as the contemporary manifestation of the Absolute, were acceptable candidates for chairs in the German state universities.

If, however, greater emphasis is placed on the principle of unending change in Hegelianism, a revolutionary philosophy can be derived from it. The left-wing Hegelians, who took this line and with whom Marx consorted, were obviously not in the running for positions of academic emolument under the Prussian government. The expulsion of Bauer from the university of Berlin in 1841 marks the recognition of danger by the authorities and the moment when Marx himself could no longer entertain hopes of a peaceful professorial career.

The left-wing Hegelians, now driven into open political opposition, continued nevertheless to be idealists. Revolution was to come through ideas, and a revolution in ideas must come first. We are sometimes surprised by the vehemence with which Marx throughout his life continued to belabour such academic firebrands, but the amount of revolutionary idealism to which he had to listen during the early eighteenth-forties seems to have left him in a state of permanent exacerbation with mere talk. He was too much of a realist not to see that revolutions made in the study would never go

beyond it, and he evidently had less respect for the ineffective Utopian socialist than he had for the capitalist who at least knew how to pursue his own interest.

Then came Feuerbach with his materialism. In the Hegelian scheme the material world had been merely the alienation, the degenerate product, of the idea. Feuerbach reversed the order, recognising the material world as primary and man with his ideas as its product. For Marx and Engels, who were already impatient with the futility of the revolutionary idealists, this came as a liberation of mind. 'Enthusiasm was general; we all became Feuerbachians.'¹ But they did not remain Feuerbachians, for Feuerbach made no use of the Hegelian dialectic and operated with what Marx came to stigmatise as abstract and static conceptions of man and his environment. The dialectic was too valuable an instrument of revolutionary interpretation to be cast aside. The philosophy of revolution had to be a dialectical materialism.

IV

Marxist materialism begins reasonably enough as an epistemological realism. 'We comprehended the concepts in our heads once more materialistically—as images of real things instead of regarding the real things as images of this or that stage of development of the absolute concept.'² This is not a very refined expression of realism, for concepts are not images, and, if they were understood literally as representations, we should be faced with all the difficulties of representative idealism such as Descartes was forced into devious ways to overcome. We may, however, assume that Marx and Engels did not intend the metaphor to be pressed; they were trying to say that facts came first and were presupposed by an awareness of them. Orthodox Marxism has indeed always insisted on a commonsense realism in the question of perception, as we see from the rebuke administered by Lenin in his book on *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* to those who turned aside in the direction of Mach's analysis of sense-experience. The similar impatience

¹ Engels: *Ludwig Feuerbach*, p. 28. Page references are to the editions of the Marxist-Leninist Library (Lawrence and Wishart).

² Op. cit., p. 54.

of Marxists with the sense-datum theories of twentieth-century British philosophers finds vigorous expression in Mr Maurice Cornforth's *Science versus Idealism*.

If this were all that was meant by Marxist materialism, we should want to suggest that considerably more analysis and precision were required to make realism philosophically satisfactory, but we should have no ultimate quarrel with it. Nor should we want to quarrel with a proclamation such as the following. 'It was resolved to comprehend the real world—nature and history—just as it presents itself to everyone who approaches it free from preconceived idealist fancies. It was decided relentlessly to sacrifice every idealist fancy which could not be brought into harmony with the facts conceived in their own and not in a fantastic connection. And materialism means nothing more than this.'³ This, after all, is much how we might have reacted to Hegel ourselves, and, if Marx on that account called us materialists, we might deprecate the name but admit the substance.

But Marx and Engels, of course, really make materialism mean a great deal more than this, and the worst of it is that they seem never to have explicitly acknowledged and tried to justify the logical jump by which they reach materialism as usually understood. What they now come to say is very different from an assertion of epistemological realism. 'Nature exists independently of all philosophy. It is the foundation upon which we human beings, ourselves products of nature, have grown up. Nothing exists outside nature and man, and the higher beings our religious fantasies have created are only the fantastic reflection of our own essence.'⁴ Marxism does not assert that mental events are really material, whatever that sentence might be taken to mean; it does not assert, to speak more precisely, that thinking, feeling and willing are simply identical with changes in the brain. Nor does it assert that mind has no influence on matter; on the contrary, it seeks to mobilise minds in hastening the course of revolutionary change. But it does hold that mind is wholly a product of matter and can have no

³ Op. cit., p. 53.

⁴ Op. cit., p. 28 (Cf. p. 31).

existence apart from it. In that way it fully deserves the name of materialism.

It is not difficult to observe that a logical jump has been made. It is one thing to say that knowing presupposes being and that human knowledge presupposes material being, but another to say that all being is fundamentally material and that all knowing presupposes and is dependent upon matter. The former propositions, which are admitted by Aristotle and St Thomas, do not entail the latter, which are a statement of materialism. But we should see wherein the intellectual temptation to materialism lies. When men for whatever reason are blind to the metaphysical acknowledgement by which the whole universe of time and change is apprehended as dependent upon a Being exempt not only from time and change but from any other limitation, a Being which is the absolute fullness of being, so that in the end only the greater can explain the less, they are confined to partial explanations in terms of temporal antecedents. In this type of explanation it is usually the less which helps to explain the greater; the oak tree is somehow the product of the acorn. On an evolutionary view of the history of the world it appears that things have gradually developed in the direction of greater complexity, first life emerging from inorganic matter and then mind from merely vegetable life. For a metaphysician such explanations are partial and incomplete, for a universe of time and change can never be self-explanatory, but, when such partial explanations come to be as comparatively fully charted as they have been through the modern progress of the sciences, there is a very considerable intellectual temptation to rest in them without going farther. Marx and his followers are by no means the only relevant instances.

For Marx, at any rate, it seemed that materialism was a natural corollary of any really hard-headed realism. He was content to rely upon the overwhelming advance of the sciences to make metaphysical explanations otiose. As far as religion was concerned, he did not make it his business to refute religious doctrine but sought to explain the varieties of human religion as reflections of social and economic structures. In any case, since religion was an opiate with which the oppressed classes consoled themselves in their prospects

of the next world for the suffering which they underwent in this, it would die a natural death in the classless society which at last abolished the exploitation of man by man. This final consummation is the object of Marxist faith and hope and the creation of Marxist charity; if these had not borne some affinity to Christian faith, hope and charity, Marxism would not have been as influential as it has been and is.

It is worth remembering that Nietzsche dismissed Socialism and Communism as being merely secularised forms of Christianity, offering the ordinary man an impossible future hope as religion had offered him an impossible eternal hope. In reality the ordinary man would always play the slavish role appropriate to him. The only remedy was to become a superman and to make sure that one was a master and not a slave. The paradox of our own day is that, where Marxism has been practically applied, Nietzsche's opinion seems to have been amply justified, whereas in the countries exempt from Marxist rule theoretical Marxism retains the quasi-religious appeal of humanitarianism. But perhaps this is a paradox inherent in any combination of theoretical materialism with moral idealism, when altruism, lacking respect for human personality, tends to degenerate into social engineering and the social engineers become a new privileged class.

v

In so far as Marxist materialism is dialectical it applies Hegel's scheme directly to the evolution of the material world. The gradual development of contradiction or anti-thesis, the sudden transition from quantitative to qualitative change and the eventual negation of the negation when it is superseded in a higher synthesis, all find their place with Marx as they did with Hegel. Indeed they deserve to do so, for Hegel's scheme, if not applied too rigidly and artificially, is a genuine contribution to the interpretation of history. On this side the Marxists are fully ready to acknowledge their debt to Hegel. Engels describes Hegel's chief merit as consisting in the 'thought that the world is not to be comprehended as a complex of ready-made *things*, but as a complex of *processes*, in which the things apparently stable no less than their mind-images in our heads, the concepts, go through an uninterrupted change of coming into

being and passing away, in which, in spite of all seeming accidents and of all temporary retrogression, a progressive development asserts itself in the end'. And, he goes on to say, 'if investigation always proceeds from this standpoint, the demand for final solutions and eternal truths ceases once for all; one is always conscious of the necessary limitation of all acquired knowledge, of the fact that it is conditioned by the circumstances in which it was acquired'.⁵ In these passages, however, we see that Marx and Engels not only made use of Hegel's dialectical scheme but drew consequences from it about the inevitability of progress and the relativity of knowledge which need a great deal more scrutiny.

In their belief in the inevitability of progress Marx and Engels were typical products of the nineteenth century. In the mid-twentieth century there is no excuse for failing to observe that change can, even in the long run, be for the worse. The only ground for believing that, in the longest run, history is genuinely progressive is that it consists in the working out of a providential plan, and Marx had no such faith to justify his optimism. One likes Marx the better for being an unconscious Messianic prophet as well as the cool scientific investigator that he thought himself to be, but it is impossible to defend his consistency in this respect.

The Marxist doctrine of the relativity of knowledge is not quite so easy to pin down and criticise. On its philosophical side Marxism is evidently intended in large measure to be a philosophy to end all philosophies, for Engels goes so far as to say that 'what still independently survives of all former philosophy is the science of thought and its laws—formal logic and dialectics. Everything else is merged in the positive science of Nature and history.'⁶ Feuerbach is attacked precisely because he tried to deal with human nature in the abstract and neglected the changing world in which men live and the changes which consequently occur in human nature itself. 'The cult of abstract man which formed the kernel of Feuerbach's new religion had to be replaced by the

⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 54-5.

⁶ Engels: *Anti-Dühring*, p. 32.

science of real men and of their historical development.⁷

When Engels descends to details and passes the departments of human knowledge in review, he admits some mitigation of his general principle of relativity. The permanent truths that he is willing to recognise are, nevertheless, apart from matters of historical fact, maxims of an elementary and trivial sort—for example, that, generally speaking, man cannot live except by labour; that up to the present mankind for the most part has been divided into rulers and ruled; that Napoleon died on May 5th, 1821, and others of like kind.⁸ It is perhaps more significant that, while Engels maintains that ‘all former moral theories are the product, in the last analysis, of the economic stage which society had reached at that particular epoch’, the morality of consummated communism is described as ‘a really human morality which transcends class antagonisms and their legacies in thought’.⁹ It appears that there is an absolute morality to be reached, although we have not yet reached it.

The Marxist doctrine of the relativity of knowledge is not, therefore, very clear-cut. The perspective varies between a view of process as primary, so that not only things but ideas are subject to a dominating law of change and ideas are necessarily relative to the stage of history at which they are entertained, and the vision of a consummation in which humanity is freed from the shackles which have hitherto warped its life, its ideas and its behaviour, and attains the full measure of its potentialities. Such a vision presupposes, if not a Platonic idea of man, at least something like an Aristotelian entelechy, an end and perfection implied by human nature itself and giving a meaning and direction to the process which leads to it. It goes without saying that Marxists do not feel at home with such conceptions, but it is difficult to see how they could logically avoid them.

A barrier against returning to this measure of what Marxists would call idealism is provided by their pragmatic theory of truth. No words of Marx are more famous than the aphorism: ‘The philosophers have only *interpreted* the

⁷ Engels: *Ludwig Feuerbach*, p. 51.

⁸ Engels: *Anti-Dühring*, p. 104.

⁹ Op. cit., p. 109.

world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change it*.¹⁰ It would be a mistake to try to demolish this statement too easily by an appeal to Hellenic snobbery about the superiority of contemplation to action; the failure of so much academic theorising to issue in relevant action is not a fit matter for complacency. But Marx plainly intends more than a just rebuke to philosophers who never leave their ivory towers, for he also says that 'the question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. In practice man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the "this-sidedness" of his thinking. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.'¹¹

Here we must protest that truths should be applied in practice because they are seen to be true; they do not become true by being applied. To hold otherwise is to provide an excuse for a good deal of hasty thinking and even for a certain amount of plain lying. We begin to see how the tyranny of a party-line could be upheld, and there is no health in any group in which a party-line takes the place of honest thinking and individual integrity of mind. Pragmatism is not simply a mistaken theory; it cuts at the root of human dignity.

VI

We have tried to sketch the nature of dialectical materialism as it appears in the Marxist classics and especially in the writings of Engels, to whose clearer style Marx preferred to leave the exposition of philosophical questions. There is no doubt, however, that the ideas expounded by Engels are those of Marx, for Engels made up for a lack of originality in thought by being the perfect disciple. History shows no more harmonious and effective an example of collaboration.

It is significant that the works of Engels which are of chief importance for Marxist philosophy are both polemical, the one being a criticism of Feuerbach and the other a

¹⁰ *Eleventh Thesis against Feuerbach.*

¹¹ *Second Thesis against Feuerbach.*

criticism of Dühring. And the criticism, especially in the case of Dühring, frequently deserves the name of invective. Marxist philosophy was expounded piecemeal, and seems to have been thought out piecemeal, in the course of attacks on opponents. A practical and revolutionary purpose was always uppermost in the minds of Marx and Engels. Hence we should not be surprised by surviving ambiguities and other evidences of hasty construction.

In the sphere of general philosophy our main criticisms are of two jumps made by the Marxists without logical justification. The first is the jump from a quite sound if not very exactly formulated realism to a dogmatic materialism. The second is the jump from a very proper appreciation of the importance of change and history to an unwarranted denial of absolutes. When we have pointed out these defects we have given sufficient reason for not being Marxists.

Yet the fact remains that Marxism offers a general outlook which has aroused enough enthusiasm to make itself the dominating philosophy over a large part of the contemporary world. It is not an accident that it is congenial to many modern minds. The chief progress of modern thought has been in the physical sciences and in a knowledge of history. Marxism claims to be able to better the human condition by making use of the sciences in the direction of a line of progress discernible in history. For this purpose it presents an impressive unity of theory and practice. An intelligent criticism of Marxism will acknowledge what is positively sound in its foundations and worthy in its purpose while seeking to show that a negation of its negations will lead to a higher synthesis more capable of achieving that purpose and satisfying the needs of man.

The question is whether it is possible to get on dispassionate argumentative terms with the Marxists when the international situation puts Marxism and anti-Marxism more and more into the position of warring creeds. At any rate it is a sound principle not to lose one's temper but to remain as sweetly reasonable with opponents as one can. For argument is the only really innocuous, and indeed positively pleasant, form of cold war.