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# Contents

Marx – or of traditional marxism – had been proved 'wrong' in real life, but because we felt that history as we were living it could no longer be grasped through these traditional categories, either in their original form[10] or as 'amended' or 'enlarged' by post-marx marxists. The course of history, we felt, could neither be grasped, *nor changed*, by these methods.

Our reexamination of marxism does not take place in a vacuum. We don't speak from just anywhere or from nowhere at all. We started from revolutionary marxism. But we have now reached the stage where a choice confronts us: to remain marxists or to remain revolutionaries. We to choose between faithfulness to a doctrine which, for a considerable period now, has no longer been animated by any new thought or any meaningful action, and faithfulness to our basic purpose revolutionaries, which is a radical and total formation of society.

Such a radical objective requires first of all that one should understand that which one seeks to transform. It requires that one identifies what elements, in contemporary society, genuine challenge its fundamental assumptions and are in basic (and not merely superficial) conflict with its present structure. But one must go further. Method is not separable from content. Their unity, namely theory, is in its turn not separable from the requirements of revolutionary action. And anyone looking at the real world, must conclude that meaningful revolutionary action can no longer be guided by traditional theory. This has been amply demonstrated for several decades now both by the experience of the mass parties of the 'left', and by the experience of the sects.

[10] In the present article we cannot enter into a detailed discussion as to which of the concepts of classical marxism have today to be discarded for a real grasp of the nature of the modern world and of the means of changing it. The subject is discussed in detail in an article *Recommencer la Revolution* (published in January 1964 in issue No.25 of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*) of which we hope to publish extracts in forthcoming issues.



## Note from Marxists Internet Archive

Between 1961 and 1965 *Socialisme ou Barbarie* published (in its issues 36–40) an important article by Paul Cardan entitled *Marxisme et Théorie Révolutionnaire*. Part I dealt with 'the historical fate of marxism and the notion of orthodoxy' and this pamphlet is based on that section. Part II went on to discuss 'the marxist theory of history'. We published it under the title *History and Revolution* in August 1971. Further sections, not yet translated, deal with 'the marxist philosophy of history', 'the two elements in marxism and what historically became of them', 'the balance sheet', and 'the nature of revolutionary theory'.

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## Which Marxism?

For anyone seriously concerned with the social question, an encounter with marxism is both immediate and inevitable. It is probably even wrong to use the word 'encounter', in that such a term conveys both something external to the observer and something that may or may not happen. Marxism today has ceased to be some particular theory or some particular political programme advocated by this or that group. It has deeply permeated our language, our ideas and the very reality around us. It has become part of the air we breathe in coming into the social world. It is part of the historical landscape in the backgrounds of our comings and goings.

For this very reason to speak of marxism has become one of the most difficult tasks imaginable. We are involved in the subject matter in a hundred different ways. Moreover this Marxism, in realiz-

ing itself, has become impossible to pin down. For with which marxism should we deal? With the marxism of Khruschev or with the marxism of Mao Tse Tung? With the marxism of Togliatti or with that of Thorez? With the marxism of Castro, of the Yugoslavs, or of the Polish revisionists? Or should one perhaps deal with the marxism of the Trotskyists (although here too the claims of geography reassert themselves: British and French trotskyists, trotskyists in the United States and trotskyists in Latin America tear one another to pieces, mutually denouncing one another as non marxist). Or should one deal with the Marxism of the Bordighists or of the SPGB, of Raya Dunayevskaya or of CLR James, or of this or that of the still smaller group of the extreme 'left'? As I well known each of these groups denounces all others as betraying the spirit of 'true' marxism which it alone apparently embodies. A survey of the whole field will immediately show that there is not only the abyss separating 'official' from 'oppositional' marxisms. There is also the vast multiplicity of both 'official' and 'oppositional' varieties each seeing itself as excluding all others.

There is no simple yardstick by which this complex situation could be simplified. There is no 'test of events which speaks for itself'. Both the marxist politician enjoying the fruits of office the marxist political prisoner find themselves specific social circumstances, and in themselves these circumstances confer no particular valid to the particular views of those who expound them. On the contrary, particular circumstances makes it essential carefully to interpret what various spokesmen for marxism say. Consecration in power gives no more validity to what a man says than does the halo of the martyr or irreconcilable opponent. For does not marxism itself teach us to view with suspicion both what emanates from institutionalized authority and what emanates from oppositions that perpetually fail to get even a toe hold in historical reality?



of the biologist is not a biological phenomenon; but the method of the historian is a historical phenomenon[9].

Even these comments have however to be seen in proper perspective. They don't imply that at every moment, every category and every method are thrown into question. Every method is not transcended or ruined by the development of real history at the very instant it is being utilized. At any given moment, it is always a practical question of knowing if historical change has reached a point where the old categories and the old method have to be reassessed. But this judgment cannot be made independently of a discussion of the content. In fact such an assessment is nothing other than a discussion on content which, starting with the old categories, comes to show, through its dealings with the raw material of history, that one needs to go beyond a particular set of categories.

Many will say: 'to be marxist is to remain faithful to Marx's *method*, which remains valid'. This is tantamount to saying that nothing has happened in the history of the last 100 years which either permits one or challenges one to question Marx's categories. It is tantamount to implying that everything will forever be understood by these categories. It is to take up a position in relation to content and categories, to have a static, non-dialectical theory concerning this relationship, while at the same time refusing openly to admit it.

## Conclusions

In fact, it is precisely the detailed study content of recent history which compelled us to reconsider the categories – and therefore the method of marxism. We have questioned these categories not only (or not so much) because this or that particular theory of

[9] These considerations are developed more on p. 20 et seq. of the French text.

or because economic facts were totally ignored. It was because in the social reality of that particular epoch the economy had not yet become a separate, autonomous factor (a factor 'for itself' as Marx would say) in human development. A significant analysis of the economy and of its importance for society could only take place in the 17th century and more particularly in the 18th century. It could only take place in parallel with the real development of capitalism which made of the economy the dominant element in social life. The central importance attributed by Marx and the marxists to economic factors is but an aspect of the unfolding of this historical reality.

It is therefore clear that there cannot exist a 'method' of approaching history, which could remain immune from the actual development of history. This is due to reasons far more profound than the 'progress of knowledge' or than 'new discoveries' etc. It is due to reasons pertaining directly to the very structure of historical knowledge, and first of all to the structure of its object: the mode of being of history. What is the object we are trying to know when we study history? What is history? History is inseparable from meaning. Historical facts are historical (and not natural, or biological) inasmuch as they are interwoven with meaning (or sense). The development of the historical world is, *ipso facto*, the development of a universe of meaning. Therefore, it is impossible radically to separate fact from meaning (or sense), or to draw a sharp logical distinction between the categories we use to understand the historical material, and the material itself. And, as this universe of meaning provides the environment in which the 'subject' of the historical knowledge (i.e. the student of history) lives, it is also necessarily the means by which he grasps, in the first instance, the whole historical material. No epoch can grasp history except through its own ideas about history; but these ideas are themselves a product of history and part and parcel of the historical material (which will be studied as such by the next epoch). Plainly speaking the method



## A Return To The Sources

The solution to this dilemma cannot be purely and simply a 'return to Marx'. What would such a return imply? Firstly it would see no more, in the development of ideas and actions in the last eighty years, and in particular in the development of social democracy, leninism, stalinism, trotskyism, etc, thann layer upon layer of disfiguring scabs covering a healthy body of intact doctrine. This would be most unhistorical.

It is not only that Marx's doctrine is far from having the systematic simplicity and logical consistency that certain people would like to attribute to it. Nor is it that such a 'return to the sources' would necessarily have something academic about it (at best it could only correctly re-establish the theoretical content of a doctrine belonging to the past – as one might attempt to do, say, for the writings of Descartes or St. Thomas Aquinas). Such an endeavour could leave the main problem unsolved, namely that of discovering the significance of Marxism for contemporary history and for those of us who live in the world of today.

The main reason why a 'return to Marx' is impossible is that under the pretext of faithfulness to Marx – and in order to achieve this faithfulness – such a 'return' would have to start by violating one of the essential principles enunciated by Marx himself. Marx was, in fact, the first to stress that the significance of a theory cannot be grasped independently of the historical and social practice which it inspires and initiates, to which it gives rise, in which it prolongs itself and under cover of which a given practice seeks to justify itself.

Who, today, would dare proclaim that the only significance of Christianity for history is to be found in reading unaltered versions of the Gospels or that the historical practice of various Churches over period of some 2,000 years can teach us nothing fundamental about the significance of this religious movement? A 'faithfulness to Marx' which would see the historical fate of marxism as

something unimportant would be just as laughable. It would in fact be quite ridiculous. Whereas for the Christian the revelations of the Gospels have a transcendental and an intemporal validity, no theory could ever have such qualities in the eyes of a marxist. To seek to discover the meaning of marxism only in what Marx wrote (while keeping quiet about what the doctrine has become in history) is to pretend – in flagrant contradiction with the central ideas of that doctrine – that real history doesn't count and that the truth of a theory is always and exclusively to be found 'further on'. It finally comes to replacing revolution by revelation and the understanding of events by the exegesis of texts.

All this would be bad enough. But there is worse. The insistence that a revolutionary theory be confronted, at all stages, by historical reality[1] is explicitly proclaimed in Marx's writings. It is in fact part of the deepest meaning of Marxism. Marx's marxism did not seek to be – and could not be – just one theory among others. It did not seek to hide its historical roots or to dissociate itself from its historical repercussions. Marxism was to provide the weapons not only for interpreting the world but for changing it.[2] The fullest meaning of the theory was, according to the theory itself, that it gave rise to and inspired a revolutionary practice. Those who, seeking to exculpate marxist theory, proclaim that none of the historical practices which for 100 years have claimed to base themselves on marxism are 'really' based on marxism, are in fact reducing marxism to the status of a mere theory, to the status of a theory just like any other. They are submitting marxism to an irrevocable judgment. They are in fact submitting it, quite literally,

[1] By 'historical reality' we obviously don't mean particular events, separated from all others. We mean the dominant tendencies of social evolution, after all the necessary interpretations have been made.

[2] K. Marx. Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach.



was often the 'development of the subject matter' that led to a revision of the previously accepted categories or even to their being exploded and superseded. The 'philosophical' revolutions produced in modern physics by relativity theory or by quantum theory are just two examples among many.[7]

The impossibility of establishing a rigid separation between method and content, between categories and raw material becomes even more obvious when one passes from knowledge of the physical world to understanding of history. A deeper enquiry into already available material – or the discovery of new material – may lead to a modification of the categories and therefore of the method. But there is, in addition, something much more fundamental, something highlighted precisely by Marx and by Lukacs themselves.[8] This is the fact that *the categories through which we approach and apprehend history are themselves real products of historical development.* These categories can only become clear and effective methods of historical knowledge when they have to some extent become incarnated or fulfilled in *real* forms of social life.

Let us give a simple example. In the thinking of the ancient Greeks the dominant categories defining social relations and history were essentially *political* (the power of the city, relations between cities, relations between 'might' and 'right', etc.). The economy only received marginal attention. This was not because the intelligence or insight of the Greeks were less 'developed' than those of modern man. Nor was it because there were no economic facts,

[7] It is obviously not just a question of turning things upside down. Neither logically nor historically have the categories of physics been 'simply a result' (and even less 'simply a reflection') of the subject matter. A revolution in the realm of categories may allow one to grasp raw material which hitherto defied definition (as happened with Galileo). Moreover advances in experimental technique may at times 'compel' new material to appear. There is therefore a two-way relationship – but certainly no independence – between categories and subject matter.

[8] See Lukacs *The Changing Function of Historical Materialism* (loc. cit.).

Although a step forward in relation to various kinds of 'orthodox' cretinism, Lukacs' position is basically untenable. It is untenable for a reason which Lukacs forgets, despite his familiarity with dialectical thinking, namely that it is impossible, except if one takes the term 'method' at its most superficial level, to separate a method from its content particularly when one is dealing with historical and social theory.

A method, in the philosophical sense, is defined by the sum total of the categories it uses. A rigid distinction between method and content only belongs to the more naive forms of transcendental idealism (or 'criticism'). In its early stages this method of thought sought to separate and to oppose matter or content (which were infinite and undefined) to certain finite operative categories. According to this permanent flux of the subject matter could not alter the basic categories which were seen as the form without which the subject matter could not be grasped or comprehended.

But this rigid distinction between material and category is already transcended in the more advanced stages of 'criticist' thought, when it comes under the influence of dialectical thought. Formerly the problem arises: how do we determine which is the appropriate analytical category for this or that type of raw material? If the raw carries within itself the appropriate 'hallmark' allowing it to be placed in this or that it is not just 'amorphous'; and if it is genuinely amorphous then it could indifferently be in one category or in another and the distinction between true and false breaks down. It is precisely this contradiction which, at several times in the history of philosophy, has led from a 'criticist' type of thinking to thinking of a dialectical type.[6]

This is how the question is posed at the level of logic. When one considers the growth of knowledge as *history*, one sees that it

[6] The classical example of such a transition is the passage from Kant to Hegel, via Fichte and Schelling. But the basic pattern can be discerned in the later works of Plato, or among the neo-Kantians, from Rickert to Last.



to a 'Last Judgment'. For did not Marx thoroughly accept Hegel's great idea: 'Weltgeschichte ist Weltgericht'.[3]

## Marxism As Ideology

Let us look at what happened in real life. In certain stages of modern history a practice inspired by marxism has been genuinely revolutionary. But in more recent phases of history it has been quite the opposite. And while these two phenomena need interpreting (and we will return to them) they undoubtedly point to the fundamental ambivalence of marxism. It is important to realise that in history, as in politics, the present weighs far more than the past. And for us, the present can be summed up in the statement that for the last 40 years Marxism has become an *ideology* in the full meaning that Marx himself attributed to this word. It has become a system of ideas which relate to reality not in order to clarify it and to transform it, but on the contrary in order to mask it and to justify it in the abstract.

It has become a means of allowing people to say one thing and to do another, to appear other than they are.

In this sense marxism first became ideology when it became Establishment dogma in countries paradoxically called 'socialist'. In these countries 'marxism' is invoked by governments which quite obviously do not incarnate working class power and which are no more controlled by the working class than is any bourgeois government. In these countries 'marxism' is represented by 'leaders of genius' – whom their successors call 'criminal lunatics' without more ado. 'Marxism' is proclaimed the ideological basis of Tito's policies *and* of those of the Albanians, of Russian policies *and* of

[3] 'Universal History is the Last Judgment'. Despite its theological form, this statement, expresses one of Hegel's most radically atheistic ideas. It means that there is nothing transcendental; that there is no appeal against what happens here and now. We are, definitively, what we are in the process of becoming, what we shall have become.

those of the Chinese. In these countries marxism has become what Marx called the 'solemn complement of justification'. It permits the compulsory teaching of 'State and Revolution' to students, while maintaining the most oppressive and rigid state structures known to history. It enables a self-perpetuating and privileged bureaucracy to take refuge behind talk of the 'collective ownership of the means of production' and of 'abolition of the profit motive'.

But marxism has also become ideology in so far as it represents the doctrine of the numerous sects, proliferating on the decomposing body of the 'official' marxist movement. For us the word sect is not a term of abuse. It has a precise sociological and historical meaning. A small group is not necessarily a sect. Marx and Engels did not constitute a sect, even when they were most isolated. A sect is a group which blows up into an absolute a single side, aspect or phase of the movement from which it developed, makes of this the touchstone of the truth of its doctrine (or of the truth, full stop), subordinates everything else to this 'truth' and in order to remain 'faithful' to it is quite prepared totally to separate itself from the real world and henceforth to live in a world of its own. The invocation of marxism by the sects allows them to think of themselves and to present themselves as something other than what they are, namely as the future revolutionary party of that very proletariat in which they never succeed in implanting themselves.

Finally marxism has become ideology in yet another sense. For several decades now it has ceased to be a *living* theory. One could search the political literature of the last 30 years in vain even to discover fruitful applications of the theory, let alone attempts to extend it or to deepen it.

We don't doubt that what we are now saying will provoke indignant protests among those who, while professing to 'defend Marx', daily bury his corpse a little deeper under the thick layers of their distortions and stupidities. We don't care. This is no personal quarrel. In analysing the historical fate of marxism we are not implying that Marx had any kind of moral responsibility for what happened.



It is marxism itself, in what was best and most revolutionary in it, namely its pityless denounciation of hollow phrases and ideologies and its insistence on permanent self-criticism, which compels us to take stock of what marxism has become in real life.

It is no longer possible to maintain or to rediscover some kind of 'marxist orthodoxy'. It can't be done in the ludicrous (and ludicrously linked) way in which the task is attempted by the high priests of stalinism and by the sectarian hermits, who see marxist doctrine which they presume intact, but 'amend', 'improve' or 'bring up to date' on this or that specific point, at their convenience. Nor can it be done in the dramatic and ultimatistic way suggested by Trotsky in 1940[4] who said, more or less: 'We know that marxism is an imperfect theory linked to a given period of history. We know that theoretical elaboration should continue. But today, the revolution being on the agenda, this task will have to wait'. This argument is conceivable – although superfluous – on the eve of an armed insurrection. Uttered a quarter of a century later it can only serve to mask the inertia and sterility of the trotskyist movement, since the death of it's founder.

## A Marxist 'Method'?

Some will agree with us so far, but will seek final refuge in the defence of a 'marxist method' allegedly unaffected by what we have just discussed. It is not possible, however, to maintain 'orthodoxy' as Lukacs attempted long before them (in 1919 1 precise), by limiting it to a marxist *method*, which could somehow be separated from its content and which could somehow be neutral in relation to its content.[5]

[4] In his 'In Defence of Marxism'.

[5] See the essay 'What Is Orthodox Marxism?' Lukacs' book 'History and Class Consciousness. An English translation of this essay was recently published by *International Socialism*, Nos. 24 and 25 () C. Wright Mills adopts a rather similar viewpoint in his book *The Marxists*.