



COMMUNISM AND PHILOSOPHY
Contemporary dogmas and revisions
of Marxism

Maurice Comforth

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**MARXISM AND THE
METHODOLOGIES OF HISTORY**

Gregor McLennan

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Communism and Philosophy was the last book Maurice Comforth wrote before his death at the end of 1980. Sadly, the work was intended to be the *first* of a whole series of volumes covering a wide range of philosophical topics, from 'thinking and being' to logic and dialectics, nature and society to values and value-judgements. The task of this ambitious project was to develop what Comforth calls 'a consistent philosophical position' on the basis of 'the scientific

achievements of Marx's fundamental formulations of historical materialism'. Cornforth clearly felt that an enormous amount of fresh work had to be done since he had then reached the view that much of traditional Marxist philosophy — including the positions he expounded in his popular introductions to *Dialectical Materialism* — stood in need of substantial revision.

What is the problem? *Communism and Philosophy* argues that while the fundamentals of Marxist theory are valid and like Copernicus and Darwin, Marx still 'awaits the refutation of his fundamental ideas', many of the formulations and propositions supposedly derived from these fundamentals are quite wrong. They get in the way of Marxism as a scientifically based theory and have led Marxists to think of classes, nations, the party, ideology and philosophy itself in dogmatic and illusory terms: as entities, agencies or structures which somehow exist outside of or in abstraction from the real social activity of concrete individuals. Althusser's view of ideology as an 'apparatus' is one example; another such 'ideological illusion' is the idea that the victory of socialism is 'inevitable', while the most fundamental illusion of all is the theory of dialectical materialism itself. The idea that there are dialectical laws which 'govern' the universe and are 'inherent in all being' is not only, Cornforth contends, a speculative dogma, it is a mischievous one. It encourages communists to believe that their political strategy is somehow guaranteed by the 'nature of the universe' and the 'laws of history' — to ignore in other words, empirical reality. Metaphysical speculations 'in the style of traditional philosophy' mar even the work of Marx himself and these residues of Hegelianism must be expunged if Marxist philosophy is to become 'wholly and purely' an 'exercise in genuine empirical theory' — a 'genuine empiricism'.

The argument gives rise to a number of puzzles. The first is the combination of a

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considerable scepticism towards many traditional Marxist positions with a rock-like certainty over the 'underlying' fundamentals. Since so much of 'orthodox Marxism' is apparently illusory, it seems strange that no argumentation is presented in *defence* of these fundamentals. Why should dialectical materialism be metaphysical, when historical materialism is not? This hints at a second problem. Cornforth's 'genuine empiricism' seems to rest upon propositions which are quite as universal as the ones he denounces as dogmatic. Socialism, for example, is described as 'a necessity, in the practical sense, for the epoch of the scientific and technological revolution': yet doesn't this imply some sense of inevitability? Cornforth contends that we can only understand the 'nature of the universe' by 'getting to know about human life and our relations with one another'. Yet wouldn't dialectical materialists agree?

Cornforth seems to be saying that *because* the propositions of dialectical materialism are universal in character, they are inherently metaphysical and dogmatic. It is true that dialectical materialists may *behave* dogmatically and *substitute* theory for facts, but that is a vice to which all philosophy is prone. Dialectical materialists follow Marx's point that theories must be empirically *derived* and concepts are only *presented* abstractly and logically in order to capture the essential properties of the phenomena concerned. To argue that because dialectical

materialism is presented in terms of concepts which move from the 'abstract to the concrete' — from universal principles to particular phenomena in nature and society — it must therefore be a 'speculative metaphysic' is like saying that Marx 'deduced' the categories of *Capital* from the 'first principles' of the commodity! There is a basic confusion here between the way we present a theory and the way in which that theory is derived. How to prevent universal philosophical categories from becoming 'an injurious dogma' is a real problem but throwing the baby out with the bathwater is no solution. As *Communism and Philosophy* itself demonstrates, 'theories of the universe', however much we seek to expel them from our midst, have a habit of continuing to hang around.

This is a question which is central to Gregor McLennan's *Marxism and the Methodologies of History* for McLennan is concerned to explore at some length the relationship between philosophical assumptions and historical writing. He makes the point that Cornforth really misses: 'Marxists are never simply empiricists' because they acknowledge *both* the 'theoretical moment in science' and the importance of empirical evidence. In McLennan's view there is a necessary friction between general theory and specific analysis and while some Marxists like EP Thompson and GA Cohen have tended to underestimate the importance of philosophy, others like John Foster and Albert Soboul have, McLennan argues,

imposed theoretical categories too rigidly upon historical evidence. This problem is evident in aspects of Marx's writing as well: the use of 'logic' as a trans-historical pattern so that concrete history becomes the 'factual fodder for positivistic abstract law'. 'A mixture of Hegel and positivism'.

Gregor McLennan has written a formidably comprehensive book. Amongst its wide-ranging assessments of contemporary and classical historical writing, Marxist as well as non-Marxist, the comment on 'social history', prominent in the History Workshop Movement, is particularly interesting; so is the pithy analysis of EH Carr's *What is History?* Yet, as a critique of classical Marxist philosophy, *Marxism and the Methodologies of History* is less convincing. The author's preference for philosophical realism over dialectical materialism is tantalisingly undeveloped and the argument that the latter can at best be 'true but trivial' is not sustained. Realism, McLennan says, can play its philosophical role as 'generalisations from science and its concepts'. It can accept tendential laws of history and a sense of economic determination imposing limits on the form and outcome of struggles. On the other hand dialectical and (classically conceived) historical materialism must of necessity imprison evidence through categories imposed 'from above', through *a priori* assertions of a dogmatic kind. Why this should be so is never really made clear.

John Hoffman

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