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Marx's Conversion to Communism

(NOTE. Soon after Hitler's seizure of power, a group of left-wing socialists who were dissatisfied with the apparent inability of orthodox Marxism to give a satisfactory explanation of Fascism, and who strongly disagreed with the line then taken-by the Communist Party, met in London over a number of years to discuss Marxist theory and practice. The group contained members of three or four nationalities, and it would therefore be inexpedient to mention their names; but the English members were all active, and critical, members of the Labour Party.

Official expositions of Marxism were mostly of such a kind as to make us sympathize with Marx's own irritated declaration that he was not a Marxist. We were driven back to Marx's own writings, and particularly to his early works which had been edited by Landshut and Meyer in Germany and by D. Rjazanov and V. Adoratskij in Russia. Several English writers (e.g. John Macmurray, Middleton Murry, and Karl Polanyi) had already called attention to the importance of these early works; but the first comprehensive study (that of H.P. Adams) did not appear until 1940, and one of the most important of them, *Political Economy and Philosophy*, has even now not been translated into English.

Recent events, as earlier issues of *The New Reasoner* have shown, are leading to a re-discussion of the fundamentals of Marxism; and the following article, based on a lecture given to various societies some eighteen years ago, may serve to call attention to the early philosophical writings of Marx, and to the motives of his conversion to communism between 1837 and 1845. I have deliberately refrained from writing of these works so as to engage directly in the controversy taking place between Edward Thompson, Harry Hanson, and Charles Taylor. But I may perhaps be permitted to say that part of the trouble has been the acceptance of Marx's later theories without an understanding of their moral and philosophical basis. Marx himself said : " Whatever is in itself evil remains evil, and is none the better for being imposed by government as the necessary means of bringing forth good in the governed." It is doubtless true, as Taylor has said, that " Marxist Communism is at best an *incomplete* humanism "; but the Marxism of Marx was not quite so incomplete as the official brand.

I should add that I have made use of a MS translation by several hands, and also of the notes and records of their discussions prepared by the group of socialists to which I have referred. (K.M.)

Marx accepted from Hegel the theory that history was a dialectical process; but, unlike Hegel, he argued that the mode of production of the material means of existence conditioned the whole process of social, political, and intellectual life. He thereby challenged the Hegelian view that thought was primary and action secondary. In *Capital* he tried to show that capital would tend more and more to be concentrated in the hands of a few men, and that this monopoly would lead to the break-down of capitalism. But meanwhile the working-class would by the methods of production become disciplined and organised, so that, at the moment when capitalism collapsed, the workers would found a socialist state. 'The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated.' Such was the theory; but the revolution Marx had prophesied came not in the heavily industrialized countries, Germany and England, but in Russia where, Marx thought, a socialist revolution was impossible. Marx believed that in the final stage of communism the state would wither away because there would no longer be any class struggle. But in Soviet Russia there are no signs of the state withering away, and apart from evils and weaknesses in the Soviet system the liquidation of the state could not happen in a divided world.

Are we to assume, as many critics of Marxism have assumed, that Marx thought that socialism was inevitable merely because he desired it passionately, and that Marxism is not a science at all? Or must we assume that new conditions have arisen which have prolonged the life of capitalism? What made Marx so convinced that socialism was inevitable? In *Capital* he did not really prove the inevitability of communism: he assumed it. To understand why he made this assumption it is necessary to examine his early philosophical writings. It is important to realise that these writings were not intellectual wild-oats of which Marx repented when he turned to economics. His dialectical materialism was dependent on his early philosophical thinking.

Marx began as a romantic poet; but as early as 1837 he realised that he was living at a decisive moment of history. He believed that philosophy had been perfected in Hegel, but that the world was imperfect, 'split, disrupted, and unsatisfactory.' Hegel had justified the *status quo* in his philosophy, and he had idealised the Prussian state; but his left-wing followers, including the Doktorclub to which Marx belonged, were revolutionary republicans, though

only in theory. In 1842 Marx became editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, and he was gradually driven from theoretical politics to a study of economic conditions. He decided that only by means of politics could philosophy become a reality. Before the end of 1843 he had come to believe that "the weapon of criticism can certainly never be a substitute for the criticism of the weapon. Physical force must be overthrown by physical force. *Theory will be a physical force as soon as the masses understand it*"

Meanwhile he had been writing a long criticism of Hegel's *Philosophy of Law*. Hegel had absurdly maintained the pre-existence of the State which manifested itself in the family and in industrial life. Marx 'turned Hegel on his head,' and declared that Man, not the Idea, is the subject, and the real actor. The relationships of individuals are the pre-condition of the existence of the state. It was easy for Marx to show the difference between the Prussian state as it really was and Hegel's romantic picture of it; but he did not conclude from this that Hegel's theory was a bad one. The disparity between idea and reality merely showed that the 'social development of mankind in history' was not yet complete. The 'essence of humanity had yet to find its expression in history.' Only in a democracy do the matter and the form of politics coincide.

In the introduction to this criticism (the only part of it which was published in Marx's lifetime) he defined his attitude to religion. Feuerbach had argued that religion was the creation of man. Marx went further:

Religion, which is a distorted outlook on the world because the world itself is distorted, is the product of the state and of society. Religion is a fantastic materialisation of the human entity, because the human entity has no true reality. Hence the fight against religion is a direct fight against a world whose spiritual aroma it is.

Religion is the sob of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the spirit of conditions utterly unspiritual. It is the opium of the poor.

Marx did not mean, of course, that religion was dope administered by capitalists to keep the workers quiet. He meant that life was so full of misery that it was necessary to seek compensation in the consolations of religion and the promise of a future life. Marx goes on:

The abolition of religion, the illusory happiness of the people, is a demand for their real happiness. The demand that one reject illusions about one's situation, is a demand that one reject a situation which has need of illusions. Criticism of religion is therefore at heart a criticism of the vale of misery for which religion is the promised vision.

Criticism has torn away the imaginary flowers with which his chains were bedecked, not in order that man should wear his chains without the comfort of illusions, but that he may throw off the chains and pluck the living flowers.

Criticism of religion disillusioned man so that he may think, act, and shape his reality, as one who is disillusioned and come to full understanding, so that he may move on his own axis and thus be his own sun. Religion is but the false sun, which revolves round him while he is not yet fully self-aware.

Marx was concerned primarily with the social function of religion, and his remarks are an effective criticism of 'other-worldliness' and of the assumption that injustice and misery in this world did not greatly matter because everything would be put right in another world. Although, of course, Marx was an atheist, it has been said acutely that his remarks represent the religious reaction of a Jew against a sham religion. At the time he was writing, the industrial revolution had made it possible to abolish extreme poverty; but society itself was based on a repudiation of responsibility of man for man. Political economists deprecated any attempt to mitigate the harshness of economic law. Capitalism had dehumanised, depersonalized, and de-Christianized social relations. Marx advocated the secularisation of religion because he wanted a religious interpretation of the historical process.

This is brought out clearly in *Political Economy and Philosophy* the unfinished work on which Marx was engaged at this time.⁽¹⁾ This work, still untranslated into English, is interesting for the light it throws on Marx's later views on economics, for we find him in the process of making up his mind on political economy⁽²⁾, and judging it from the point of view of philosophy. He is trying to determine the philosophical significance of political economy, as systematized by the great political economists of the eighteenth century. He sets out to define the philosophical implications of the main terms used by economists, such as private property, wants and needs, saving and spending, capital and labour, and landlordism. His starting point is entirely orthodox. Ever since Locke, private property had been regarded as the result of human labour; and in the industrial system of Adam Smith human effort was represented as the essence of private property, and private property itself as: the essence of all human industry. But the more clearly human labour is recognised as the essence of private property, the more self-contradictory must appear the inhumanity of the conditions of a society based on private property. This contradiction reaches its height in the exist-

- (1) There is a useful summary of the three MSS of this work in H. P. Adams, *Karl Marx in his Earlier Writings* (1940), pp. 104-117. The section with which I am mainly concerned is the third MS and will be found in S. Landshut and J. P. Meyer, *Der Historische Materialismus: Die Fruehschriften*, pp. 286-366.
- (2) The term 'political economy,' since the middle of the eighteenth century when it became current, successively signified (a) philosophy (b) the actual organisation of the finances of a country (c) a science concerning wealth.

ence of Capital and Labour. Although, by definition. Capital *is* Labour, the capitalist can live without labouring, while the labourer can hardly live at all. Such a state of affairs is morally intolerable; and Marx was driven to maintain that only by the abolition of private property could the humanity of mankind be restored.

This is the central point of Marx's argument, and it is one which is of vital importance for the understanding of his later and more famous works. Because of its fundamental inhumanity Capitalism must be abolished. Indeed, it would inevitably be abolished because it was a denial of the nature of man. It was impossible to continue a system which was fundamentally unnatural.

For Marx believed that human nature is the result of the history of human society; that history is the story of the progressive realisation of freedom; and that Man becomes free, not as an individual, but as a member of the community. Man fulfils himself only in society: only in his relationship with others does he become fully Man, fully human. 'Mutuality is the essence of human existence.' That is why, in a society based on private property, man is in a state of self-estrangement.

The emphasis which Marx placed on mutuality can be seen from his condemnation of the kind of communism which is really the generalising and perfecting of private property.

Immediate physical possession becomes for it the very end and aim of existence; the state of toeing a 'worker' is not done away with - it is extended so as to include everybody.

In this primitive and stupid communism, community of women is substituted for marriage, 'which is certainly one form of exclusive private property.'

But this kind of communism, denying in every respect the personal nature of man, is merely the logical expression of private property, which *is* precisely that denial. Universal envy, which constitutes itself a power, is only a veiled form of greed . . . The primitive communist is simply the perfection of that greed . . . How little such an annulment of private property is a real achievement of the essential being of man is proved by its abstract denial of the whole world of education and of civilisation: it is a return to the unnatural simplicity of the poor human being who has no needs and who, far from having passed beyond the stage of private property, has not yet reached it. Community in such a communism is only community of labour and equality of pay, which . . . the community as the universal capitalist pays out. (p. 293).

The same emphasis is to be found in the following remarks on the relationship between the sexes:

The immediate, - natural and necessary relationship of one human being to another is that of man to woman. In it is revealed how far the natural behaviour of man has become human - how far his human nature has become natural for him, how far his needs have become human needs, how far another person has become one of his human needs, how far existence has

become mutual being, and even how far the annulment of private property has proceeded, (p. 294).

In a later passage, one of the greatest that Marx ever wrote, he describes the effect of the institution of private property on man. He shows that at the present stage of man's development property is an obstacle to the fulfilment of his being. He becomes to himself a strange and inhuman object. His 'life's expression is also his life's repression, his realisation is his lack of realisation.' Marx shows that all man's relationships by which he is in touch with his total environment (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, regarding, experiencing, wishing, acting, loving) are ways in which he relates himself to objects so as to achieve human reality.

Private property has made us so dumb, dull and inactive, that we regard the object as ours only when we possess it; only when it exists for us in the form of capital, or when we own it, eat it, drink it, wear it, live in it, - in short, when we use it. In place of all physical and intellectual senses there has been substituted the self-alienation of all of them - the sense of possession. Man's essence had to be reduced to this, its absolute poverty, so that it could be allowed to bring forth its inner wealth, (p. 299).

Marx therefore declares that the abolition of private property is necessary for the freeing of all the senses and attributes of man.

It is to this liberation, merely by virtue of the fact that now these senses and attributes have become *human*, both subjectively and objectively, that the eye now becomes a human eye, human not in a materialistic sense, but in a spiritual one. The eye becomes a human eye when what it sees has become socially human - an object made by man for man. It is as if the senses themselves had now, in fact, become in their own practice human philosophers, for they contemplate the object for its own sake; but that object has now entered into an objective and human relationship, involving both the object and the man.

Only through the abolition of private property can man become: fully human. Marx speaks of true communism

as the positive annulment of Private Property, the self-alienation of man, and therefore as the real appropriation of the essential being of man, by man, and for man; communism, therefore, as a complete and conscious return . . . to himself as a social, that is a *human* human-being. Such communism is to be regarded as a perfected Naturalism. It is the veritable solution of the conflict between man and nature, and between man and man . . . between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. It is the solution of the problem of history, (p. 295).

Communism is therefore necessary for the regaining of humanity. 'It is the necessary form and organic principle of the immediate future; but it is *not* the goal of human development.'

One other passage will illustrate the way Marx's mind was working at the moment of his conversion to communism. He takes as

his texts passages from Goethe's *Faust* and *Timon of Athens* on the power of money. ⁽³⁾

I am what I possess . . . My power is as great as the power of my money. . . . What I am and what I can do are not determined by my individuality. I may be hideous, but I can buy the most beautiful women: therefore I am not really hideous, for the repellent effect of hideousness is destroyed by money. I may be lame, and yet money can procure me twenty-four legs. I may be wicked, dishonest, conscienceless, and unintelligent; but money is honoured, and so its owner is honoured too. (p. 556).

Money, under capitalism, is the highest good. The unintelligent rich man

can buy for himself intelligent people to work for him; and is not he who has power over the intelligent more intelligent than they? . . . Does not money, then, transform all his incapacity into its opposite?

According to Shakespeare, money is the visible divinity, because it transforms all human and natural qualities into their opposites. It makes brothers of impossibilities. It is also the universal whore. It turns every power into' its opposite :

It lifts my wishes out of the world of idea; it translates them out of an ideal and imaginary existence into the real, physical one - out of imagination into life, out of imagined being into real being.

It is useless for a man with no money to have any demand, for his demand is a mere creature of the imagination, which has no effect on anybody.

Between the effective demand, based on money, and the ineffective one based only on my need, is the difference between being and thinking, between a subjective idea and an objective one.

If I have a vocation to study, but have not the money for it, then my vocation is unreal; but if I have the money, I can go to the university, even though I have no vocation. Money

turns idea into reality, and reality into a mere idea. It can just as easily turn the real, natural and essential powers of men into abstract ideas, and so into imperfections, into torturing phantoms of the mind, as it can turn real imperfections and phantoms of the mind . . . into actual essential powers and capacities.

Money is hostile to the individual, and also to the bounds of society : It turns loyalty into disloyalty, love into hate, virtue into vice, vice into virtue, slave into master, master into slave, stupidity into intelligence, intelligence into stupidity.

Money metamorphoses everything. It is the universal transformer and confuser of things. It is the essence of the topsy-turvy world, the muddler and transmogrifier of all natural and human qualities.

' It compels contradictions to kiss each other.'

(3) Kenneth Muir, 'Timon of Athens and the Cash-Nexus' (*Modern Quarterly Miscellany*). In this article I gave a complete translation of Marx's commentary on these passages - together with the corresponding commentary in *Capital* - and I suggested that his realisation of the horrible power of money may have been sharpened, or at least confirmed, by Timon's diatribes.

in a human society these bitter paradoxes on the power of money become falsified. Money no longer has the same power over men's souls.

If you regard a man as a human being and his relationship to the world as a human one, you can only exchange love for love, trust for trust, and so on. If you want to enjoy art, you must be a person educated in art; if you want to influence other men you must be a man who is effective in stimulating others and challenging them. Every one of your relationships to men and to nature must be a definite one corresponding, in its expression of your real individual life, to the object of your will.

But since we live in an acquisitive society, it is impossible for us to be fully human; for we are all to some extent warped and corrupted by the society in which we live.

By 1845, therefore, Marx had rejected religion because it sanctified an immoral society; he had condemned capitalist society because it prevented its members from being fully human; and he had come to believe that when the corruption and disintegration of society had reached their maximum, mankind would revolt and introduce a system under which they had the possibility of being fully human. He was convinced that 'the existence of a suffering humanity which thinks, and of a thinking humanity which is oppressed' would inevitably become intolerable. Once we had reached 'a political animal-world . . . there is nothing to be done but to go deeper into it, and no other progress than to leave it completely and pass over to the human world of democracy.'

Fully to understand Marx's later writings, *The Communist Manifesto*, *Capital*, and the general theory of dialectical materialism, it is necessary to realise that they are built on the foundations of the works written between 1837 and 1847. It is hardly too much to say that Marx was primarily an anthropologist. He was concerned with the nature of man in society and with the means by which man could become fully human. He became interested in economics because human beings cannot escape from economic relationships. Man, though he may not be able to live by bread alone, cannot exist without bread. Marx's basic attitude - an attitude he assumed **but** did not express in his better-known works - was much closer to that of William Morris and William Blake than one would suspect from reading most Marxist literature. Because of his conception of the nature of man, he believed that a society in which men could be fully human would inevitably emerge. He might almost have echoed Blake's lines :

*Rent from eternal brotherhood we die and are no more . . .
Man exists by brotherhood and universal love.*