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Introduction to Marx (1818–1883):

The Background.

1. CONTEXT

To understand Marx, and Marxism, it helps to consider first, the circumstances in which Marx found himself when he entered the University of Berlin in 1836 and, secondly, the intellectual climate of German philosophy at that time.

When Marx left Trier and entered Berlin Hegel had been dead five years dying at the height of his influence on German philosophy. Marx's own thought develops partly as a response to the Hegelianism of German university life and partly as a response to what Marx saw as the suffering experienced by the universal class - the proletariat. This combination of practical and theoretical concerns characterises Marx's own thought and, in principle, should mark the work of all followers of Marx. An adequate understanding of Marx, therefore, requires an examination of his theoretical and of his practical contribution.

However, we cannot understand his theoretical account without examining Hegel's system and, in turn, the philosopher with whom Hegel was concerned. This requires us to consider, briefly, Kant and then Hegel.

2. KANT

Kant's contribution to European and philosophical thought in general is outstanding. In the three major texts: *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1784); *Critique of Practical Reason* (1785) and *Critique of Judgment* (1790) Kant summarises the achievement of the Enlightenment, claims to have established the limits of pure cognition and identified the conditions of freedom. The problem is that he clearly establishes the limits of pure reason:

'For by this new method we are enabled perfectly to explain the possibility of a priori cognition, and, what is more, to demonstrate satisfactorily the laws which lie a priori at the foundation of nature, as the sum of the objects of experience - neither of which was probable according to the procedure followed. For we come to the conclusion that our faculty of cognition is unable to transcend the limits of possible experience; and yet this is precisely the most essential object of this science.

The estimate of our rational cognition a priori at which we arrive is that it has only to do with phenomena, and that things-in-themselves, while possessing a real existence, lie beyond its sphere' (Kant, 1784, Preface) [1]

Whilst this certainly resolves the problem about knowledge of the phenomenal world, the difficulty with the analysis of the world of things in themselves still remains. This becomes, for example, the topic of both Husserl and Heidegger in the 1900's and 1920's.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant attempts to establish autonomous reason as the basis of freedom. This claim rests on Kant's identification of a categorical moral imperative which is unconditionally binding on all - in Kant's view the moral imperative is to act towards others as we would wish them to act towards us. However, if the source of what we ought to do lies in the categorical imperative and that the recognition of this imperative, this necessity, is the act of freedom the problem is how do we recognise this categorical imperative and its law like relationship to us when we are free not to recognise it?

Charles Taylor in his excellent study of Hegel [2] points out that:

'..the Kantian appeal to formal laws which would nevertheless give a determinate answer to the question of what we ought to do has always seemed a little like 'squaring a circle' (Taylor, 1975, p. 31)

What Kant advances is a most radical notion of freedom - the autonomous human agent. I am free, self-determining as a pure moral will. I am therefore independent of natural considerations. It is this problem of freedom, and the declaration of autonomous moral reason, and the consequential contradictions, that Hegel, Fichte, Schelling, Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, etc have all examined in various ways. The problem is the relation between moral action, moral freedom and autonomous reason. In effect, the unification of reason and freedom by uniting subject and object. Kant resolves the problem of the natural, object world but fails to resolve the nature of the subject world, the world of self.

3 HEGEL

Hegel's solution, briefly, to the problem is to introduce the transcendental spirit which proceeds in a series of dialectical transformations to establish the unification of freedom and reason in the absolute spirit: self, being and spirit are united in the Absolute. Subject and object are reconciled in a transcendental Absolute of thought which can only be grasped in thought. This synthesis dominated German philosophy in the years following Hegel's appointment to the chair of philosophy at Berlin and formed the intellectual framework with which Marx engages in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* published in 1843.

4. MARX'S EARLY WORKS

Marxist thought has been interpreted as two separate genres: either a distinction between the early and the late Marx or an understanding of Marx as a consistent and developing thinker. The most notable exponent of the first genre is Althusser; of the second Lukacs.

4.1 *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845).

Though the theses are short in number (11) and length, they are formidable statements of Marx's understanding. Taking Feuerbach's 'Essence of Christianity' as a mistaken statement of materialism, Marx reconceptualises the notion of materialism as entailing both theoretical and practical activity not, as Feuerbach argued, as just theoretical; i.e materialism conceptualises the thing as the object in thought (Thesis 1) without identifying human activity itself.

The first thesis therefore is an attempt to express the possibility of 'practical-critical' activity.

The second thesis is the assertion that there is a necessity to 'prove the reality of his thinking' (Marx was unconsciously a patriarch).

The third thesis is an assertion that men (an anthropological category) are in charge of their own lives - that they can change circumstances and that 'the educator needs educating'.

The remaining theses all provide a critique of Feuerbach's views and constitute a statement of Marx's own position. Thus, in thesis five Marx conceives of 'practical, human-sensuous activity'; in thesis seven the 'individual is not abstract but 'belongs in reality to a particular form of society'; in thesis eight 'social life is essentially practical' and in theses ten and eleven the 'standpoint of the new is human society' and the task of the philosophers is not to interpret the world but 'to change it'.

These eleven theses comprise, in my interpretation, a programmatic statement of intent which Marx partially fulfils in the course of his writing life.

4.2 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844)

In contrast to most of Marx's writings, the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (EPM) were not identified until 1931 when the Marx-Engels archive in Moscow published them. They comprise a set of developed and undeveloped papers which examine the nature of the relationship between social life, economic and material issues and philosophical questions. There are three manuscripts: the first examining the relationship between labour and capital— capital being defined as 'private property in the products of another's labour'—and proceeds to identify the circumstances in which the relationship between worker and capitalist is expressed in wages and the conditions in which this relationship is experienced. After some further discussion of property and capital, Marx moves on to the question of estranged labour.

In this section of the first manuscript Marx argues that

'we now have to grasp the essential connection between private property, greed, the separation of labour, capital and landed property, exchange and competition, value and the devaluation of man, monopoly and competition and the money system' (Colletti, L. p. 323)

For Marx, private property acts as 'the entire system of estrangement'

Political economy, in Marx's view, proceeds from the fact of private property - it does not explain it; it grasps the material process of private property, the process through which it actually passes as laws. It does not comprehend these laws.

Marx's principal task is the explanation of the relationships that express 'the essential connection' between the 'entire system of estrangement' and 'the money supply'. In order to do this, he starts from a fact:

'the worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and extent...the devaluation of the human world grows in direct proportion to the increase in value of the world of things. Labour not only produces commodities; it also produces itself and the workers as a commodity and it does so in the same proportion in which it produces commodities in general. This fact simply means that the object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien,

as a power independent of the producer. The product of labour is labour embodied and made material in an object, it is the objectification of labour. The realisation of labour is its objectification. In the sphere of political economy this realisation of labour appears as a loss of reality for the worker, objectification as loss of, and bondage to, the object, and appropriation as estrangement, as alienation.' (Colletti p. 323-324)

The consequences are as follows:

- (i) the worker is related to the product of his labour as to an alien object;
- (ii) externalisation of the worker in his product means that labour becomes an object - an external existence - and confronts the worker as an autonomous power;
- (iii) Nature - the sensuous external world - is essential to labour: it is the material in which his labour realises itself. But the more the external world is appropriated through labour, the more he (the worker) deprives himself of the means of life
 - (a) because nature becomes less and less an object belonging to labour and
 - (b) it becomes less and less a means of life. The worker becomes a physical subject maintaining himself as a physical subject of another
- (iv) Political economy conceals estrangement in the nature of labour by ignoring the direct relationship between the worker and production.

The result is the alienation of labour both in the act of labour and the product of labour. Human beings are successively estranged from their own products of labour; from the act of production itself (self-estrangement); estrangement from species being and, fundamentally, of human beings from nature. Instead of being the metabolic interchange between human beings and nature, labour becomes the means whereby the estrangement from human beings and nature is expressed.

4.3 The *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. This consists of two parts - normally published separately—the first being the critique itself which concerns itself with paragraphs 261–313 of Hegel's work and the second being an introduction to the Critique. The first part was produced in the summer of 1843 and the second part published in the German-Franco Yearbook of 1844. The critique, and its Introduction, is important for its criticism of Hegel's idealist dialectic and it establishes the materialist methodology Marx uses in his empirical studies in the 1850's, 1860's and 1870's.

The form of the Critique is a statement of the paragraph from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* followed by a commentary upon it. In the first pages Marx establishes his argument by commenting upon paragraph 261 as follows:

'Thus Hegel presents us with an unresolved antinomy. On the one hand external necessity, on the other immanent end. The unity of the universal end and aim of the state and the particular interests of individuals lies in the supposed identity of their duties towards the state and their rights as members of it' (Cited in Colletti, L p. 60)

Marx then quotes paragraph 261 in full which reads as follows:

'The real Idea is mind, which, in sundering itself into the two ideal spheres of its concept, family and civil society, enters upon its finite phase, but does so only in order to rise above its ideality and become explicit as infinite real mind. It is therefore to these ideal spheres that the real Idea assigns the material of this its finite reality, viz human beings as a mass, in such a way that the function assigned to any given individual is visibly mediated by circumstances, his caprice and his personal choice of his station in life' (cited in Colletti, L., p. 61)

The analysis of this paragraph is crucial to any understanding of Marx's work. It reads as follows:

'The real relationship is 'that the assignment of the material of the state to any given individual is mediated by circumstances, his caprice and his personal choice of his station in life' This fact, this real relationship is described by speculative philosophy as appearance, as phenomenon. These circumstances, this caprice and this personal choice of a station in life, this real mediation, are merely the appearance of a mediation which the real Idea performs on itself and which takes place behind the scenes. Reality is not deemed to be itself but another reality instead. The ordinary empirical world is not governed by its own mind but by a mind alien to it; by contrast the existence corresponding to the real Idea is not a reality generated out of itself, but is just the ordinary empirical world.

The Idea is subjectivised and the real relationship of the family and civil society to the state is conceived as their inner, imaginary activity. The family and civil society are the preconditions of the state; they are the true agents; but in speculative philosophy it is the reverse. When the Idea is subjectivised the real subjects - civil society, the family, 'circumstances, caprice, etc' - are all transformed into unreal, objective moments of the Idea referring to different things.' (cited in Colletti, L p. 62)

This critique of Hegel's idealist philosophy where the rational is real frames all of Marx's work. In the afterword to the second German edition of *Capital* written in the 1870's he writes as follows:

'My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life process of the human brain i.e. the process of thinking, which, under the name of the Idea, he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of the Idea....With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought'(cited in Cate, D., p. 33)

Essentially Marx's method is a materialist dialectic in which the social elements of the material world represent contradictions that are transcended, hence resolved, in the form of society.

5. MARX'S LATE WORKS

The late works of Marx—*Grundrisse*, *Capital* and the *Critique of Political Economy*—offer an account of the nature of estrangement in industrial society. In his early works, Marx identifies the method (dialectical-materialism); the subject (human estrangement) and the site (industrial/capitalist society). Industrial society, he argues, is the outcome of a long historical process and this is described in the preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* in the following way:

'In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society. The bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production - antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals social conditions of existence'

But this process of transformation of the social conditions of existence takes place within the social formation itself. The social formation therefore always contains the potential for transformation. As Marx says in the preface

'No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society' (2)

The essential analysis Marx introduces into the later works is to demonstrate how the social formation can be understood as two separate elements:

- (i) the material means of production and the social relations of the material means of production,
- (ii) the social relations that are built upon this material base.

The distinction is between the base (the material means of production) and the superstructure (the social relations of the means of production). In the preface, Marx writes as follows:

'In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness'

The superstructure contains the legal, political, educational, familial, military, cultural and information elements that constitute social, political and intellectual life in the social formation. It is these superstructural forms which influence and determine the social consciousness of human beings living within the social formation. They comprise in Althusser's formulation, the ideological apparatuses of the State which, in turn, are divisible into repressive and ideological state apparatuses.

However, whilst Marx does develop this distinction between base and superstructure, and the consequent and important analysis of ideology and material life and their relationships in terms of true and false consciousness as early as the *German Ideology*, his aim in *Capital*, *Grundrisse* and *Critique of Political Economy* is to outline the nature of estranged life as lived in industrial Britain in the middle of the 19th century. Thus, he writes in *Capital*, volume 1 as follows:

'Objects of utility become commodities only because they are the products of the labour of private individuals who work independently of each other. The sum total of the labour of all these private individuals forms the aggregate labour of society. Since the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their labour, the specific social characteristics of their private labours appear only within this exchange. In other words, the labour of the private individual manifests itself as an element of the total labour of society only through the relations which the act of exchange establishes

between the products and, through their mediation, between the producers. To the producers therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material (*dinglich*) relations between persons and social relations between things.' (p.165–166 *Capital*, volume I Penguin, 1976)

This quotation expresses the estrangement workers experience in the act of exchange in a society where commodities are 'fetishised'. The significance of the distinction between the base and the superstructure is that the superstructural forms: education, family, media, law, etc all generate the explanations that provide persons with an understanding of why relations between persons should be material relations rather than social relations between persons. They provide that is the legitimation of the false consciousness which disguises the 'real' reality of estranged labour.

References:

[1] Kant, I. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated Meiklejohn. Published by Everyman Books. A newer translation is by Kemp-Smith (1913) and this is available from Macmillan. Second edition (1784)

[2] Taylor, C, 1975, Hegel. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.