

MARX AND THE END OF HISTORY

I

The hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of Marx's birth is a more propitious occasion for commemoration of him than the hundredth would have been. In May, 1918, the world was at war, and not much concerned with such ceremonies. A party of Marxist revolutionaries had just taken power in Russia, but the future of that revolution, and others like it, was still unclear. And some early philosophical writings of Marx, knowledge of which was destined greatly to deepen our understanding of the genesis and meaning of Marxism, were still lying in archives and unknown to all but a very few. It was still too soon to assess the historical significance of Marx. Now we are better situated in time to make the assessment.

The most important of the since published early writings are the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844. Here the young Marx set down a first systematic sketch of Marxism in concepts largely derived from post-Kantian German philosophy,

¹ Address to a Symposium, "Karl Marx Heute," held in Trier, May 5, 1968 by the German UNESCO Commission. Copyright Robert C. Tucker 1968.

Hegel's in particular. Deciphering what he conceived to be the "esoteric" meaning of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, he formulated his own conception of history as a process of self-development of the human species culminating in communism. Man, according to this conception, is essentially a producer; and material production is the primary form of his producing activity, industry being the externalized productive powers of the species. In the course of his history, which Marx described as a "history of production," a world of created objects gradually arises around man. Original nature is overlaid with a man-made "anthropological nature" or "nature produced by history". And Marx believed that this was the true or scientific restatement of the Hegelian conception. For had not Hegel seen the history of the world as a *Produktionsgeschichte* on the part of the world spirit? His error had been to mystify the process by treating the productive activity as *mental* activity primarily. To move from mystification to reality, from philosophy to science, one had only to turn Hegel on his head. Then it appeared that the Hegelian image of spirit creating a world was simply a philosopher's distorted picture of the reality of history, namely that man, working-man, creates a world in *material* productive activities over the centuries. Inevitably, therefore, Marx later named his transformed Hegelianism the "materialist conception of history."

Still following Hegel's basic scheme, Marx in the *Manuscripts* visualized the human history of production as being also a history of estrangement (*Entfremdungsgeschichte*). Man's nature, he postulated, is to be a "free conscious producer," but so far he has not been able to express himself freely in productive activity. He has been driven to produce by need and greed, by a passion for accumulation which in the modern bourgeois age becomes accumulation of capital. His productive activity has always, therefore, been involuntary; it has been "labor." And since man, when he produces involuntarily, is estranged from his human nature, labor is "alienated labor." Escape from alienated labor finally becomes materially possible in the stage of technological development created by modern machine industry. The way of escape lies in the revolutionary seizure and socialization of the productive powers by the workers. Repossessed through revolution of this organ of material production externalized in industry, man

will at last be able to produce in freedom. To Marx communism did not mean a new economic system. It meant the end of economics in a society where man, liberated from labor, would realize his creative nature in a life of leisure. So Marx defined communism in his manuscripts as “trascendence of human self-alienation,” and saw it as the real future situation that Hegel had depicted in a mystified manner at the close of his *Phenomenology*, where spirit, having attained absolute knowledge, returns to itself out of its alienation and is fully “at home with itself in its otherness.”

Such, very briefly, was Marxism as originally expounded; and it was this view of history that Marx and Engels elaborated in their voluminous later writings. Naturally, much was added and refined. Marx’s thought, however, like that of most powerfully original thinkers, showed an underlying continuity. The terminology changed somewhat in the later writings; the *Weltanschauung* did not. Indeed *Das Kapital*, published in 1867, was simply the form in which Marx finally finished and published the book he set out to write in his manuscripts of 1844.

Consequently, we are now able to see in him, far more clearly than anyone could easily have done a half-century ago, an heir and representative of the great age of German philosophy that started with Kant and ran its course through Schelling, Fichte and Hegel to its diverse later outcomes. I do not mean to say that we should see him only as a philosopher, or Marxism itself exclusively as a philosophical phenomenon. For Marx, as perhaps befitted a descendant of rabbinical forbears, had a prophetic mission. The teaching that he derived from philosophy and saw as science was received widely as a new faith. It became the party ideology of movements for revolution and, in our century, regimes of revolution acting in Marx’s name. Here, however, I am not concerned with Marxism as party ideology, but with Marx as an intellectual and Marxism as *he* understood it. My question is this: What is his most important message to us now? The answer I wish to suggest is that the aspect of Marx with the greatest enduring significance and relevance for our time is the Utopian aspect, the part that we today might call his “futurology.” In order to explain this view, let me go a few steps further in identifying his position.

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II

If we ask ourselves what kind of philosopher Marx basically was, it is easy to answer that he was a philosopher of history. For all his various attempts at a general definition of his position were statements about the historical process. Yet to describe Marx as a philosopher of history is to express a rather superficial truth, because history *per se* was not the primary object of his theorizing. The primary object was man, man as a species and “species-being” (*Gattungswesen*); and the theory of man is the matrix of Marx’s theory of history. He defines history as the *growth-process* of the human species. In his own succinct statement in the 1844 manuscripts: “And just as all things natural must *become*, man, too, has his act of becoming—*history*...”²

Now this way of thinking carried the interesting implication that history has an end. Not in the sense of the world’s ending, for Marx assumed, in his pre-nuclear innocence, that man and his world would exist indefinitely if not forever. The end of history meant the end of the growth—process of humanity, its emergence into adulthood. Although life and its vicissitudes would go on, and presumably some sorts of change would still occur, the historical agony of growing up, the long struggle of the species to *become* man—a class struggle in large part—would be over finally. The developmental stages of history, which Marx linked with successive “modes of production” from slave labor in antiquity through serf labor in the feudal period to wage labor in the bourgeois era, would be superseded by a radically new mode of productive activity and, along with it, an entirely new form of human community not subject to the dialectical dissolution and breakdown that had necessarily overtaken all historical forms of society. It was with this central idea in mind that Marx wrote in the preface to *The Critique of Political Economy* that the existing bourgeois social formation would bring to a close the pre-history of human society.³ It was another way of saying that the coming great revolution would usher in the post-historical phase of man’s existence on this planet.

² “Und wie alles Natürliche *entstehn* muss, so hat auch der Mensch seinen Entstehungsakt, die *Geschichte*...”.

³ “Mit dieser Gesellschaftsformation schliesst daher die Vorgeschichte der menschlichen Gesellschaft ab”.

The notion of the adulthood of the species was meant by Marx with utmost philosophical seriousness. History as man's protracted "act of becoming" would give way in post-history to man's *being*, to his maturity on both a collective and individual scale. Only at the end could this occur, although the material conditions for it were developing all along. For alienation dogged humanity in every historical cycle of the growth-process, and indeed reached its lowest depth in the bourgeois era when man in the form of the wretched proletarian factory worker became a totally abased dehumanized being, an *Unmensch*. Thus, self-realization, or becoming fully human, was not for Marx a problem that an individual person could solve on his own. It could only be solved within the framework of the self-realization of the species at the end of history. Before that time, no individual could be fully human; afterwards, all could.

The normative concept of man implicit in this theory has already been touched upon. Man was seen as a spontaneously productive being with a need to express himself along a multitude of lines, and as tending in all his productive activities, material production included, to construct things "according to the laws of beauty." Marx's vision of the post-historical future was governed by this idea. Not only would machine industry be liberated to produce enough goods to meet the needs of all. Man himself would be liberated from the acquisitive drive, the obsession with wealth that had made him an alienated being. He would consequently be emancipated from the twin tyranny of need and specialization, from his age-old imprisonment in a life of labor and from the various enslaving forms of division of labor inherent in that life. The radically new mode of production coming in post-history would be the free creativity of individuals producing in cooperative association.

Marx not only conceived man as an artistic being in essence, but envisaged his post-historical relationship with "anthropological nature" in artistic terms. Unlike most modern Western philosophers, for whom the subject-object relationship has presented primarily the problem of knowing, Marx hardly recognized this problem. Having translated Hegel materialistically, he saw the objects outside man as so many congealments of human productive

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activity combined with the stuff that the earth provided wherewith to make things. Consequently, this existence and knowability were not really in question. The posture of Cartesian doubt was not for Marx. How could it be for one whose imperative need was not to establish that a world exists but to explain why it appeared so unbearably ugly and oppressive—and to change it? Marx approached the problem of the subject-object relationship from an aesthetic viewpoint.

The self-realization of the species would involve the humanization of the world that man had created, the “resurrection of nature.” Having been produced in alienated labor and appropriated as private property, the world of objects made by human hand and machine confronted its makers during history as an “alienated world.” The end of history would bring its de-alienation. After acquiring mastery of his productive powers and freedom to produce in a human way, man would refashion his own objectified nature according to the laws of beauty. Instead of confronting him as negations of himself, alien and hostile beings, the objects of his production would bring him self-confirmation. In addition to developing his productive talents in all directions, he would develop his capacity for aesthetic experience. His five senses would be cleansed gradually of the possessiveness the “sense of having,” that had always in the past defiled them and prevented him from perceiving and appreciating the intrinsic aesthetic quality of objects outside him. Consequently, reasoned Marx in his manuscripts of 1844, post-historical man would finally leave even communism behind. For communism, too, was a kind of ownership and possession—communal possession. With the complete humanization of man, even this form of possessiveness would be transcended. So we read in the manuscripts that “Communism is the necessary form and energetic principle of the immediate future, but communism is not as such the goal of human development, the form of human society.”⁴ Not communism as such but “positive humanism” was the goal of human development.

⁴ “Der *Kommunismus* ist die notwendige Gestalt und das energische Prinzip der nächsten Zukunft, aber der Kommunismus ist nicht als solcher das Ziel der menschlichen Entwicklung, die Gestalt der menschlichen Gesellschaft.”

The idea of history having an end is not something new with Marx. In essence it is an eschatological idea with roots extending deep into the Judeo-Christian tradition. The heavenly after-life was brought down to earth in the utopias of the Renaissance, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and the early nineteenth-century socialists. Marx built upon these foundations as well as upon German philosophy. But because of the Hegelian philosophical perspective from which he worked, and of the genius that he brought to the task, he created one of the most *relevant* of modern utopias.

What makes his futurology so pertinent to present problems is, I think, first of all the world scope of his conception of man's post-historical future. Marx was not a community-builder. He had no use for small-scale utopian community ventures carried out, as he once scornfully put it, "behind the back of society." That, to him, was utopianism in the pejorative sense. Being a philosopher of Hegelian formation, for whom history was meaningful only as world-history, he insisted from the start of his theorizing that the goal of human development could only be a new state of the world (*Weltzustand*). So he envisaged utopia on a global scale: man fully matured, master at last of his own powers and those of nature, exercising conscious control of the collective life-process, living the freely creative life in a universal human society.

Marx has been criticized for having little to say about community structures and institutional arrangements in post-historical society.⁵ But such critics may be misdirected in the final analysis, and in any event there is something to be said on the other side. A growing number of human problems have become or are fast becoming world problems, not resolvable within the confines of a single community or country or region, however large, although solutions may and should often *begin* locally. Not only war and arms competition fall in this category, but also unchecked population growth, economic lag and food shortage, racialism, denial

⁵ See, for example, Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (London, 1949), ch. VIII, and Robert Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Cambridge 1961), ch. XIII.

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of human rights and freedoms, the squandering of mineral resources, the pollution of soil, water and the earth's atmosphere, and so on. Progress can be made on such problems in nations and regions, but adequate solutions cannot be found within any national or hemispheric or European or Atlantic or Communist community but only within a universal human community. In our time, any serious utopia must be, like Marx's, a new state of the world.

His futurology also has relevance for us in its concrete envisagement of a future human life-style. Marx's concept of the "abolition of labor" in post-historical society anticipated certain present developments that are taking place owing to a technological revolution rather than the proletarian revolution forecast in the *Communist Manifesto*. Automation and the unlocking of the productive powers of the atom have begun to pose the question of a profound reorientation of man's existence, a reorientation from the work-centered life to a different kind of life. With the elimination of a great deal of economic labor, the problem of the good life may become inescapable for a growing proportion of mankind. What kind of living will then take the place of a large part of what has been called working for a living?

Marx's aesthetic utopia, his vision of a post-historical world where human existence takes on the character of creative leisure and artistic expression, represents at least one conceivable answer. Since men in the mass may not have as much artistic bent as he imputed to human nature, and may not regard leisure as the unmitigated blessing he thought it would be, we cannot take his utopia as a statement of the inevitable. It still has value, however, as a preview of what is possible. And his notion of the entire environment as a field for aesthetic effort, of "anthropological nature" itself as man's supreme work of art, is particularly pertinent in an age that has seen so much spoliation of nature, destruction of natural beauty, and spread of urban blight. Who in our time, living in big cities, can doubt the imperative need for what Marx called the "true resurrection of nature?"

There is possible guidance for us, finally, in his fundamental concept of the growing up of the race, the graduation of man from his historical growth-process into adulthood. Not that we can take a happy ending of history for granted any longer.

Living in the final third of the twentieth century, with great tragedies behind and dangers ahead, we cannot anticipate the future in a Marxian spirit of millenarian optimism. We can see that man may not achieve a universal community, that he may not gain mastery of his powers, that the world's population may go on exploding, that racialism and nationalism may continue to flourish, that life may grow poorer in an increasingly crowded, impersonal, coercive and regimented society, and that—in the warning words of Erik H. Erikson—“Reactionary rage equipped with atomic weapons may mean the end of man just when for the first time he has a chance to become one species.”⁶ But the very hugeness of these dangers suggests that *without* some such breakthrough to human maturity as Marx was talking about, the cause may be lost. What I mean to say is that the least likely future may be one in which man muddles through more or less as he has been doing, governments show no more imagination and moral leadership than they have been showing, and history goes on as usual.

The precondition of successful human adaptation and even survival may be radical change—not so much in the organizational arrangements for living as in the consciousness of people, their attitudes to others and themselves, their sense of responsibility to distant peoples and future generations, their patterns of feeling and identity. This is to say that further growth is essential, that the species may now be in a “maturation crisis.” If so, one of the most serious aspects of the crisis is the general lack of awareness of it, the tendency of most people and even the leaders of nations to assume that no great change is called for, that no enlargement of the human spirit is necessary, that we immature humans are already grown up. Marx therefore may be at his most relevant in telling us that this is not so, that the species is still engaged in its historical act of becoming and has not yet fully achieved the condition of *being* human.

It must be said, in conclusion, that he was far more effective in grasping these fundamentals and envisaging a fully human future than he was in specifying the means of bringing it about. He greatly overestimated material and technological development as

⁶ R.I. Evans, *Dialogue with Erik Erikson* (New York, Evanston and London, 1967), p. 33.

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the prerequisite of human maturation, failing to see the immense psychological difficulties and the consequent critical role of leadership and education in the process. He imagined, mistakenly, that revolutionary force and violence could be the means of achieving not only a new society but the new adult human being as its inhabitant; and so he left to such teachers as Gandhi and Martin Luther King the task of showing men how to change society, non-violently, by changing themselves. Finally, and as a result, Marx thought that the revolutionary process of man's maturation could take place very rapidly once the conditions were ripe. He did not understand that the growing-up of collective man is bound to be—like the growing-up of individuals—a protracted process marked by partial advances, occasional breakthrough, inevitable setbacks, and only eventual success.

But he was not the first prophet to be more successful in pointing out the promised land than in leading people to it. His genius lay in his powers of visualizing the end. In an age when utopianism has become the only realism, we should attend carefully to the thought of our great visionaries, one of whom was Karl Marx.