

RATIONALISM AND FAITH: KOLAKOWSKI'S MARX

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Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*. Vol. I: The Founders. pp. xiii, 434. Vol. II: The Golden Age. pp. viii, 542. Vol. III: The Breakdown. pp. xii, 548. Translated from the Polish by P.S. Falla. Oxford University Press, 1978.

Among the many perverse features of human action, one of the most remarkable is its sublime self-confidence in manipulating things unseen. Vast material wealth moves and fluctuates without being touched in the daily routines of stock exchange and banking transactions. Modern science applauds the progressive refinement of the physicists' instruments that reveal the existence of particles with infinitesimally small mass and lifespan. Experts in the affairs of souls, gods and devils manage fantastic property holdings and in places operate gallows and firing squads around the clock. Others await their turn to reorganize social relations according to the dictates of the "not-yet-present" and the "what could be." And all of them regard themselves quite correctly as eminently practical men and women.

Modern society has realized the synthesis that eluded all earlier times, the union of rationalism and faith. It is a potent brew.

Marxian socialism turned out to be one of the most influential variations of this union. Its message was grounded in a proposition of stunning simplicity and elegance, namely, that *what must be* (the unavoidable outcome of historical laws) and *what should be* (the most desirable and appropriate framework for human relations) are identical: the triumph of socialism and communism as the universal social form. The proposition is the core of Marx's thinking, the unifying ingredient that provides an overall coherence for Marxism as a "system" of thought. It is one of the great strengths of Leszek Kolakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism* to see it as the focal point for a study of Marxism: "The present conspectus of the history of Marxism will be focused on the question which appears at all times to have occupied a central place in Marx's independent thinking: viz. how is it possible to avoid the dilemma of utopianism versus historical fatalism?" (I, 6)

The idea of a thoroughgoing unity between what is necessary and what is good is a cornerstone of religious thought. Modern philosophers (notably Kant) dissolved this unity, and struggled with the resultant dualism of a world fractured into the realms of natural necessity and ethical freedom. As a secular philosophy of history Marxism re-asserted their unity on the level of collective social action. The commonplace that Marxism is a secular version of religious faith,¹ however, usually does not distinguish with sufficient precision between two quite different

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aspects of Marxism considered as soteriology. One is the (false) unity between the necessary and the good in Marx's own thought. The other is the essential difference between Marx's philosophy of history, considered as a product of rational inquiry (and thus subject to requirements of adequate reasoning and evidence), and Marxism as a dogma in the service of social movements and state power.

The false unity between the necessary and the good in Marx's thought results from his attempt to overlay a rationalist historical sociology onto a philosophical scheme, rooted in Hegelian dialectics, that aims at the dissolution of the split between essence and existence. As the notorious passage from the 1844 *Manuscripts* says, communism as "completed naturalism" overcomes the estrangement of mankind, not only from its own nature (its species-being), but from nature itself. What is presented here is essentially a conceptual issue of some considerable complexity, requiring sustained philosophical reflection—namely, what is this estrangement, and can it be cured? Furthermore, is it something that we can even conceive of "curing" through rearrangements in the structure of social relations?

Marx does not stop to examine such issues, but instead proceeds to announce that there is an agent of social change (the proletariat) to accomplish the overcoming of estrangement. What the 1843-44 writings develop, of course, is the *concept* of the proletariat, as it (the concept) "emerges" from the dialectic of private property. To this point Marx remains faithful to the tradition of rationalist social theory (for example, Plato and Rousseau), where hypothetical social conditions are arrived at deductively from speculative premises. The next step marks his break with the tradition. In Kolakowski's words: "Having arrived at his theory of the proletariat's historic mission on the basis of philosophical deduction, he later sought empirical evidence for it." (I, 373) The subsequent historical sociology, based on the theory of classes, was to provide the grounds for asserting that the good (the overcoming of estrangement) was also, by a happy coincidence, the outcome of the historically necessary evolution of social forms. What linked the two was *the proletariat itself*.

In fact this was sheer fantasy, and subsequently the link was ruptured. The philosophical scheme nurtured a commitment, still a vital part of contemporary social critique, to the reduction (if not the elimination) of estrangement and reification as a goal of social change; the more prominent this theme was in any particular case, however, the less successful was any connection to a detailed sociological analysis (for example, Marcuse's works). On the other hand, modern historical sociology is deeply indebted to Marx's thought; yet the more detailed is the understanding of class structures, the more tenuous becomes the link to any coherent account of class consciousness.

It is only with respect to a desire to uphold this false unity of the necessary and the good, and not with respect to the philosophical or sociological themes taken independently, that Marx's thought itself represents a secular faith.

The philosophically grounded conception of "true human production" in the early Marx, for example, leads us to believe that a market society such as ours

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systematically blocks the development of creative human powers; distorts the expression of fundamental needs; deprives persons of any control over their own labour activity and its products; and encourages an "instrumentalist" attitude in relations between persons that undermines the social (non-economic) bonds of family and community life. These are all propositions that are subject to rational analysis, discussion and proselytizing.² In other words, they form (potentially) a coherent position on which one can base a set of rational goals for social change. (It must be said again that this position remains remarkably underdeveloped both in general and in details; but it is capable of further development.) The associated contention—that modern society's evolution produces of itself a group that is the overwhelming majority whose *being* is the concrete embodiment of this position—has never been accorded the dignity of a consistent argument.

In fact the assertion of an internal contradiction in Marx's thought between historical materialism and proletarian revolutionary consciousness is an old one. It was stated forcefully, for example, by the Russian Marxist Peter Struve in an 1899 essay, "Marx's Theory of Social Development." In Struve's view "it could not be expected that a class condemned to increasing degradation of mind and body would be able to bring about the greatest revolution in history, including not only economic changes but the efflorescence of art and civilization." Historical materialism, on the contrary, reveals the continuous interaction of socio-economic change with changes in legal, moral, aesthetic, and other forms. As capitalism developed, so did the resistance to its injustice and degradation; this resistance became embodied in the institutional structures—unions, social welfare policies, public education, and so forth—that represent a growing "socialist" element within the evolution of capitalism (Kolakowski, II, 366-7).

On the other hand, the historical sociology stemming from Marx's work represents a powerful tool of rational social inquiry when separated from the eschatological vision of proletarian revolution. The study of social class formation shattered traditional paradigms of, for example, political history; helped to destroy the "naturalistic" illusions inherent in the economic ideologies of market society; and offered—in its best expressions—a sophisticated view of the differential impact of large-scale historical changes on particular social groups and their self-understanding. Divorced from the eschatological revolutionary vision, it also helps us comprehend the new constellations of social interests, relations between privileged elites and other groups, and the functional interplay of economic and political power that characterize the so-called "socialist" societies. What it emphatically does not do, however, is lend credence to the eschatological vision.

Marxist thought itself, then, represents a secular variant of religious faith insofar as it insists on the unity of the necessary and the good. Insofar as it does so, it reproduces, in the contradiction between historical determinism and proletarian consciousness, the eternal conundrum represented best in Christianity's "freedom of the will."

There is a quite different sense in which Marxism fell victim to a kind of

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historical determinism that makes plausible an analogy with religion. This occurred to some extent as soon as Marxism became an "official" ideology of social movements and solidified when it became the official dogma of a political regime. For in this setting its rational content is inevitably subordinated to its instrumental function in the service of political power. For example:

Zhdanov in his address to the philosophers in 1947 inveighed against the disciples of Einstein who declared that the universe was finite ... In general, since Einstein made temporal relations and movement dependent on the 'observer,' i.e. on the human subject, he must be a subjectivist and thus an idealist. The philosophers who took part in these debates ... did not confine their criticism to Einstein but attacked the whole of 'bourgeois science,' their favourite targets being Eddington, Jeans, Heisenberg, Schrödinger, and all known methodologists of the physical sciences. (III, 132)

The historical legacy on which *this* way of treating ideas is based is not hard to discern: "The Second Council of Constantinople in 553 recognized the key issue in the christological controversy when it anathematized anyone 'who says that God the Logos who performed the miracles is one, and that the Christ who suffered is another.'"³

In this regard the historical analogy is illuminating. Both Christianity and Marxism infiltrated shaky empires, steeling the resolve of oppositional groups in their struggles against decadent ruling classes. Both ideologies ultimately were founded on an antagonism, not only towards particular regimes, but also towards political power *per se*. Thus the groups motivated by these ideologies were unprepared for the exercise of political power, with the result that they were ruined by their own successes. Lacking any conception of legitimate authority of their own, both were forced to pretend that they could make do "temporarily" (i.e., until political authority itself was abolished, which was to be done post-haste) with the institutional structures conveniently left at their disposal in the old regimes' collapse. These structures wreaked their revenge on the conquering ideologies by converting thought into dogma, ideas, into instruments of repression.

The outstanding virtue of Leszek Kolakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism* is to impose an ineluctable duty on all serious participants in discussions of its subject-matter: the duty to confront the intellectual content of Marxism in terms of both its deepest originating impulses and its historical fate.

The first of these two tasks is undertaken in volume one, where what is at stake is identifying the key presuppositions in one of the great nineteenth-century "systems" of thought, and then subjecting them to rigorous criticism. Volumes two and three are occupied with the second task, which properly falls under the

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rubric of the "history of dogma"; here typically the system's subsequent permutations can be understood only by relating them to definite historical circumstances to which they have become subordinated.

Kolakowski's principal interpretive framework in volume one is straightforward. Its first feature is the idea of the unity and consistency of Marx's thought. This obliges us to seek to understand Marx's thought in its entirety as being governed by a conceptual unity, and not by the historical circumstances of his day. Its second feature is to locate the foundations of that conceptual unity. For Kolakowski the foundation is Hegelian dialectics, which itself is heir to the long Western tradition of neo-Platonism and religious mysticism; volume one opens with a fascinating chapter on this theme. Kolakowski is both a historian of ideas and a philosopher, and the merits of this volume lie in the detailed, combined application of both approaches. It culminates in a close examination of the key concepts and methodological principles, especially the concept of value (325 ff.) and historical materialism (363 ff.).

Of course both the interpretive framework and the critical commentary are subject to debate. What is especially important about them, however, in addition to their own contribution to the ongoing debate on Marx's work, is their strong challenge to a fundamental impulse in the Marxist tradition: namely, the desire for an intellectual synthesis that harmonizes a "scientific" theory of social development with a utopian vision of a single, perfected future state of social relations.

The first phase of Marxism after Marx and Engels is called by Kolakowski its "golden age," encompassing the period from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginnings of Stalinism. During this time Marxism "was not the religion of an isolated sect, but the ideology of a powerful political movement; on the other hand, it had no means of silencing its opponents, and the facts of political life obliged it to defend its position in the realm of theory. In consequence, Marxism appeared in the intellectual arena as a serious doctrine which even its adversaries respected" (II, 2). There were a number of interesting new developments, such as the attempted synthesis of Kantian and Marxian thought, and many variations on the original themes, such as the meaning of materialism. Perhaps most importantly, it began to be recognized and assimilated into the broader intellectual currents of the time by outstanding thinkers in philosophy, economic history, and sociology (Croce, Sombart, Simmel). At the same time, however, sectarian quarrels began to take shape in which the doctrine's intellectual content was interpreted from the standpoint of the "practical situation" of the moment.

Kolakowski dates the next phase, "breakdown," from the beginnings of Stalinism, and under that rubric includes both Soviet Marxism and all the varieties of "Western Marxism." Clearly it is the Bolsheviks' success in seizing state power, and in converting a sectarian ideology into a police-state dogma, that is the watershed; but Kolakowski's own scheme breaks down here. Since, as he argues, Stalinism is so firmly rooted in Leninism, why does "the breakdown" begin with the former? More serious are the presumptions implicit in the

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lumping together of Soviet and Western Marxism. There is not transition at all here; the third volume moves without interruption from Stalin and Trotsky to Gramsci, Lukács, Korsch and other "Western Marxists."

Ironically the historical situation here enters Kolakowski's own work and in fact dominates it; philosophical reflection on Marxism's historical fate itself falls victim to an interpretive framework that is conditioned by historical circumstances. The author attempts to be disarmingly candid in this preface to volume three, warning his readers that he is "not able to treat the subject with the desirable detachment." This is something of an understatement. The entire tone of the discussion changes drastically in the passage from the first two volumes to the third, from patient exposition and severe but temperate criticism to curt dismissal and harsh — sometimes shrill — condemnation. I hasten to add that there is much in this period that merits condemnation; but the evenhanded treatment of the first two volumes ill prepares us for the lack of restraint and discriminating judgment in the third.

For example, the specific criticisms levelled at Adorno are well formulated and to the point. However, the discussion is framed by the following remarks: "There can be few works of philosophy that give such an overpowering impression of sterility as *Negative Dialectics*. ... The pretentious obscurity of style and the contempt that it shows for the reader might be endurable if the book were not also totally devoid of literary form" (III, 366, 357). Similarly, there is much in Marcuse's work — especially his disdain of reasoned defense for radical perspectives and his theoretical affirmation of vague revolutionary slogans — that merits severe and even harsh criticism. Kolakowski is not content to rest his case with his detailed and pointed critique, however; and he wishes us to believe that "Marcuse's demands go much further than Soviet totalitarian communism has ever done, either in theory or in practice" (III, 419). It is possible to interpret what Marcuse wrote in this way; but a critic who fastens onto the least charitable interpretation of his sources will fail to earn his own readers' sympathy.

Kolakowski's understanding of twentieth-century Western Marxism is clearly shaped by his lived experience of Marxism as dogma in the service of repressive political power.⁴ How could it not be? It may be impossible for one with this experience to understand it either in its own terms, as a response to the imperialism, economic crisis, and rise of fascism earlier in this century, which was the lived experience of those theorists — or in terms of its impact on intellectual developments in North America and Western Europe in the 1960s.

I wish to contrast Kolakowski's experience with my own, which was a part of the "second phase" of Western Marxism in the 1960s. Anyone associated with universities in the 1950s will remember the unofficial ban on Marxist thought then in force (I do not claim that this was in any way equivalent to police-state repression), which in practice inhibited even non-Marxist forms of social critique. I recall an episode at graduate school in the early 1960s: Having written a careful analysis of some seventeenth-century English pamphlet literature for a graduate course, I incautiously mentioned a few general observations at the end, including an offhand use of the phrase "capitalist society." My professor, a

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well-meaning soul concerned for my prospective academic career, who as a young man had tasted the spicier ideological fare of the late 1930s, remarked: "We don't write that way anymore."

He was wrong. In the ensuing period many of the existing constraints on intellectual discourse were eroded, and the legacy of Western Marxism (together with its major surviving expositors) played an important part in the process. There were the usual rhetorical excesses, to be sure, but these have largely disappeared. What remains today is a much richer dialogue, in which those who have been influenced by Marxism have a recognized place in both academic and more general public forums. My teacher would, I trust, no longer be surprised to see casual references to "capitalist society" in writings by those considered to be in the "mainstream" of social commentary.

Events have ruptured — permanently, I suspect — the unity of historical sociology and utopian vision that provided the basic impetus for Marx's thought. That historical sociology, shorn of all but the most tenuous associations with the eschatological vision of proletarian revolution, has found a permanent home in the intellectual culture of the semi-capitalist societies, whose future evolution, so far as we can now see, will bear little resemblance to Marx's crudely-sketched scheme. That scheme, however, lives on in the cruel masquerade conducted by the official ideologies of the "socialist" and "communist" states. In becoming the public language of authoritarian regimes, it has surrendered whatever moral authority it once possessed as a guiding image in the struggle for a better society.

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Notes

1. For a brief summary of representative examples see J. Habermas *Theory and Practice*, tr. Jeremy Shapiro, Boston: Beacon Press, 1973, pp. 199-201.
2. In discussing Ernst Bloch, Kolakowski remarks that "Bloch helped in one way to throw light on Marxism by revealing its neo-Platonic roots,... He emphasized the soteriological strain which was blurred in Marx and could therefore be neglected and overlooked, but which set the whole Marxian idea in motion: namely, the belief in the future identification of man's authentic essence with empirical existence,..." (III, 448). My formulation in the text above suggests that there are a set of propositions critical of market society which can be stated in secular terms and be the subject of rational discourse—even though the underlying "inspiration" for them may be located in the tradition of neo-Platonism and religious mysticism. I hasten to add that, more than a century after their formation, as secular propositions they remain seriously underdeveloped.
3. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 2 vols., University of Chicago Press, 1971, I, 244.
4. "At public meetings, and even in private conversations, citizens were obliged to repeat in ritual fashion grotesque falsehoods about themselves, the world, and the Soviet Union, and at the same time to keep silent about things they knew very well, not only because they were terrorized but

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because the incessant repetition of falsehoods which they knew to be such made them accomplices in the campaign of lies inculcated by the party and state. It was not the regime's intention that people should literally believe the absurdities that were put about: if any were so naive as to do so and forget reality completely, they would be in a state of innocence *vis-à-vis* their own consciences and would be prone to accept Communist ideology as valid in its own right. Perfect obedience required, however, that they should realize that the current ideology meant nothing in itself: any aspect of it could be altered or annulled by the supreme leader at any moment as he might see fit, and it would be everyone's duty to pretend that nothing had changed and that the ideology had been the same from everlasting" (III, 96).

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