

KARL MARX AND THE FUTURE
OF THE HUMAN

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PREFACE

In 1995, when I finished my little book **Marx at the Millennium**, the idea that Marx had to be read independently of - or even in opposition to - the Marxist tradition was still being received with hostility in many quarters. Upholders of the rule of capital had been relieved to hear that 'Marxism was dead' and were very upset by any attempt to distinguish it from the work of Karl Marx. They much preferred to go on smearing him with responsibility for the monstrous regimes in Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, the dwindling and aging band of 'orthodox Marxists' pointed to the obviously obnoxious features of the world after the fall of the Wall, and loudly denounced every attempt to question our old beliefs as 'revisionist betrayal'.

Five years on, the situation has changed considerably, and the idea that Marxism totally misread Marx is quite often repeated. However, I believe the intensity of the opposition between the two is still not grasped by many people, who still think of Marx as a 'theorist' who was also – incidentally - a revolutionary. This hides the radical nature of what Marx, the revolutionary humanist, was trying to do.

While the idea of the impossibility of life without the market still predominates, my own position has if anything hardened over the past five years, and I hope some issues are a bit clearer. In particular, I soon came to see that I gone too far in my attempt to absolve Engels of all blame for the Marxist distortion of Marx, and blunted my attack on the old orthodoxy. To make amends, I wrote a paper on 'Friedrich Engels and Marx's Critique of Political Economy' (**Capital and Class 62**, Summer 1997), showing that even that great and devoted upholder of Marx had not really grasped what his friend was trying to do.

During these past five years, socialism has begun to escape from the shadow of the revolution of October 1917 and its betrayal, but little more than that. It is impossible to exaggerate the extent to which this long historical detour affected the entire socialist project. Understanding of the struggle for a new social order or even its possibility was pushed back in the thinking of millions. When the end of the Russian revolution was finally placed beyond doubt, the disappointment of many 'leftists' was great. But it meant that a new generation could begin to face the challenge of fighting against the old order without the dogmatic straitjacket worn by its elders.

In this book, investigating the origins of Marx's fundamental ideas yet again, I want to demonstrate more clearly that his humanism, clearly stated in his early writings, was developed throughout his life, and was never abandoned, or replaced by what Marxism had called a 'scientific world outlook'. In particular, I want to probe further the relation between Marx's three concepts: 'truly human', 'science' and 'critique'. Without understanding what he meant by humanity and inhumanity, the contrast between his own critical science and what is generally called 'science' is lost. Herein lies his crucial relevance to today's problems.

Marx's critique of philosophy, of political economy and of socialism was made from the standpoint of 'human society and social humanity'. Only from this angle can the inhuman

character of modern society be comprehended and the social categories of science criticised as embodiments of inhumanity. Only then can they be transcended in conscious practice. What is at stake here cannot be overstated, for it involves the very survival of what it means to be human.

The first essay in this volume emphasises the gulf between Marx's attitude and nearly all the various meanings given to the word 'socialism'. I hope that, at this time when the very notion of a world of social relations freed from the domination of the market is widely rejected, this will help to press the reader even harder to grasp the radical nature of what Marx is up to. He is neither propounding a scientific doctrine nor constructing a model of how he thinks the world works. Nor is he setting out a Utopian 'vision' to which he thinks the world ought to conform. His central aim is 'universal human emancipation', so that in principle there can be neither a blueprint for freedom, nor a 'doctrine of freedom'. Marx's critique of all blueprints and doctrines constantly strives to strip away the obstacles to freedom, as they exist both in our heads and in the way we live. That is the aim of his critique of all forms and categories of 'social science'.

Chapter 2 is an attempt to separate Marx from the commonly-repeated idea that he was the author of something called 'historical materialism', a way of 'explaining' history and social change. Marx never used this term, which implies something quite opposed to his own understanding of his work. When the journal **Historical Materialism** was started, I submitted an earlier draft of this paper to the Editors. Two years later, it became clear that they were never going to agree to publish it. Eventually, one of them told me - quite correctly - that I hadn't discussed 'the secondary literature'. At this point, I gave up the unequal contest, and the article appeared in **International Socialist Forum**, Volume 1, Number 3.

Chapter 3 reprints an article I wrote in 1998, when there were many commemorations of the 150th anniversary of the publication of the Communist Manifesto. This also appeared in **International Socialist Forum**. One of its aims was to correct some of the many 'orthodox' accounts of the origins of this vital document, repeating the old mythology, for example, that re-hashed in the Introduction to the Verso edition of the **Manifesto**, contributed by Eric Hobsbaum.

Part 2, the remainder of this book, consists of an investigation of the relation between Marx and the tradition of political philosophy. In writing this essay, I was prompted especially by a book which received hardly any attention when it appeared. Gary Teeple's **Marx's Critique of Politics, 1942-47** (Toronto, 1984) was very important for me because of his careful account of the way that Marx's concept of critique developed in his early work. I then found that, in order to understand this, I had to return yet again to the contradictory relation between Marx and Hegel, and to re-examine it in the light of the history of political philosophy as a whole.

I know some readers will complain about my immersion in what they will call 'academic' questions. But I believe more strongly than ever that Marx's main work was to cut away

those mental forms embodying the forms of oppression. Only then can the 'real movement' find its 'mouthpiece'.

While doing this work, I have tried to draw my old comrades into discussion, but with little success. In the main, they have preferred to take up simpler matters, which they see as getting on with the 'real job', as they variously understand it. Still, my campaign has forced me to clarify some important questions, and for that I am grateful. My discussions with Don Cuckson have, as always, been invaluable, especially in pulling up by the roots any remaining vestiges of Leninism. Hayo Krombach has continued to place his knowledge of Hegel's system at my disposal. Geoff Barr and Christian Heine read an earlier draft of Part 2 and their criticisms and comments were vital in making me attempt to express more clearly what I was trying to achieve. Discussions with Ute Bublitz have left their mark on these pages. Several arguments with Massimo De Angelis have also forced me to reconsider many issues. These and many other discussants have helped me in this work, while being entirely innocent of responsibility for its shortcomings.

I must also thank Glenn Rikowski for the title of this book. When he presented his paper 'Marx and the Future of the Human' to a meeting of the Seminar on 'Marx: Individuals and Society', at Birkbeck College, London, I agreed with some aspects and disagreed with others, but I realised that its title express just what I was trying to do. So I asked him if I could purloin it, and he very kindly allowed me to do so.

Cyril Smith.

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‘I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle,
and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and
when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men
have to fight for what they meant under another name.’
(William Morris, **A Dream of John Ball**, 1887.)