

# Kant as a problem for Marxism

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The relation between the thought of Immanuel Kant and the Marxist movement has been a distinctly problematic one. Kant, as the founder of the German idealist school, was recognised by Marx as one important precursor of his own theory in a general sense. But his understanding of any specific importance in Kantian thought - while insightful in general (1) - at times betrayed an astonishingly harsh dismissal. In the German Ideology, the writing where he came to terms with his 'philosophical conscience', while sensing quite correctly that the heart of Kant is his Critique of Practical Reason, not, as traditionally thought, the Critique of Pure Reason, he nonetheless treats Kant merely as the theoretical representative for:

... the impotence, depression and wretchedness of the German burghers, whose petty interests were never capable of developing into the common national interests of a class and who were, therefore, constantly exploited by the bourgeois of all other nations. (2)

In common with this interpretation, therefore, he understands Kant as relegating the resolution of a conflict between the individual and society, to the world beyond.

Basically, though, Marx had very little to say about Kant. Lucio Colletti, who has recently tried to reconstruct the theoretical relationship between the two (3), has had to do it by way of Marx's critique of Hegel; suggesting from the results of the critique that Marx ends up facing certain Kantian problems. But he does not claim explicit reference of these problems to Kant.

This blindness on the part of Marx is not common. He was usually quick to grant recognition to important, or even minor forbears (4). One might be tempted either to join Marx in dismissing Kant as a theoretician, or to conclude with Kant himself that: 'I am a century too early with my works; it will be a hundred years before they are properly understood.' Neither would help in grasping what are the essential elements in Kant's thought, so that we can know whether the appearance of Kantianism in the Marxist tradition must always be a signal for political worries (as has often appeared to be the case in the past).

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## Marxist critiques of Kant

If we consider the traditional images, and consequently the traditional objections to Kant as a theorist, they are as follows. He is seen, first, as providing a last-ditch defence of theism against the encroachments of science. In this respect, he is seen to be in the same tradition as Descartes, who, by positing a strict dualism of body and soul, was able to allow Newtonian mechanics full sway over the body, leaving the soul to the governance of God. Kant, it is said, reproduces this dualism in his distinction between appearance and reality, or

1 It was Marx who coined the famous phrase about the Germans doing in their heads what the French had done in practice.

2 K Marx and F Engels, The German Ideology, Progress Publishers, 1964, p207

3 In 'Kant Hegel and Marx' in L Colletti, Marxism & Hegel, New Left Books, 1973

4 Das Kapital, for instance, is littered with footnotes in which he pays his respects even to those he opposes fiercely in other ways

between phenomenon and noumenon as he calls them. For God is then sealed off in the noumenal realm, only graspable by faith.

Secondly, he is seen as introducing a hard separation of fact and value, to the point where they become irreconcilable contradictories. A sample of this approach, seen as an article of faith hardly needing argument, can be seen in the following:

In the case of the natural world, Kant distinguished between things as they are (in-themselves) which are unknowable and the phenomenal world of appearances subject to causal laws. Correspondingly, man's existence has a similar dual structure: man as a phenomenal being is under the sway of unalterable causal laws, while the other aspect of his existence (the noumenal sphere) is characterised by freedom and self-determination. Thus any knowledge of man as a social being could only be achieved through the speculative methods of philosophy. The result of Kant's distinction was radically to separate fact from value, relegating the former to the domain of nature and the latter to the social. (6)

Thirdly, Kant is seen as introducing a purely formal, contentless ethics, which can therefore be filled with any content. As a consequence he is read as the theorist of the abstractly free individual, from the interstices of which analysis (now seen as a simple version of bourgeois individualism) can come all forms of domination. This is connected with a further objection (one which Durkheim apparently makes a virtue of (7)) that Kant makes a hard distinction between reason and emotion, therefore making of morality a Puritan system of duties which are to be followed by continuous acts of self-denial.

Finally, Kant is regarded as introducing a new form of fatalism which neatly matched the uncertainty and practical pessimism of the German burghers:

So sharp was his distinction between appearance and reality ... that reality ceased to be knowable, one could only act 'as if' it existed at all. So radical was Kant's dualism that, paradoxically, his effort to save human freedom seemed to result in a new form of philosophical fatalism. (8)

The key, in fact, to all the objections is embodied in Anchor's comment. For all of them derive from a claim about the relationship between appearance and reality, or the phenomenon and noumenon as Kant called them. All the claimed dilemmas and oppositions dovetail into that distinction, or rather, into an interpretation of that distinction. For it is argued that Kant uses this distinction to argue that God is what Kant called a 'Regulative Idea', that is, something beyond the realm of appearance, and therefore not capable of being proved - but also not capable of being disproved. Kant can therefore make religion a matter of rational faith, safeguarded against any possible scientific development; for science is the method of comprehending appearance,

6 R McDonough, Ideology as False Consciousness: Lukacs, Working Papers in Cultural Studies No. 10 p33

7 'There is no moral act that does not imply a sacrifice, for, as Kant has noted, the law of duty cannot be obeyed without humiliating our individual, or as he calls it, our "empirical sensibility".' E Durkheim, 'The Dualism of Human Nature' in K Wolff (ed.) Emile Durkheim, Ohio State UP, 1960, p328

8 R Anchor, The Enlightenment Tradition, Prentice-Hall, 1967, p119

not reality. The fact/value distinction is seen as growing out of the same problem: for, it is argued, Kant sees value, and all morality, as deriving from his concept of freedom which is only applicable as a noumenal category, while the phenomenal world is governed by mechanical causality. The contentless ethic comes from the same source, for Kant is seen to insist that morality as such has no empirical content, and therefore the moral laws derivable from the concept of freedom also can have no empirical content. The pursuit of the formal requirements of duty is therefore seen as demanding the 'humiliation' of all empirical desires such as the desire for happiness or self-realisation. Finally, the fatalism is derived precisely because the realm of freedom (the noumenal world) is seen to be out of all contact with the world as we experience it (phenomenally).

## An ahistorical philosophy?

Traditionally, therefore, what Marxists of all hues have made out of this, has been the denial of the importance of Kant to the actual construction of a Marxist theory. He is important as a precursor of Hegel, but was dedicated to ahistorical deductions of no use to us:

However we read Kant, Hegel and Marx could both argue that Kant's separation of the noumenal and phenomenal worlds made it impossible for him to discover the concrete historical mediations for the transvaluations of human practice. (9)

Of course, not all have agreed. There have been serious attempts to make something more of Kantianism for the Marxist tradition. Lucien Goldmann, in his fine book, presses a Lukacsian mould out of Kant - not without success. But apart from the fact that the book is marred with a strong idealistic tendency, we are left at the end with little sense of the actual use that we can make of Kant for our own purposes. More, it seems like an exercise in historical honesty.

One of the recent revaluations that has done something to discover the historical and theoretical significance of Kant, still nonetheless concedes much to the tradition of anti-Kantianism. Sohn-Rethel, in his insightful studies on epistemology and ideology, argues:

It is an essential condition of capitalism that the technology of production be founded upon knowledge of nature from sources other than manual labour. And how a knowledge thus defined and yet reliable, exact and objectively valid is constituted and indeed possible, is a question which must be answered, especially if we do not share the idealistic belief in the original theoretical capacities of a 'pure intellect'.

The epistemological interest in science is clearly specified historically and economically by its tie-up with the capitalist mode of production. It is not Kant's ahistorical concern with the possibility of knowledge and of experience in general and as such. Still, even taking leave from Kant's philosophical apriorism, the questions he asks - how are pure mathematics and pure science possible? - look confusingly like the ones of concern to us. The reason for the similarity lies in the emphatically ahistorical or rather timeless, universal character of mathematics and science and indeed of all intellectual labour divided from manual labour. While Kant's answer is in line with this character and,

correspondingly, implies the perpetual necessity of the division of head and hand and, hence, the impossibility for ever of social classlessness, the answer that we require must, on the contrary, be in historical and materialistic terms. (10)

This reads Kant as not only not concerned with a historical understanding of the possibility of knowledge, but also as producing an account that is incompatible with a historical account. In saying this, Sohn-Rethel has reintroduced the absolute antinomies which he had apparently overcome by allowing that empirical knowledge has a priori grounds determining its form. But now, the opposition has become one between history and theory. He therefore concludes that Kant represents only the apex of bourgeois thought, which is to be taken over by Marxism via a critique which reveals it as the most systematic possible version of bourgeois thought. The problems, the concepts, and the system are all, according to Sohn-Rethel, those of the rising bourgeois class.

## Who are the educators?

What is particularly crucial about Sohn-Rethel's interpretation, is that he cites against Kant a problem which I think can be shown to be absolutely central to Marxism: the problem of the educators. He argues that there is a necessary distinction implicit in Kant between head and hand. This clearly recalls the problematic of the Third Thesis on Feuerbach:

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. Hence, this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. (11)

This is a key point in Marxist theory, it is even the key point in Marxist theory, because it is the point of juncture between theory and practice. On the one hand, it derives its force as a question of theory from the perception of the possibility of a world which is, according to one's theoretical preferences, rational, non-alienated, planned, post-ideological, or whatever; in short, a socialist world. But it also immediately raises the total question of agency - why the working class, etc, which is at once a theoretical question, and a practical one - in what ways can organisation and action by the working class be brought to bear on the capitalist system so that it can carry through its role of self-education? In that little question, who shall educate the educators, is embodied a whole problematic.

If it were the case, therefore, that Kant had never seen a problem of any description here, and also that the problem is not even stateable in terms of his concepts and his theoretical outlook, the significance of Kant for Marxism would be minimal. He would be merely an important part of the history of bourgeois theory. But the hard fact is, that Kant in fact directly posed the problem, because it was implicit in his whole theory, and worked hard to find a solution to it.

The most explicit discussion of the problem occurs in one of the most neglected of Kant's mature writings, an essay on history published in 1784 (12).

10 A Sohn-Rethel, 'Mental and Manual Labour in Marxism' in Walton and Hall op cit p46

11 K Marx and F Engels op cit pp651-2

12 I Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View'

9 J O'Neill, 'On Theory and Criticism in Marx' in P Walton and S Hall (eds) Situating marx, p77

But the solution he proposes, and its theoretical underpinning, is implicit in the whole of his work.  
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## How men make history

In this essay, Kant sets out nine Theses, which are the result of the application of Kant's mature investigation of the nature of man and his capacity for knowledge and morality, to history. It is necessary to trace the course of the argument in fair detail, to see how Kant arrives at the problem of, and the attempted solution to, the 'educators' (13). The beginning of the main argument, essentially, is the Third Thesis:

Nature has willed that man shall produce wholly out of himself everything that goes beyond the mechanical ordering of his animal existence; and that he should partake of no other happiness or perfection than that which he himself, independently of instinct, has created by his own reason. (14)

The crux of this Thesis is the denial of any instinctual basis to man. We are given the opportunities and capacities in general to make of ourselves what we will:

Man, accordingly, was not to be guided by instinct, not nurtured and instructed with ready-made knowledge; rather he should bring forth everything out of his own resources. Securing his own food, shelter, safety and defence (for which Nature gave him neither the horns of the bull, nor the claws of the lion, nor the fangs of the dog, but hands only), all amusement which can make life pleasant, insight and intelligence, finally even goodness of heart - all this should be wholly his own work. (15)

If it is to be man's own work, it is risky. The risks are various. Kant discusses the theoretical possibility that we might have remained in a state of 'Arcadian bliss', at such a low level of development that human capacities are hardly developed at all. But noting the fact that massive development has in fact taken place, Kant had to explain the motive force behind change and human social growth. For Kant made it clear that, even if theoretically 'men make themselves', nonetheless, they decidedly do it 'under conditions not of their own choosing'. In a statement that has all the appearance of paradox, Kant writes:

The means employed by Nature to bring about the development of all the capacities of men is their antagonism in society, so far as this is, in the end, the cause of a lawful order among men.

By 'antagonism' I mean the unsocial sociability, ie their propensity to enter into society, bound together with a mutual opposition which constantly threatens to break up the society. (16)

The appearance of paradox comes first from the fact that, after the Third Thesis had denied the presence of significant instincts, the Fourth has put two back: a social instinct, and an anti-social instinct. Without going into the whole explanation and argument, in fact, the resolution of the paradox consists in the following. Kant sees social life as the precondition of being human at all. He talks of the tendency to socialise as making man more than

in I Kant, *On History*, Library of Liberal Arts, 1963

13 I am, nonetheless, condensing the argument which I have dealt with at length elsewhere; so some problems and possible objections are left out.

14 I Kant, *op cit*, p13

15 I Kant, *op cit*, p14

16 I Kant, *op cit*, p15

'the developed form of his natural capacities'. But the anti-social tendency is not of a Hobbesian sort; it is not a tendency to disengage from society, rather it is a tendency to a specific form of antagonistic social relations. These constitute a specific way of becoming human. But the antagonism is not instinctual or rooted in any basic human nature. It comes from the limited experience of any particular individual, who therefore confronts the world with only a partial understanding. The antagonistic social relations are those in which each individual attempts to make use of other individuals to his own end. And that is attempted because the world beyond the individual appears governed by (social) laws which are alien to him or her.

This point is important because it connects closely with Kant's then developing ethical theory. In that, he gives as a prime version of the Categorical Imperative that we should never treat others merely as means to an end only, but always as ends-in-themselves. The substantive implications of this need disentangling, but it certainly is very important in seeing how he now understands history. By application of his ethical theory, we can see how antagonistic social relations are decidedly immoral. But that does not lead Kant to a simple condemnation. On the contrary, first we must recognise their naturalness; and having done that, he applauds the antagonisms for the most interesting reason:

Thanks be to Nature, then, for the incompatibility, for heartless competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess and to rule!...

The natural urges to these, the sources of unsociableness and mutual opposition from which so many evils arise, drive men to new exertions of their forces and thus to the manifold development of their capacities. (18)

## Towards a rational society

Kant is here taking an enormous stride forward, theoretically. For his model of history, deriving from his general philosophy, now admits the naturalness, but not the inevitability, of competitive social relations; recognises the evil they embody, and also generate; but nonetheless develops from his conception a theory of social development. The theory, crudely put, is that even

18 I Kant, *op cit*, p16



with antagonistic social relations, the degree and richness of social relationships determines the level of possibilities of any individual's personal development. In other words, in order to extend my 'exploitation' (19) of you, I need to deepen the social relations between us, not weaken them. Exploitation can increase, rather than reduce, social interdependence; can be the mechanism for the development of human capacities, rather than the source simply of mutual destruction.

But not only does Kant see this vital logic, he also adds the last dimension which is required to make him useful to Marxism. He posits as an essential element, both practically in terms of our acting in the present with an orientation to the future, and theoretically in terms of our capacity to grasp the essential nature of the present, that social antagonism can be superceded:

What is the good of esteeming the majesty and wisdom of Creation in the realm of brute nature ... if that part of the great stage of supreme wisdom which contains the purpose of all the others - the history of mankind - must remain an unceasing reproach to it? (20)

Kant is insistent that a rational, non-antagonistic society must be possible, even if only as a theoretical condition in the light of which we think and act now. Otherwise, he says, Rousseau would be right 'in preferring the state of savages, as long, that is, as the last stage to which the human race must climb is not attained' (21). Kant's problem therefore was: how was a rational society possible, both theoretically and practically? It is my interpretation that the bulk of his writings in the Critique of Pure Reason and the Critique of Practical Reason, was devoted to the theoretical possibility of this; and his writing in 'Idea for a Universal History...' to its practical possibility. It can, of course, be argued that Marx's scathing comment on him is true to this extent, that in the German conditions of the late 18th century, Kant was not really able to go beyond consideration of the theoretical possibility of freedom, while consideration of the practical-political mechanisms for achieving it is restricted to one essay.

The differences between a cooperative society and the present antagonistic society need restating. In the present, men form antagonistic social relations in which each attempts to use others to his own ends, that is, as means only. This has the effect of enforcing human development; we become increasingly socialised, and therefore in one sense more humanised, because humanity requires social relationships. But the cause of unsociable, antagonistic relations is not any innate drive; rather, it is that our understanding of the world is limited to the world as it appears. And it appears that any progress on my part requires the subjection of you to my will. But the very fact of this reveals a paradox which reason can disentangle. For in subjecting you to my will, it becomes evident that both I and you are conscious agents, more than mere objects of mechanical causation. Therefore, the greater the degree of antagonistic social development, the greater the possibility of reason discovering the fact that all this antagonism is at the level of appearance. Thus reason can show us the possibility of human mutual development on the basis of co-operation: reason here understood as the capacity to

have insight into the way the world could be. (22)

We are left, therefore, with a problem of the relation between the world-as-it-is, and the world-as-it-could-be. It is in tackling this problem, which is immediately a theoretical and a practical problem, that Kant predates Marx's statement of the 'educators' problem:

Man is an animal which, if it lives among others of its kind, requires a master. For he certainly abuses his freedom with respect to other men, and although, as a reasonable being he wishes to have a law which limits the freedom of all, his selfish impulses tempt him, where possible, to exempt himself from them. He thus requires a master, who will break his will, and force him to obey a will that is universally valid, under which each can be free. But whence does he get his master? Only from the human race. But then the master is himself an animal, and needs a master. (23)

Of course the language is that of the 18th-century thinkers, but the problem is that of Marxism. Kant continues:

Let him begin it as he will, it is not to be seen how he can procure a magistracy which can maintain public justice and which is itself just, whether it be a single person or a group of several people. For each of them will always abuse his freedom if he has no one above him to exercise force in accordance with the laws. The highest master should be just in himself, and yet be a man. This task is therefore the hardest of all... (24)

... but it is still a task.

Kant in the end finds the practical achievement of it impossible, or nearly so. He posits its possibility as a necessary condition of living; but finds the difficulties of realisation overwhelming. It is in fact quite noticeable how his certainty diminishes at the end of the article, as he tackles the transformation issue. Statements become questions; questions become hesitant, even querulous:

Would it be expected ... that states ... should form all sorts of unions which in their turn are destroyed by new impacts, until once, finally, by chance a structure should arise which could maintain its existence - a fortunate accident that could hardly occur? Or are we not rather to suppose that Nature here follows a lawful course in gradually lifting our race from the lower levels of animality to the highest level of humanity...? Or perhaps we should prefer to conclude that ... absolutely nothing, at least, nothing wise, is to issue? (25)

It would indeed be amazing, if I am right in any way in seeing Kant as having identified correctly a major practical/historical paradox in advance of Marx, if he had gone on to provide a solution (26). For what enabled Kant to discover the dimensions of this

22 This interpretation of reason is also a signal for a whole reinterpretation. Kant's account of reason in the two main Critiques has been singularly misunderstood, almost as another mode of perception which, because it attempts to look at noumena, can't really see anything at all. But in the case of humanity, the noumenal character to be grasped is a series of potentials: man is capable of being free, and rational, and moral. That is thereby to make reason a faculty for grasping what is materially possible.

23 I Kant, op cit, p17

24 I Kant, op cit, p17

25 I Kant, op cit, pp19-20

26 It has been said that Rousseau, by whom Kant was very much influenced, also found himself in this situation. For him, the General Will, with its metaphysical bases, had to become the theoretical substitute of a practical political will embodied in a specifiable group, precisely because his experience of the world revealed no group or class with the characteristics of simultaneous universality, and sectional power.

19 That is, my use of you as means only to my ends.

20 I Kant, op cit, p25

21 I Kant, op cit, p21

problem was an emergent philosophical anthropology of 'man the maker', still partly conceived idealistically. He lacked all the derived categories of labour, production and class which gave Marx his solution.

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There is of course a great deal more that needs to be said about Kant's notion of the human construction of history. But just from what I have indicated, the following points can, I think, be gained. First, Sohn-Rethel's argument that Kant was a metaphysical idealist whose thought, because it was ahistorical, could not encompass the problem of the educators, is just wrong. He is wrong because he has in part misunderstood what Kant was attempting in his Critiques. In particular, both Sohn-Rethel and the others who find fatalism etc in Kant, wrongly construe the noumenon/phenomenon relation in his thought.

Without going into a long account of this, it must first be recalled that Kant saw himself as an idealist. We should expect from this a theoretical imbalance between the possibilities of knowledge of the natural, and the human world. Therefore Benton's sharp remark will only hold against Kant's concept of natural science, as I shall show:

Kant's distinction between a phenomenal world, open to perception and to knowledge through scientific concepts and methods, and an unknowable world of free subjectivity is, of course, open to serious philosophical objections. The principal difficulty is that the resolution of the problem of freewill and determinism (as well as the other problems of speculative metaphysics) require a good deal to be said about the nature of the supposedly unknowable things-in-themselves. (27)

As I shall show, the world of free subjectivity can have a lot said about it. Kant is insistent upon the special position of the concept of freedom in this respect. And Benton is only partially right in his consequential comment:

Accordingly, attempts to modify, or even altogether abandon Kant's noumenal/phenomenal distinction played a vital role in the development of German philosophy following Kant's death. (28)

For the reasons for the attempts to modify or reject the distinction are not purely philosophical. For it was his phrasing of the distinction that enabled Kant to see the possibility of a free, rational world. For he did not separate them crudely. On the contrary, for him practical action, that is moral action, could in a sense break down the boundaries between freedom and causality. Thus he writes: 'The concept of freedom is meant to actualise in the sensible world the end proposed by its laws.' (29) Kant specifically connects the possibility of this, and the impossibility of knowledge of the noumenal character of non-human nature, with his idealism:

Properly, therefore, it was understanding - which insofar as it contains constitutive a priori cognitive principles has its special realm and one moreover in the faculty of knowledge - that the Critique, called in a general way that of Pure Reason, was intended to establish in secure but particular possession against all other competitors. In the same way, reason, which contains constitutive a priori principles solely in respect

27 T Benton, Philosophical Foundations of the Three Sociologies, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977, p104

28 T Benton, loc cit

29 I Kant, The Critique of Judgement, Oxford, 1952, p14

of the faculty of desire, gets its holding assigned to it by the Critique of Practical Reason. (30)

Understanding is the Kantian faculty for grasping the world of appearance, by analysing concepts and their relation to experience. Reason is the faculty that can give us insight into the noumenal nature of things, because it analyses and synthesises concepts in their relation to the totality. But reason is here specifically limited to the faculty of desire, that is, to man as actor.

This demand for a reinterpretation of Kant is not an idle matter. For, as has already been suggested, Kant's system is not primarily one of theoretical reason, but of practical reason (this is something Marx instinctively grasped). He saw the Critique of Pure Reason as a ground-clearing exercise ('like a stone from the path' (31)) before the essential job. And that job was the construction of a scientific and human ethic, rooted in the nature of man and the possibility of a rational world. And he insists right at the start of his Practical Reason that the whole of reason is practical. His own preferences were clearly stated:

Then I will go on to metaphysics, which has only two parts: the metaphysics of nature, and the metaphysics of morals, of which I shall publish the last part first, and I rejoice over it in anticipation. (32)

The moral philosophy was the heart of Kantianism; and it was a very special moral philosophy. Not at all the formal, contentless Puritan self-flagellation most interpreters would have us believe. On the contrary, as Cassirer notes:

What is truly permanent in human nature is not any condition in which it once existed and from which it has fallen; rather it is the goal for which and towards which it moves. Kant looks for constancy not in what man is but in what he should be. (33)

And, more importantly, as I have tried to show, 'could be'.

The second philosophical reason for misunderstanding on this score arises from the ignoring of the force of the terms 'noumenon' and 'phenomenon'. For this specifies that they are not simply two alternative worlds, but that one is an ordered version of the other. The problem therefore is to trace the way in which reality appears. (This is in Marxist terms none other than the problem of ideology.)

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## Kant's legacy for Marxism

Why say all this, though, in a paper on Kant's relation to Marxism? As I argued before, I believe that in many senses the Third Thesis on Feuerbach constitutes the heart of the Marxist problematic. And it is not accidental that Kant discovers the problem, and has at his disposal the theoretical means to move towards a solution. What, therefore, I am arguing for is that within the rich texture of Kant's thought there are elements, and in particular a structure, which need preserving in the transformation from idealism to materialism. If we agree with Lukacs that Marxism is the theory of proletarian revolution, then two points from Kant become essential to us:

30 I Kant, op cit, p4

31 I Kant, letter to Herz, quoted in F van de Pitte, Kant as Philosophical Anthropologist, Martinus Nijhoff, 1971, p37. This is an excellent book, one of the first to grasp that at the centre of Kant is a perception of a possible future.

32 F van de Pitte, loc cit

33 E Cassirer, Rousseau, Kant, Goethe, Princeton UP, 1945, p20

(1) The theory has to contain the possibility of liberation. It is worth while recalling Marx's insistence that he had surpassed theoretically not merely Hegelianism, but also the metaphysical materialists of the Enlightenment. And it was the metaphysical materialists who had created the impassable dichotomies of the sort that 'man is born free, but is everywhere in chains'. Who put them on him? Who can take them off? Marxism as the theory of the liberation of the working class supplied the answers to these questions. For the working class is the creator, in a crucial sense, of its own exploitation, and therefore has the potential capacity to end it - and thereby free the whole of humanity. But if Marxism is the theory of that, it has to work as a theory, not simply as an assertion.

Kant supplied the essential premises to make it work. These premises lie within the distinction, and the relation, that Kant draws between noumenon and phenomenon. For Kant sees freedom in man as both ground and end; ground, in that, as he says, freedom is the ratio essendi of morality: end, in that morality is the ratio cognoscendi of freedom. The possibility and realisability of a moral social order is what gives content to freedom, turns it from a mere absence of instinctual determination to a freely constructed social system. What is needed therefore is the materialist equivalent of the concept of freedom in this Kantian sense.

Therefore, the dismantling of the noumenon/phenomenon distinction and relation was the demolition of Kant's solution to empiricism. In empiricism, the present judges the future. The given world is the source of our understanding of possibilities. In Kant, the materially possible future judged the present, and specified the action to be taken in it. It is this fact that re-emphasises my objection to Benton's suggestion that it is philosophical faults alone which led to the post-Kantian rejection of the distinction and relation. On the contrary, if we take two highly perceptive post-Kantians who make use of Kant in entirely contrary ways - Weber, and Durkheim - we find that it is possible to understand their pessimism and conservatism, and opposition to Marxism only on the basis of tracing their rejection of the Kantian distinction and relation between noumenon and phenomenon (34).

I believe also that it can be shown by careful 'immanent criticism' (to use an important idea of Lucio Colletti's) that a number of modern interpretations of Marxism fail as possible theories of revolutionary socialism, precisely because they have no materialist equivalent of this concept of freedom, with its intricate theoretical and practical logic (35).

These are claims, and I am not trying to substantiate them here. But, even if there were no other reasons for re-evaluating the tradition of Kantian interpretation, this would surely be more than enough. But of course, for Kant to be able to grasp and develop means towards the solution of the 'educators' problem must mean that his system of concepts and arguments has far more than that to offer us.

(2) I think it is not a trite thing to say that Marxism is a theory of revolutionary socialism.

34 I have in fact carried out this exercise in detail for both those thinkers. But space obviously forbids its inclusion here.

35 If we take, as a central example, the Althusserian system, I am struck by Simon Clarke's argument ('Althusser's Marxism', circulated in CSE but so far unpublished) that Althusser is in fact a metaphysical materialist, returning to Montesquieu, Smith etc. But it is worth recalling that it was precisely against such that Marx directed the Third Thesis; they had not solved, could not solve, the 'educators' problem. Therefore, in a sense, he is a pre-Kantian (except that, ironically, his thought owes a heavy debt to a Hegelian inevitabilism).

36 A Gramsci, Selections from Prison Writings, Lawrence & Wishart, 1971, p461

As a theory, it must pass critical tests of adequacy; it must also live in a world of competing theories, and have much to say about them.

Since Marxism is opposed to all variants of empiricism, one of whose chief tenets is the pre-conceptual availability of the world, Marxism needs a theory of concepts, of understanding. As Gramsci put it:

An enquiry into a series of facts to discover the relations between them presupposes a 'concept' that permits one to distinguish that series from another possible series of facts. How can there take place a choice of facts to be adduced as proof of the truth of one's own assumption if one does not have a pre-existing criterion of choice? But what is this criterion of choice to be, if not something superior to each single fact under enquiry? An intuition, a conception which must be regarded as having a complex history... (36)

... but also as having a logical structure. I think that one of the lessons from Kant is the requirement of systematic structure. Marxism as a theory creates by its central concepts a number of dilemmas - the compatibility of the following apparent contradictories, and the possibility of historical movement between them: between determinism and freedom, alienation and self-realisation, ideology and science, etc. As a theory, therefore, Marxism needs a structure of concepts that admits and resolves these contradictories into practical historical problems. That, it seems to me, is the unrecovered heritage of Kant.

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To conclude in two ways then. Kant is wrongly regarded as a fatalist; he regarded freedom not merely as a Regulative Idea, guiding our penetration of the world of appearance, but also as a material possibility imposing on us the duty to try to realise it. He was not a 'defender of the faith' (though he was religious); I think in considering his views here we should recall the extent to which he was regarded in his own time as atheistically inclined. But most importantly, the positive point in his theory of religion was that God can have ascribed to him/her/it only those characteristics which are derived from our moral life; our perception of God reflects our understanding of morality, he argued.

Kant did not distinguish fact and value; he worked theoretically to merge them. He did not produce a timeless, contentless ethic: on the contrary, he showed the necessity for a substantive concept of freedom and social morality. More than that, in his consideration of 'evil', he was the first to make it clear and to integrate the understanding of this into his theory, that it is not unnatural, and that it is an aspect of human development. (There is no socialism without capitalism.)

In the light of these and many more points that deserve bringing out, I believe that it should be possible to reconstruct, by way of a materialist critique of this real Kant:

- (a) a theory of ideology, which is already implicit in many of Kant's comments (notably in the Critique of Practical Reason);
- (b) a theory of science, resolving both logical and historical dimensions;
- (c) a resolution of the apparent shifts within the theory and practice of Marxism between inevitabilist and voluntarist orientations;
- (d) a powerful base for the critique of specific ideological views.