

Karl Marx, Death and Apocalypse

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Thoughts occasioned by reading Wayne Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch* (Macmillan, 1982) and Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin* (Macmillan, 1982)

There are five grand old men of twentieth-century European Marxism: Adorno <1>, Benjamin <2>, Bloch <3>, Lukács <4>, and Marcuse <5>. Their works loom bulky and ominous on the library shelves. Who can afford to buy them for themselves? Who can claim, in all honesty, to have read them all, with understanding? Looking again, three common features appear: they are all men; they are all white; they are all upper middle class: thrice privileged and thrice blinded. They share a revulsion from narrow gauge political economy, and, not coincidentally, they are all thrown into confusion by the failure of the working classes in Europe to produce the proletarian revolution on schedule. They do not turn to political economy to provide an explanation of that failure of Marx's hypothesis. They therefore do not set about uncovering the exploited and oppressed classes behind the elite workers of Europe, women and the populations of the third world, who really provide the surplus value for the makers of super profit. They are individualists, working on their own, with a strongly marked romantic resonance. These romantic revolutionaries appeal to an original unreduced Marxism, before the fall into political-negotiation and calculation, and into economic management and social administration. They identify in the Marxism of the second international an undialectical reduction to the second part of Hegel's logical triad, a reduction to material nature, at the expense of the idea and of the spirit, the first and third parts of the triad. They seek to generate a more properly dialectical understanding of society, and of human existence, by reaffirming those other two moments.

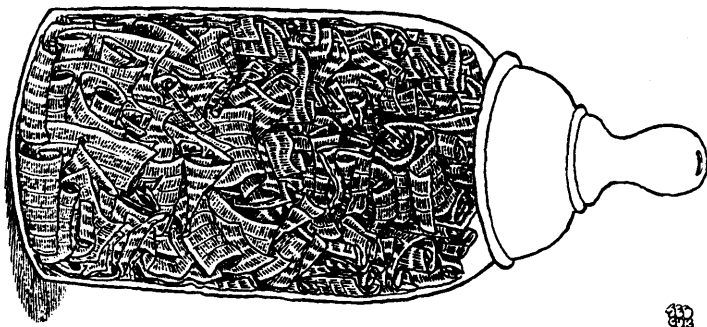
There is an unnamed sixth in the list: Martin Heidegger <6>. He breaks ranks with the rest, by having culpably stayed in Germany, during the Nazi period, teaching at Freiburg University. Unlike the others, he was not immunised from Nazi enthusiasm by socialist beliefs and by Jewish heritage. His commitment was to local community, not to international communism; he objected to proscribing Jews, but was not personally at risk. He has however a good word for Karl Marx in his *Letter on Humanism*, composed just after the war, and his major work *Being and Time* (1927), is clearly connected to that of both Bloch and of Lukács: the apocalyptic moment, bringing revelation and authenticity is a common theme <7>. Marcuse admits to admiring Heidegger's work; and Benjamin proposed, but

never presented, a systematic critique of Heidegger's account of temporality, indicating how that account touches on and challenges his own understanding of temporality. What binds the six more firmly together is their common pessimism with respect to installing morality on a collectively constituted and validated ethic. They address aesthetics, sometimes optimistically, sometimes pessimistically, as the domain in which the echoes of natural law certainties about justice and self-determination may find articulation. Increasingly they sought in aesthetics a substitute not just for ethics but also for politics. Heidegger sought to criticise Nazism, in the late thirties, through analysing Holderlin's work; it is more surprising that Adorno, Benjamin and Lukács seek to criticise capitalism through identifying the gaps in contemporary literary understanding, and the incompletenesses of art forms in the capitalist world. Benjamin's work on Baudelaire, and Lukács' on the historical novel are cases in point.

This common appeal to aesthetics marks a difference between these romantic Marxists and the political economists: Kautsky, Lenin, Luxemburg and Marx himself. Marx studied statistics; the romantic individualists sought to generate an interest in the work of Schelling, Kierkegaard, and Schopenhauer, to supplement economically reduced understanding of society. Lukács, in *The Destruction of Reason* (1954) (Merlin, 1980), discusses this attempted supplementation indirectly, identifying Schelling, Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer as forefathers of the founding of irrationalism by Nietzsche, in the second part of the nineteenth century. Lukács describes his inquiry as an analysis of Germany's path towards Hitler, on the terrain of philosophy; but it was Lukács himself who argued the importance of Kierkegaard's work to Bloch, in the years leading up to the first world war. It was Bloch who introduced Lukács to the work of Hegel. The impact of Hegel on Lukács is clear, both in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and in *The Young Hegel*, completed in 1938. In the latter, Lukács attempts to show how Hegel's earlier, more radical social and economic analysis informs his later, more clearly philosophical work, in an inversion of the argument used by the romantic individualists, to show that Marx's earlier, more philosophical analyses inform his later, more radical political economy.

The effect of Kierkegaard on Bloch, on Benjamin, and on Adorno is clear. Adorno published a study of Kierkegaard in 1933, called *Kierkegaard's construction of the aesthetic*. For Kierkegaard, the aesthetic is strongly counterposed to the ethical: the ethical prescribing behaviour in general; the aesthetic leaving space for individual idiosyncrasy. They all mobilise his systematically anti-

systematic writing, as a defence against the authoritarian implications of Hegelian conceptions of totality. The manoeuvre is theorised, not without self-contradiction, in Adorno's Negative Dialectics, but is clearly already in play in the much earlier works of Bloch and Benjamin. Kierkegaard's anti-system disrupts the philosophical will to system in two ways. It disrupts the teleology in writing, through which an argument is proposed, developed and concluded. It also more radically disrupts the identity of the author of the writing, by installing a series of semi-transparent pseudonyms and substitute identities, as named author, and as subordinate character actually appearing in the works attributed to Kierkegaard, under the various pseudonyms. Kierkegaard's anti-system is at least as important as Nietzschean aphorism in the formation of Bloch's anti-teleological style of writing, and of Benjamin's fragmented sloganeering. Heidegger, too, shows signs of a deep and enduring interest in Kierkegaard's work in Being and Time.



It is striking that all six show reservations about composing long continuous monographs. Lukács' earlier works are compilations of essays; Heidegger's Being and Time remains a half completed torso. In the secondary literature, however, while these various resonances between the six are touched on, and the tendency to question written forms noted, the example of fragmentation and experiment is not imitated. Julian Roberts, in Walter Benjamin, and Wayne Hudson, in The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch, while commenting intelligently on the complexities of their subjects' thought and writing, do not address the paradox of writing about these men in a style reviled and abandoned by them. The fracturing of society and of social understanding, so painstakingly investigated and delineated by Bloch and Benjamin, is surreptitiously glossed over by the very style in which these commentators write. In that style, Hudson and Roberts suggest either that society is no longer fractured, a pious if inaccurate hope, or that writing and publishing is sufficiently independent of the fractures in society to permit the smoothing over of social fractures in academic commentary. In their mode of presentation, then, Hudson and Roberts suggest a lack of seriousness in their sympathy with the Marxian cultural and philosophical critiques which Bloch and Benjamin undertook.

Lying behind the intimidating monument of the works of the romantic Marxists there is a further monument of works: those of Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. In the early years of this century, the authors of the first named monument found themselves deflected back to those in the second. These grand old men of European Marxism were not working to develop political economy in order to be able the better to analyse twentieth-century conditions; nor were they working against the increasingly authoritarian politics of Germany, Eastern Europe and Russia. They were acquiring philosophical culture. Lenin and Luxemburg, meanwhile, were developing theories of imperialism, as the logical extension of primitive capital accumulation and expropriation. There is then a marked split between the political economists and the romantics. The intellectual careers of Lenin and Luxemburg were cut short by revolution and reaction; the grand old men lived and worked to a great age, all, that is, except Benjamin.

The spectre of Hitler, and mass complicity in genocide, threaten to overwhelm these grand old men, driving one of their number, Benjamin, to suicide in 1941. In different ways, they identify an excessive emphasis in Marxism on rational materialism as leaving the emotional and the spiritual prey to the anti-politics of fascism. The individual's fear of isolation and death is soothed by the collective anonymity and irresponsibility of fascist organisation, and is then exacerbated by its terroristic mode of organisation, thus continually regenerating the need for consolation. The communist sense of collectively marching in the vanguard of history is to be gained only after undergoing the rigours of analysing the contradictions of capitalism and recognising the need for a decisive break with previous modes of social organisation. That sense of membership in the vanguard had often to be bought at the cost of deep familial and communal disapproval, police harassment and political imprisonment. Articulating and endorsing principles for individual and social conduct is a radically individuating process, as Heidegger seeks to show in Being and Time. Thus, while Nazism offered a comforting collective anonymity, without responsibility and acceptance of rational argumentation, Marxism seems to have offered an unwelcome radical individuation and a sense of personal responsibility for the success or failure of the revolution. Bloch therefore sought to complement reductive Marxism with a neo-romantic sense of enthusiasm. Lukács attempted to complement the scientific excesses of the second international by proposing in History and Class Consciousness the centrality of revolutionary activity to Marxism, although his own career is marked, after the late twenties, by a series of strategic withdrawals from the domain of political contestation. Parallel to Heidegger's analysis of Hölderlin, he attempted to criticise Stalin and Stalinism through aesthetic reflection and cultural critique. The failure of the working classes to form a revolutionary proletariat, and the mass appeal of fascism is a central theme for both Adorno and Marcuse, the one retreating into nihilism, and the other positing students as a potentially revolutionary group. Benjamin, in attempting to theorise revolutionary cultural organisation, tries to show how it is not just members of the working classes who can resist fascism. The impotence of revolutionary thinking without mass support remains however one of the stark lessons of the twenties and thirties. The absence of collective revolutionary activity fractures the writings of these romantic individualists, and leads them to postulate a mending of those fractures only in a far-flung utopian future.

Eschatological and chiliastic utopianism are present in the writings of all six: Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, Heidegger, Lukács, and Marcuse. They are all still engaged in the traditional philosophical quest of making time space, of neutralising the disjunctions and discontinuities generated by temporal process. Discussing possible forms for future societies is utopian, that is not in space: the future is conceived in spatial terms. This is the quest of Plato's Republic, and of Augustine's City of God. It is the theme of Benjamin's Theses on the Philosophy of History, which, with more time at his disposal, might have grown to the proportions of the earlier works. Hegel's philosophical project is perhaps the most ambitious attempt to show how the pure concept is inherent in temporal and historical process, thus neutralising disjunction and discontinuity. Hegel theorises the fulfilment of world history in absolute spirit, and the fascination exerted by his work over the six thereby becomes explicable. Of the six, it is Heidegger who offers a revised version of the four last things of eschatology: earth, sky, mortals, divines. The original four, heaven, hell, death and judgment, are not, however, far from the surface in the writings of the others. By confronting these eschatological themes, comfort for the isolated individual is sought. These themes in part add to, but in part derive from Marxist orthodoxy. The Communist Manifesto is clearly chiliastic, announcing the coming of good government, when human beings cease to be at the mercy of historical developments, and take over the direction of events. The Manifesto is eschatological in offering an end to history,

and a judgment of all that has gone before. It offers a barely secularised version of the belief in the millenium, the coming of Messiah, to reign on earth in peace and plenty for a thousand years, a theme which brings these Marxists into uncomfortable proximity with Hitler's thousand year Reich. Revulsion from Nazism led both Bloch and Lukács, both passionately awaiting the period of good government, great happiness and general prosperity, to conceal from themselves the dimensions and implications of Stalin's purges and of the Gulag. Bloch stayed in East Germany until the building of the Berlin Wall, in 1961. Lukács left Hungary for a brief period in 1956, but returned to die in Budapest. Their position is not unlike that of Heidegger, quietly dissenting from Nazism in Freiburg, from 1934 to 1945.

Heidegger, in Being and Time, seeks to naturalise history; Bloch, in The Spirit of Utopia, seeks to historicise nature. Both seem to attempt to homogenise difference in theoretical form, in response to a disastrously fragmented contemporary political situation. Despite their attempts to disrupt the natural expectation of smooth, complete models, through their style, their terminology, and the nature of their inquiries, they nevertheless seek to eliminate difference, and to reduce incompatibility. They attempt to give an overall view of human existence. This attempt turns into a refusal to recognise the ineliminable nature of rupture and of disjunction in human existence. This failure of recognition returns to wreak revenge in the inarticulable appeal to inexplicable apocalyptic interruptions of human life, through which order and meaning are suddenly intro-

duced into it. Adorno's theorising of fragmentation in Negative Dialectics reproduces the paradox of attempting to totalise fragmentation, to give an orderly presentation of the disparate, disorderly elements which make up human existence. The origin of the paradox, is the attempt to impose order on this disorder through writing, rather than through political and revolutionary activity.

These grand old men, all six of them, reflect on their relations to the great philosophical, Marxist and creative traditions of Europe, and attempt to reconcile themselves to their sense of isolation, through the brilliance of their writing and of their analysis. They fail to produce a collective account of their collective situation, and are thus subject to that situation. They fail to provide an account of their social and political circumstances, in political economy. Still less do they analyse domestic economy, the exploitation of women, through marriage, in the home. They do not analyse imperialism and neo-colonialism. These grand old men, white, middle class, and European, write for those who share, or seek to share, the privileges of white middle class men. The rest of us should be too busy with exploitation and expropriation, called international aid and marriage, with the threat of the new holocaust, called nuclear deterrence. The imminence of collective death has eliminated the space in which romantic revolutionaries flourish, with their individualist responses to death. There is no room for their utopian eschatology, and their chiliasm looks sadly optimistic. And who dare admit to having the time to read them?

Footnotes

- 1 Adorno, Theodore Wiesengrund (1903-1969), Minima Moralia, Negative Dialectics; Gillian Rose, The Melancholy Science: an introduction to the thought of Theodore W. Adorno, Macmillan, 1978.
- 2 Benjamin, Walter (1892-1940), One-Way Street, Charles Baudelaire: a lyric poet in the era of high capitalism; Julian Roberts, Walter Benjamin, Macmillan, 1982.
- 3 Bloch, Ernst (1885-1977), The Spirit of Utopia, The Principle of Hope; Wayne Hudson, The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch, Macmillan, 1982.
- 4 Lukacs, Georg (1885-1971), History and Class Consciousness, The Historical Novel; G.H.R. Parkinson, Lukacs, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977.
- 5 Marcuse, Herbert (1898-1979), Eros and Civilisation, Reason and Revolution; Barry M. Katz, Herbert Marcuse and the Art of Liberation: an intellectual biography, Verso, 1982.
- 6 Heidegger, Martin (1889-1976), Being and Time, On the Way to Language.
- 7 See Lucien Goldmann, Lukacs and Heidegger, for an account of the overlap between these two on the priority of the practical over the theoretical.

Books Received Cont.

- A. Montefiore (ed.), Philosophy in France Today, Cambridge UP, £20 hc, £5.95 pb
- J. Needleman, The Heart of Philosophy, RKP, £8.95 hc
- K. Nielsen, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion, MacMillan, £14 hc, £4.95 pb
- R. Norman, The Moral Philosophers - an Introduction to Ethics, Oxford UP, £15 hc, £4.95 pb

- L. Nowak, Property and Power, D. Reidel, \$57 hc, \$24 pb
- Allen Oakley, Marx's Critique of Political Economy, Vol. I, Intellectual Sources and Evolution, RKP, £14.95 hc
- W. Outhwaite, Concept Formation in Social Science, MacMillan, £12.50 hc
- George Pitcher, Berkeley: The Arguments of the Philosophers, RKP, £7.95 pb
- R. Plant, Hegel, an Introduction: Second Edition, Blackwell, £17.50 hc, £6.50 pb
- G. Poggi, Calvinism and the Capitalist Spirit, Macmillan, no price
- K. Popper and J. Eccles, The Self and Its Brain, RKP, £7.95 pb
- J. Rée, Proletarian Philosophers, Oxford UP, £15 hc
- Stewart Richards, Philosophy and Sociology of Science - an Introduction, Blackwell, £17.50 hc, £5.95 pb
- Manfred Reidel, Between Tradition and Revolution: the Hegelian Transformation of Political Philosophy, Cambridge UP, £20 hc
- J. Roberts, Walter Benjamin, MacMillan, £15 hc, £5.95 pb
- The Dora Russell Reader, Pandora Press, £3.95 pb
- Dora Russell, The Religion of the Machine Age, RKP, £12.95 hc
- M. Sarup, Education, State and Crisis - A Marxist Perspective, RKP, £8.95 hc, £4.95 pb