

by David McLellan

Less than ten years ago the 'exhaustion of political ideas' was widely proclaimed. At least in the Western World the differences dividing parties of the left and right seemed to be getting less and changes of government only made for a little more or a little less emphasis on economic planning and welfare. One of the most renowned of American political scientists wrote at the end of the 1950s:

. . . the fundamental political problems of the industrial revolution have been solved: the workers have achieved industrial and political citizenship, the Conservatives have accepted the Welfare State, and the democratic Left has recognized that an increase in overall state power carries with it more dangers to freedom than solutions for economic problems. This very triumph of the democratic social revolution in the West ends domestic politics for those intellectuals who must have ideologies or utopias to motivate them to political action.¹

In the space of a few years, however, the atmosphere has changed. The collection of essays edited by Erich Fromm under the title *Socialist Humanism*² well summarizes the change in outlook; here are thirty-six articles, most of them written specially for the book, affirming unequivocally that men can and should create their own world, that élitism is not inevitable and that work can be a creative activity. Of course, a book written by so many hands and claiming, at least on the dust-jacket, to cover Marxism, Gandhi, Renaissance humanism, existentialism, Utopia, history, science, dialectic, psychoanalysis, freedom, alienation, justice, labour, welfare, ethics, law, Christianity, technology, and revolution, must at times be exasperating. But at least it shows that one can think both critically about the way we live at present and hopefully about the future.

One real achievement of *Socialist Humanism* is the way many of its essays present Marx's thoughts as an undivided whole. Our picture of Marx tends to be fragmentary due both to the lack of any strong Marxist tradition in Britain and to the fact that many of his earlier writings have only recently been made available in English. As a result, the early texts of Marx have only recently entered the discussion on the nature of Marxism. Around the turn of the century, the dispute was about the economic theories of *Capital*. But the publication of many of Marx's earlier texts for the first time in 1932,

¹S. M. Lipset, *Political Man*, New York, 1960, pp. 404 ff.

²*Socialist Humanism*, ed. Erich Fromm, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, London, 1967.

together with the appearance of Existentialism and the revival of enthusiasm for Hegel, led to an immense interest in the 'young Marx' which has only recently reached Britain and the United States. The debate is no longer so much about the economic forecast of *Capital* or even the truth of dialectical materialism, but about Marx's understanding of history and human nature—Marx's 'humanism'. Nor has this evolution been confined to the non-Communist world; even members of the official Communist hierarchy like Roger Garaudy and Adam Schaff, as well as avowed revisionists like Kolakowski in Poland and Harich in East Germany, exemplify this change of emphasis in the interpretation of Marx.

Inevitably Marx became divided into two and the question was raised whether the early writings were implicitly rejected by the mature system of Marx's later years or whether, on the contrary, they did not reveal Marx's true philosophical inspiration. Was Marx an economist or a philosopher? Recently there has been a strong tendency to elevate the 'young' at the expense of the 'mature' Marx. Erich Fromm has said: 'It is impossible to understand Marx's concept of socialism and his critique of capitalism as developed in later years, except on the basis of the concept of man that he developed in his earlier years.'¹ Robert Tucker, too, in his attempt to portray Marxism as a religious type of myth that has misunderstood the true location of alienation, says, '... human self-alienation and the overcoming of it remained always the supreme concern of Marx and the central theme of his thought.'²

It is true that Marx later implicitly, even if only by his entire neglect of them, disavowed his earlier writings. Nevertheless, there have recently been attempts to portray Marxist thought as a coherent unity without giving weight to one period over another. The actual word 'alienation' does not occur in *Capital*, though Marx's remarks on the fetishism of commodities are obviously inspired by the idea. Also, the publication during the last war of Marx's *Grundrisse* in Moscow have helped to show the unity of Marx's thought. The *Grundrisse* were drafted by Marx in 1857-8 and represent preliminary work for *Capital*. In them the vocabulary and conception of the early writings is still very noticeable. Both in the 1844 MSS and in the first book of *Capital*, Marx puts the Hegelian notion of creativity in the foreground, though basing it on the actual process of production. Marx's earlier and later works are united by a conception of human nature that involves freedom for a man to decide his own future and a willingness to analyse rigorously the conditions of this freedom. But since the conditions change with time, only those commentaries on Marx that have some historical sense are relevant to us now. The possibilities of freedom today depend on what exists today.

Whatever the relationship of 'young' to the 'mature' Marx, a

¹E. Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man*, New York, 1961, p. 79.

²R. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, Cambridge, 1961, p. 238.

knowledge of his early work is essential to understand his thought. Aristotle's remark that 'to consider the origins of things, here as elsewhere, is the best way to understand them' applies also to Marx, and this symposium is a great help.

On the other hand, *Socialist Humanism* has, to my mind, certain deficiencies which are worth while mentioning since they are fairly common in this type of writing. There is very little in the book on the problems posed by mankind's division into nation states, for any humanism must interest itself in mankind as a whole and particularly in the widening gap between rich and poor nations. This is all the more urgent as the widening is now increasing at an accelerated rate. 'Socialism in one country' is a self-contradictory concept and, just as autarky has, ever since Plato's *Republic*, been a pre-condition of totalitarianism, so a reform of economic structures and trading conditions is essential to any human progress. This lack of a world perspective in the book is emphasized by the fact that virtually all of the authors are from Europe or North America and that no reference at all is made to the Chinese experiments in permanent revolution and community living.

Another disappointment is the relatively low level of the thirteen contributions from Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Poland whose similarity to each other is quite striking. They are almost all rewritings of early phases of Marx's thought, a humanism that borrowed many elements from romanticism. As essays in socialist philosophy they are rather naïf and quite unselfconscious as to language and its social bases. All such writings would benefit immeasurably by a study of, for example, the illuminating overview of the interplay between language and community by Fergus Kerr, O.P., in the November issue of *New Blackfriars* last year.

These rewritings of the early Marx seem cloudy and idealistic in the worst sense of the word. They would certainly have incurred the irony that Marx in the Communist Manifesto poured on those German *literati* who glossed the works of French economists with remarks on the 'alienation of human essence'. The recent history of the concept of alienation well illustrates my point. Because of its extraordinarily widespread contemporary use its meaning has inevitably become debased. To quote a recent writer:

Its evident resonance for 'neo-Marxist' thinkers, in both the West and the East, for existentialist philosophers and theologians, for psychiatrists and industrial sociologists, for *déraciné* artists and intellectuals and student rebels, has meant that it has been widely extended and altered in the interests of a number of contemporary preoccupations; as a result the core of Marxist concept has been lost.¹

There is a danger that the re-interpretation of Marx via his early writings will emasculate Marx's doctrine. The very comprehensive-

¹S. Lukes, 'Alienation and Anomie', in *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Third Series. Oxford, 1967, pp. 134f.