

## MARX AND CONTEMPORARY HUMANISM

One of the more interesting theoretical problems is why history is being constantly re-written. After all it is a notorious fact that everything of historical consequence is not only variously viewed by those living at the time, depending on their social background, convictions, etc., but is also subject to different constructions in different ages. This applies to the vision and interpretation of events and people alike; and especially of great people.

In seeking to answer this question—of course, in this context, only enumeratively—a number of factors come to mind, from the most elementary and commonplace to the more complex and arguable. The most obvious is the discovery of new evidence which sheds fresh light on an event or person. Then there is the materialization of the effects of particular processes which gives us a better and sometimes altered insight into their causes (by their fruits ye shall know them—we read in the Gospels—and the same point was made by Marx in his metaphor of the anatomy of man being the key to the anatomy of the ape). A third factor is the development of scientific thought, methodology above all, which makes for a new understanding of historical processes and the interrelationships between their component elements, leading to

an apprehension of the integrality of these processes. Finally there is the part played by social dictates which require different issues and affairs to be picked out and emphasized depending on the objective conditions of a given age or milieu; they accordingly steer the investigator's attention to particular aspects of the historical process which vary not only at different periods but also in different sections of society.

Now there can be no doubt that Marx was one of history's great men, idolized by some and hated by others in his lifetime as well as after his death. Hence everything that has just been said about the shifting perspective in which historical facts and personalities are seen is equally true of our view and conception of the historical role of Karl Marx.

If one considers the various followers of Marx one might imagine at times that there were several people of the same name, so radically divergent and occasionally even antithetical have these representations been. At present, after years of a purely economically, or at most sociologically, oriented reading of his views, it may seem surprising, not to say curious, to find Marx in the role of humanist holding the centre of the stage. But the fact of the matter is very simple. A combination of objective and subjective factors, particularly the need felt by our day and age for a revival of humanism, has opened up a new angle on Marx and generated a new vision. The point is simply that our age is receptive to such a vision, craves for it, one could even say. Consequently it is not only on the humanist market, but is also more apt than preceding generations to perceive and fathom its manifestations in the past. This "discovery" of the humanism of Marx, the impulse for which has been both objective—the publication of previously unknown writings—and subjective—the contemporary world's thirst for humanism—, has mapped a new contour in his work as a whole by tracing its roots to the soil of humanism and so unfolding a vision of Marx the humanist.

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Our age which has been the scene of the most barbarous and destructive crimes against humanity and lives beneath a Damoclean sword of total annihilation is also a time of great humanist yearnings and of conflicts between the various trends of thought in-

## *Marx and Contemporary Humanism*

spired by them. There is no reason to be surprised by this statement, paradoxical though it may sound. After all a humanist revolt has usually occurred in history as a reaction to all that is most precious to humanity—and this has always been most perfectly embodied by humanist tendencies—being put in jeopardy.

There are various reasons why, despite the quite fantastic advances in knowledge and the ability to control nature, men feel threatened and long for their existence to be stabilized at a level corresponding to the potentialities of the age.

In the first place this is undoubtedly the effect of finding ourselves at the watershed between two different socio-economic formations, a fact that cannot be disputed by any sane observer of social life, whether he believes in the prospect of socialism or not. As tends to be the case in history, this turning point has brought with it various earthquakes, chief among them a crisis in the traditionally accepted system of values. As long as social relations are guided by a normally functioning mode of production, the individual will regard the traditional forms of society and his place in them as natural since they are stable and in accordance with socially recognized values; in turn, the system of values prevalent in society will be treated as “natural” since it is consistent with the established relations and the socially felt needs of man. Thus the socially accepted system of values is the product and expression of certain social relations and at the same time the basis and guarantee of their stability. In consequence any shake-up in the prevalent mode of production is enough for the repercussions to be felt in the social acceptance of its related system of values, and vice-versa: dislocation of the established system of values has immediate reverberations in the whole run of social life. In the same way as a man suffering from some disease comes to be aware of the existence and functioning of the parts of his body, something to which the healthy person does not give a second thought, the individual in a society which is “sick,” afflicted by a cleavage between the actual production relations and those that are in fact needed in the given conditions, gradually becomes conscious of, and discontented with, his relationships with other people, with society. These strains are most acute in the transitional stage when the old system of values is seen more or less clearly to be tottering, but a new one has not yet finally crystallized, or at any rate has

still to be socially accepted and looked upon as “natural.” Such a period took place in the passage from feudalism to capitalism, and it is again evident today as we cross over from capitalism to socialism, as we undoubtedly are doing even though the transition may take a variety of forms and so is and will be given a variety of names. This is the very reason why the youthful writings of Marx which contained such a sharp reflection of the first period have so strong an appeal for us today in the midst of the second. The point is that, despite the real differences between the two, there are certain general features articulated in the language of philosophical anthropology which are common to both and so form a bridge between them.

The switch to the problems of man, and in this sense to humanist issues, is at present due not only to the breakdown in the system of values typical of periods of transition, but also—and under a certain aspect of the problem—to a feeling of extreme imperilment by war above all and the possible use of weapons of mass destruction. Two world wars in the lifetime of a single generation and the bombs dropped on Hiroshima explain this fact well enough. Without making a study of social neuroses, which no one has yet done—for reasons of a deeper political nature—it is hard to say what the aftermath of this feeling of peril has been for human personality. It is these repercussions which have perhaps most helped to make ours a time of humanist longings and general preoccupation with fundamental human values.

People’s minds are being turned in this direction not only by apprehension for their physical existence in the face of modern military technologies, but also by an alertness to the danger in which these basic values have been put by contemporary civilization.

Here we come up against a complicated problem where it is easy to be lured into the superficialities of subjectivist speculations about the human individual, such as have been practised by existentialism among others. On the other hand a blank dismissal of this question for fear of lapsing into the idealism of existentialism or personalism carries the risk of losing sight of a real and thus extremely important problem of our times and in this way forfeiting an opportunity for deeper analysis of contem-

## *Marx and Contemporary Humanism*

porary life. Thus we are compelled—and this is no new experience for philosophy—to steer a course between the Scylla of idealism and the Charybdis of overlooking a crucial issue.

Contemporary civilization is a mass civilization whose material basis is provided by the life and work of human beings in large, mainly urban centres, by the mode of transmission by mass media and by the form of cultural manifestation by mass culture. This is not the place to make a detailed examination of these concepts and the social phenomena connected with them. Suffice it to say that the development of modern industry and its technological base which formed the bedrock of contemporary civilization brings enormous material and cultural benefits from the point of view of the social life of man. Suffice it also to mention the multiplication and intensification of the social bonds arising from the way of life of contemporary man. On the other hand, this development has led to a straining or even disruption of the traditional bonds (neighborhood, occupational, to a large degree familial, etc.) and, most important of all, a depersonalization of the forms of social life. If we make the connection between this fact, which must be identified as a social fact for good or ill, and the undeniable adaptation problems of the individual springing from the shocks of a period of transition, we shall find it easier to understand the philosophical speculations about the “isolation” of the individual and grasp the core of the “philosophy of despair,” without having to turn our backs on a real issue simply because we disown its extreme interpretations and solutions. Here we have yet another vital source of that attraction towards the problems of the individual, his social and ontological status, his destinies and place in society, which is so characteristic of the *whole* of contemporary philosophy and of the *trend* observable in the whole *world* of western civilization which we have called “humanist longings.”

Finally there is one more factor which, though of a different nature, has conspired with the previous ones to guide the swing towards humanism that is a feature of our times.

The evolution of contemporary philosophy, especially of epistemology, is marked by an increased interest in the problem of the subjective factor in knowledge. The impulses to undertake and develop this line of inquiry have come from the specialized sci-

ences: depth psychology, particularly psychoanalysis; linguistics, anthropology and logic which have investigated the active role of language in human cognition; sociology of knowledge which has studied the social conditionings of human knowledge and so on. Now all of this detailed research has yielded evidence of the active role of the subject in the cognitive relationship though it offers no grounds whatsoever for adopting a position of subjectivist individualism. In consequence it is possible, without slipping into idealism, to attack along new lines the old, traditional problems related to the human individual, among them the Kantian question of *a priori* cognition. The development of this line of inquiry, which has become focal to contemporary philosophy and is exerting an extremely brisk influence on various fields of knowledge, notably the humane sciences, is another incentive to make a frontal approach to the question of the human individual, to humanism in a special sense.

These are the elements which explain the humanist tendencies of our times. These are the elements which explain why our age is disposed to see and analyse events and people through a lens of humanism. These are the elements which go to explain why the humanism of Marx, which failed to register for so long even with the supporters of Marxism, has now risen to the rank of the central problem of Marxism and as such is having a stimulating effect not only on the followers of Marxian doctrine. The modern age is here clearly coming around to our way of viewing and interpreting history—which encourages us to believe that the doctrine of presentism in the interpretation of history, although it cannot stand up in its radical form, contains certain rational ideas and observations if employed in a moderate version.

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Bearing in mind these arguments, no one should be surprised by the present tide in humanist currents with a variety of sources. If by humanism we mean a theoretical point of view and a practical attitude which regards man as the supreme good, it is obvious that a humanism so understood can be variously interpreted in relation to how one answers the question “what is man?”; to how one conceives the system of values which ought to shape human at-

## *Marx and Contemporary Humanism*

titudes and behaviour; and finally to how one sees the paths leading to the attainment of the goals of action specified by a given system of values. The answer given to each of these questions is governed by the particular theoretical—and specifically philosophical—system that has been adopted as the frame of reference for such reflections. This is why we have a Catholic as well as a Marxist humanism, an existentialist as well as a naturalistic humanism, and so on and so forth.

The variety of humanisms is, therefore, in the natural order of things, given a multiplicity of interpretations of a single attitude towards certain phenomena. But, by the same token, competition, and even conflict, between humanisms becomes equally understandable. The point is that humanism is concerned with ideas and attitudes relating to practice and action, and so it is not immaterial to any one of its schools whether it succeeds in gaining more allies than the others. This accounts for the competition and conflict between humanisms.

Where do the supporters of Marxist humanism find their ammunition for this battle—for what is involved is, in its way, a battle for influence? On what do they stake their belief in its superiority over the positions held by their competitors and opponents? What is the source of the empirically evidenced appeal of this humanism despite its decades of neglect?

This appeal comes primarily from the collision between a scientific, rational interpretation of humanism offered by Marxism and the a-scientific, not to say downright anti-scientific version presented by the mystic irrationalism of religious humanism. These two currents—Marxist humanism and Christian humanism—are, after all, the most widespread and influential varieties in circulation today. The outcome of their conflict is a function of the clash between a scientific view of the world and an irrational, mystical-religious one, the point being that the question of humanism is only a fragment of this wider problem. Now, in my opinion, there can be no doubts as to the final result of this contest though I am far from sharing the glib optimism of militant atheists. As things stand now, the development of science and culture is becoming increasingly inimical to religious faith in the old, traditional style although it does not debar either its more sophisticated forms or the appearance in the future of people with a leaning

towards mysticism who may practise religion in the old way. Nevertheless, as a mass phenomenon, religious faith in its traditional form is being squeezed out by the advances of science and culture: To believe, a person has to be not only willing but also able: that is to say, belief is possible as long as the tenability of its assumptions, *credo quia absurdum* and all, is not undermined. The development of science has sapped these foundations. Although the loophole in the doctrine of the dual nature of truth still remains, this, to be taken seriously, requires, when all is said and done, a schizophrenic personality—something that is not all that common among the mass of humanity. This is the very reason why our age, being a time of scientific modes of thought with a culture to match, is auspicious for humanism which is grounded in the common sense of scientific thinking. In the long run, this assures Marxist humanism, provided it is properly cultivated and developed, a decided advantage over its rivals in the colours of religious, including personalist, humanism.

What is the interconnection between Marxist humanism and the scientific view of the world? The link is to be found primarily in its conception of the human individual which is the crux of any philosophical anthropology.

Both Christian personalism and existentialism in its secular and religious forms hinge on an idealistic, or rather spiritualistic, view of the human individual. In the first case he is conceived as a *persona spiritualis*, in the second as an atom of free will. In both cases, the concept is accommodated to the whole philosophical system of the trend concerned for the purpose of laying down serviceable premises for its speculations. Obviously such a notion of the human individual is not only coherent with the system (this is especially true of personalism) but also immensely convenient: it presents as a *premise* a thesis that still needs to be *proved*. But the weakness of such a conception is that it is demonstrably at odds with the demands of *scientific* thinking which has little trouble in pinning down the error of assuming something that is subject to proof and in exposing the spiritualistic nature of the postulate—a breach, this time, of the demands of empirical procedure.

The Marxist conception of the human individual, homogeneous in its structure and coherent with the system of materialist philosophy, does not offer so convenient a point of departure as the



## *Marx and Contemporary Humanism*

personalist theory for example; on the other hand it does not suffer from its handicaps since it does not fall foul of the rigours of scientific thinking. Forming as it does the outcome and generalization of empirical observation, this conception can be reduced to three basic propositions:

1. The human individual is a part of nature as the result of his evolution and as such is subject to the general laws of the development of nature;

2. The human individual is at the same time a part of society and as a product of its evolution is subject to the relative laws of development;

3. The human individual is, finally, a product of *autocreation* in the sense that man, the maker of history, by transforming and creating the conditions of his existence, at once transforms and creates himself as social man conditioned by the development of nature and society.

This conception of the human individual is not only consistent with a scientific view of the world but is also optimistic as regards man's chances of forging his own destinies. Where the existentialist theory, *opposing* as it does the individual to society, nourished the "philosophy of despair," the Marxist conception can inspire the unfolding of a kind of "philosophy of optimism."

The interpretation of history, and so of man himself, as *autocreation* is the second trump card held by Marxist humanism which gives it an advantage over the competing currents, especially those of religious provenance. The point here is that recognition or rejection of autocreation forms the dividing line between autonomous and heteronomous humanisms.

By *autonomous* humanism I mean the kind which sees in man not only the supreme good and the object of the actions based on this humanism, but also the architect and engineer of the tasks it assigns him. The values and standards of the human world are not therefore derived from a world beyond—and above—man, but are created by man himself, social man of course. The same is true as regards the effectuation of these values and standards: man is the *maker* of history and so he alone is responsible for his destinies. Such a humanism is a *consistent* humanism since it always revolves around man: as the supreme *good*, as a *goal* and a *creator* of social development. It is also, as I have pointed out,

an *optimistic* humanism since nothing stands in the way of indefinite development when its planning and execution lie in the hands of man.

The case is utterly different with *heteronomous* humanism in which all the currents connected with religious faith belong. Here the world of values and standards is of a non-human origin and so is, as it were, *imposed* on man from the outside. But history, that is the pursuit of the purposes of human life, also slips out of man's control, being either fatalistically pre-ordained by a superhuman will or at best co-ordained. Such a humanism is inevitably diluted and inconsistent, and so is beset by various internal contradictions. Nor can it have the optimistic message of making man feel the master of his fate and understand that he can, historically speaking, shape it according to his intelligence.

This collision between autonomous and heteronomous humanism, which combines with the conflict between a humanism founded on science and one inconsistent with it, is characteristic of our age. Its own development patterns, above all the prevalence of scientific thinking, fortify the appeal of Marxist humanism and lend credence to its hopes of victory in the battle for hearts and minds that underlies the contemporary conflict of humanisms.

The appeal of Marxist humanism, its appeal *to the masses*, is not, of course, solely or even primarily theoretical. After all it would be stretching the imagination to think that the ranks of the communist partisans in South America or in South-east Asia, or for that matter the mass communist organizations of France and Italy, are chiefly manned by enthusiasts of the superiority of autonomous to heteronomous humanism. It is more likely that the vast majority are quite unaware of the problem and would find it hard even to understand the terms in which it is worded. Nevertheless their struggle is strictly, if unwittingly, connected with this theoretical issue.

Communism, like every variety of socialism, is humanism in action since it makes the cause of man the very heart of its concerns as the supreme good. Its appeal to the masses gains its strength from the fact that it does so consistently, that is not in the abstract, not only in theory but also in practice as a problem of *struggle*. Here we have yet another, momentous feature of Marxist humanism: it is a *militant* humanism.

## *Marx and Contemporary Humanism*

This is by no means just an additional, isolated, haphazard characteristic. On the contrary it is organically related to the others we have mentioned, and is their logical consequence. It is only the affirmation that man himself is responsible for his destinies, that he is the creator of his future and is himself a product of autcreation, that gives a sense to exhortations to fight in the cause of shaping history according to certain defined values. Indeed they not only have a sense, but are a duty, moral as well, since we are aware of the consequences of our action or inaction.

This feature of Marxism has been known for a long time. It is only because of the misconceptions surrounding Marxism, for which its own supporters are largely to blame, that this principle of struggle—ideological and physical—was not knitted into a single fabric with humanism but tended to be opposed to it. It is only because of these misconceptions which were largely the fault and handiwork of Marxism's own followers, that the principle of struggle was identified solely with physical struggle and at the same time opposed to the chance of dialogue and its intrinsic tolerance. As this question profoundly distorts the sense of Marxist humanism, I should like to broach it in conclusion.

I shall confine myself to the simple statement of the truism that for Marxism the word "struggle" means not only physical struggle, but also spiritual, ideological struggle, the object of which is to persuade an opponent and win him round to one's point of view. It is this aspect of the question which here interests us most.

Ideological struggle signifies no more than pitting one's own system of values against that of the adversary and countering his arguments with arguments in support of one's own case. The object of this bloodless, but vital struggle is the capture of the hearts and minds of those we address and the transformation of them into supporters of our position.

Ideological struggle, as the word "struggle" indicates, places *in opposition* two sides defending different, usually contradictory positions. Is it an opposition which rules out discourse and excludes a *dialogue*? To put it another way: is it an argument between views which betray *no* common ground but only differences?

There can be no single answer to this question: sometimes this

is the case, sometimes not. There are views which are so diametrically opposed that they admit of struggle only in a negative sense and entirely prohibit dialogue: communism and fascism for instance. But there are also views which differ from each other and in a certain respect are locked in battle but which at the same time reveal certain points of convergence: examples are the various kinds of contemporary humanism, and these are of primary interest to us in the context of these remarks.

The problem of struggle and dialogue in the field of ideology is an extremely important one in a time of peaceful coexistence which has been led by the threat to mankind to reject the use of force to settle political and ideological disputes but at the same time has emphasized the status of ideological struggle in the basic political and other arguments between states. This is why it is so vital to answer the question: does the militant nature of Marxist humanism rule out the possibility of conducting a *dialogue* with other humanisms?

My answer is in the negative: the struggle of Marxist humanism with its rivals in this area not only does *not* rule out a dialogue with them but on the contrary is predicated upon it. The object after all is not to reject these other humanisms lock, stock and barrel, but to criticize those elements we cannot agree with, while at the same time maintaining an alliance against our common foe—antihumanism. The only way in which this purpose can be achieved is by means of a dialogue.

In any case dialogue is a specific form of struggle since it postulates differences and oppositions of views without which it is impossible and otiose. However, for a dialogue to be practicable, there must be certain points of contact in order to find the common ground and common language without which dialogue is useless and impossible. This is precisely why dialogue is a *specific* form of struggle, one that is short of total war and conducted on a plane where there is a measure of community. It is a struggle to which is added the element of tolerance—the recognition that there may be at least some grounds for my opponent's views and the discarding of the arrogant conviction that *only* my views can be right and proper. Tolerance should not be confused with weakness or a lack of conviction and commitment in pressing one's views. One can be tolerant in relation to others even though one

## *Marx and Contemporary Humanism*

is totally convinced of the justice of one's opinions and dedicated to the struggle for them. Tolerance is simply the privilege of the strong, and in no way an act of surrender or sign of doubt. Tolerance is a quality which can be afforded by a contender who is robust and resolute and realizes that such an attitude, far from weakening his position, actually strengthens it, since he has the chance of learning something from others, if they represent views of value, and thus of amplifying and fortifying his own opinions.

Is Marxism a school of thought capable of a dialogue in the above sense of the word and of the essential tolerance that goes with it, even though it so clearly possesses all the features of a militant philosophy? Undoubtedly. The founders of Marxism who even fervently disclaimed the status of a system for their views, thought of it as an *open* system able to absorb new elements and so uphold Cartesian scepticism which Marx acknowledged as his motto as a methodological principle. Was this open, dialogue-prone and tolerant nature of Marxism not belied in a certain period by the practice of the communist movement and is this still not the case here and there, in China for instance, to this day? Undoubtedly. But this can and should be explained as a symptom of the "teething pains of leftism," strictly connected with the weakness of the movement and the fears this aroused. It is an old truth that confidence and its accompanying tolerance are a function of strength and experience accumulated over the years. And this applies to both individuals and social movements.

Be that as it may, the contemporary development, or rather renaissance of Marxist humanism is taking place in the spirit of an open-minded doctrine prepared to enter into a dialogue and equipped with the necessary degree of tolerance. Today this is the greatest and strongest guarantee of Marxism's appeal in intellectual quarters. This is the direction in which the substance of this humanism is operating, its ties with the liberation movement of the masses, its militant nature inseparably linked with a readiness to conduct a dialogue. On this soil we can see the emergence of an *alliance* of humanisms which, without surrendering their identities or renouncing the struggle for their truths, are pooling their resources in the furtherance of common purposes and tasks. On this basis a great *dialogue* of humanisms is evolving, which serves

their mutual enrichment with new contents. Issuing from this climate is *a revival of the influence* of Marxist humanism, a visible proof of the vitality and relevance of the ideas of its founder—Karl Marx.