

Part 2.

Marx's Critique of Political Philosophy

Sir, I see that it is impossible to have liberty but all property must be taken away.

Thomas Rainsborough. Putney, 1647.

Chapter 4 **Introduction: Marx's Critical Science**

How can six billion human beings live on this small planet without destroying each other? Which features of humanity make this question so difficult to answer? Which make an answer seem just possible? Such ways of putting the problem may sound comparatively modern, but, over the past two or three thousand years, some of the greatest thinkers have grappled with more or less the same issues. Of course, their approaches differed, in line with the actual forms the problems assumed in their own times, but several themes constantly reappear throughout the entire tradition of thinking about political life.

How does each individual relate to the social set-up as a whole? Why do some people hold power over others? Which ways of living might be considered to be good? Is one way the best? Are social and political forms given 'by nature' or by God? Are they the outcome of human decision, either a collective wish or the will of some superhuman Hero? Can either of these make any difference at all?

And is it possible for us to obtain the knowledge needed to answer questions like these? For the past few decades, some of these issues have been ruled out of court by authoritative academics, and our century begins not just without answers, but with a raucous chorus deriding any attempt to find them. It is fashionable to dismiss such matters as not accessible to systematic thinking, and, indeed, for the past couple of decades, the very notion of the True has been sneered at, along with the Good and the Beautiful. The context for this declaration of intellectual and moral bankruptcy is undoubtedly the eclipse of Stalinism, and the consequent allegation that 'Marxism is dead' and the near-unanimous and mindless view that the market is the 'natural' way to organise our lives. However, these ways of thinking – or non-thinking - are actually symptoms of much deeper aspects of life at the start of the twentieth-first century.

In this essay, I want to try to look at the ideas of Karl Marx in relation to the tradition of political thought. I do this because I think that clarifying this relationship will illuminate the vital assistance that his work can give us – humans as a whole – in finding our way to a 'truly human' way of living. At a time when the very possibility of anything worthy of the name 'human' is under threat, many people will shrug off such a quest. To attempt this, it is first necessary to distinguish clearly between 'Marxism' and the ideas of Marx. The Marxists - Marx did not count himself one of them! - dogmatically refused to grapple with questions like the ones I have outlined. In general, the would-be followers of Marx thought he was engaged in setting up 'models' of society, or economics, or politics, or history. When they (I ought honestly to say: 'we'!) claimed that Marx's works were 'scientific', this generally meant something like the natural sciences, in which 'theories' or 'hypotheses' yield predictions, which have then to be checked against empirical data. These theoretical models, it was said, allowed us to gain knowledge of the mechanics of socio-political change, and the 'laws' which governed the revolutionary transition from one social order to the next.

A single tentative metaphor of Marx about base and superstructure (an extract from the Preface to the **Critique of Political Economy**) was misread into a complete 'theory of history'. It was treated as the diagram of a historical machine, in which an economic basis, pushed forward by the development of productive forces - generally that meant technology - in turn 'caused' changes in an ideological-political superstructure. [1] Ideas were 'determined' by 'material conditions', where 'determined' was automatically assumed to mean 'caused'. Since this presumably included the ideas of the Marxists themselves, this led to difficulties, for 'Marxism' pretended to justify its doctrine of social development by appeal to its own special 'scientific world outlook', deriving its idea of socialism as a corollary. But how could it know any of this?

A 'Marxist' theory of politics went along with this mechanical view, according to which the individuals who make up the ruling class are determined to defend their interests against those they exploit, and are ready to use violent means where necessary. The state was then said to be 'nothing but' their instrument for this purpose. 'Revolution' simply meant smashing up this instrument, and establishing a new one, just changing the form of state power. 'Socialism', largely identified with state ownership, was the next 'mode of production' on a pre-set historical agenda. The conception of revolution flourishing in Marxist circles thus centred, not on the idea of liberation, but on the concept of power. In its Leninist form, Marxism misread some of Marx's formulations and transformed them into justifications for new, oppressive political structures. (For instance, the phrase 'dictatorship of the proletariat', Marx's most democratic concept, was one such victim.) The phrase 'workers' state' became current in Marxist-Leninist circles - Marx himself never used it - even before Stalin had revealed its totalitarian content. The idea was that the transition to socialism would begin when this new form of state power - later revealed to be a pseudonym for the Party - had firmly replaced the old one, and industry was taken into its control.

Even while Marx was still alive, his central notion of 'general human self-emancipation' had become almost incomprehensible to his devoted followers. When some of his earlier writings became generally available in the 1950s and 1960s, it was hard to see how they could be fitted into the 'Marxist' framework. 'Marxists' dodged this difficulty by separating a 'Young Marx' from an 'Old Marx', the latter being the 'scientific' one. When we studied the *Grundrisse*, written when Marx was forty years old, and found it had the same outlook as the **Paris Manuscripts** of 1844, some of us realised that this escape-route was effectively blocked. It would not be overstating the situation to say that, right down to the present day, the 'Marxists' have been among the most direct and bitter opponents of the ideas of Karl Marx. [2] Above all, they lost all connection with Marx's actual conceptions of human self-emancipation and 'free association'.

In reality, Karl Marx seeks to construct neither a Utopian 'vision' of what the world ought to be like, nor a 'scientific' 'theory of history'. Indeed, he shows how each of these ways of thinking embody the inhuman features of modern life. His aim is no less than universal human freedom, our self-liberation, and, as we shall see, this is something no theory and

no mechanical model could ever comprehend. He conceives of communism as ‘a free association of producers’, a ‘truly human society’, where ‘humanity’ means the process of free social creation and self-creation, which implies ‘the free development of individualities’. Social production, material and spiritual, individual and collective, forms the heart of self-creation, what it means to be truly human. But, after developing for millennia, this has not yet been liberated from ‘alienated’ forms of living.

Thus Marx could show how the distortions and falsifications of what is truly human are associated with private property and that this is the basis of the power which some humans have over others. Both property and state power are expressions of forms of social labour alienated from their truly human content. Alienated society is characterised by antagonism between the material interests of individuals, between classes, and between each of these and the collective public life. These antagonisms, which stand in the way of a life ‘worthy and appropriate for our human nature ... the true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself’ [3], are regarded by Marx as insane.

To achieve a human form of life requires that we collectively accomplish the task of progressively transcending these age-old antagonisms, sanely making the ‘free development of each ... the condition for the free development of all’. So the required social revolution does not just mean a change of regime, or a new economic system, but ‘the alteration of humans on a mass scale’ [4], through their own conscious activity. When humanity can consciously confront this as its major task, it already possesses the material conditions to accomplish it, that is, to learn to live without either private property or state power. The ‘free association of producers’ will then live humanly, that is, it will engage in the mutually self-creating activity of social production, free from estrangement, in relationships it has self-consciously made.

Individuals become part of the history of society’s metabolic exchange with nature in the course of their productive, that is, their creative activity. In this process, we change our relationships with each other, and thus change ourselves, collectively and individually striving to realise our potential for freedom. However, within the existing social order, founded upon the atomised institutions of private property, we are rarely conscious of what we are doing. Living fragmented lives, estranged from each other and from ourselves, we have fabricated a casing around ourselves which denies freedom, and that means our humanity. We ourselves have constructed the forms of antagonism, oppression and exploitation, the very antitheses of free creation, enclosing us like suits of armour. These social forms rule over the individuals, who treat each other - and themselves - as if they were things, mere means to further ‘self-interest’.

In a world under the power of money, what is good for some is bad for others. Thus the possibility of true community, the condition for freedom, is continually being destroyed, both in practice and in theory. This is how private property works, and especially private ownership of means of production: what belongs to me cannot belong to you. The products of social labour become attached to particular individuals, who often have

played no part in their creation or, indeed, in the creation of anything at all. If the needs of the community clash with the needs of its individual components it is impossible to be socially and individually self-governing, that is, to be free. Labour itself comes to be alien to the labourers and their own 'life-activity' is just a means to 'make a living'.

People live under conditions which are not of their own conscious choosing and so not fit for humans. But there is a continual struggle of humanity against this inhuman way of life, and this is what shows itself in the antagonisms between individuals, between social classes and between nations. Marx identifies the struggle of the proletariat, the producers of wealth who are oppressed and exploited, against the power of capital which they themselves create, as the movement which would emancipate humanity as a whole. Their labour, their very life-activity as human beings, is hostile to them. They can win their collective fight against this alien power only if they take control over their own human, creative activity. Thus they potentially challenge all forms of oppression and exploitation. This movement must transcend private property, which Marx understands as 'the perceptible expression of the fact that man becomes objective for himself and at the same time becomes to himself a strange and inhuman object.' [5] Correspondingly, the transcendence of private property means 'the perceptible appropriation for and by man of the human essence and of human life, of objective man, of human achievements.'

An essential part of this understanding of social revolution is that the state must be transcended along with all other forms of antagonistic social power. As individual production and public life cease to be separate processes, the domination of some individuals by others fades away. The claim of the state to act on behalf of the collectivity of individual lives, ruling over them for their own collective good, is false, Marx declares. When the state performs functions like punishing crime, sanctioning morality, or waging war, its pretence to act for everyone is a lie. In reality, the state is an illusory surrogate for the 'true community'; in a world where relations between people are ruled by the exchange of private property, the community cannot operate directly as a single entity. (One of the most alienated of recent political figures once told us that: 'There's no such thing as society'. No wonder that she is also often depicted as being unhinged!) Proletarian revolution means smashing this power and releasing human potential in a community of freely developing individual subjects.

All of these notions raise the problem of knowledge: 'How do you know?' Living as we do, estranged from each other and from ourselves, how can we get to know how to live humanly? If ideas are generated as part of the alienated life-activities of individuals, how can we find the truth? How can we even talk about a new way of living with the language of the old? The new society can only be seen as just a variant of the old one, or as a Utopian 'vision', to which the world must be made to conform.

'Marxism' had a sort of answer, and it was not very different in form from the kind of solution attempted by the old Utopians. 'Just trust us,' we said, in effect. 'We who are in the know will provide the necessary "leadership". We shall tell you how to be free. Just do as we say.'

Marx's answer is nothing like that, of course. As he put it in a letter to Ruge in 1843:

We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for, and consciousness is something it has to acquire, even if it does not want to. [6]

Before Marx, socialism was a set of opinions or doctrines, arguing from personal feelings or philosophical or religious doctrines to a vision of a better future. Those who have tried to build a socialist movement on such foundations have failed. They have even obscured that vision which has inspired the instinctive movement of impoverished masses of slaves, peasants or wage-workers several times in history.

Marx knows that the agency of the new social transformation has to be conscious of itself, to comprehend itself, to be critical of itself as it arises from the history and structure of the existing order, and Marx's conception of critique is central to all his work. At any rate from 1843 onwards, what he means by this word is something quite precise. When Marx speaks of the critique of a science he means a demonstration that its fundamental assumptions, categories and methods are expressions of an inhuman way of life. Concrete negation of these assumptions, scientifically and in practice, make it possible to preserve what is human about them in an outlook which transforms the idea of a human society into a practical task.

The critique of religion', 'the premise of all critique', is the best illustration of what Marx means by critique in general. [7] Marx is not concerned to develop 'irreligious criticism', the kind of abstract atheism which argues against the truth of religious belief, as if it were either a logical mistake, or the result of a lying conspiracy of priests. Instead, his aim is to uncover the roots of such belief in the actual lives of individuals, and to reveal its meaning in their actual oppression and misery. Religion is then seen to be 'the heart of a heartless world', and the way is opened for the overthrow of those real inhuman conditions to which it is the illusory response. But this insight is possible only if the conditions of life are themselves internally contradictory.

Alienated social relations rule the lives of individuals and the concepts in which those relations are expressed govern their thoughts. So philosophy, along with religion, is the highest expressions of alienation. Marx's aim is to derive the nature of a truly human society, and thus of an inhuman, bourgeois society, from his critique of the philosophical tradition, a critique whose criterion is 'social humanity'. Marx's entire life's work is the critique of the highest forms of established knowledge, so as to get to the heart of the struggle of humanity for its emancipation, and to speak for it. How else is it possible to see beyond the horizons of existing society?

In a very important remark in **Capital**, Marx explains that

(r)eflection on the forms of social life, hence also scientific analysis of these forms, takes a course directly opposite to their actual development. Reflection begins *post festum*, and therefore with the results of the process of development ready to hand.

These forms ‘already possess the fixed quality of natural forms of social life before man seeks to give an account, not of their historical character, for in his eyes they are immutable, but of their content and meaning.’ [8] Marx’s critique is directed at the highest expression of this ‘content and meaning’. It is significant that the paragraph containing this sentence leads directly to the characterisation of political economic categories as ‘mad’ [*verrückte*]. (The English translations weaken this to ‘absurd’.) While ordinary thinking does not question these forms, science tries to give a consistent account of the world as a rational structure. But this is precisely the falsehood at the core of the most disinterested science.

For bourgeois society is not a rational whole, as all kinds of economics assume. Looked at humanly, this is a crazy way to live, and to ‘make sense’ of money, wages, rent, interest and profit is to lie. This has nothing to do with subjective intention. Indeed, the more honest and sincere the attempt at rationalisation, the more mendacious. Marx, to break through the natural appearance of existing economic forms, allows the theoretical results of political economy to clash with what is self-evidently human. Thus his critique of the science which glorifies what exists, merges with and becomes the mouthpiece for the practical movement of workers who ‘know’ - without benefit of science - that they are not things, but human beings treated as things. Their suffering expresses the necessity of a revolutionary change. But that is not enough: it also requires the critique of economic science to get to grips with its true cause.

We could summarise Marx’s outlook like this:

- (1) In class society, individual humans are governed by social forms that are alien to their humanity. This is insane.
- (2) These forms condition the way that they think about themselves and about their social life.
- (3) When science theorises social problems, its categories give the alien forms their highest expression.
- (4) The critique of these categories breaks up their appearance of being ‘natural’, and so opens the way for conscious social practice to release their human content.

Marx’s critique of political economy, the only part of his work he came anywhere near to completing, is not a ‘criticism of capitalism’. It aims to give a coherent account of economic life under the power of capital, while refusing to accept those categories of political economy which express this power. Precisely because these categories accurately represent the essential structure of private property, they, like all other forms of ‘social science’, systematically hide the inhumanity, the ‘craziness’, of its essence. What the best political economists can only present as the realm of freedom and equality, turns out to be

the arena of inequality, oppression and exploitation. (This includes, of course, the economic interventions of a bureaucratic state, which some people later misnamed 'socialism'.) This critique both illuminates and is made possible by those actual forces unleashed by the contradictions which political economy has hidden. The critique becomes 'the mouthpiece of the real movement'.

Marx shows how uncritical acceptance of the 'natural' appearance of bourgeois private property, of money, wages and so on, as seen at its very best in classical political economy, disguised and perverted the human content of all systematic thinking. This is what Marx, always conscious of the parallels between religion and money, calls 'fetishism'. Political economy, by definition, has to accept the form of appearance of bourgeois social relations, founded upon 'thing-like [*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things.' [9] Working 'behind the backs of the producers' [10], the exchange of private property necessarily leads to the development of money and its most important form, capital. Once it is a going concern, capital produces and reproduces itself as an all-pervasive, oppressive, impersonal power, globally linking individuals together by setting them against each other. This is the power which now threatens all truly human forms.

Wherever labour-power is bought and sold, what is already implied by the simple exchange of commodities for one another comes into the open: individual humans are treating each other and themselves as if they were objects. The resulting forms of productive activity are abstract, encased in alienated relations between the producers. When wage-workers fight against capital exploiting them - a struggle essential to the capital-relation itself - they are demanding to be treated as human subjects. On the other hand, the creative potential of social humanity is made to appear to be the productive power of a subject: capital.

Thus relations dominated by capital engender forms of thinking which disguise the oppressive, exploitative character of these relations. Political economy, even at its best, took these false appearances for granted. Only by taking the critique of its categories and methods to their logical depths could the inhumanity and insanity of money and of the buying and selling of labour-power be revealed and overcome. So long as it remains dominated by the forms of the market, thought confuses our character as active subjects with impersonal objects, means with ends. Under the power of capital, people cannot but participate in creating and recreating that power. They might hate it and grumble about it, but they have no choice but to live with it. Capital appears as a pseudo-subject, producing and reproducing itself, using both capitalists and workers as its instruments. This is the subject-matter of **Capital**, whose first volume is sub-titled 'The Production-Process of Capital' - although a reader of any one of the English translations might not know this.

How is it possible for humanity as a whole to achieve the consciousness that will enable it to free itself from the bonds of private ownership? For Marx, this was the most practical question of all. A remark in *Grundrisse* helps to see the way that Marx answers it:

(I)ndividuals enter into relation with each other only as determinate individuals. These objective relations of dependence, in contrast to the personal ones, also appear in such a way that the individuals are now ruled by abstractions whereas they were previously dependent on one another. (The objective relationship of dependence is nothing but the social relations independently confronting the seemingly independent individuals, ie their own reciprocal relations of production which have acquired an existence independent of and separate from them.) Yet the abstraction or idea is nothing but the theoretical expression of those material relationships which dominate the individuals. [11]

Entities like state, law, money, family, all appear to individuals to be part of the furniture of the universe. Actually, they are the products of human activity, but this is hidden from the actors themselves. The categories of theoretical science polish up these entities, beautifying them and presenting them as beyond criticism. Within the realm of these abstract categories, they are the only way to express such forms of living, precisely because these forms themselves are abstract, separated from and antagonistic to the individuals who live inside them.

But this is the nature of all theory, theory as such. It is inherent in every theory devised by theoreticians who imagine that they are separated from the object theorised: this is what they usually mean when they praise themselves as 'objective'. This is a false way of thinking, because is a true expression of a false - inhuman - way of living, of social forms in which humans are estranged from themselves. Thus every effort to establish an 'objective social science', as if the scientists were not themselves in the picture, is not just a logical error, but essentially expresses humanity's estrangement from itself.

When Marx claimed that his work was scientific, it was in a special sense, which I contrast with the common understanding of science as theory. Since he was engaged in the critique of every kind of 'social science', Marx's critical science necessarily includes self-critique. Theoretical science – by which I mean uncritical science - is incapable of anything like this, as is demonstrated by the futile attempts to construct a 'theory of knowledge', or an 'explanation of explanation'. If this also a theory, it must be a viciously circular 'theory of theory'. If it is not, what is it? Marx's critique of 'theoretical' or dogmatic science stripped away its hidden assumptions. By its very character, theory necessarily assumed that private property, money, family, state and the enforced division of labour, everything that Marx includes under the label 'alienation', were 'natural' aspects of human life, since they certainly exist.

Marx's critique of social science reveals the contrary: within any theory, the categories with which it operates cannot be questioned. Thus, inevitably, they are forms of oppression. The possibilities for truly human relationships have developed only inside, and in opposition to these forms. Since we ourselves have constructed these prisons in the course of human history, we humans can - with difficulty - break our way out of them. Since these forms are abstractions, appearing as ideas, critique clears the intellectual space needed for this breakout to succeed. Social and political philosophy operates in this

dead world of abstractions, while its critique shows the way to break them up and bring them to life. While there could never be a 'theory of freedom', Marx's science opens the way to human emancipation.

Throughout its history, philosophy, and particularly political philosophy, has been the highest expression of private property, class division, state power and the other alienated social forms. At each stage of its development, it provided the most abstract summary of an abstract way of living, not only in its conclusions, but also in its methods, its categories and its attitudes to objectivity.

That is why Hegel's work is crucial for all of Marx's ideas. Remaining firmly within the boundaries of philosophy, the Hegelian system reached the very brink of philosophy's self-annihilation. Faced with the conflicts and confusions which convulsed Europe after the French Revolution, Hegel aimed to unify and reconcile them in a universal and all-embracing system of thought. As a whole and in each of its parts, this system purported to reconcile contradictory particulars, by showing that they both made up a universal whole and were given their meaning by it.

Before Hegel, Kant, summing up the Enlightenment, had put his finger on its fundamental problem. He turned the spotlight of Reason on Reason itself and tried to explore its limits. Hegel pursued this question much further, breaking through the limitations of the Enlightenment. Knowledge of the world could not be separated from self-knowledge of the knowing subject, for it too was in the world. The categories with which we gained knowledge and self-knowledge arose objectively as forms of world history, said Hegel. Thus Hegel's system claims to find itself in its own world-picture. It contains its own beginning, which turns out to be the consequence of its end.

Hegel's unifying movement operates in two directions. At any moment, the contradictory aspects of modern society had to form an organic whole. On the other hand, the stages of development of Western philosophy, summing up in its categories, formed a single process, called Mind or Spirit (*Geist*). The movement of world history was identical with this development of thought, and each stage of the unfolding of the Idea was 'its own time expressed in thought'. Hegel had shown that social life did not develop in line with some 'natural' characteristics with which humans were endowed, but was the outcome of their own work and the struggle to comprehend this work. The development of philosophy was thus the movement of freedom, as humans became conscious that the world confronting them was indeed the outcome of their own activity. In particular, the antagonisms between individuals in 'civil society' must be contained by a rational higher power, the state, which seeks to represent the needs of the collective activity of society. [12] Hegel calls this activity 'Objective Spirit'.

Marx's critique of Hegel's system is not a complete, once-and-for-all 'epistemological break', as some have alleged. He returns to his battle with his teacher again and again throughout his lifetime. After Hegel had unified the tradition of philosophy into a single system, Marx's critique of Hegel confronts that tradition as a whole. Hegel had revealed

the element of reconciliation to be at the heart of philosophy as such. Marx agrees with this assessment, but sees it as the proof that philosophy as such had to be transcended. That is how Marx demonstrates in opposition to Hegel that neither social antagonism nor the state's response is a logical necessity, but the outcome of the power of private property, a particular stage of historical development. Transcending the antagonisms of modern society did not imply a new philosophical synthesis, but a practical revolution in which the state and its basis in private property would be transcended. Marx sees that taking 'the standpoint of human society and social humanity' [13], that is, the standpoint of communism, is the only way to grasp what society is. What his philosophical predecessors faced as their central problem, Marx takes as his starting-point.

So, before Marx can begin his critique of socialism and of political economy, he has a great deal of preliminary work to do. [14] To understand the limitation of the political emancipation for which the eighteenth-century Enlightenment had fought so hard, he has to tackle the nature of politics itself. Although he never published any work dealing specifically with the state, (he planned one in one of his outlines in 1858), his study of political philosophy, made in the years before 1844, is the essential prelude to all of his later work. In the celebrated 1859 Preface to his **Critique of Political Economy**, he explains the importance of this study as follows:

The first work which I undertook to dispel the doubts assailing me was a critical re-examination of the Hegelian philosophy of law. ... My inquiry led me to the conclusion that neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended, whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but that on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life, the totality of which Hegel, following the example of English and French thinkers of the eighteenth century, embraces within the term 'civil society'; that the anatomy of this civil society, however, has to be sought in political economy.

Marx here refers mainly to his incomplete manuscript **Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right**. (Although Marx wrote this in 1843, it only became available in the 1950s and 1960s. [15]) Dealing with a section of Hegel's **Elements of the Philosophy of Right** (1820), it is undertaken before Marx has read much about communism and before he has begun to see the proletariat as the force for revolutionary change. Why was the **Philosophy of Right** so important? It was because this, the last book Hegel published in his lifetime, was an attempt to epitomise the entire tradition of political thought, stretching back to ancient Greece. When Marx has finished his critique, he is in a position to understand that private property, whose laws are sought by political economy, form the basis on which political life is founded. A truly human society implies the transcendence of both property and the state, and the critique of political economy, tracing the oppressive laws of private property, is the prerequisite for this.

Marx has convinced himself that all philosophy - philosophical thinking as such - is the deepest expression of alienated, oppressive, exploitative, and thus inhuman relations. Hegel had seen philosophy as tracing the path of world history. Now Marx's critique of

philosophy can reveal that it is an alienated expression of the course of development of alienated life. In the tradition, important thinkers tried sincerely to further the cause of human emancipation. The works of Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and others probe deeply into the problems of social and political power and contain indispensable insights into the nature of social forms. But all of these great thinkers began, tacitly or openly, with certain assumptions. For each of them, property and political power are necessary features of the life of humans. The age-old separation of mental and manual labour, the division between 'thinkers' and 'doers', is built into their fundamental categories and into their conception of what humanity is. Whatever the subjective wishes of the philosopher, philosophical thought must take it for granted that relationships between humans are necessarily antagonistic, that some people must have power over others, and that there has to be a division between masters and slaves, rulers and ruled.

It is therefore understandable that, in spite of their varied standpoints, the philosophers were almost unanimous across two millennia on one point: they all rejected any possibility that the whole of a community could govern itself. (Spinoza stands out as the great exception to this generalisation.) Democracy would inevitably degenerate into mob-rule, they all believed, for inequality, the essence of private property, implied that poor people would take away the property of the rich if they had the chance.

The philosophers believed that to interpret our own collective actions and to penetrate the mysteries of social life, specialists in thinking have to be called in - namely the philosophers themselves. Of course, the questions they asked themselves were vital ones: What is Justice? What is the good life for humanity? What is humanity? How does humanity relate to nature? But they did not think that the answers for which they struggled could be made available to the mass of the population. Indeed, what could the man-in-the-street do with this knowledge if he got hold of it? No, it was those who governed - the 'Philosopher-King', or the 'Prince', or the 'Magistrate', who made up their audience. At times when absolute rulers went out of fashion, 'the best people' (*aristoi*) were the ones to talk to, and later the owners of large-scale property. However, over the centuries, attempts to get these rulers to put the results of philosophical thought into practice met with little success. In modern times, forms of 'representative democracy' came to be the ideal, designed to accommodate the needs of community to those of private property. (Of course, today's multimillion-dollar contests between public relations agencies, trying to sell us politicians packaged like brands of soap, should not really be given the name 'democracy' at all.) Then political philosophy as such ceased to exist, being replaced by various kinds of 'political science', theorising the technology of power.

But if they saw the conflict between individual life and the life of the community as inevitable, the philosophers were left with a central mystery: how was human society possible at all? Given the antagonisms necessarily accompanying private property and political power, how could individual humans unite in one community? Very broadly, there were two ways to attempt an escape from this problem: either individuals appeared on the scene already moulded by society; or pre-existing individuals came together into a

community. On the first view, society is an organism whose organs are the individuals who live in it. In general, they can never know how their lives are taken over by laws governing the whole social body. On the second view, the individuals are independent atoms and the interactions resulting from their clashing wills and interests move the whole machine along. In the main, political economists fell into the second group. But then, how is knowledge of the whole picture possible?

Neither view, neither 'organicism' nor 'individualism', allows the possibility of a consciously self-governing community, in which individuals can freely develop. If the community is an organism, it is not possible for any of its component parts to know anything about it as a whole. If it is a conglomerate of independent individuals, how can any one of them, however intelligent, ever be able to consider the whole as a unity?

We repeat: the confusion resulting from these opposing views of society was not the result of false logic, but expressed the real contradictions of alienated social life. However, the philosophers themselves believed that philosophy was needed to make sense of this conflict. If only they could find the necessary categories and sort them into the correct order, all would be clear. Analogous problems are repeatedly encountered in various forms throughout the history of philosophy: whole and parts, universal and individual, inner and outer, substance and accidents – pairs like these keep cropping up as antinomies. Philosophy is thus itself a symptom of the basic contradiction of society. That is why Marx needs a critique of the categories of philosophy before he can uncover the underlying contradiction. Philosophy appeared on the scene to attempt to dispel the basic mystery. Marx shows that this struggle, philosophy's very existence, is the highest expression of what is actually a problem of practical life. The critique of its intellectual structure is, of course, not itself human emancipation, but it is vitally necessary to achieve it.

Marx's critical reworking of the tradition is far more radical than 'Marxism' could have imagined. He is sure that the mass of working people had to govern themselves and that they would, under conditions yet to develop, be able to do it. So his answers are addressed, not to kings and princes, but to all of us. After the scalpel of critique has done its work of dissection on the body of philosophy, the essence of this knowledge can be put into the hands of those who are today without power or property. To actualise the wisdom of the philosophers, those without property or power have to abolish both private property and state power, making possible the free association and free development of all humans as social individuals. In his earlier writings, Marx calls this idea 'true democracy', and a little later 'real humanism'. Later, (to avoid misunderstandings!), he calls it 'communism'. The real movement to transform social life was the struggle to 'win the battle of democracy' [16], through the transcendence of private property and the development of human forms of freely productive life. Only when private property has ceased to set individuals against each other can they unite their human creative powers in a free, self-governing community, and this is foreshadowed when they unite in the struggle against capital.

In the next four chapters we shall review - very briefly - the ideas of some important figures in the history of political thought. Each of these great thinkers tried to work out how the community could co-exist with the particular form that private property took in his own time. First, we look at central texts which laid the foundation for the entire tradition of Western thought, at the time when Athenian democracy was breaking up: Plato's **Republic**, and the **Politics** of Aristotle, which is inseparable from his **Ethics**. When slavery and money were eroding the old forms of community, the meaning of Justice became a major problem. Under the new conditions, it was no longer clear what kind of constitution would make possible the good life. Thinkers who came after Plato and Aristotle, notably the Stoics, turned away from considering the structure of political life, towards the inner life of the individual.

Next, we jump to the beginning of the modern era. As feudalism was entering its centuries of decline, the study of Greek philosophy was taken up by Christian scholars, trying to find a rational foundation for Christian theology. But, while the name of the pagans Plato and Aristotle were revered in the Church, their ideas were given a content which they might not have recognised.

The philosophers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries junked Scholasticism, and threw Aristotle out along with it. As bourgeois economic forms fragmented society into self-interested atoms, the Good was replaced with individual feelings and opinions, and politics became a matter of statecraft. In Machiavelli and Hobbes, the state comes to be seen as a special instrument to exercise power. Following closely behind them, the great anomaly, Spinoza, tries to find another way out of the conflict between the individual and the social, which he calls 'democracy'. (At one point, he calls this 'truly human'.) Montesquieu, Rousseau and Kant begin to reveal the contradictions of modern forms of property, and Adam Smith tries to analyse them in detail and investigate their political and moral consequences.

We examine Hegel's **Philosophy of Right** as the conscious culmination and summary of this entire movement. Then Marx's critique of Hegel's conception of the state can be seen in its historical context, and as the real beginning of his life's work. Finally, we ask what our investigation has told us about Marx's own conception of revolution and its relevance for present-day struggles.

Notes

- [1] See Chapter 3, 'Marx versus Historical Materialism.'
- [2] I have attempted to explore these and other problems in **Marx at the Millennium**, Pluto Press, 1996.
- [3] **Capital**, Volume 3, p 896.
- [4] **German Ideology**, **Marx-Engels Collected Works**, (MECW), Volume 5, p 45.
- [5] MECW, Volume 3, p 299.
- [6] MECW, Volume 3, p 144. For a revealing misquotation of this letter, see Lenin's **What the Friends of the People Are**, Collected Works, Volume 1, pp 184-5, and 328.
- [7] MECW, Volume 3, p 175.
- [8] **Capital**, Volume 1, p 168.
- [9] *Ibid*, p 166.
- [10] *Ibid*, p 135.
- [11] *Grundrisse*, MECW, Volume 28, p 101.
- [12] For my disagreement with some common notions about the relations between Hegel and Marx, see 'Hegel, Economics and Marx's **Capital**', in **History, Economic History and the Future of Marxism**, edited by Terry Brotherstone and Geoff Pilling, Porcupine, 1996.
- [13] **Theses on Feuerbach**, Thesis 10.
- [14] See Gary Teeple, **Marx's Critique of Politics, 1842-47**. Toronto, 1984.
- [15] Riazanov discovered the manuscript, and published it in Germany in 1927. It was reprinted in 1957. I have referred to the translation given in MECW, Volume 3, p 3. Only the well-known **Introduction** to this work was ever published by Marx, in the *Deutsch-Französischer Jahrbücher*.
- [16] **Communist Manifesto**.