Chapter 9 Marx, Communism and Revolution

As the twenty-first century gets going, a widespread opinion holds that, whether you like it or not, the world is going to be run by the global market for ever. Many people don’t like this and see clearly its terrible effects on the way we all live, but the vast majority are convinced that nothing can be done about it, shrugging their shoulders at the absurdity of the very idea. Meanwhile, the market is destroying, not just the environment in which humans can live, but their humanity.

Over the past 80 years or so, the notion of a revolution which would transform social and economic relations was largely absorbed into the idea that a bureaucratic state would take the place of privately-owned industry. The Russian revolution was supposed to provide the model of how such a change would come about. Marx’s understanding of revolution was totally obscured by the iron-clad dogmas of ‘Marxism’.

In this book, we have been trying to uncover the ideas of Marx and rescue them from all such dogma. For him, the social revolution had to be the work of the immense majority. The idea that ‘the masses’ were to be used as muscle to overthrow the old order, then handing over power to their ‘leaders’ was quite alien to him. The new world had to be founded upon a transformation of humanity itself, by itself, its universal emancipation. That is why we have concentrated on Marx’s critique of the tradition of systematic notions which explained why the world was like it is. Without dealing fundamentally with all such ideas a free association of humans is not possible.

According to the traditional ‘Marxist’ account of the ideas of Karl Marx, Marx and Engels started off as ‘revolutionary democrats’ and ‘Left Hegelians’, who, some time in 1844, turned into ‘dialectical and historical materialists’ and communists. A causal model to explain social development worked like this: changes in production methods led to changes in social relations, which were accompanied by changes in forms of consciousness; social and political struggles at each stage of history were ‘really’ the conflicts between economic classes. When they reached boiling point, these struggles spilled over into revolutions and a new set of social relations were established.

‘Marxism’ also identified the state as an instrument with which the ruling class oppressed the exploited class, so that they could go on exploiting them. ‘Marxists’ often quoted Engels about the state being ‘bodies of armed men’. In the socialist revolution, according to this scheme, a new, ‘workers’ state’ had to be established, to replace the old bourgeois state, just as the bourgeois had replaced the feudal state in the bourgeois revolution. The communists would use this new form of power as an instrument to transform the economic and social landscape. Eventually, society would be ready to do without the state. In the meantime, the ‘workers’ state’ had to get tough with those who got in the way, whether the remnants of the old ruling classes, or those sections of the masses who were misguided enough to oppose what their own state was doing for their own good.
Our analysis of the 1843 Critique helps to show that none of this represents the thought of Karl Marx. Consider, in particular, just where freedom fits into this picture: it doesn’t, as the history of communism demonstrates only too graphically. In the ‘Marxist’ tradition, ‘freedom’ could only be mentioned in the same breath as ‘necessity’, regarded purely as its opposite. The class struggle, private property and the state were not seen as aspects of estrangement. Marx showed that they were the outcome of the activities of humans, but of humans living inhumanly. However each partial and local struggle might appear to the participants, any movement of the working class actually ‘represents man’s protest against a dehumanised life, because ... man’s true community (is) human nature.’

[1] Of course the activities of the state apparatus are, indeed, frequently violently coercive. But this does not explain what the state is, its essence, and how it relates to communal ‘human nature’.

Is a free, united, self-governing association only possible for gods, as Rousseau thought? Is the task of emancipation too hard for mere mortals? Marx’s conception of history is the key to an answer to these questions: ‘Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution.’ [2] Humans have themselves unconsciously made this inhuman world, and have now reached the stage where, on the basis of past conquests, they can and must consciously remake it. That is how freedom, which is the essence of humanity, emerges into the open and the nightmare of our prehistory gives way to our real, conscious, human history.

The real Marx is engaged precisely with the problem of how human freedom in society is possible, how the individuals can freely associate. As we have seen, this same problem lies at the heart of the entire history of political thought, and Hegel’s attempt to reconcile private property with free communal life was the last and most advanced step along that road. Indeed, Hegel’s great contribution was to pinpoint the contradiction between these two sides of society. So when Marx demonstrates that Hegel’s attempt at their reconciliation has failed, this is not just another station along the philosophical path, but the beginning of the search for a different kind of answer. Before he could conceive of the transcendence of both private property and political power, Marx had to subvert the opinion which philosophy had of itself. Then, the universal emancipation of humanity, which could only be self-emancipation, could be seen as a conscious practical task for the whole of humanity.

Marx was always simultaneously an admiring follower of Hegel and one of his sharpest critics. He upheld Hegel’s break with the Enlightenment’s view of society as a collection of independently-existing individuals, each armed with individual rationality, and with the corresponding logic, as summarised by Kant. But, against Hegel, Marx fought throughout his life for his conception of ‘true democracy’, a free association. When he had completed the 1843 Critique, he discovered that he could give this political conception the name ‘communism’, not in the shape of an addition to an already long list of enlightened utopian ‘doctrines’, but as the ‘real movement’. Having dismantled Hegel’s intricate constitutional devices for reconciling community with private property, Marx had now to ask new questions about how the transcendence of this contradiction
was to be understood and achieved in practice. The answers to these questions were no longer contained within a framework which accepted the existence of private property, but soon revealed themselves to centre on the very nature of what already in the 1843 Critique he had called ‘socialised humanity’.

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When Marx discovered that his ‘true democracy’ was really communism, he could begin to criticise existing communist and socialist ideas. In the main, the socialist heirs of the Enlightenment had accepted the notion that society was a collection of individuals, whose defects might be attributed to their ‘material circumstances’. Once the socialists had got control of these circumstances, and changed them for the better, they could educate people to be better, too, and communal life could be harmonised. But, as Marx explains, this enlightenment view (a) ignores the fact that we also make the circumstances, and (b) leaves unanswered the question: ‘who will educate the educators?’ [3] Only when these linked paradoxes had been resolved were either communist revolution or communism possible. Revolutionary practice did not just mean change, but self-change, and, as Hegel understood, critical consciousness must also be self-consciousness. For utopianism in general, the communist revolution was something to be imposed on society - for its own good, of course - by enlightened leaders. In many ways, the history of socialism is about its failure to understand this break with the Enlightenment. Like the Utopians, the ‘Marxists’ regarded the revolutionary overthrow of the old order as quite unrelated to the characteristics of a communist society.

Marx continually deepened his conception of what humanity was, and showed that it was essentially a process of social self-creation. So when he considered social revolution, he insisted that what was needed was

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\text{the alteration of men } [\text{Menschen} = \text{humans}] \text{ on a mass scale, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; the revolution is needed, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.} \quad [4]
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These words, written two or three years after the Critique, show how, after that work, Marx’s conception of revolution is quite foreign to the idea of a mere transfer of state power. The proletarian revolution is not a more radical re-run of the French Revolution. The problem is not to ‘take power’ into enlightened hands, but to transcend power and to learn to live without it. This is still our problem today.

Through the clarification of his relationship with Hegel, Marx has also got to grips with the entire philosophical tradition. He has settled accounts with Plato’s Guardians and with Aristotle’s understanding of ‘association’, not by throwing them away, but by drawing out of them their human meaning. At the same time, his critical analysis of the notions of individuality and community enable him to answer the attempts of Hobbes, Rousseau and Kant to confront the problems of the modern state. Now he has to move further in
understanding the nature of property in general and its modern form, capital, on which the modern state was founded.

Early in 1844, strongly influenced by Engels’ 1843 article, Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy, Marx began his study of the great political economists. This task, never completed, continued for the rest of his life. Hegel had accepted the work of political economy, which tried to explain the unity of society in terms of the exchange of property. He then attempted to transcend the contradictions inherent in such an explanation, with his notion of the state as a spiritual entity. That is why he could not engage in a critique of political economy: its one-sided view of humanity was built into the foundation of Hegel’s system. In 1844, Marx could state: ‘The standpoint of Hegel is that of modern political economy.’ [5]

Right at the beginning of his work, in some ‘Comments on James Mill’s Elements of Political Economy’, Marx tells himself what this science signified for him. Examining the elder Mill’s conception of money, Marx says:

Mill very well expresses the essence of the matter in the form of a concept by characterising money as the medium of exchange. The essence of money is not, in the first place, that property is alienated in it, but that the mediating activity or movement, the human, social act by which man’s products mutually complement one another, is estranged from man and becomes the attribute of money, a material thing outside man. Since man alienates this mediating activity itself, he is active here only as a man who has lost himself and is dehumanised; the relation itself between things, man’s operations with them, becomes operation with them, becomes the operation of an entity outside of man and above man. [6]

Relations between individuals, in this case in the shape of money, have come to dominate the individuals related, isolating them from each other. To grasp the inhuman nature of these atomised relations was to reveal the true, human, communal relations which they concealed and distorted.

The community of men, or the manifestation of the nature of men, their mutual complementing the result of which is species-life, truly human life - this community is conceived by political economy in the form of exchange and trade. [7]

Exchange or barter, is therefore the social act, the species-act, the community, the social intercourse and integration of man within private ownership, and therefore the external, alienated species-act. ... For this reason ... it is the opposite of the social relationship. [8]

Political economy, as well as political philosophy, took the exchange of private property for granted as the typically human activity, as the foundation of all social connection and as necessary for the organisation of social labour. Hegel’s discussion of civil society takes
the same starting-point. Marx declares that it is ‘the opposite of the social relationship’, and thus inhuman. He shows how political economy enshrines the inhuman character of bourgeois economic and political relations and their mutual separation.

Society, as it appears to the political economist, is civil society, in which every individual is a totality of needs, and only exists for the other person, as the other exists for him, insofar as each becomes a means for the other. The political economist reduces everything (just as does politics in its Rights of Man) to man, ie, to the individual whom he strips of all determinateness so as to class him as capitalist or worker. [9]

Political philosophy had striven to resolve the contradiction between private property and community. Hegel, in summing up this work, had tried to show how the modern state, emerging from the French Revolution provided this resolution. But none of these thinkers had come anywhere near an explanation of the origin of private property, apart from some pseudo-psychological ‘Just-So Stories’, set in a mythical ‘state of nature’.

Through his critiques of Hegel, political economy and socialism, Marx can now find the central importance of labour which was ‘alienated’, that is, whose product became a power over the producer. Political economy had made labour the foundation for its analysis. But it took the estranged form of labour as the natural social form. Marx’s new discovery is that alienated or estranged labour is the basis for property. Once he has overthrown Hegel’s conception of needs, Marx can see the foundation for the entire character of a fragmented society. ‘The object which labour produces - labour’s product - confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer.’ [10] Both Hegel and political economy had identified the objectification [Vergegenständlichkeit] of labour, its embodiment in a product, with its alienation or estrangement [Entfremdung].

Marx must now face the problem of the relation of private property to ‘truly human and social property’. [11]. Alienation is not to be seen as a matter of ‘economics’. It is ‘self-alienation’, involving the very life of the worker as a human being, and thus the very nature of humanity. In the Paris Manuscripts, Marx combined political economy’s crudely material conception of labour with Hegel’s spiritualised understanding. Humanity creates itself by socially producing its own life. Today, this is only in opposition to itself.

For labour, life activity, productive life itself, appears to man in the first place merely as a means of satisfying a need - the need to maintain physical existence. Yet the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life. The whole character of a species - its species-character - is contained in the character of its life-activity; and free, conscious activity is man’s species-character. Life itself appears only as a means to life. [12]

The understanding that labour is alienated reveals the human content of labour, and the possibility of its liberation from its estranged, inhuman form.
The animal is immediately one with its life activity. ... Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life activity. ... Only because of this is his activity free activity. ... An animal forms [things] in accordance with the standard and need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and know how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object. Man therefore also forms [things] in accordance with the laws of beauty. [13]

‘Forms [things]’ is here the translation of the single word ‘formieren’. But Marx employs it in an unusual way. In a deliberate allusion to the Philosophy of Right, he uses it as if it were an intransitive verb, just as Hegel had done. Marx’s conclusion, however, is quite opposed to that of Hegel, and gets to the heart of bourgeois society. For Hegel, as we saw, ‘formieren’ is always bound up with individual possession, while Marx is talking about the true but hidden human meaning of social labour. This is the relation between humanity and nature, a social relation distorted and perverted by the fragmenting effect of private property.

In tearing away from man the object of his production, therefore, estranged labour tears from him his species-life, his real objectivity as a member of the species, and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken away from him. [14]

But, if we all live within social forms which are estranged from us, and dominate us as alien forces, a very simple question arises: how is it possible for anyone to know this? How can Marx or any of us have knowledge of non-alienated life? Neither political economy nor Hegel had this knowledge, and it is not usually available to the ordinary citizen of civil society, so why does Marx think he has discovered it? There seem to be two answers to these questions. On the one hand, Marx criticises Hegel’s remarks about that mass of people without property which grows within modern society. Marx - and not Hegel - is led to see this mass of labourers, of alienated producers, growing into a class of inhumanly-treated humans, and becoming conscious of that inhumanity, is the key to universal emancipation.

From the relation of estranged labour to private property it follows further that the emancipation of society from private property, etc., from servitude, is expressed in the political form of the emancipation of the workers; not that their emancipation alone is at stake, but because the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation - and it contains this, because the whole of human servitude is expressed in the relation of the worker to production, and all relations of servitude are but modifications of this relation. [15]

On the other hand, Marx knows that truly human production can exist. He knows about the work of art, for instance, and scientific work. Like Hegel, he knows about the life of the ancient Greek polis, and can contrast it with production for private need, mere
‘working for a living’. So he can begin to ask: what would a truly human relation and a truly human life-activity look like? Here is Marx’s critical reworking of Hegel’s ‘mutual recognition’. If humans lived truly humanly, they would mutually recognise, not each other’s rights to own property, excluding everybody else, not their relative positions in a power structure, but their common humanity. And what is that humanity? It is not a property of each individual in isolation from all the others, as the Enlightenment had taught. Each of us is directly an embodiment of the whole of society and its history. The human essence is ‘the ensemble of social relations’, so that what each of us recognises in the other turns out to comprise the social whole, and includes ourselves.

Let us suppose that we had carried out production as human beings. Each of us would have in two ways affirmed himself and the other person. 1) In my production I would have objectified my individuality, its specific character, and therefore enjoyed not only an individual manifestation of my life during the activity, but also when looking at the object I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be objective, visible to the senses and hence a power beyond all doubt. 2) In your enjoyment or use of my product I would have the direct enjoyment both of being conscious of having satisfied a human need by my work, that is, of having objectified man’s essential nature, and of having thus created an object corresponding to the need of another man’s essential nature. 3) I would have been for you the mediator between you and the species, and therefore would become recognised and felt by you yourself as a completion of your essential nature and as a necessary part of yourself, and consequently would know myself to be confirmed both in your thought and your love. 4) In the individual expression of my life, I would have directly created your expression of my life, and therefore in my individual activity I would have directly confirmed and realised my true nature, my human nature, my communal nature. Our products would be so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature. This relationship would moreover be reciprocal; what occurs on my side has also to occur on yours. [16]

Plato and Aristotle, together with all their successors, right down to Hegel, had accepted, and thought they had demonstrated, the necessity of rule by the intellect over material labour. All of them knew that this demonstration raised powerful difficulties, and tried, in different ways, to indicate how they might be overcome. Marx, for the first time, finds the possibility for revolutionary practice in which humanity could liberate itself from them, and finds it within these difficulties. Here is the essence of Marx’s critique of political economy and of politics, which emerged from his critique of the political philosophy of over two millennia. For the first time, a scientific account of alienated social life is possible, which is at the same time imbued with hatred for oppression and exploitation. Ethics and human science have been united.

Marx never ceased to believe that the state as an institution was an aspect of an inhuman way of living. Already in 1843, in yet another reference to Hegel, Marx knew that ‘the philistine world is a political world of animals’, and that ‘centuries of barbarism
engendered and shaped it, and now it confronts us as a consistent system, the principle of which is the dehumanised world.’ [17] The communist revolution, with all its difficulties, was the transcendence of all such ‘barbarism’, which was summed up in the division between civil society and politics. Despite all their talk about individual freedom, bourgeois thinkers had accepted without question the subordination of individuals to the economic and political forms in which they lived. Revolution for Marx now centres on the self-change of humans though their revolutionary practice. Such practice breaks through what appear to be necessary, immutable historical laws, laws imposed on individuals. This is how Marx himself understood the communist revolution:

It can only be effected through a union, which by the character of the proletariat can only be a universal one, and through a revolution, in which, on the one hand, the power of the earlier mode of production and intercourse is overthrown, and, on the other hand, there develops the universal character and the energy of the proletariat, which are required to accomplish the appropriation, and the proletariat moreover rids itself of everything that still clings to it from its previous position in society. Only at this stage does self-activity coincide with material life, which corresponds to the development of individuals into complete individuals and the casting off of all natural limitations. The transformation of labour into self-activity corresponds to the transformation of the previously limited intercourse into the intercourse of individuals as such. With the appropriation of the total productive forces by the united individuals, private property comes to an end. [18]

The first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy. The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, ie of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase the total of production as rapidly as possible. ... If the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by the force of circumstances, to organise itself as a class, if, by means of a revolution, it makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class. In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. [19]

Marx’s communism is in no way separated from his conception of the path to its achievement. It implies the practical task of removing all those institutions which divided and fragmented community. The communist revolution itself, while centred on the movement of the proletariat, implies the flowering of the joint activity of the whole of society in governing its own affairs.
Instead of a special caste of Guardians, as in Plato’s Republic, the entire community had to find the way to rule itself and to live without property or state power. Here is Aristotle’s autarkeia, without slavery or any other form of class division or gender oppression. It requires the search for the Good, not as a contemplative task for a leisured few but as a practical task for all. The Stoic understanding of individual virtue and self-sufficiency, as continued by political economy, is not simply rejected by Marx, but is now shown to be essentially bound up with its opposite, community. Adam’s Smith’s ‘Providence’ cannot be relied upon to balance ‘self-interest’ and ‘sympathy’, as unavoidable opposites: we ourselves have consciously to accomplish their unification. Hegel’s bureaucracy is not the ‘universal class’, but the proletariat, which will find the way to its own abolition, along with all class division and struggle.

A crucially important passage from his 1846 book, The Poverty of Philosophy indicates what this implied for the role of science as such:

Just as the economists are the scientific representatives of the bourgeois class, so the socialists and the communists are the theoreticians of the proletarian class. ... In the measure that history moves forward, and with it the struggle of the proletariat assumes clearer outlines, they no longer need to seek science in their minds; they have only to take note of what is happening before their eyes and to become its mouthpiece. [20]

The community of property is the only way that true democracy - self-rule without rulers - can exist. Throughout his life, Marx maintained this understanding and fought for it. In the opening chapter of his most important work he foresaw ‘an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness a one single social labour force’ [21]. Near the end of Volume 3, he is as certain as ever that only such a way of life will be ‘worthy of and appropriate for their human nature’. [22]

Nowadays, it is often loudly argued that ‘Marxism is irrelevant’. Yes, but the ideas of Karl Marx are desperately relevant, not as a finished doctrine, but as a starting-point to guide future work, in thought, and in practice comprehended in thought. He never wrote his projected book about the state. But if we draw out the implications of his early attack on this problem, we find it startlingly contemporary, as vast, corrupt and brutal bureaucratic machines oppress billions of us, on behalf of the transnational corporations, or on their own account. It is precisely Marx’s conception of freedom which must illuminate the struggles for a truly human society in the new millennium, and show the way to a human future.
Notes

[17] Ibid, p 137.