

MODERN FRENCH MARXISM



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Introduction

Nationally and internationally, French Marxists have played a crucial role in the social and political changes of the past century. For almost half of that time, their practical importance has been complemented by a theoretical contribution of equally remarkable proportions. Despite this, and sometimes even because of it, French Marxism has been ill served in the English-speaking world. Little known and less understood, its contours have generally been perceived through the distorting mirrors of impatience and antipathy. Though its political importance is often acknowledged, its intellectual wealth remains almost unexplored. There are, it is true, exceptions to this picture. Some few individual theorists have been singled out for particular attention. Most notably, the innovative approach of Louis Althusser and his circle attracted considerable interest among young Marxists during the early and mid-1970s. And the earlier attempts of Jean-Paul Sartre to marry Marxism with his existentialist principles also aroused some belated support on the 'New Left' at the same period. Outside these intellectual enclaves, French Marxism has obtained some limited and piecemeal recognition in the study of politics, economics, history and sociology, but virtually none in the field of philosophy. Moreover, the ideas have almost invariably been seen in isolation from the historical and cultural context in which they were elaborated. The object of this book is to give a sympathetic but critical survey of the development of Marxist thought in France, and to analyse the contributions which French Marxists have made on certain central questions of philosophy and social thought. In this way it may also help to redress the patchy and distorted view of French Marxism which is still widely held, and convey something of the richness and diversity of its philosophical traditions.

The notion of Marxist philosophy immediately poses conceptual problems for readers accustomed to the division of knowledge and enquiry prevalent in English-speaking countries. Many British philosophers are reluctant to concede that Marxism has any significant philosophical dimension, since it has little to say on most of the problems which commonly preoccupy them, and can only with

difficulty be translated into the terminology of their intellectual framework. The reluctance is not confined to Marxism, but extends to much of contemporary European thought, since most cultures allow a broader understanding of the term 'philosophy' than does the 'Anglo-Saxon' tradition. In consequence, recent years have seen the spread of the hybrid category of 'social thought' to describe the enquiry into general principles of thought, related to politics, society and the human and social sciences. Typically it includes theoretical discussions which fall neither into the narrow view of philosophy nor into a recognized scientific discipline. Such discussions are pre-eminently the domain of Marxism, and what the French and others call Marxist philosophy corresponds broadly to what in English might be termed Marxist social thought.

The philosophy or social thought of Marxism comprises not only a conception of history and society, usually designated historical materialism, but also a conception of the more general principles of development and relation in the world, often termed dialectical materialism. It is this latter that forms the major focus of this study, embracing a network of problems which include the nature and status of thought, especially philosophy and social thought; its relation to the natural world, to human society, and to the sciences which study them; and the types of rationality appropriate to investigate such questions.

French Marxist reflection on these issues begins with the key concepts of dialectics and materialism, used by Marx and Engels to characterize their approach. Dialectics is taken to offer a rational framework within which the movement and interrelation of natural, social and conceptual processes can be comprehended. Materialism is taken to affirm the priority of the material world over the thought which reflects on it. A recurrent point of reference is the relationship between the materialist dialectic of Marx and the idealist dialectic of Hegel from which it emerged historically. Debate on these questions has ramified into a complex and diverse philosophical culture, and the following pages will hope to show something of its richness and depth, as well as its historical roots and practical importance.

Any intellectual movement has both a cognitive and a social dimension. That is, it has a conceptual structure, however rudimentary, which seeks to provide knowledge of the world; and it articulates and organizes, however indirectly, the experience and activity of people in society. In the case of Marxism, both dimensions are recognized and asserted in its ambition to be both scientific and revolutionary. How far French Marxism has progressed in the scientific understanding of the world or the revolutionary changing of it is a matter on which

assessments will vary. But this book seeks to provide elements towards a firmer basis for judgement. On a cognitive level, the various philosophical issues in question are critically analysed to draw out their theoretical and practical implications, strengths and weaknesses. On a social level, they are placed in their historical context, and related to the changing configuration of French politics and society, and to international relations. The shifting interrelations of social and cognitive content are traced often in fine detail, especially where that interrelation is itself a point of contention in debate.

The organization of the material follows as far as possible the logic of its internal development, though inevitably the need for selection and division imposes something of its own pattern. As will be observed, Marxism led a mediocre life in France until the 1930s. The short first chapter therefore aims to situate the problems, both historically and conceptually, as they stood before that time. A brief account of the major relevant statements by Marx and Engels is followed by short surveys of the development of Hegelian and Marxist ideas in France up to 1929. Thereafter the chapters proceed chronologically, examining the significant contributions to debate on materialism and the dialectic, in their intellectual and historical context.

As far as possible, the most interesting, influential, or representative work has been given special attention at the expense of other less noteworthy contributions. For this purpose, focus has been centred on varieties of Marxism broadly associated with the communist movement, at the expense of the 'New Left' or Trotskyist tendencies, which are extensively discussed in other studies. Similar but even more compelling reasons underlie the absence of many of the Christian, existentialist, structuralist or post-structuralist writers who have seen themselves in some sense as Marxist. Most of those omitted on this basis have made little or no notable contribution to debate on materialist dialectics, so that their absence is not a major loss to the subject under consideration. Any subsequent work which attempts to discuss in any detail the multitude of currents claiming a close or distant affinity to Marx or Marxism will practically involve a complete intellectual history of modern France. The writings studied from the most recent period also reflect an inevitable degree of personal choice, since the passage of time has not yet revealed how important or influential they have been. But the writers chosen are all in some sense representative and, I hope, stimulating.

In the gestation and preparation of this book, I have received more material and intellectual assistance than I can adequately acknowledge. In particular, I should like to thank University College Dublin for

generously allowing me the leave of absence necessary to complete the work. I am also grateful to the library staff of the College, who have been particularly helpful to me at all times, and to the Institut des Recherches Marxistes in Paris for access to valuable source material. I am deeply indebted to many colleagues and friends with whom I have discussed the various problems of the subject-matter, and to many others of my friends and family for their assistance and encouragement. I hope they will forgive me for not singling them out individually. I should, however, like to express my special gratitude to Jo Doyle, my wife, for her indispensable, unfailing and many-sided help and support.

1

Beginnings

1845 – 1929

Marx, Engels and the Hegelian dialectic

My dialectical method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of 'the Idea', he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of 'the Idea'. With me on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.

The mystifying side of the Hegelian dialectic, I criticised nearly thirty years ago, at a time when it was still the fashion. But just as I was working at the first volume of 'Das Kapital', it was the good pleasure of the peevish, arrogant, mediocre *Ἐπιγονοί* who now talk large in cultured Germany, to treat Hegel in the same way as the brave Moses Mendelssohn in Lessing's time treated Spinoza, i.e., as a 'dead dog'. I therefore openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker, and even here and there, in the chapter on the theory of value, coquetted with the modes of expression peculiar to him. The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.

*Karl Marx, Afterword to the second German edition of Capital,
24 January 1873, English edition (London, 1970), 19–20*

Karl Marx never gave a systematic account of his philosophy, understood in the narrower sense. Successive generations of Marxists have regretted the fact and argued over what such an account might have contained. They have also debated at length what its absence implies. But the inescapable fact remains that no such text exists.

Claims have been made on behalf of two introductions which he wrote to his *Critique of Political Economy* (1859), but neither of them meets the necessary conditions. The first, written in 1857, contains lengthy discussion of methodology, but is incomplete, unrevised and was unknown for almost a century, until 1953.¹ It also poses serious problems of interpretation, some of which will be examined in later chapters. The second, which replaced the first and was published as a preface to the work in 1859, is a famous text in which Marx gives a brief account of his personal development and the most celebrated short statement of his historical materialism.² But philosophical questions, in the restricted sense, are not even broached. Neither text is the missing exposition of Marxist philosophy.

It is true that during his early twenties, Marx wrote voluminously about philosophy. It was his passion. And some commentators have sought to interpret the writings of these years, the early 1840s, as the substantive philosophy of Marxism as a whole. A full discussion of this viewpoint cannot be undertaken without entering into the debates on humanism and alienation which have nourished many volumes of discussion. These are deliberately left aside in the present study in favour of the philosophical questions posed by Marxism after it reached the main conclusions which characterize its distinctive conception of history and society. At this stage, soon after Marx's association with Friedrich Engels had begun in 1844, they decided, as Marx said, to 'settle accounts with our erstwhile philosophical conscience', by jointly writing the manuscript now known as *The German Ideology* (1845–46). In it the young men worked out 'the opposition of our view to the ideological view of German philosophy'.³ The implications of this process remains contentious and, as later discussion will show, some commentators have taken it to mean the rejection of philosophy as such. After 1846, by a mutual division of labour sustained over a lifetime, Marx devoted his attentions to the urgent problems of political economy, culminating in *Capital*, while Engels specialized in matters of the natural and human sciences and philosophy. For this reason, though the two men were in constant consultation over each other's work, there is no further writing on philosophy in Marx's hand.

The usual sources for an account of Marxist philosophy are therefore the works of Engels, in particular his lengthy polemic against the German theorist Eugen Dühring, usually known as *Anti-Dühring* (1880), and his pamphlet *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1888). More recently the fragments collected as *Dialectics of Nature*, written from 1873 to 1886 and first published in 1925, became a further source. Engels' works are not treatises addressed to professional

philosophers, but they set out the philosophical framework of Marxism with clarity and precision.

Some commentators have disparaged Engels' formulations, arguing that they are not by Marx's hand, do not correspond to Marx's conceptions, and cannot validly be counted as Marxist. His philosophical conclusions are especially singled out for criticism on this basis. However, such a view is without historical or textual foundation. The closeness of Marx's and Engels' collaboration and the frankness of their relationship leave little room to suppose a major undiscovered divergence on such important questions of overall perspective. More pertinently, the scattered comments which Marx occasionally made on topics relating to philosophy serve only to corroborate the more developed expositions of Engels.

There is, at least, no dispute that the methodological and philosophical positions of Marxism developed out of Hegelian philosophy and the criticism of it by Marx and Engels in the mid 1840s. So much is certain, though views on how Marxism emerged and how it relates to Hegel diverge considerably. Much of the controversy which the present study is concerned with refers back more or less explicitly to this issue. There were, of course, other important theoretical and practical sources for Marxism as a whole. But no discussion of its conceptual procedures and general philosophy can evade the question of their relation to Hegel.

Like many thinkers quite remote from either Marxism or Hegelianism, Marx and Engels regarded Hegel as the last great systematic philosopher of Western Europe. With him, they thought, philosophy had reached its highest point of development. In common with many of their German contemporaries, they belonged initially to the Young Hegelian movement which sought to develop the revolutionary implications of his thought. Engels later offered the following assessment:

The Hegelian system was the last and most consummate form of philosophy, in so far as the latter is represented as a special science superior to every other. All philosophy collapsed with this system. But there has remained the dialectical method of thinking and the conception that the natural, historical and intellectual world moves and transforms itself endlessly in a constant process of becoming and passing away. Not only philosophy but all sciences were now required to discover the laws of motion of this constant process of transformation, each in its particular domain. And this was the legacy which Hegelian philosophy bequeathed to its successors.⁴

What was revolutionary about Hegel was therefore his conception of change and development as the fundamental reality. Earlier philosophers had articulated the same view, but Hegel's originality lay in formulating a way of thinking which could grasp the 'constant process of becoming and passing away'. However, this way of thinking – dialectics – was embedded in a deeply conservative system of idealist philosophy, which Hegel had constructed. While they recognized the great power and value of the Hegelian dialectic, Marx and Engels rejected the idealist philosophy that enveloped it.

The materialist dialectic which they espoused holds a relation of both continuity and discontinuity with its idealist predecessor. But whereas Hegel devoted lengthy volumes to his conception of dialectics, the founders of Marxism were content with a few brief indications of their conception of it. Hence, the difficulties of defining a precise relationship between Marxism and Hegelianism have constituted many of the contentious points attending the elaboration of materialist dialectics in subsequent Marxist philosophy.

The classical statement of the relationship, the one to which all debate eventually returns, is Marx's own assessment at the end of his afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*, part of which is quoted at the head of this section. But, as with most crucial texts, it has become the starting point, rather than the final word, in the recurring discussion. Despite its concision and clarity, it has fuelled more than a century of controversy. Almost every phrase has given rise to intense disputes over its precise interpretation and implications. Many of them will be examined in the present work, but an initial census can usefully indicate some of the questions raised. Is Marx's dialectic simply a method or is it a philosophy, or both? Likewise Hegel's? Does Marx use an opposite method or an opposite philosophy? How far does the rejection of idealism affect the nature of the dialectic? Is Marx's criticism of Hegel a limited modification or a complete rejection? What is the 'mystifying side' and how far does Hegel mystify the dialectic? Does Marx's 'coquetry' affect the substance or simply the presentation of his analyses? In what sense is Marx a 'pupil' of Hegel, and is it limited to *Capital*? What takes place in the process of turning Hegel right side up? And what is the 'rational kernel', what the 'mystical shell'?

Essentially, the problems can be expressed in terms of Marx's 'inversion' of Hegel. In what does the process consist and does it contain or lead to any structural changes in the Hegelian dialectic? References to Hegel are scattered throughout *Capital* and through most of Marx's other writings, but the brief statement quoted here is the most explicit judgement on his general attitude to his predecessor. More extended

examination of the Hegel question was left to Engels, who spent some time discussing it, particularly towards the end of his life.

Engels frequently quoted Marx's statements as a condensed expression of their common position. Sharing Marx's respect for the 'mighty thinker', he recognized the great wealth of Hegel's thought, where 'one finds innumerable treasures which today still possess undiminished value'.⁵ He also acknowledged that in his writings 'there is much that is botched, artificial, laboured, in a word, wrong in point of detail'. The defects largely stemmed, in Engels' view, from the idealist viewpoint which was a crucial limitation. Hegel, he explained, held that instead of thoughts in the brain being more or less abstract pictures of actual things and processes, things and their evolution are 'the realized pictures of the "Idea", existing somewhere from eternity before the world was'. 'This way of thinking', he concluded, 'turned everything upside down, and completely reversed the actual connection of things in the world.'⁶

On the other hand, Engels emphasized the revolutionary character of dialectical philosophy, which holds that 'nothing is final, absolute, sacred', which 'reveals the transitory character of everything and in everything', and for which nothing endures except 'the uninterrupted process of becoming and passing away'.⁷ Hegel's great achievement he suggested, was to enunciate this philosophy and attempt to 'trace out the internal connection that makes a continuous whole of all this movement and development'.⁸ In contrast, he said, the overall system, which Hegel felt compelled to construct, was conservative, dogmatically declaring itself to be absolute, in contradiction with the revolutionary implications of his method. Consequently, depending on whether a person leant towards the system or the method, quite opposing conclusions could be reached concerning particularly religion and politics.

The contradiction between the system and the dialectical method, he felt, was an incurable one, but it showed the way out of the labyrinth and made Hegel's the last great philosophical system in the classical sense. The search for an impossible absolute truth was now replaced by the pursuit of 'attainable relative truths along the path of the positive sciences, and the summation of their results by means of dialectical thinking'.⁹

Engels' analysis clarifies some of the lapidary formulations of Marx's statement, and proposes answers to some of the outstanding questions. His distinction of Hegel's system as against his dialectical method makes it clear that Marxism adopts the dialectical method without its systematic expression, but whether the dialectic is a

philosophy remains unsolved. Engels, like Marx, uses the term 'philosophy' in several senses, depending on the context. The Hegelian system is for him the end of German philosophy and even of all philosophy in the classical sense. But dialectical philosophy remains revolutionary and valuable.

At least one distinction may be proposed, between philosophy as the construction of definitive intellectual systems, and philosophy as a way of thinking and reasoning. The first, static, sense excludes Marxism, the second, dynamic, sense includes it. In the latter sense, Marxism incorporates the dialectical method. But there is also the suggestion that it incorporates the results of dialectical thinking, including the criticism of philosophical systems and the 'summation' of scientific discoveries. Whether it may legitimately be inferred that Marxism is therefore a philosophy in some sense is a question that has provoked much controversy. It relates to what Marx means by 'settling accounts with our erstwhile philosophical conscience'. Is Marxism a new philosophy or the end of philosophy? The interpretation of Marx's relation to Hegel has a vital role to play in the answer.

It was already clear, from Marx, that he considered Hegel's dialectic to be mystified by his idealism. The suggestion that with Hegel the dialectic was 'standing on its head' is already a paraphrase of Hegel's own characterization of his idealist viewpoint. In his *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), Hegel spoke of the need to understand reality as an 'inverted world' (*verkehrte Welt*) in which the negation of things by the idea of their opposites represented the truth of those things.¹⁰ In the sense that, for him, the truth of the world lay in ideas and mind, Hegel deliberately sought to stand the conventional view of reality on its head. In repeating this assessment, then, Marx and Engels are not indulging in the type of unkind caricature which is sometimes supposed. Their materialist viewpoint asserts that ideas are reflections of the world rather than the reverse, hence turning the 'inverted world' 'right side up'. In this sense materialism, whether or not it is viewed as philosophy, is plainly the opposite of idealism, which is a philosophy. Correspondingly, Marx's dialectic is the opposite of Hegel's in that it follows an opposite direction, proceeding from the world to ideas. The dialectic is therefore the 'rational kernel', idealism its 'mystical shell'.

Despite the satisfying metaphorical solution, Hegel is not such a simple nut to crack. Marx acknowledges that the dialectic suffered mystification in Hegel's hands; Engels speaks of aspects that are

botched or plain wrong. Evidently, the Hegelian dialectic cannot be simply adopted unchanged by Marxism, albeit in inverted form. Even the fact of inversion would suggest the need for some modification: ceilings can hardly be expected to serve as floors without some reconstruction. The interrelation of Hegel's idealist philosophy and his dialectic raises the question of how far they are separable and in what form Marx appropriated the dialectic. Part of the answer lies in the notion of a contradiction between the dialectic and the total system in Hegel. The dialectic, if it intrinsically undermined the system, must have been in a healthy state from a materialist viewpoint. But even the concept of contradiction, a Hegelian concept, implies an interpenetration of the opposed aspects, and in turn poses the question of how much of each aspect survives in the eventual resolution of their conflict.

The possible complexities of the answer have left later generations of Marxists ample scope for debate. The closely connected issues of the relations between Marx, Engels and Hegel, the status and content of philosophy, and the nature of materialist dialectics, have continuously stood at the centre of controversy. The texts which have been quoted, far from closing discussion, have been variously adduced and traduced in support of quite divergent positions. To propose a single exclusive interpretation of Marx's and Engels' statements would preempt an important part of the debates to be studied in the forthcoming pages. More important, it might foster the erroneous impression that philosophical questions can be resolved by exegesis of authoritative texts. Further discussion of Marx and Engels would go beyond the present purpose of setting the initial terms of discussion. The issues raised will be taken up in the context of French Marxism and its development.

Marxism in France before 1917

La France aura fait attendre Karl Marx. C'est un paradoxe que nous l'ayons connu si tard, alors que nous subissons depuis longtemps son influence, indirecte et gênée il est vrai: le marxisme menait dans notre pays une vie médiocre.

Pierre Gérôme, '*Le marxisme pénètre en France*', Europe,
15 août 1935, 611

The implantation of Marxism in France was a long, painful and uneven process. Organically bound to the working class, its progress followed the rise and fall of the socialist movement and mirrored the

development of the conflicts within it. From the beginnings of the Guesdist movement in the late 1870s, the economic and political analyses of Marx and Engels spread widely through the French labour movement, albeit in an elementary and at times distorted version. By the turn of the century the general principles of historical materialism were generally known and accepted by socialists, even though they were often deformed by a variety of foreign accretions. It was a much longer task to introduce the philosophical principles of Marxism into a working class suspicious of abstractions and an intelligentsia profoundly steeped in bourgeois ideology.

Marx's own connections with France are well known. From the time of his early months of political exile in Paris during 1844 and 1845, and his exhilarating experience of the French socialist movement, he maintained throughout his life a close interest in France. Some of his most memorable and influential essays were devoted to developments there: *Class Struggles in France 1848–1850*, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, and *The Civil War in France*. But it was not until the last years of his life that Marx's conception of socialism began to take root in French political culture. There was only one professed Marxist among the leaders of the Commune: Léo Frankel, a Hungarian by birth, whose solitary efforts to give the Commune a Marxist direction were assisted from London by Marx. Frankel's work was cut short by the slaughter of the *communards*, and the International Workingmen's Association to which he belonged was ruthlessly harried by a government anxious to stamp out all forms of socialism. Marx's reputation among the surviving socialists working in clandestinity was gravely compromised by the nomination of three disastrous representatives for the International in France. The Bordeaux agent vanished without a trace; the Paris agent abjectly repudiated socialism at his trial in early 1873; and the Toulouse agent turned out to be a police spy who secured the conviction of nearly forty Internationalists in the area. The French socialist movement, such as it was, continued to find its theoretical nourishment in the moralistic syndicalism bequeathed by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, or in the revolutionary putschism of Auguste Blanqui.

The first significant promotion of Marxist ideas in France was the work of Jules Guesde and the small group of socialists around him. During his exile after the fall of the Commune, Guesde developed from a confused form of anarchism to a collectivist socialism close to that of Marx, whose work he encountered in the late 1870s after his return to France. Guesde embarked on an energetic campaign to popularize the new ideas through lectures, pamphlets and the review *Egalité*, which he founded in 1877. The efforts of Guesde and his colleagues led to the