

# **THE ILLUSION OF THE EPOCH**

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Marxism-Leninism as a  
Philosophical Creed

H. B. Acton

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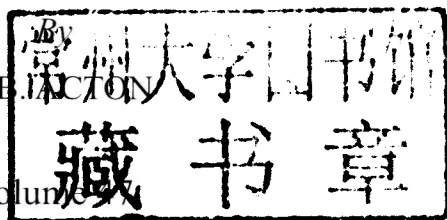


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Philosophical Creed

By  
H. B. JACKSON

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AS A PHILOSOPHICAL CREED

by

H. B. ACTON

*Professor of Philosophy in the University of London*

‘The exponents of this conception  
of history . . . in each epoch have had  
to share the *illusion of that epoch.*’

MARX and ENGELS



ROUTLEDGE & KEGAN PAUL  
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## PREFACE

The following work arose from a Seminar which I gave in the University of Chicago in the summer of 1949. I am grateful to my wife for her help in removing obscurities, to Mr R. N. Carew Hunt for generously putting his Marxist scholarship at my disposal and for reading and commenting on the major part of the manuscript, and to Professor E. E. Turner, F.R.S., for advice in connection with Part I, Chapter II, Section 7. The Aristotelian Society has been good enough to allow me to reproduce a passage that originally appeared in their 1951-52 *Proceedings*.

\* \* \* \* \*

For this second impression I have corrected some misprints and expanded footnotes and references when new editions and translations of the books referred to have made this necessary.

Mr Emile Burns's remark in *The Marxist Quarterly* (October 1955) suggesting that Engels did not regard equality as the chief element of the morality of the future raises the question of the importance of equality of reward in Marxism-Leninism. Marx applauded the Paris Commune for paying a working-man's wage to all revolutionary functionaries no matter how important, but he also said that during the period of socialism (as distinct from the ultimate communism) payment would vary in accordance with output. Lenin regarded differential rewards as unwelcome and temporary necessities. Stalin, however, said it was unMarxist to advocate equality of incomes during the period prior to communism (see S. Dobrin, 'Lenin on Equality and the Webbs on Lenin', *Soviet Studies* 1956-7). The conclusion I draw is that on the Marxist-Leninist view equality of incomes is impracticable before the advent of communism and unnecessary afterwards, when there will be enough to satisfy all needs. Marxist-Leninists who live in non-Marxist societies will, of course, as Engels says, advocate equality 'as an agitational means in order to rouse the workers against the capitalists on the basis of the capitalists' own assertions' (*Anti-Dühring*).

Mr John Plamenatz (*The British Journal of Sociology*, June 1956) makes two interesting criticisms of what I wrote. He says that Marxists are not necessarily committed to 'total planning', but only claim to have knowledge which would enable the planners to decide what to control and what to leave alone. In practice this may be so (though even democratic governments find that their plans have to take in more and more of human life), but in principle I think the Marxist ideal requires nature to be wholly tamed and humanized. Mr Plamenatz also criticises my view that the Marxist distinction between basis and superstructure requires what are really inseparable factors to act causally upon one another. Social factors, he says, which may be distinguishable but incapable of existing in isolation, may be related to one another in such a way that some are more fundamental than others. There is not space for me to discuss this interesting point here. All I can say is that insofar as aspects are abstractions, they are fundamental or derivative in a *logical* sense, according to which what is not fundamental is what is logically derivative. Discussion of this topic, therefore, takes us into the realm of sociological concepts and their logical relationships.

Since the first impression of this book, the Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, has published translations in English of *The Holy Family* (Moscow, 1956, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1957), and of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (Moscow, no date, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1959). Reference should also be made to *Osnovy Marksistskoj Filosofii* (Moscow, 1958), the joint work of a number of Soviet philosophers. A summary and brief discussion of it may be read in J. M. Bochenski's *Die Dogmatischen Grundlagen der Sowjetischen Philosophie* (Reidel, Dordrecht, Holland, 1959). The Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, has also published (no date given) *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism, Manual* (described as translated from the Russian and as edited by Clemens Dutt). This is also a joint work, but by a different set of Soviet authors. I do not think that either of these books renders necessary any alteration of my account of the Marxist-Leninist philosophy.



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## INTRODUCTION

Marxism is such an important influence in the contemporary world that there is no need to apologise for trying to understand and assess it. In Great Britain the tendency has been to consider it primarily as a body of economic and social doctrine, and to concentrate attention on such parts of it as the accounts of surplus value, historical materialism, the class struggle, the alleged decline of capitalism, the struggle for markets and imperialism. This is natural enough, since these are the elements of Marxism that are most obviously relevant to policies of action. Marxism, however, is much more than a system of social and economic doctrines. It is also, in a wide sense of the word, a philosophy. When we talk about a philosophy in this way we mean a system of thought and conduct comprising views about the most general and significant features of the universe, and about the principal purposes of human life. In the German language the word *Weltanschauung* is used for such a system, but the translations 'world-outlook' or 'world-view' do not seem to have established themselves in English, so that we had better continue to use the word 'philosophy', which is, indeed, widely understood in this sense. It will be seen that a philosophy comprises views about the most general and significant features of the universe. Such views are often called metaphysical, and the study of them metaphysics. A philosophy, in the sense we are considering, also comprises an account of the principal purposes of human life, and this is its ethical part. Thus a philosophy consists of a metaphysics and an ethics that is generally supposed to depend on it. Some philosophies are fundamentally religious, and people may thus talk of the Christian or the Buddhist philosophy. Some philosophies, again, have been carefully reasoned out and defended by arguments, as were those of Plato, for example, or of Epicurus or Spinoza. Marxism is an anti-religious philosophy first formulated by Marx and Engels, who did not, however, attempt such a closely reasoned account

of their view as a whole as Plato or Epicurus or Spinoza did of theirs. The economic and social doctrines of surplus value, historical materialism and the rest are believed by Marxists to gain in depth and significance by belonging to such a system, and in countries where they can decide what is taught in schools and universities Marxists see to it that their philosophy informs the whole curriculum. It is this philosophy in its most general terms as metaphysics and as ethics that I wish to discuss in language that presupposes no technical training in philosophy.

Contemporary British philosophy is not at all sympathetic towards philosophical systems of any kind, and is especially opposed to those of them that provide reasons for policies of individual or social action. Metaphysical theories according to which, for example, the universe is all matter, or all mind, or both, or neither, are criticised on the ground that their propounders unwittingly misuse language and appear to be saying something important about the world when they are really talking nonsense, or recommending a peculiar vocabulary, or following a linguistic trail that ends up in the wilderness, or stressing an analogy that other people may not wish to stress. It is further argued that, even if metaphysical theories about the universe as a whole were not fundamentally misconceived, they could still provide no grounds for one sort of social policy rather than another. The philosophers who accept these views believe, therefore, that they have exposed the illegitimacy of *all* metaphysical theories about the universe as a whole, and of *all* practical policies in so far as they are supposed to be based on such theories. The result is that, though they are themselves called philosophers many of them do not very often discuss philosophies in the sense in which I have been using the word. Even if they do, it is usually by the way and in very general terms, so that Marxism, as one of them, is thus left to be dealt with by economists, social theorists or historians. I think it is possible that some economists, social theorists and historians might welcome an attempt on the part of a philosopher to discuss the philosophy of Marxism in some detail instead of merely stigmatizing it as one disreputable member of a thoroughly disreputable class. In any case, the educated public are entitled to expect that some philosopher will try to interpret

this philosophy on its merits, with a view to its consistency and suggestiveness, in case there are things of importance to be said about it apart from the criticisms that apply no more to it than they do to other metaphysico-ethical systems.

Now the writings of Karl Marx, and of his faithful supporter Friedrich Engels, form the basis of two socialist movements that are bitterly opposed to one another, the reformist Marxists on the one hand, who are often known today as Social Democrats, and the Communist Party Marxists on the other hand, who regard the government of the U.S.S.R. as the chief vehicle and director of Marxist policy. It is this latter form of Marxism that I shall discuss. There has been, so to say, an apostolical succession from Marx and Engels themselves, through Lenin to Stalin and the spokesmen who have succeeded him. The exponents of this form of Marxism call it 'Marxism-Leninism'. Indeed for a time, I believe, they contemplated calling it 'Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism', but were happily deterred by the cumbrousness of the expression. But whatever we call it, its exponents are right, it seems to me, in regarding it as based on and continuous with the doctrines and directives that Marx and Engels handed on. Certainly both Lenin and Stalin were most assiduous in using the writings of Marx and Engels as their chief theoretical guide. It is not inappropriate, therefore, to give the name 'Marxism' to the whole tradition that Marx and Engels inaugurated and which Lenin and Stalin have continued. Indeed it has on occasion an advantage over the term 'Marxism-Leninism' in that it enables us to avoid the awkwardness of calling Marx and Engels 'Marxist-Leninists' before Lenin had been born.

I have not dealt with the doctrines of the Marxist philosophy in the historical order in which they were published. What I have called the Marxist metaphysics, and what they themselves call Dialectical Materialism, is regarded by Marxists as fundamental, and I have therefore given over the first part of the book to a discussion of it, leaving the social theory and ethics, which they call Scientific Socialism, for the second part. Nor have I been concerned to keep an historical order within each part, but have chosen those statements of a view that seemed best designed to introduce it, whether they were by

Marx, Engels, Lenin or Stalin. I have frequently referred, however, to such early writings as the *Holy Family*, the *German Ideology*, and the *Paris Manuscripts*. These are the writings that philosophers are likely to find of most interest because in them Marx—and in the *Holy Family* and *German Ideology* Engels also—discusses philosophical issues raised by Hegel and Feuerbach. Marx's doctoral dissertation was on the philosophies of Democritus and Epicurus, and at one time he had hoped to become a professor of philosophy. In these early writings we can sometimes see fundamental features of Marx's thought more clearly than in the later ones. I agree, therefore, with those scholars who have used these works to throw light on the argument of *Capital*. Their influence on later Marxism was, of course, only via Marx and Engels themselves, since the *Paris Manuscripts* and the *German Ideology* were only published in their entirety in the nineteen-thirties, and the *Holy Family* was extremely rare until it was republished about the same time. These early writings, then, are valuable as aids to the interpretation of the general drift of the Marxist philosophy, and that, as well as their intrinsic interest, is what has led me to refer to them so often.

In a work of this sort it is essential to base one's interpretations on detailed references to the texts. When I know of English translations I have referred to them, and have generally, though not always, used them in quoting. I have had to make my own translations of passages from works that have not been translated into English. This documentation of the Marxist classics has led to so many footnotes that I have been very sparing with other references. I have not, for example, given references to those views of Fourier which, I believe, must have greatly influenced the Marxist ethics. Nor, again, have I discussed the views of other expositors and critics of Marxism at the length that they deserve, so that the number of my references to the writings of Hans Barth, Karl Popper, Hook and Bober, to mention only a few—all of them writers on Marx himself rather than on Marxism in the sense in which I am using the word—is small in proportion to their importance and to the benefit to be derived from them. In brief, I should say that the chief aim of this book is to expound and interpret

the philosophy of Marxism, that the next aim is to criticise it, and that a subsidiary aim is to show its kinship with some other philosophies.

The book commences, then, with an account of Dialectical Materialism. The word 'materialist' is often used by preachers and others to stand for someone whose life is spent in the pursuit of material wealth for his own satisfaction. In this moral sense of the word a materialist is a selfish seeker after comfort and luxury. I need hardly say that it is not in this sense of the word that Marxists regard themselves as materialists. Nevertheless, there is an important connection between their moral beliefs and their materialist theory. For while they advocate the pursuit of objects more valuable than food and drink, they put great stress upon the ways in which higher values are rooted in such essential physical needs. Thus, while their opponents sometimes accuse Marxists of having low aims, Marxists, for their part, are apt to reply that the idealism of their critics is impracticable or even hypocritical. This, however, is a matter that must be left over for discussion in Part II. In the meantime it is sufficient to say that 'materialism' is not primarily understood in the moral or rhetorical sense just indicated.

Involved in their description of themselves as materialists there are, I think, three main contentions. In the first place, Marxists hold that material things exist independently of perception of, or thought about, them. This is the view which philosophers call Realism. In the second place, they hold that matter existed before minds existed, and that minds have developed out of matter. This is a view about the world that philosophers have sometimes called Naturalism. In the third place, they hold that matter is not adequately understood in mechanical terms, but needs to be understood in dialectical terms. This is the main respect in which Marxist materialism differs from other forms of that philosophy. In Part I I shall discuss each of these views in turn.





**PART I**  
**DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM**