

*Chris Sciabarra*

## MARX ON THE PRECIPICE OF UTOPIA

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MARX, REASON, AND THE ART OF FREEDOM

by Kevin M. Brien

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Kevin Brien presents a provocative, integrated, systematic, and illuminating discussion of the relationship between reason and freedom in the works of Karl Marx. Brien's philosophical and methodological study uncovers important and often neglected epistemological parallels between Marxist and non-Marxist philosophers, while it distinguishes Marx's dialectical method as an indispensable tool for radical analysis. However, in his valiant, and successful, efforts to provide an original contribution to Marxist scholarship, Brien has inadvertently raised far more questions about the actualizable potential of Marx's project than he has answered. These questions are decisive precisely because they challenge Marxist theory on an epistemological level.

Brien's book views Marx's thought as a philosophical whole, one which transcends the apparent tensions between Marx's early and later writings, between Marx and Engels, and between the "critical" and "scientific" Marxist traditions. "Critical" Marxism, such as that of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, is far more Hegelian, "voluntaristic" and anti-positivist in its intellectual orientation, while the "scientific" Marxist tradition, recently embodied in Althusser's structuralism, is decidedly "determinist" and positivistic. Althusser, in fact, suggested that this split between "critical" and "scientific" tradi-

The author's doctoral dissertation, "Toward a Radical Critique of Utopianism: Dialectics and Dualism in the Works of Friedrich Hayek, Murray Rothbard and Karl Marx," was successfully defended in 1988 in the Department of Politics, New York University.

tions is an outgrowth of an "epistemological break" in Marx's own writings that separates Marx from his young Hegelianism, and propels him toward the "mature," historical materialism of his post-1844 writings.

This Althusserian position has been disputed by Bertell Ollman and Scott Meikle, among others, now joined by Kevin Brien.<sup>1</sup> Brien argues persuasively that Marx's thought is a developing, open-ended and incomplete system, and that the apparent tensions in his writings are not illustrative of any profound philosophical or epistemological conflicts within the totality of Marx's thought. Still, Brien's Marx embraces a specific and consistent set of principles in his interpretation, understanding, experience and explanation of reality (181).

### *Marx's Metaphysics*

Brien writes that Marx's metaphysics treats consciousness as internally related to objective reality. Man is a "being-in-the-world." His free, conscious life-activity is both objectifying and transformative. It is objectifying because it concretizes human purposes in the real world. It is transformative because it does not merely react upon objective reality; it changes and alters the natural and social context from which it springs. Based upon this presupposition, Brien suggests that Marx's opposition to "vulgar" philosophical idealism is not inspired by an equally vulgar, mechanistic materialism. Marx does not view ideas as disembodied abstractions. He sees ideas as internally related to the social and material context within which they are expressed, and without which they would lose existential significance.

Brien writes that this dialectical view of the internal relationship between ideas and material context is inherently opposed to determinism. Though Brien admits that Marx's language is sometimes ambiguous (56–57), he argues that economic determinism is, nonetheless, a fundamental distortion of the essential Marxian perspective. Engels, in 1890, acknowledged his own responsibility for the distortive "vulgarization" of historical materialism. He wrote that

Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasize the main principle *vis-à-vis* our adversaries, who denied it, and we had not always the time, the place or the opportunity to give their due to the other factors involved in the interaction.<sup>2</sup>

The key word here is "interaction." The dialectic incorporates a thoroughly organic understanding of internal relationships. When Marx and Engels emphasize economic factors, they do not lose sight of the fact that just as economic factors influence non-economic factors, so too are there reciprocal effects.

Brien's interpretation of the Marxian dialectic incorporates this organic conception of internal relations in a way which is both original and provocative. Brien's presentation of dialectical method appropriates the philosophical insights of both contemporary Marxists and non-Marxists. Naturally, Brien cites the significant contributions of Marxist thinkers, such as Ollman. Surprisingly, Brien also cites the crucially important work of Brand Blanshard in this area of philosophy. Blanshard argues in *The Nature of Thought* that every object of thought is what it is by virtue of its relations to other objects. These relations are constitutive of the object itself and, in differing degrees, they determine the object's fundamental characteristics down to the last detail. According to Brien, certain key elements of Blanshard's view of the theory of internal relations can be utilized to elucidate the Marxian perspective. But Brien argues that Blanshard's philosophical idealism cannot offer precise definitional criteria. Blanshard assumes that an object is defined by *all* of its internal relationships. To this extent, the definition relies upon a complete grasp of these relations. Brien criticizes this proposition when he suggests that human knowledge is an open-ended process, and that human beings cannot gain an exhaustive comprehension of the whole. Thus, Brien rejects what Geoffrey Hellman calls the "doctrine of strict organicity."<sup>3</sup> Strict organicity assumes that the interdependence of social reality makes it impossible to examine any part of existence without taking into account *every* part of existence.

### *The Epistemic Utopia*

This opposition to strict organicity is not restricted to Marxist philosophy. F. A. Hayek and Michael Polanyi, for instance, have suggested that a synoptic grasp of the whole is epistemologically impossible. Indeed, the idealist belief in the possibility of an exhaustive comprehension of the whole and its internal relations is the hallmark of utopian thinking.

Utopians attempt to reconstruct and transform social reality as if they were outside the context of history and culture. They embrace constructivist designs for progressive change which ultimately rely

upon a synoptic grasp of the social whole. Constructivism is based on the belief that human beings can achieve a complete understanding of all the subtle and sophisticated complexities of social life. It does not recognize the dialectical interplay of human intentions and unintended consequences, since by implication it assumes that intentional human action can achieve any desired effects. This is not merely an exaggeration of the efficacious potential of the human mind. It is a prescription for social change based on human omniscience. Not only does the utopian require full knowledge of what is knowable, he or she needs full knowledge of that which has not even been articulated. Hayek correctly views utopian blueprints for social change as resting on what he describes as a "synoptic delusion."<sup>5</sup> A "synoptic delusion" represents a false belief that one can consciously design a new society as if one had possession of holistic knowledge. Holistic knowledge involves grasping the complex inter-relations of the society which are necessarily constituted by both tacit and articulated social practices. Drawing upon the insights of Michael Polanyi, Hayek explains that to achieve such knowledge, man would have to know the structure and processes of his own mind. Hayek argues that, on the contrary,

there will always be some rules governing a mind which that mind in its then prevailing state cannot communicate, and . . . if it ever were to acquire the capacity of communicating these rules, this would presuppose that it had acquired further higher rules which make the communication of the former possible but which themselves will still be incommunicable.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Hayek believes that the idea of a mind explaining itself is a logical contradiction, and that its impossibility gives us a lesson in cognitive humility, curbing our intellectual hubris.<sup>7</sup> Man's fallibility and the inherent, contextual limits of his knowledge, are, then, the strongest factors militating against a fully imposed or designed utopian order—which would, Hayek suggests, dislocate the very processes which make order possible.

Hayek expresses a distrust of utopianism on an epistemological level that both Marx and Engels would have appreciated. Marx and Engels opposed utopian theorizing because it depended upon abstract system-building. According to Marx, the ability of human beings to transcend the unintended consequences of their actions and to consciously create non-exploitative social conditions could only arise out of specific historical circumstances. Marx writes that for utopian thinkers,

historical action is to yield to their personal inventive action, historically created conditions of emancipation to fantastic ones, and the gradually spontaneous class-organisation of the proletariat to an organisation of society *specifically* contrived by these inventors. Future history resolves itself, in their eyes, into the propaganda and practical carrying out of their social plans.<sup>9</sup>

Marx's stated opposition to utopian theorizing, however, does not mean that Marx's project itself is able to transcend the epistemological pitfalls of utopianism. Brien writes that for Marx, capitalism engenders concrete social relations which "are independent of human will in the sense that people are born into a network of already existing, historically developed social relations which they did not choose, but which shape the development of individual consciousness from birth" (47). While these social relations are themselves constituted by free, conscious human agency, it is clear that true "freedom" will not emerge until men and women have conquered the "alienated" social conditions of capitalism.

Brien emphasizes that Marx views reason as "historical and grounded in the primacy of man's material practice" (176). Free, conscious, creative, human activity is the historical achievement of socialism. But socialism "presupposes a structural transformation of the cognitive and conative faculties as they obtain in capitalism" (174). In Marx's vision of communism, the form of human freedom heralded by the capitalist system, in its "bourgeois" celebration of free, conscious, human volition, is concretized by a content, or social context, which makes free choice both rational and emancipatory. Man's capacity to reason is actualized by social conditions which are rational. Man's nature as a free, conscious being is actualized by social conditions which are free.

And yet, by tracing the internal relationship between "reason and the art of freedom," Brien's interpretation of Marx's project suggests inadvertently that communism is fundamentally dependent upon a grandiose epistemological achievement. Marx posits an historically emergent cognitive efficacy which boggles the human mind. On one level, Marx's speculations about man's future imply that he has a synoptic grasp of the movement of history. It is not entirely clear how Marx has access to knowledge about the inevitable triumph of human efficacy which is central to the achievement of communism. Marx's optimism is amplified by his historicism. Marx does not accept the Hayekian-Polanyian thesis which places fundamental strictures on

man's cognitive capacity. For Marx, these strictures are themselves historically specific to pre-communist social formations.

The Marxist philosopher Marx Wartofsky, who, in fact, has written the introduction to Brien's book, writes on another occasion that "it remains an empirical question whether there are transhistorical invariants in the history of cognition."<sup>9</sup> The Hayekian-Polanyian arguments against constructivist-utopian planning illustrate that this "empirical" issue is decisive. While Brien's book emphasizes the important links between reason and freedom, it does not adequately question the actualizable potential of Marx's epistemological transcendence. If, indeed, the strictures on human knowledge are *ontological*, rather than historical, then Marx's project may be leading many genuine radicals toward an inherently unreachable, utopian goal.

#### NOTES

1. See Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), and Scott Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1985).
2. Friedrich Engels, "Letter to Joseph Bloch" (21–22 September, 1890) in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Correspondence, 1844–1895*, 3rd rev. ed., trans. I. Lasker, ed. S. W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1982), 396.
3. Geoffrey Hellman, "Historical Materialism" in John Mepham and David-Hillel Ruben, eds., *Issues in Marxist Philosophy: Materialism* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979), 161.
4. Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* (New York: Regnal and Hitchcock, 1936), 62.
5. F. A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 1, *Rules and Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 14.
6. F. A. Hayek, "Rules, Perception and Intelligibility," *Studies in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 62.
7. F. A. Hayek, "The Theory of Complex Phenomena," *Studies in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics*, 39. See also Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science* (Illinois: The Free Press, 1952).
8. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto" (1848) in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works, In One Volume* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 60.
9. Marx Wartofsky, "From Genetic Epistemology to Historical Epistemology: Kant, Marx, and Piaget" in *Piaget and the Foundations of Knowledge*, ed. Lynn S. Liben (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1983), 16.

