

interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

January 1986

Volume 14 Number 1

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Volume 14 number 1

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Annual subscription rates individual \$15; institutional \$18; student (3-year limit) \$7.50. There are three issues of INTERPRETATION a year.

Address for correspondence INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y. 11367, U.S.A.

Authors submitting manuscripts for publication in INTERPRETATION are requested to follow the *MLA Style Sheet* and to send clear and readable copies of their work.

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Setting the Seal on Marxist Criticism

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Main Currents of Marxism. Volume I, "The Founders"; Volume II, "The Golden Age"; Volume III, "The Breakdown." By Leszek Kolakowski. Translated from the Polish by P. S. Falla. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981. Each volume \$32.50 cloth, \$9.95 paper.)

Though Marxism has long lost any credible claim to the status of a science, it continues to have a compelling, if illusory, psychological appeal. Thus, despite repeated falsification or lack of intelligibility, its major theorems can still be invoked as talismans promising deliverance from an assortment of worldly ills, and justifying the ambitions of a variety of insurgents and despots. On the other hand, when Marxism-Leninism is considered not as theory, but as a set of practical techniques for gaining and exercising power, it sheds this guise of fantasy in favor of a hardboiled, clear-eyed, ultrarealistic pragmatism. This striking (though by no means unparalleled) disjuncture between the status of theory and practice is hardly accidental. It reflects the historical willingness of Marxism's most successful practitioners to accord a pious veneration to the hallowed formulae, while freely twisting their substance to meet the exigencies of political combat.

Still, as noted, the "theory" is not unimportant. Fantasies have their use. The utopian vision, the deterministic certainties, the antinomianism, the mythic stature of the early Marxist fathers, all play essential roles in preparing believers to accept the Machiavellian core. To be sure, the converse is also true. Without Marxism's awesome victories in the field few men of ideas would bear its errors, confusions and incoherence with the patience they have generally received. For scholars, no less than anyone else, power breeds respect. But every great movement requires its mysteries, and that is what Marxist theory—enhanced by its very intellectual decadence—is fully equipped to provide.

Whether our descendants experience Marxism as universal dogma, or recall it as we recall phrenology and the Albigensian heresy, will probably have more to do with the contest of diplomats and generals than with the state of Marxist criticism. Nonetheless, criticism does matter, particularly when it comes in a form that is accessible and digestible for those unable to fully immerse themselves in the subject. When that criticism is also distinguished by an unusual trenchancy, an unflinching logical rigor and an extraordinary breadth of learning, it marks a major pedagogical event. It is for these reasons that the publication of Leszek Kolakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism* in an affordable, three-volume paper-

back edition is so important not only for students and scholars of political theory but for the overall health of modern intellectual life.

This is not to say that *Main Currents of Marxism* is simply an outstanding text (Kolakowski modestly uses the term “handbook”): it is also an original and impressive work of interpretation. But its primary use—in accord, I believe, with the author’s intention—is likely to be as an educational resource, providing concise, demystifying introductions to the thought of the more significant members of the Marxist pantheon.

As tools of graduate instruction (and reinstruction for established academics) these volumes have several special assets.

First, they are close to being encyclopedic, giving extended coverage not only to all of the tradition’s “giants” (Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Luxemburg, Plekhanov, Lenin, Trotsky and Mao), but also to those lesser lights who added significant nuance or represented new points of theoretical departure (LaFargue, Labriola, Krzywicki, the Austro-Marxists, and the Russian Empiricritics among others), and to the more prominent exponents of recent Marxist scholarship (such as Gramsci, Lukacs, Korsch, and the members of the Frankfurt School), and to those Marxist “heretics” whose work highlighted ruptures in the movement (Bernstein, Jaurès) or suggested affinities with non-Marxist strains of radicalism (Sorel, Marcuse, Bloch).

Second, they clearly place the origins and development of Marxism within the larger context of Western thought. This is particularly true of the initial volume which emphasizes not merely the Hegelian roots of Marx’s ideas, but the extent to which Hegelian philosophy itself (and thus Marxism as well) reflect that far older, quasi-religious longing to recover for mankind a lost state of wholeness and perfect freedom. Kolakowski is perhaps at his best as a teacher in tracing this line of philosophic continuity stretching from the Neoplatonists through the medieval scholastics to the German Idealists of the early nineteenth century.

Third, Kolakowski takes considerable pains to separate exposition from evaluation. To be sure, this is never completely possible, partly because the meaning of much of what Marx and his heirs wrote is a subject of controversy in its own right, and partly because the basic incoherence of a good deal of their writing can only be “explained” by labeling it as incoherence. Nonetheless, Kolakowski’s general scrupulousness in this regard makes *Main Currents of Marxism* a strong candidate to become the acknowledged standard reference work in the area for all but true believers.

Finally, the clarity of Kolakowski’s expository style, (assisted by a remarkably good translation from the original Polish by P. S. Falla), and his complete familiarity with the subject, make his criticism at once understandable and convincing. Following his dissections, little of tissue remains in the theory of labor value, historical materialism and other central tenets of the faith. Appropriately, Kolakowski, once a Marxist himself, is also capable of acknowledging the elements of intellectual value within the tradition, as well as of distinguishing hon-

est or ambitious error from empty pretentiousness, apologetic servility and outright cretinism. Thus, he stresses Marx's critical role in establishing the now somewhat truistic proposition that political, literary and artistic phenomena can only be fully understood through reference to a society's economic underpinnings and social conflicts. In general, he also treats the representatives of nineteenth century Marxism with much greater respect than their post-Bolshevik epigoni. But the overall thrust of Kolakowski's review is to consign Marxism to the status of fantasy, "the greatest fantasy of our century."¹ As he observes in his epilogue:

The influence that Marxism has achieved, far from being the result or proof of its scientific character, is almost entirely due to its prophetic, fantastic and irrational elements. Marxism is a doctrine of blind confidence that a paradise of universal satisfaction is awaiting us just around the corner. . . . In this sense Marxism performs the function of a religion, and its efficacy is of a religious character. But it is a caricature and a bogus form of religion, since it presents its temporal eschatology as a scientific system, which religious mythologies do not purport to be.²

One of the most curious sides to Marxism's ingenious amalgam of science jargon and religiosity is found in its notion (or notions) of historical materialism. This is a subject to which Kolakowski must repeatedly return, as the divergent lines along which the concept evolved separate the two major schools of Marxist epistemology. On one side stand those Marxist thinkers for whom historical materialism expresses a particular understanding of the relationship between human consciousness and practical existence, in which all forms of self and social awareness are deemed to be dependent on the existing level of technical development. On the other are those for whom the term defines a type of positivism, denying any reality other than the world of material phenomena, and asserting the primacy of economic relationships in the explanation of human behavior. For the former, Marxism is a self-contained and radically relativistic view of the world based on an epistemology derived from Hegel, while for the latter it is a scientific theory. Engels, Kautsky and, in a vulgarized form, Lenin represent Marxist positivism, while among modern writers, Gramsci and Lukacs are the foremost champions of Hegelian relativism.

Where Marx is to be placed has been a subject of continuing debate among scholars, particularly in view of the change in tone between his early and mature writings. For his part Kolakowski argues that Marx never abandoned his insistence on viewing thought as a function of socially defined action, and that this remained the framework within which he conducted what otherwise appears to be the largely inductive analysis of the operation of capitalism that occupied his later years. Kolakowski thus rejects the notion that one can usefully distinguish between a "young" and "old Marx", in favor of a single, basically Hegelian char-

1. Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, III, p. 523.

2. Kolakowski III, pp. 525-6.

acterization of Marx's entire career. While Kolakowski's arguments are unlikely to settle this long-standing controversy they suggest a further issue (unexplored by Kolakowski) that perhaps deserves more attention from scholars: can an ideology like Marxism, which is virtually oblivious to the possibilities of a human nature independent of the external environment, really be considered materialist in the sense that this word is generally used today (i.e., to denote a mode of explanation which finds the causation of phenomena in physical agencies)?

For Marx the ultimate motive force behind the evolution of consciousness (and hence of history as well) is the development of technology, technical ability and the technical division of labor. His materialism, therefore, essentially rests on an assertion that man is made by his tools. Of this the classic statement is to be found in Marx's Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859):

In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations correspond to a particular stage of development of their material forces of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond particular forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the social, political and intellectual life processes in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.³

What impresses one in reading this passage is its exclusion from consideration of that "tool" of production which is also the most palpable of all the material objects in the social universe: biological man. While in Marx's time not much was specifically known about the biological underpinning of cognition and motivation, it was already a matter of lively medical speculation and research. Certainly, the leading precursors of nineteenth-century materialism, such as Hobbes and Holbach, had taken it as axiomatic that human behavior could be explained through a mechanical analysis of the workings of body and brain. So, too, did many of the thinkers within the emerging liberal tradition who, whether explicitly materialist or not, based their arguments for constitutions or free markets on very definite conceptions of an underlying human nature. It would hardly have been extraordinary, therefore, had Marx chosen to adopt a similar position. Yet in opting for the view that consciousness must be understood as a function of social context, he did quite the reverse. It is here, of course, that the influence of his Hegelianism is most apparent, for if Marx's (or at least the young Marx's) epistemology had not been relativistic but positivist—as was that of most other materialists—he, like them, would have been obliged to begin his analysis at the level of the concrete and work his way upward. Following such a course, a detailed consideration of human nature as an independent variable of some significance could hardly have been avoided.

3. Kolakowski I, p. 335.

Marx's outlook on this question has more in common with classical idealism than it does with modern materialism, for like Plato, he is inclined to invert the common order of a purely materialist causality, explaining the activity of the brain in terms of its abstracted products, rather than seeing those products as functions of the properties of the brain. To be sure, Marx substitutes the "relationships of production and distribution" for "ideal forms" (or, in Hegelian terms, "Mind"), as the primary factors in his causative system. And in his view, as well as in those of the more orthodox Hegelians, this was sufficient to establish his "materialist" credentials. Nonetheless, his studied neglect of the biological is striking, particularly from a twentieth century perspective.

There may be a motive behind this omission, for Marx bears yet another resemblance to Plato (or in any event, to the Plato of *The Republic* read literally): he is a utopian. Accordingly, he needs a malleable substance from which to construct his new order. For this a wholly plastic concept of consciousness, ready to respond to the progressive evolution of the environment, is far more serviceable than a set of refractory psychic givens. Liberal theorists, starting with the limitations of a human nature, whose impulses might be redirected but not redesigned, inevitably created systems that placed bounds on human possibilities. With quite different objectives, Marx must have found the escape hatch of a relativistic epistemology, with its extreme contextualism, quite welcome.

Marxists have continued to find the concept of human nature a source of trouble, both in the realms of theory and practice. This has been particularly true for those within the more orthodox positivist tradition, who have had either to discover an empirically grounded theory of human nature compatible with the goal of an egalitarian utopia, or factually demonstrate that the human personality is amenable to social re-engineering. Thus Karl Kautsky, influenced by Darwinism, argued that man was neither "naturally" egoistic or altruistic, since two basic instincts, one for self-preservation, and one for species preservation, existed side by side within him. Socialism simply provided the opportunity for the cooperative impulse to achieve its full expression. Soviet sociologists, in contrast, have attempted to rest their case on the "data", asserting that experience under socialist conditions demonstrates the emergence of an altruistic "New Soviet Man." Neither of these approaches, however, have been particularly convincing to outsiders. (Indeed, an enormous body of observation by journalists, visiting scholars and emigres suggests, if anything, that the experience of Soviet socialism has greatly accentuated, rather than reduced, self-serving attitudes). Finally, most contemporary Marxists have shown unremitting hostility toward efforts to forge theories of human behavior based on comparative ethology and sociobiology, since these carry within them suppositions about individual and group competition that cannot be squared with radical equalitarianism.⁴ As it is precisely in

4. See, for example, Sociobiology Study Group of Science for the People, *Sociobiology—Another Biological Determinism, The Sociobiological Debate: Readings on the Ethical and Scientific Issues Concerning Sociobiology*, ed. Arthur L. Caplan (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 280–90.

these fields, as well as in work being conducted by experimental psychologists and neurologists, that the major advances toward “materialist” explanations of human behavior are likely to be made, the prevailing Marxist prejudices only underscores how far the ideology has drifted from a formulation of the concept that might be intelligible to the modern mind.

Like any comprehensive review of the subject must, Kolakowski’s survey fully documents Marxism’s eventual abandonment of materialism even in its own sense of the term (i.e., as a theory of economic determinism). Obviously, Marx, Engels and most of the pre-Bolshevik Marxists did argue that economic relationships determined all others, though as Kolakowski shows they were quickly reduced to qualifying their determinism by noting that economic relationships were only decisive in the “last resort”. Lenin, however, reversed this orientation by severing the connection between economic development and revolutionary readiness, and substituting the activity of party cadres for that of the working class. As a result, Lenin elevated political action and will to the status of primary causative agents. Since his time, and due to his success, operational Marxism has meant the subordination of just about everything, not to economics, but to the demands of politics.

Without this *de facto*, but essentially complete, reversal of roles between economics and politics, it is hard to imagine the appearance of a Marxist totalitarianism. Totalitarianism is, after all, a political rather than an economic conception. It ultimately depends not on the manipulation of economic incentives to produce this or that form of desired behavior, but on wholesale regimentation through the mobilization of irresistible force. Thus, in cases of conflict between economic and political needs, totalitarian systems always show a strong tendency to sacrifice the former to the latter. (It is only on this basis that the colossal centralization of the Soviet economic planning makes any sense, for though it stifles overall productivity, it also secures the Party’s grip on power and guarantees the steady flow of resources to the military.)

Marx’s vision of mankind’s future, while utopian, was not totalitarian. Nowhere in his works, for example, is there anything like the design for coerced uniformity that is so conspicuous in earlier utopian literature. Indeed, if anything, Marx’s utopia bears more than a passing resemblance to the promised land of nineteenth century liberalism, though without liberalism’s necessary concessions to the realities of human nature. As pictured by Marx, postcapitalist society would witness a withering away of the state, coercive power to be replaced by a set of purely technical arrangements for the administration of production. Where capitalism had “objectified” the life of the individual, reducing him to a mere unit of production, communism would liberate him from the direction of impersonal forces, and restore him to control over his own life. And, far from suppressing individuality, the new dispensation would, for the first time, give it a true opportunity for creative self-expression, though in a form compatible with a cooperative society of free workers. Thus, in Marx’s idyllic phrasing (from *The German*

Ideology [1846]), socialist man could “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear livestock in the evening, and criticize after dinner,” without thereby being bound to the roles of either “hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.”⁵ As Kolakowski puts it, “the notion that Marx regarded socialism as a system for depressing individuals into a Comtean universal being deprived of all subjectivity is one of the absurdest aberrations to which the study of his work has given rise.”⁶

Marx avoids totalitarian advocacy precisely because of the centrality he accords to economics. His revolution comes only when contradictions between the forces of production and the forms of property relationships require it. His conflict-free millennium is attained only when technology ceases to demand a class division of labor. In postrevolutionary society, economics more or less takes care of itself, without fuss, bother or political conflict.

There is an obvious parallel between this vision of economic automaticity in a postrevolutionary world and the automaticity of the marketplace as conceived by nineteenth century liberals. There is yet another with respect to the negative view of government and its social role that Marx shared with his liberal contemporaries. On these levels Marx was clearly a child of his time, and quite different from modern socialists who view public ownership not as a means of banishing politics from economic life, but as a way of making economic decisions a permanent extension of majoritarian democracy.

Above all, it is difficult to imagine how Marx’s schema, with its postulate of economic determinism, could have attained any plausibility whatever outside the world of liberal capitalism. The system rests on the possibility of clearly distinguishing between economic and political activity, but before the rise of industrial capitalism there was no such clear distinction to be made. The transition, for example, from a Rome of free farmers to a Rome of latifundia worked by slaves—certainly a major transformation in the mode of social production—had little to do with any change in the quality of technology or skill, unless weapons, strategy and administrative technique be included under those headings. By the same token “the means of distribution” in imperial China or feudal Europe were no more “economic,” in the sense of being based on market or customary exchange, than they were “political,” in being based on exactions of tribute and taxation. It was only during Marx’s lifetime that liberal reforms finally secured for the market a degree of autonomy greater than it had formerly (or has since) enjoyed. Moreover, they also helped to vastly accelerate industrial invention, spurring technology to develop faster, and far more visibly, than any other factor connected with social change. Beguiled by both these transient phenomena, and not realizing that the former was itself a product of politics, Marx unwisely generalized them into universals of history.

So long as it was grounded in economic determinism Marxism remained rela-

5. Eugene Kamenka, ed. and trans., *The Portable Karl Marx* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 177.

6. Kolakowski I, p. 311.

tively harmless. Waiting for a revolution based on accumulating contradictions, to be led by a historically conscious working class, was to wait for something that would never come. Thus, despite its revolutionary rhetoric, Marxist orthodoxy drifted in the political currents of the late nineteenth century, unsure of the uses of power, or the means of charting its own course. In Germany it whiled away its time in parliamentary maneuver and trade unionism, eventually succumbing to a movement with truer instincts for the political jugular. Further east, as represented by the Mensheviks, it also tended toward political accommodation, arguing even in the midst of the Czarist collapse that the revolution had to be put on hold pending the development of a mature Russian capitalism. In practice, subscription to economic determinism seemed to entail a loss of revolutionary nerve.

Without Lenin's transformation of Marxism from a body of deterministic theory into a set of operational precepts for the seizure of power, without his tactical genius during the summer and autumn of 1917, without the dissolution of the Russian Empire in the crucible of the First World War, there would probably not be many Marxists in the world today. Certainly, by 1914 Marxism was rapidly becoming politically domesticated, particularly in those countries where it was most successful. This simultaneously involved an increasing willingness to base political strategy on contesting elections, an acceptance of democratic political values, an emphasis on gradual economic reform, an openness to cooperation with other parties, the assimilation of a nationalist outlook, and an emerging conviction that socialism would not constitute the destruction but the universalization of that which was best about bourgeois culture. This had gone further in practice than in explicit preaching, but was manifest at both levels. Especially important on the theoretical plane was the appearance of "revisionism," embodying a widening tendency on the part of a variety of Marxist thinkers to treat major elements of the system with skepticism.

One of the thorniest issues in Marxist scholarship is whether the emergence of Leninism represents an extension or a departure from the thought of Marx. Kolakowski's discussion of this problem is particularly useful because of his insistence on considering it as a matter of consequences rather than intentions. The intentions of a theorist are sometimes ambiguous, and often have little to do with the uses to which his theories can be put. Since it is the origin of Lenin's tactical principles, and not his ultimate intentions, that are really at issue, Marx's intentions, whatever they may have been, are also a bit besides the point. Finally, to try as some do, and ask how Marx would have reacted to the reality of Soviet power, is to raise a question that can have no meaningful answer.

For quite good reasons Kolakowski refuses to argue that despotic socialism was a direct consequence of Marx's ideology. As has been noted, the Marxist movement appeared to be heading in quite a different direction as of 1914. Nonetheless, the possibilities for a totalitarian interpretation, which were implemented by the Bolsheviks after 1917 were, according to Kolakowski, always present in

the doctrine. He finds these possibilities in Marx's "Romantic" and "Promethean" tendencies, the former encompassing a desire to recover a lost organic unity between the individual and the society, the latter asserting that at the climactic moment of human history man would attain both the will and understanding to totally remake himself and his surroundings. "Marx's dream of unity could thus take the form of a despotic party oligarchy, while his Prometheanism would appear in the attempt to organize economic life by police methods, as Lenin's party did at the outset of its rule." Moreover, "if freedom equals social unity, then the more unity there is, the more freedom; as the 'objective' conditions of unity have been achieved, namely the confiscation of bourgeois property, all manifestations of discontent are relics of the bourgeois past and should be treated accordingly."⁷

But, as I have tried to argue, Marx's Prometheanism is hitched to his determinism and cannot be construed as a blank check either for revolutionary action or wholesale revolutionary suppression. His is a world to be made over on schedule, not through a mastermind's command. Consequently, Prometheanism only serves as a point of departure for charting the course from Marx to Lenin if some additional explanation can be offered for why the deterministic anchor was cut loose. In searching for this explanation Kolakowski might better have returned to those quasi-religious sources of the ideology's appeal (of which he is so clearly aware), than to its philosophic content.

If, after all, Marxism is a form of religious fanaticism (at least for some), if it offers the prospect not of improving but transcending the human condition, if it is less a theory than a vehicle of redemption, then it is hardly surprising that it should eventually spawn a brand of activism impatient with both the limitations set by economic determinism, and those engendered by constitutional forms. With stakes so high what true believer can bear to wait, or temporize, or tolerate, or only persuade? If Marxism can have an intense religious appeal, why expect its effects to be any different from those produced by other intensely apocalyptic faiths? Promising a world to be won, they have always resulted in activism of the most strenuous kind. To be sure, this has often been of an inward nature (taking shape in unusual regimes of discipline and mortification) rather than constituting moral, political or military crusades, but it has never been at rest with the mundane art of the possible. Traditional religions do, of course, have the saving grace of placing redemption beyond the bounds of this world, thereby avoiding the Marxist vice of seeking to turn human society inside out. But in their more extreme expressions they always embody the principle fully taken up by the zealots of world revolution: transcendent objects demand transcending efforts.

Viewed from this angle the wellsprings of Leninism are to be found in Karl Marx's millennial promise rather than his theoretical plan, in the psychological appeal of his doctrine rather than its intellectual substance. Accordingly, if Marx set the stage for Leninism he did it when he fashioned a creed capable of fasci-

7. Kolakowski 1, pp. 418-19.

nating those chiliasts left high and dry by the advance of modern secularism. Undoubtedly, his doctrine attracted other types as well: scholars impressed by the sweep and insight of the theory per se, politicians drawn by the prospects of organizing an emerging industrial class, and workers who saw it as a means of material advancement. But none of these were interested, or capable, of breaking with its deterministic constraints and transforming it into a world-changing force. The chiliasts, in contrast, were emotionally prepared to do precisely that, and needed only a set of slippery formulae to subsume both working class and historical process within their impatient revolutionary wills. Lenin's genius lay in creating these and combining them with organizational techniques inherited from pre-Marxist Russian terrorists. Thus, under his auspices, and through the powerful assist of an accident of war, Marxism ceased to be the property of a school of thought and became the intellectual totem of a cult.

Whether or not he would fully accept these conclusions, Kolakowski superbly documents the underlying process, deftly interpreting its course and end result. This is surely as much as any historian of ideas can be expected to do. Indeed, he may well have closed the book on the entire subject, for as *Main Currents of Marxism* amply demonstrates, the Marxist enterprise is no longer a genuine part of the history of ideas.