

REVIEW ARTICLE

HISTORICIST READING: AN IDEOLOGICAL SIMPLIFICATION OF MARXISM

MAURICE BLOCH, *Marxism and Anthropology: The History of a Relationship* [Marxist Introductions, gen. eds. Raymond Williams, Steven Lukes], Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 1984 [1983]. 172pp., Bibliography, Index. No price given.

I

The unity of theory and practice which has so prominently characterised Marxism has made it a great source of inspiration to countless numbers of people since the time of its inception in the middle of the nineteenth century. It is, however, equally true that this unity has brought to Marxism practical, political pressures which have limited the effects of its other source of strength: theoretical practice. The subordination of theory to ideological needs, as is well recognized today, has proved disastrous. However, this unavoidable link with political practice, which accounts for its great achievements as well as its failures, makes every theoretical reading of Marxism rather hazardous.

To evaluate the contribution of Marxism to any branch of human knowledge such as anthropology requires a careful consideration of the political exigencies with which Marxism is neatly interwoven. This is so despite the fact that theoretical practice, the search for truth, has its own relatively independent position, which is by no means subservient to the ideological imperatives in Marxism. This is particularly true of Marxism's founders, whose scholarly works are clear examples of the fact that the relationship between theory and practice, science and ideology in Marxism, beyond a certain general point, is in no way straightforward and transparent.¹

¹ We should remember Marx's publicly announced response to the

Maurice Bloch's book, *Marxism and Anthropology*, is a sad example of a simple functionalist interpretation of the relationship between theory and ideology in Marxism. In discussing the relevance of Marxism to anthropological topics, the book certainly does Marx and Engels 'both too much honour and too much discredit'² by transforming certain historical sketches which they drew in their studies of historical developments into an evolutionary theory of history which was to serve their socialist cause. The theory itself is based on a reductionist conception of society as 'a social system for production'.

II

Bloch describes Marxism primarily as a politically-motivated attempt by Marx and Engels to construct a new version of human history which would serve the exploited and oppressed in their struggle against the capitalist system. This theoretical construction would have revealed to the former 'the nature of the oppression to which they were subjected, and how it had come about' (p. 2).³ Through the revelation of 'the general forces which govern the history of man' (p. 3),

pressure which he felt the publicity of his findings was bringing to bear on him on several occasions. At the end of his famous Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, while acknowledging the unfitness of his views with established interests, he defended them as 'the result of conscientious investigation lasting many years. But at the entrance to science, as at the entrance to hell, the demand must be posted: *Qui si convien lasciare ogni sospetto; Ogni viltà convien che qui sia morte* [Here you must abandon all division of spirit; and here all cowardice must perish]' (Marx 1969 [1859]; the quotation is from Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, translation from Praver 1976).

It was in defence of this relative autonomy that Engels, in a letter to Lafargue, went so far as to recommend the non-interference of ideological aims in the objective investigation of social phenomena. Recognizing fully the political commitment of the scientist, Engels nevertheless warns him of mixing the two. 'A man of science', Engels writes, 'has no ideals, he elaborates scientific results, and if he is also politically committed, he struggles for them to be put into practice'. It was such emphases on objectivity in the study of society that led Engels' critics to label his approach positivist (Walton and Gamble 1976: 56).

² A phrase taken from Marx's letter to the editors of a Russian journal, *Otechestvennye Zapiski*, in 1878 (Marx 1983 [1877-8]). It included a significant warning against the rigid interpretation by some Russian leftist circles of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe as sketched in *Capital*.

³ All unattributed page numbers refer to Bloch's book.

the transitory nature of prevailing ideas and institutions such as private property would also have been shown. So it was both the negative aspect of rewriting history, denying capitalist institutions any claim to permanence, as well as its positive dimension of demonstrating the work of 'the general forces' which drew Marx and Engels to anthropological sources. By using these sources they were 'to show how capitalism and its institutions have been produced *by history* and how it will therefore be destroyed *by history*' (p. 27, emphasis added).

However, the *unfolding* historical processes Marx and Engels were supposed to reveal as the main theoretical thrust of their radical political practice could not operate in 'primitive' societies, the traditional subject-matter of anthropology. This was because of the nature of the general historical forces to be revealed by Marx and Engels, which consisted of a continuous lack of fit between 'the system of concepts and values' on the one hand and 'the process of production' on the other. This incompatibility is itself the result of the division of society into social classes around which the Marxist theory of society, the author argues, is built.

Now since 'primitive' society was defined by the founders of Marxism as classless, no class division can be seen through which these incompatible processes, which were regarded as the source of historical change, operate. In other words, by incorporating anthropological findings into the construction of an early, classless stage in the history of mankind, Marxism, an evolutionary theory of class society, was left without an adequate theoretical means of dealing with 'primitive' societies. This incorporation was the unfortunate result of the combination of 'rhetorical' and the 'historical' use of anthropological sources in Marxist theory. Bloch praises Marx's and Engels' use of anthropological data in order to show the diversity and transitory character of capitalist social institutions within which the lives of their contemporaries were organized. Against this use of anthropological findings, which he calls 'rhetorical', he places the 'historical' use of these findings in constructing the early stage of human history. However, he regards the 'historical' use of anthropological sources as disastrous for Marxism, since the creation of a classless society imposed a disunity on human history as outlined by Marx and Engels.

As a result of this inconsistency, more and more Darwinian and 'utilitarian' notions had to be adopted into the Marxist theorization of 'primitive' society, a fault for which Engels is particularly blamed. However, the borrowings of heterogeneous, biological or other non-Marxist elements by Marxists increased later on to compensate for this theoretical inadequacy. The latter became even more rigid, with the reification of Marxism as a unilinear, evolutionary five-stage theory, in political-theoretical discourse not only in the Soviet Union but also in many Marxist circles around the world after Stalin's arrival in power. According to this theory all human societies have already passed or will pass through consecutive stages, from primitive to modern communism. This was despite the fact that although the first stage of this evolution, i.e. the classless one, was accounted for by biological, ecological and other eclectic factors, the rest, namely the era of class society, is

explained by the incompatibility between 'social system' and 'technological system'. This rigid evolutionary view seriously hampered the fruitful influence of Marxism in anthropology for decades to come. For example, Marxist anthropology did not start to flourish in France during the 1960s until the theoretical legitimacy of this rigid evolutionary approach was effectively questioned by French Marxists, most prominent among whom was Louis Althusser.

III

It is noticeable that both the 'rhetorical' and the 'historical' use of anthropological sources attributed by Bloch to Marxism are in fact historical. The first, the 'rhetorical', is to establish the historical forms which do not exist in any particular place, and the second, the 'historical' one, is to establish the historical forms which existed in the past. When Bloch describes as disastrous the mixture of the negative and positive historical use of anthropological data, which he defines as 'rhetorical' and 'historical', in the hands of Marx and Engels as well as other Marxists, he actually argues for the negative historical use of anthropology in Marxism against the other, positive use of anthropological findings, which he rejects. As mentioned earlier Bloch fully recognizes Marx's and Engels' attempts to establish the historicity of their contemporary capitalist institutions by bringing to the fore the antithetical features of 'primitive' peoples such as their 'gentile constitution', 'lack of individualism' etc. In this way the historical nature of the facts about capitalist society were established so that they could be incorporated into an evolutionary theory of society, which is what Bloch claims Marxism is all about.

Thus Bloch neglects essential parts of the picture of primitive classless society in his presentation of Marxism, while in a long chapter on 'The Present-Day Standing of Marx's and Engels' Anthropology', he confirms the authenticity of the main parts of the picture against recent anthropological findings. In other words, Bloch to a large extent approves of Marx and Engels when they speak, say, of communal property, lack of profit-making, or kinship-based obligations. But he implies that these characteristics of primitive society should have been left theoretically untreated by the founders of Marxism, since these features are incompatible with the class divisions which are the foundation of Marxism (p. 54).

This contradictory position not only arises from a confusion on the part of the author as to Marx's and Engels' historical subject of study and the explanation they gave of this subject. It is also related to his double-standard evolutionary position in reading Marxism. That is, although Bloch expresses his sympathy every now and then with those disillusioned with a rigid evolutionary interpretation of Marxism, he reads only an evolutionary sequence into it. The author's opposition to the classificatory historical approach, which was quite prevalent in many Marxist circles and up to the early 1960s had effectively hindered the use of Marxist

analytical tools in various branches of human knowledge, including anthropology, is therefore half-hearted. What he rejects is not the notion of social evolution, which he regards as meaning 'that there are general laws governing human history' (p. 65), but that of the rigid interpretation of a fixed, unilineal, five-stage evolutionary sequence which had to be replaced by several multilinear evolutionary paths. So by excluding 'primitive' society from his evolutionary scheme, Bloch can sympathetically quote (p. 150) the anti-evolutionary comments of such authors as the French Marxist anthropologist E. Terray to use against Morgan, to whose work Terray goes to great pains to give a non-evolutionary reading (Terray 1972).

IV

As is well known, the rapidly changing circumstances in the period during which Marxism was formed fostered an acute sense that human institutions as well as natural objects and creatures were *evolving*. Due to the prevalence of this evolutionary approach, the relationship between every human institution and its past was regarded as an integral part of its existence. In Terray's words: 'Just as in the Middle Ages anyone who wanted to be heard on any subject had to express himself as a theologian, so at the end of the nineteenth century "transformism" became the universal language of the biological and human sciences' (Terray 1972: 23).

Such a historicist approach becomes even more apparent when the directions in which these changes moved became matters of concern to these observers. Those among whom these changes fostered hope or disappointment could hardly afford to be left uninspired by the historical prospects the large-scale changes seemed to unfold. To Marx and Engels, who expected and struggled for revolutionary change in the structure of capitalist society as a whole, history was, inevitably, the arena in which their grandiose hopes were to be materialized. If for young Hegelian radicals it was where the pure form of the State was to be realized, for the philosopher's revolutionary pupil and friend Engels, it was the arena of human emancipation from exploitation and oppression.⁴

Moreover, the dynamic character of Marx's and Engels' analysis of society, as well as its large-scale focus, the structure of society as a whole, inevitably bestowed a historical dimension upon the theoretical practice which has characterized Marxism until now. To examine the expropriation of the objective conditions of the reproduction of labour - Marx's main theoretical concern in writing *Capital* - not only required a holistic view of society but also a historical one. As the penetration of capital into various spheres

⁴ It is this political content, of Marxist historical orientation which does not seem to have been sufficiently appreciated by Althusser in his otherwise important critique of historicism and humanism in certain versions of Marxism (Althusser 1972).

of social production was a historical process, so was its theoretical presentation.

The depiction of such a process entailed the analysis of earlier, that is pre-capitalist, forms of social reproduction into which capital had broken through. This analytical use of historical forms is particularly prominent in that part of Marx's *Grundrisse* (commonly known as *Formen*) which deals with pre-capitalist forms. What Marx is concerned with here is this: 'the relationship of labour to capital or to the objective conditions of labour as capital, presupposes a historic process which dissolves the different forms, in which the labourer is an owner and the owner labours' (Marx 1964: 97). It was the unity of labour and its conditions of reproduction in a classless society that attracted Marx and Engels to 'primitive' society. For obvious reasons this fascination, which is exemplified by the great interest which Marx and Engels showed in Morgan's reconstruction of the *gens* in the early stage of human history, was both theoretical and ideological. Analytically as well as ideologically, a society in which the objective condition of labour is still the property of the labourers and leadership has not yet turned into rule is the logical start or end of an intellectual journey which it was vital for Marx and Engels to take in order to *objectify* their contemporary capitalist exploitation. The succession of historical forms under which Marx examines, however briefly, the conditions of the reproduction of labour does not assume any more significance to him than an abstraction from certain historical developments.

If the variety and transformations of historical circumstances under which labour is reproduced is used by Marx in *Formen* to objectify the domination of capital in his contemporary society, Engels' preoccupation in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* is the monogamous family as an institution, characteristic of civilization, within which male dominance is reproduced. This domination is historically illustrated by depicting its antithesis as reflected in the 'gentile constitution' of the earlier stage of development of human society. This was when households headed by women were the foci of communal life rather than the centres of private ones. It was a society in which blood ties governed the relationships between its members and there was 'no place for ruler and ruled. In the realm of the internal, there was as yet no distinction between rights and duties' (Engels 1970 [1884]: 316).

V

Many anthropologists across the political spectrum would agree (cf. Gough 1975) that Morgan, Engels and, as we have every reason to include him, Marx too⁵ have proved to have been speculative in

⁵ Terray refers to Emile Bottigelli, according to whom, 'Marx read [Morgan's] *Ancient Society* between December 1880 and March 1881 and took no less than 98 pages of notes' (Terray 1972: 21).

this historical reconstruction of the development of the monogamous family. However, there is no reason to believe that temporal ordering of the material, technological or otherwise, was the prime aim of Engels in his account of the historical development of the family. On the contrary, Engels more than once conditions (ibid.: 193, 201, 203, 204, 209) his assessments of the materials available to him by their temporal nature. So there is not much, if any, justification in saying that in *The Origin* 'Engels more or less tells us that the scheme presented is not likely to be changed by new discoveries' (p. 96) when Engels himself has already told us that 'unless important additional material necessitates alterations, his [Morgan's] classification [of prehistoric order] may be expected to remain in force' (Engels 1970: 204).

Moreover, as Engels himself confesses, 'the picture of the evolution of mankind through savagery and barbarism to the beginnings of civilisation that I have sketched here after Morgan', though at that time having incontestable features because they were 'taken straight from production, nevertheless ... will appear faint and meager compared with the picture which will unfold itself at the end of our journey. Only then will it be possible to give a full view of the transition from barbarism to civilisation and the *striking contrast* between *the two*' (ibid.: 208-9; emphasis added). The 'end of our [historical] journey' for Engels was a clearer objectivity about the present situation which could only be recognized through its 'contrast' with the past.

This is equally true of *The German Ideology*, which Bloch regards as the first text in which Marx and Engels formulated their evolutionary theory of society (p. 21). It has to be remembered that *The German Ideology* sprang out of Marx's and Engels' critical reviews of a number of Young Hegelian philosophers, particularly Feuerbach, who had radicalized Hegel's philosophical views by treating consciousness in its own terms while arguing for its replacement by a pure form (Marx and Engels 1969 [1845-6]: 18-9). The aim Marx and Engels set for themselves in *The German Ideology* was, therefore, to establish that ideas and various forms of human consciousness do not have an independent existence and, consequently, should be seen externally not in their own terms but in terms of their condition of production. The conditional existence accorded to ideas and the social institutions which supported them did not, in Marx's and Engels' view, reduce their effective existence by regarding them as the mere 'epiphenomena' of something at the 'bottom' of society which Bloch considers to be 'a system of organization producing the goods on which people depend for their life' (p. 22). Far from that, the denial of independence to human consciousness would only have brought it into relationship with its condition of existence whereby 'the whole thing can be depicted in its totality (and therefore, too, the reciprocal action of these various sides on one another)' (Marx and Engels 1969 [1845-6]: 42).

Nor did such a reductionist view of society lead Marx and Engels to look at the evolving historical process which would unfold its essence through successive stages to those who need to be assured of its promises! Marx's and Engels' first reference to historical forms in *The German Ideology* is clearly made to

demonstrate 'the first premise' of their materialist approach to the study of human society (ibid.: 19). They try to show that different stages of the 'division of labour', which they use rather metaphorically to imply various economic, political and ideological contradictions in each stage (ibid.: 52), carry different forms of ownership. The 'tribal', 'the ancient communal and State' and the 'feudal' forms of ownership are accompanied by different levels of development of the 'division of labour' in society. But there is nothing beyond the sketches of historical developments suggested by Marx and Engels which can be abstracted and legitimately turned into 'a general historico-philosophical theory, whose supreme virtue consists in being supra-historical' (Marx 1983 [1877-8]: 136).

Despite their constant hope for historical changes for the betterment of humanity Marx and Engels never sought in human history anything other than the real effects of individuals acting in their own societies. Indeed, it was to deny history an absolute power, bestowed upon it by Hegel and his followers, which unravelled itself through successive stages, that Marx and Engels emphatically stated in *The German Ideology*: 'History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations' (1969 [1845-6]: 38).

VI

To present such a reductionist as well as evolutionist conception of society as 'the central characteristics of anthropology' of Marx and Engels is a great misrepresentation of their significant anthropological contribution. As far as *The German Ideology* is concerned, the main aspects of this contribution are to establish: a) the dependent social existence of various forms of consciousness and the social institutions within which they are organized, and b) the relation of determination which exists within each social totality between ideas and social institutions on the one hand and the economic structure of the society on the other. What Marx and Engels were always concerned with in their study of human society was a differentiated social totality (cf. Marx 1973 [1857-8]).

Within this social whole, it is true, Marx and Engels considered the effect of production of means of subsistence on other spheres of social reproduction as, on the whole, determinant. But nothing is a greater betrayal of the subtlety and complexity with which they saw this relation of determination than to assume that they regarded it as one-sided and as reducing other aspects of social life to the level of 'epiphenomena' of economic factors. After all, it was their awareness of the real effects of their German opponents' philosophical illusions that led them to spend years of hard intellectual work in repelling them. In fact, in several well-known letters Engels, in the last years of his life, warned his socialist contemporaries against a narrow interpretation of the materialist conception of history (cf. Engels' letters to Bloch, Schmidt, Borgius, Mehring, in Marx and Engels 1979). He even accepted his and Marx's responsibility in not paying sufficient attention

to the effects of other, non-economic factors on social situations (see Engels' letter to Bloch, *ibid.*).

It was pointed out above that what is meant by the 'division of labour' in *The German Ideology* is not, contrary to what Maurice Bloch would have us believe, purely the economic structure of the society, but also the process of its reproduction. It is equally true of the phrase 'mode of production' which, Marx and Engels write, is not confined to the sphere of economic production: 'This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part' (Marx and Engels 1969 [1845-6]: 20; original emphasis). To fail to consider the metaphorical meanings of these expressions, such as 'division of labour' and 'mode of production', which has led Bloch to read into the first 'the social organization of production' and into the second (in the *Formen*) a 'social evolutionary stage' (p. 35), amounts to neither more nor less than the impoverished Marxism which the book represents.

The foundations of Marxism were laid by Marx and Engels as a political and theoretical challenge to the social inequality which characterized the capitalist system in which Marxism was born. Thus class division in capitalism, and by extension in other social and economic systems, constitutes a prime concern in Marxism at which a great deal of theoretical effort has been directed. Class division in Marxist terms starts with unequal appropriation by one section of the society of the labour of another. The appropriation or, to use another term for the same thing, exploitation of one class's products of labour by another class requires the loss, partially or completely, of the control of the exploited class over the objective conditions of its reproduction of labour to the exploiting class. So for Marxists the analysis of class formation in any society means examining the reproduction of social totality as a whole and determining objectively the control exerted by one part of the population over the conditions of the producers' reproduction of labour. That is to say, despite Marxism's main concern being with class division, it provides a novel analytical means of studying social differentiation, irrespective of its stage of development.

However, since exploitation requires the unequal distribution of social products among the various classes into which the society is divided, its discussion inevitably involves some account of the development of productive forces and the consequent rising productivity of labour. But this development, though increasing the technical division of labour, does not require, in Marx's and Engels' view, any class division. The significance of technological developments for class division lies in the fact that the amount of surplus labour which can be squeezed out of the producers' hands at any particular time depends on the level of productivity of labour. Therefore technology only provides or denies the ground for the development of class divisions in society. Besides, the very dialectics of class formation in human society, something which, in the Marxist conception, has to be specified within a certain historical context, *negates* the present class composition, not

ideologically but theoretically, by subjecting it to a diachronic examination.

So Marxist analysis of class formation in any particular society is bound to come up with a) something different having existed before and b) something else which will emerge in the future. Thus the classless stage, even if - and Bloch should admit that this is controversial - the evidence for such a primitive communism were not presently available, is predicated upon the dialectical methods Marx and Engels employed in their approach to the problem of social class. It is therefore quite conceivable to speak of a classless society, both in the past and in the future, as the latter was Marx's and Engels' main aim in their political struggle. Bloch's claim that the notion of a classless society cannot be integrated in Marxism arises from his mechanical conception of history, which can only be set in motion by incompatibility between the system of production and the idea.

VII

The holistic and at the same time diachronic features of Marxism would have made any Marxist analysis a historical one. However, if economic determinism and political fatalism are not kept at bay in any such attempt, Marxism can easily be turned into a kind of philosophy of history which will inevitably deprive it of all its theoretical strength: it will become an easy political target to pick up or knock down. Bloch seems to me to be guilty of such an easy choice. Far from what he reads into their writings, neither Marx's or Engels' historical investigations are designed to provide us with a historical guarantee of the materialization of their aims nor for that matter, those of their followers. The connection between theory and practice in Marxism is not as straightforward and transparent as Bloch would have us believe.

Another point to be mentioned here is that although to return to 'the sources' in any discussion of Marxism seems to be inevitable, such an intellectual journey cannot be effective unless it is made as part of a dialogue with contemporary debaters. There is no such thing as 'the essence' of Marxism to be discovered, and whatever one may find significant in these sources is connected, directly or indirectly, with what others have already found important in them. Thus the relevance of Marxism to contemporary anthropology has unavoidably to be sought through contemporary Marxist debate on economic determinism, reductionism, historicism etc. As a consequence, leaving aside for the most part contributors such as Gramsci and Althusser and the important questions they have raised, as the author evidently confesses as his intention (see Bloch's 'Preface'), is an arbitrary way of presenting Marxism.

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