

Marx and Philosophy

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In July 2005 BBC Radio 4 announced the result of its poll of listeners to find 'the greatest philosopher of our time'. And the winner was – Karl Marx, as the first past the post with 28 percent of the 34,000 or so votes cast, way ahead of the second, the eighteenth-century sceptic and agnostic, David Hume, with 13 percent, and the early twentieth century logical positivist, Ludwig Wittgenstein, with seven percent.

There must be some sort of significance to Marx being selected by some 9,500 people. It would be nice to think that it was a vote for Marx's aim of a society without private property in the means of production, without money, the wages system or the state. More likely it represented a recognition of his contribution to the analysis of history and capitalism.

What did Marx have to say about philosophy? In fact, was he really a philosopher? He was certainly a doctor of philosophy in the literal sense, having obtained his doctorate – the trade unionists who associated with him in the 1860s in the First International knew him as 'Dr Marx' – for a thesis on two ancient Greek philosophers, Democritus and Epicurus. And in his early and mid twenties he thought and wrote extensively about philosophical problems, but then he reached the conclusion that abstract philosophising about 'God', 'the nature of Man' and 'the meaning of life', which nearly all philosophers had speculated about till then, was a pretty useless exercise and he abandoned it, at the age of 27, never to return to it. This was in fact more or less the same conclusion as reached by the two runners-up in the BBC poll, Hume and Wittgenstein.

What such philosophy was replaced by, for Marx, was the empirical, ie scientific, study and analysis of history

and society, what has become known as the materialist conception of history. Strictly speaking, this is not really a philosophy but a theory and methodology of a particular science. Engels has had to take some stick for introducing the term 'scientific socialism' but it is an accurate description of the outcome of Marx's (and his own) encounter with the German philosophy of his day.

Marx had come to socialism via German philosophy. Like many other radical-minded Germans in the 1840s he had been a 'Young Hegelian', the name given to those who interpreted Hegel's philosophy in a radical way to justify the establishment of a democratic and secular state in Germany. Hegel himself (who had died in 1831) was no radical democrat, even though he had initially welcomed the French Revolution. Quite the opposite. By the 1820s he was a conservative defender of the Prussian State, almost its State philosopher. And he believed that Christianity was true, with all that implies in terms of the existence of a god with a plan for humanity and which intervenes in human affairs.

What appealed to German radicals in Hegel's philosophy was the concept of alienation (of something from its nature, or essence) and the view that (until the end of history) all human institutions were transitory and developed through intellectual criticism bringing out and then transcending the contradictions in the idea behind them. For Hegel this was all in a religious context (alienation was the alienation of Man from God and the end of history was the reconciliation of Man with God). The Young Hegelians completely rejected this and were highly critical of religion; in fact they made a specialty of this, presenting a secularised version of Hegel's system in which alienation was still the alienation of Man (with a capital M) but from

Man's true nature, and the end of history was the reconciliation of Man with this nature, or human emancipation as they called it.

Most of them identified this with the establishment of a democratic republic. So did Marx, to begin with, but he came to the conclusion that political democracy, though desirable as a step forward for Germany, did not amount to full emancipation, but only to a partial 'political' emancipation; 'human' emancipation could only be achieved by a society without private property, money or the state. Looking for an agent to achieve this, Marx identified the 'proletariat' but conceived of in very philosophical terms as a social group that was 'the object of no particular injustice but of injustice in general', 'the complete loss of humanity and thus can only recover itself by a complete redemption of humanity'. As he wrote at the end of his article 'Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right' published in February 1844: 'The head of this emancipation [of Man] is philosophy, its heart is the proletariat.' This is the same article in which occurs perhaps his most well-known saying 'religion is the opium of the people', ie an illusory escape from real suffering. This was in fact aimed at his fellow Young Hegelians who seemed to imagine that religion could be made to disappear merely by criticising its irrationality. Marx's analysis of religion and of what was required to make it disappear went deeper:

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about their condition is a demand to give up a condition that requires illusion. The criticism of religion is therefore the germ of the criticism of the valley of tears whose halo of religion.

And:

The criticism of religion ends with the doctrine that man is the highest being for man, that is, with the categorical imperative to overthrow all circumstances in which man is humiliated, enslaved, abandoned and despised. (translated by David McLellan in Karl Marx: Early Texts)

This is still a philosophical approach and it makes Marx, at this time, a humanist philosopher. Some find this enough, and eminently commendable (and Marx may even have got some votes in the BBC poll on this basis), and of course being a socialist has to rest in the end on wanting to 'overthrow all circumstances in which man is humiliated, enslaved, abandoned and despised.'

Marx himself, however, was not satisfied to let the case for socialism rest on a mere philosophical theory that it provided the only social basis on which the 'essence of Man' could be fully and finally realised. After continuing to initial with the previous philosophical position, he ended by rejecting the view that humans had any abstract 'essence' from which they were alienated. As he put it in some notes jotted in 1845: 'The human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.' (Theses on Feuerbach)

This led him away from philosophical speculations about 'human essence', what it was and how to realise it, to the study of the different 'ensembles of social relations' within which humans had lived and to see history not as the development of any idea but as the development from one 'ensemble of social relations' to another in line with the development of the material forces of production. This gave socialism a much firmer basis than a simple 'categorical imperative to overthrow all circumstances in which man is humiliated, enslaved, abandoned and despised.' It made it the next stage which was both being prepared by the development of the current state (capitalism) and the solution to the problems caused by capitalism's inherent internal contradictions. It kept

the agent of its establishment as the class of wage workers, no longer considered as a class embodying all the sufferings of humanity, but as the class whose material interest would lead it to oppose and eventually abolish capitalism.

Marx still retained some of the language and concepts of his Young Hegelian past, but he gave them a new, materialist content. Thus, for instance, the alienation of the 'proletariat' was no longer alienation from their human essence but alienation from the products of their own labour which came to dominate them in the form of capital as personified by a capitalist class and 'the emancipation of Man' became the emancipation of all humans through the abolition of classes and class rule by the

world-wide working class pursuing its material interest; and he still referred to end of capitalism as the close of 'the pre-history of human society'. The imperative to change the world too remained, but addressed to the working class rather than to philosophers. As he put it in 1845 in his parting shot at German philosophy: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.' (Theses on Feuerbach)

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