

The True Realm of Freedom: Marxist Philosophy after Communism

This article is an attempt to consider the implications for Marxist philosophy of the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. It would be well to start by saying what Marxist philosophy is taken to be here. A convenient map of the field is provided by Alex Callinicos in his Introduction to a recent collection of essays. Confining himself to tendencies which have had a living presence in the West, he distinguishes between Hegelian, Althusserian or structuralist and analytical Marxism.¹ This corresponds pretty closely, one suspects, to the sort of picture most people interested in the matter carry in their heads. Moreover, Callinicos's view of the relations between the various tendencies would have widespread assent. According to it, Hegelian modes of thought, dominant since the nineteen-twenties, were expelled from Marxist theory by Althusser, thereby creating the conditions for analytical Marxism. It is plain that Callinicos sees this as a progressive development, as being, if he would allow the use of the term, a kind of dialectic. It is for him a movement from the Hegelian mists

through the cleansing gales of Althusserianism into the sunlight of analysis. Against this background it may seem merely perverse to seek to undo the verdict of time by returning to the first stage of the triad. For Hegelian Marxism is surely well and truly dead, dead twice over, as it were. Adapting a metaphor from Callinicos, we have, it appears, to accept that its ancient groves have been felled and cleared away by Althusser, leaving the site to be redeveloped by the enterprise of the analytical school. Yet it is just on behalf of this apparently superseded doctrine that the present paper will speak. Indeed, it will seek to represent it as the best theoretical framework for understanding the complexities of the contemporary world.

Redeeming the Time

There are a number of considerations one might cite to encourage such a project. The first has a somewhat negative force. It is that a satisfactory response to recent events is scarcely to be expected from the other tendencies identified by Callinicos. In the case of Althusserian Marxism the response is likely to be silence, and not silence of the rich, meaningful kind that invites, even as it eludes, interpretation, but simply non-being, a void. The problem, put more literally, is a dearth of committed and articulate interpreters. Callinicos is surely on safe ground in suggesting for the analytical movement a post-Althusserian as well as post-Hegelian character.² The difficulty with that movement itself, on the other hand, is that it seems increasingly clear that it is best regarded as an episode in the history of analytical philosophy, a late flowering perhaps, rather than of Marxism. This truth emerges plainly enough, even if unwittingly, from the work of sympathetic commentators. Thus, Callinicos points out that 'analytical Marxists tend to deny much of the substance of Marx's thought.'³ If words are to have their usual meanings, and, in particular, if 'Marxist' is to retain any identity at all, these deniers of substance should not be included under the rubric of what they deny. To say this, of course, is not itself to make any kind of critical remark, since there can be no intellectual obligation to be a 'Marxist', however the term is defined.

The case for ascribing some special responsibility at the present time to Hegelian Marxism may be put in more positive terms. For this body of thought has a need and a duty to respond to what happens in the world in a way its rivals do not. It is at heart a philosophy of history, a scheme of interpretation that purports to make the course of historical change rationally intelligible. No one has taken the task of assimilating the flux of events, of redeeming it for reason, more seriously than Hegel. At times this commitment finds expression with a literalness verging on the absurd, as in the following words:

¹ Alex Callinicos, ed., *Marxist Theory*, Oxford 1989, pp. 2–6.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3. On the state of Althusser's reputation, see Gregory Elliott, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*, London 1987, pp. 1–12.

³ Callinicos, p. 14. For supporting evidence, taking a representative case, see Joseph McCarney, 'Analytical Marxism: A New Paradigm?', in Sean Sayers and Peter Osborne, eds., *Socialism, Feminism and Philosophy: A Radical Philosophy Reader*, London 1990, pp. 169–77.

The morning reading of the newspaper is a kind of realistic morning prayer. It orients one's attitude to the world with respect to God or with respect to what the world is. The latter provides the same security as prayer, in that one knows where one stands.⁴

This attitude might be hard to sustain through the morning engagement with the British press today. Nevertheless, no reader of that press could have been in doubt as to the extraordinary importance of the events of 1989 in Eastern Europe. Indeed, it was mildly surprising how often the Hegelian-sounding phrase 'world history' was invoked in characterizing them. For a philosophy of world history this situation is both an unequalled opportunity and a challenge it cannot evade. It is, one may say, unconditionally obliged to take to itself the injunction '*Hic Rhodus, hic salta*' of which both Hegel and Marx were so characteristically fond.

It may be that some dialectical categories other than 'world history', which in more ordinary times can appear exotic or uncouth, will now take on a different aspect. In those times their most hardened exponents could scarcely avoid a kind of self-consciousness that hinted at ironic, even comic, possibilities. Now that reality seems, as it were, to be rushing to meet thought the categories of negation, contradiction, mediation and totality may come into their own. It might even be possible to find some respectable use for the notion of *Aufhebung*, a notion so removed from common sense that there is no satisfactory rendering of it in English.⁵ At any rate it is evident that Hegelian Marxism has the vocabulary to match its ambition to deal with great events. Whether it will actually succeed in doing so in the present case is a crucial test of the entire movement of thought.

History as Freedom

To gauge the prospects of success one should turn at once to the deepest roots of the movement. What Hegelian Marxist philosophy essentially offers, it was suggested, is a reading of history. It is not hard to discern the constitutive principle of Hegel's own reading, for he affirms it openly and often. World history is, he tells us, among many similar formulations, 'the progress of the consciousness of freedom'.⁶ There is room for debate as to the relative importance of speculative thought and historical study in deriving and establishing this thesis. There can, however, be no doubt that Hegel regards it as fully in line with, and as yielding a realistic reading of, the empirical record. Thus, he makes regular appeals, in the course of filling it out, to our sense of what actually happened in history. In one version the appeal has the form of general taxonomy, comprising the oriental world in which one was free, the classical world in which some were

⁴ Quoted in J. Ritter, *Hegel and the French Revolution*, trans. R.D. Winfield, Cambridge, Mass. 1982, p. 106.

⁵ Though, of course, it is rendered variously as 'overcoming', 'transcendence' and 'sublation'.

⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge 1975, p. 54.

free, and the modern world in which 'man' as such is free.⁷ In another the appeal is to certain key episodes in the unfolding of the theme, from the destruction of the *polis* to the coming of Christianity and on to the Protestant Reformation of the Christian Church. The series culminates for Hegel in the French Revolution as the embodiment of the demand that freedom should be the organizing principle of political and social life. It is in his view the specific task of the modern world to work out the implications of this demand and realize them universally in practice.⁸

The revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe seem to slip almost too easily within this scheme. There is, for instance, a mass of evidence bearing on the point which concerns the views of the participants in the events themselves. The evidence is most dramatically illustrated by the crowds calling for 'Freedom' on the streets of Prague and Leipzig. It is surely not at all fanciful to see these people in a Hegelian perspective as having grasped the central truth of the modern world, that freedom belongs to their nature as human beings, and as having grasped also the contradiction between that nature and their actual conditions of life. The revolutions they made then appear as the outcome of the struggle to resolve this basic contradiction. Here one may invoke also the standard Western interpretation, held across virtually the entire political spectrum. According to this the East European revolutions were carried through for the sake of freedoms long familiar in the West.⁹ These are various kinds of personal and civil freedom exercised through the ballot box and the market. As such they are aspects of what Hegel calls 'subjective' freedom, itself a constituent of the 'absolute' or 'substantial' freedom towards which history is making its patient progress.¹⁰ He would be fully entitled to regard the latest developments as fitting his historical scheme, as stages in that dissemination of the legacy of the great French Revolution which is the definitive task of the age. To recognize this is not, of course, itself a formal confirmation of the scheme. Nevertheless, it provides at least the kind of assurance, the sense of being on the right lines, that comes from any large-scale conformity of empirical reality and the projections of theory.

There is no difficulty in associating Marx with this position, at least in general terms. At the most general level of all it is uncontroversially clear that he shares the vision of history as the history of human emancipation. It is for him a record of progress leading to 'that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom'.¹¹ At the level of the freedoms at stake in Eastern Europe there is a plausible line of thought which would keep him fully in step with Hegel. For there are sound textual grounds for supposing that Marx would no less have welcomed the achievement of 'bourgeois

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁸ On this topic, see Ritter, *Hegel and the French Revolution*.

⁹ A trenchant expression of this idea may be found in K. Sword, ed., *The Times Guide to Eastern Europe*, London 1990, p. 7.

¹⁰ For discussion of these terms and Hegel's views on freedom in general, see A.W. Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*, Cambridge 1990, ch. 2.

¹¹ Karl Marx, *Capital* Volume 3, London 1974, p. 820.

democratic' freedoms in those circumstances. It is at any rate plain that he did not by any means despise such freedoms, as some of the more unwise of his followers have done. Thus, he was an enthusiastic supporter of wider suffrage and, in practice, of the workers obtaining their full rights within the bourgeois order. Indeed, he was prepared to allow that by such means they might gain political supremacy in some countries.¹² Reminders of this kind can, however, be at best only isolated insights at the present stage of the argument. To fill them out we need a more detailed specification both of Marx's reading of the theme of freedom and of the significance of the recent events in Eastern Europe.

A Moment of Liberation

The first requirement is to make the philosophy of history we are concerned with less abstract and schematic. For that one has to have some view of the dynamics of the patterns it deals in, of just what it is that drives the story forward. The natural direction in which to look is towards the idea of freedom itself. The question is how its claim to provide the constitutive principle of human history is to be understood and defended. Hegel's own thinking about freedom is often thought to involve various kinds of metaphysical excess. Marx fixed this tendency in his challenge to what he saw as the autonomous, transcendent status of spirit, the primary bearer of freedom in Hegel's account. Whether or not the challenge is justified, it is certain that Hegel's understanding of what freedom means starts from close to everyday conceptions of the matter. Freedom, he tells us, is 'self-sufficient being', and so 'If I am self-sufficient, I am also free.'¹³ Thus, the basic idea of freedom is of a life which is at the subject's own disposal, determined by self and not by whatever is external to and other than self. Such a conception of freedom as self-determination is not only in keeping with everyday thinking but also captures the basis for the mainstream treatment of the topic by philosophers since the Greeks. These philosophers include Marx, as a mass of recent scholarship has confirmed.¹⁴

What spirit is initially confronted with as its other in Hegel's dialectic of freedom is nature. Hence, this dialectic is essentially the process by which nature, through the efficacy of human purpose and action, comes to be subordinated to spirit. With some conceptual and terminological revision the theme is fully taken up in Marx's thought. Thus, the 'true realm of freedom', referred to earlier, consists in 'socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control'.¹⁵ Moreover, Marx's view of the means by which this end is achieved builds on elements he found in Hegel. The process of emancipation is driven by the kind of interaction with, and transformation of, the

¹² See, for example, S. Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, Cambridge 1968, pp. 202–20.

¹³ Hegel, *Lectures*, p. 48.

¹⁴ A useful summary of, and contribution to, this scholarship is R.G. Peffer, *Marxism, Morality and Social Justice*, Princeton 1990, ch. 3.

¹⁵ Marx, *Capital* Volume 3, p. 820.

natural world that consists in working on it. Thus we arrive at the category of work, the distinctive foundational category of the Hegelian Marxist project. Work is, as Hegel explains in the *Science of Logic*, a purposive activity involving an end postulated by need, a material supplied by nature and the rational shaping of instruments to transform what is given in the service of the end.¹⁶ A ‘moment of liberation’ is, he believes, ‘intrinsic’ to the process.¹⁷ This is so for the individual who objectifies his or her powers in the world, thereby both developing the powers themselves and achieving self-awareness. Thus, in the master–slave dialectic it is the slave who ‘through work . . . becomes conscious of what he truly is’ while the master remains sunk in indolence and insensibility.¹⁸ Moreover, the labour of the slave is both the emblem of and the key to the development of the power and self-consciousness of the species; that is, of the distinctive human history of freedom. Hence it is that Marx is able to praise Hegel for grasping labour as ‘the essence of man’ and for comprehending ‘objective man’ as ‘the outcome of man’s own labour’.¹⁹ The idea was to be taken up and given canonical status in the classic texts of the Hegelian Marxist tradition.²⁰ The core of that tradition is a philosophy of history grounded in the teleology of human labour.

A Weak Impulse

This is still a highly abstract thesis, in immediate need of being interpreted in more concrete terms. Marx’s own interpretation is, of course, usually known as the ‘materialist conception of history’. The precise nature of this conception is much disputed, even as regards its most salient features. It should, however, be possible to take the argument forward without having to adjudicate here between the rival accounts. The best plan may be to develop it with reference to a particularly widely held and textually plausible version, but in a way that allows the results to be adapted for others. On any view the story chiefly concerns the forces and the relations of production. The one we shall use holds that the source of large-scale historical change lies in the nature of the forces, in their lust to expand.²¹ It is this inner dynamism which, in revolutionary times, is responsible for the transformation of the relations of production, hence of social relations generally and, ultimately, of the entire ‘superstructure’ of society. The point to note is that this dynamism can be intelligible only if it is conceived as internally related to the purposive character of the labour process. The idea, roughly speaking, is that the intelligent shaping

¹⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, London 1969, pp. 745–50.

¹⁷ *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox, Oxford 1952, p. 128.

¹⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford 1977, p. 118.

¹⁹ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Moscow 1974, p. 131.

²⁰ See, in particular, Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. R. Livingstone, London 1971; Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, London 1967.

²¹ Other versions attribute greater scope and initiative to the relations, or seek to weaken the force–relations contrast. See, for example, the essays in M. Cohen, T. Nagel and T. Scanlon, eds., *Marx, Justice and History*, Princeton 1980, Part 2. In all versions the internal link to the labour process remains a condition of intelligibility, the chief point of the present discussion.

of means to ends in that process brings inescapably with it the possibility of technical innovation. Such innovation tends of itself both to ease the burden of labour and to enhance the productive capacity of the labourers. Given an appropriate setting, itself perhaps comprising a complex and vulnerable set of circumstances, innovations that do arise may be assumed to have some further tendency to catch on in the community in question and become a permanent addition to its repertoire. In so doing they may be said to constitute an expansion of its productive power; that is, of the forces of production.

By steps such as these it becomes possible to envisage an in-dwelling, enduring tendency towards the development of the forces. This in turn may be seen as providing a shaping impulse, an element of essential directedness, in history. It will have to be conceived of as a weak impulse, constantly liable to be overborne or lie dormant for long stretches of historical time.²² This will be particularly the case where relations of production are unfavourable to the growth of the forces. It may be that, for instance, the existing ruling class does not stand to benefit from their growth. Such conditions are quite routinely met in history. Indeed, their satisfaction may, as Marx suggests, be characteristic of all economic systems other than capitalism.²³ Only under capitalism does the immanent logic of the labour process become, as it were, directly harnessed to the vital principle of the mode of production itself, to its insatiable drive for profits and wealth accumulation. Moreover, it is only under capitalism that it becomes possible for thinkers such as Marx to grasp the historical dynamic of the weak impulse and thus for it to enter more generally the consciousness of the age. When this occurs it may be assumed to take on a more insistent beat, less subject to countervailing forces. Even when it is subdued or suppressed, however, it yields an intelligible, guiding thread for historical reflection. Between such an inner dialectic and the blank externality of the causal sequences that occupy positivist thought there is, it may be suggested, all the difference in the world.

Now that theoretical grounding for the materialist doctrine of forces and relations has been suggested, it may be asked whether the doctrine itself is capable of bearing any explanatory weight. The obvious way to test this is to seek, as Marx did, to apply it to key transitional episodes in history. It is difficult to think of one capable of bringing it to life more vividly than the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe. The standard view of those events, advanced by a wide range of commentators, locates the primary causal factor in the failure of the economic project in which existing regimes were engaged; that is, of matching or surpassing the capitalist West. These countries, together with the Soviet Union, did have significant achievements to their credit in the 'extensive' phase of development, that of heavy industry and of problems amenable to solution through quantitative increases

²² The term 'weak impulse' is taken from Erik Olin Wright, 'Giddens's Critique of Marxism', *NLR* 138, March–April 1983, p. 28. See this source for further discussion of the idea.

²³ See, for example, Karl Marx, *Capital* Volume 1, trans. B. Fowkes, Harmondsworth 1976, p. 617.

in the factors of production. Where they began to falter, and eventually to fail altogether, was in the second, 'intensive' phase, that of high-technology production geared to satisfying consumer needs. This failure is reflected in a distorted but still revealing form in information on economic growth rates. By the second half of the nineteen-eighties, it is generally agreed, the rate of growth for most of the countries of Eastern Europe was effectively zero.²⁴ This situation placed great strain on political and social systems. It induced popular disaffection and unrest and, perhaps just as important, a loss of morale on the part of the ruling groups themselves. The outcome was a general crisis of legitimacy leading to revolution. Once again events seem to fit almost too neatly our theoretical framework. In particular, they exemplify the supposedly central case of the sweeping away of relations of production which have come to be obstacles to the dynamic of the forces. Old texts come to mind at this point:

At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production . . . From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.²⁵

These well-worn phrases now take on freshness and substance. They seem before our eyes to lose their formulaic, quasi-metaphorical character and become literal and lived truths. This readiness with which the 1989 events fit the basic materialist explanatory scheme is of considerable significance for the present discussion. It suffices of itself to ensure that reports of the death of Marxist theory, whether jubilant or despairing, are at least premature.

The Standpoint of Totality

The discussion has so far managed with a thin specification of the meaning of events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. This now needs to be made a little thicker, even if nothing like full justice can be done to the subject here. To begin with, one should draw out what is implied in the universally accepted description of the events as marking the death of Communism. The positive side of the coin is that they signify the restoration of capitalism in those countries and their reintegration into the international capitalist system. This description seems safe enough on general grounds, for there is no other complete mode of organization in sight within our present horizons. Moreover, the most powerful forces in the region, backed by relentless pressure from the West, are continually working to make reality conform ever more adequately to the description. This is not to imply that the process will take the same course in all the former territories of 'actually existing socialism', or that it will be plain sailing in any of them. Yet even though a comprehensive study would have to take account of significant differences between individual countries, we may reasonably abstract from them here, relying on our overall characterization. We can also accommodate within it the fact that, as a whole army of commentators have pointed out, the process

²⁴ See, for example, the information in Sword, ed., *The Times Guide to Eastern Europe*, for individual countries.

²⁵ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Moscow 1970, p. 21.

is likely to be accompanied by considerable distress and dissatisfaction as the implications of market solutions begin to be felt, particularly by the working classes. These factors, however, seem likely to determine the speed and ease of the transition to capitalism, not its character as such. The situation is, of course, also complicated by the existence of national and ethnic tensions which are liable to be exploited by forces of the authoritarian and racist Right. But once more there is nothing here that lies off the capitalist agenda. The issue is rather the admittedly important one of just how that agenda is to be accomplished. In particular, there is the matter of whether the bourgeois freedoms for which the revolutions were fought are to be realized as an immediate outcome of them. More generally, there is the extent to which capitalism in the East will turn out to be accompanied by its supposedly standard, Western superstructure of liberal democracy. Thus the question is not whether the future is capitalist but rather what kind of capitalism is in store, whether it bears a human or a monstrous face.

Among the categories which offer prospects of getting a grip on this situation, that of 'totality' seems to have a special place. It is at any rate difficult to exaggerate the significance that has traditionally been attached to it within Hegelian Marxism.²⁶ The basic idea is of a structured whole whose movement is, as Hegel constantly insists, self-movement. Hence, its development is to be understood not in terms of the impact of external forces but in terms of the working out of internal oppositions, the self-contradictions of the system. In Marx's thinking about history the category finds concrete expression in the theme of the world market, a theme inextricably linked to that of world revolution. Thus, in the programme of work sketched in *Grundrisse* the culminating section was to be devoted to 'the world market and crises'. We are given a hint of the content envisaged for this section in a reference to the world market as the end-state 'in which production is posited as a totality together with all its moments but within which at the same time all contradictions come into play'. The implications for world revolution are drawn straight away:

The world market . . . forms the presupposition of the whole as well as its substratum. Crises are then the general intimation which points beyond the presupposition, and the urge which drives towards the adoption of a new historic form.²⁷

Thus, it is the world market which constitutes the totality within which all the contradictions come into play, 'driving' towards the new world order of socialism.

The Old Filthy Business

Marx was never to complete the *Grundrisse* programme. The resulting absence of any systematic treatment by him of the theme of 'the world

²⁶ 'The whole system of Marxism stands and falls with the principle that revolution is the product of a point of view in which the category of totality is dominant.' Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 29.

²⁷ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. M. Nicolaus, Harmondsworth 1973, pp. 227–8.

market and crises' was to have unfortunate consequences for Marxist thought. Nevertheless, the sense of a totalizing perspective organized around that theme haunts his work throughout his career. For present purposes it may be most useful to note the way it informs his thinking whenever he addresses the possibility of a revolution that stays confined to some corner of the capitalist world. The discussion in *The German Ideology* of the material premisses of communism is particularly striking in this regard.²⁸ The basic premiss is declared to be the 'universal development of the productive forces'. With this development comes the world market which is itself a precondition of the existence of the revolutionary proletariat. For that class can 'only exist *world-historically*, just as communism... can only have a "world-historical" existence'. Without the full development of human productive powers a revolution would serve only to generalize want and, thereby, 'the struggle for necessities would begin again, and all the old filthy business would necessarily be restored'. All that would be possible is a communism existing merely 'as a local phenomenon' and destined to perish, for 'each extension of intercourse' between peoples 'would abolish local communism'. Marx summarizes the position as follows:

Empirically, communism is only possible as the act of the dominant peoples 'all at once' and simultaneously, which presupposes the universal development of productive forces and the world intercourse bound up with them.

This passage scarcely needs a gloss in order to bring out its relevance to the history of the Soviet Union. It offers in advance a judgement on that history that all the benefits of hindsight do not require us to alter in essentials. Its epitaph might be fashioned from the references here to a local communism mired in the struggle for necessities and doomed to extinction with the development of the productive forces and of 'the world intercourse bound up with them'.

This attitude towards the prospects for isolated revolutionary outbreaks is grounded in the very structure of Marx's thought.²⁹ It seems to have been universal, a feature of the intellectual climate, in early Marxism. Engels took for granted throughout his career the need for socialist revolution to be coextensive with the capitalist world as a whole. Similar assumptions were basic to the thought of such Marxists as Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Kautsky and Antonio Gramsci, and did much to condition their response to the Bolshevik seizure of power.³⁰ Even more striking is the way in which Marx's thinking was mirrored so faithfully by the makers of the Russian Revolution themselves. Over and over again, with unequalled force and clarity, and before and after October 1917, Lenin insisted that revolution in Russia could not succeed or sustain itself unless it led to revolution in

²⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 5, London 1976, p. 49.

²⁹ There is a particularly vivid expression of it, set specifically in the context of the formation of the world market, in a letter to Engels of October 1858. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, London, n.d., pp. 133–5.

³⁰ Some light is shed on this in Robin Blackburn, 'Fin de Siècle: Socialism after the Crash', *NLR* 185, January–February 1991, pp. 5–66.

the West. So unequivocal are these warnings that Stalin in the thirties had some of them expunged from the published writings.³¹ This was done in the fantastic cause of 'socialism in one country', a project so devoid of roots in either Marxist thought or empirical reality that even the pretence of the Soviet state's commitment to it had to be sustained through systematic violence and terror. The fundamental congruence of Trotsky's thinking with that of Lenin in this area scarcely needs labouring. It forms a large part of the substance of the theory of permanent revolution, itself the mainspring of his political thought. It seems reasonable to conclude that nothing in the recent history of the Soviet Union would have caught its founders intellectually unprepared. That history should be seen rather as belated testimony to their insight and prescience.

Ripeness is All

The Russian Revolution has, it appears, to be recognized as a premature outbreak, an abortive attempt to force the pace of change, creating a historical interlude which is now drawing to a close. That the capitalist system should be able to absorb such a failure of socialism is itself no more surprising than its overwhelming, as noted by Marx, of the traditional economies of the East. Both testify to its progressive role, which he fully acknowledges, in developing world production and trade. It is part of the significance of recent events to demonstrate that this historic role is as yet by no means exhausted. Capitalism remains the uniquely dynamic form of organization, the only possible material basis for human emancipation under socialism. The events that demonstrate this are themselves wholly in accord with the logic of a system which insists that 'no social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed.'³² On numerous occasions Marx reveals an awareness that such ripeness was not in fact the condition of the capitalism of his time.³³ At other times, it must be admitted, his realism is defeated by a species of wishful thinking, by too great an eagerness to discern in the present the lineaments of the new historic form. Yet such anticipations, misrecognitions, as it were, of the location of his own time in history, are surely understandable in someone who had devoted his life to the revolutionary transformation of the existing state of things. The events of our time, too, have left socialists with bitter truths to swallow. Even some with deep and principled misgivings about the Soviet system have become locked into a posture of anti-anti-Communism from which release is difficult. Moreover, all are alike subject to the current triumphalism of the Right, weary of jocular invitations to consider the longest route from capitalism to capitalism and similar conundrums. Yet students of dialectic, with the examples of Hegel and Marx in mind, should be able to keep their sense of humour. They will be aware that humour is itself a dialectical weapon, liable to the kind of reversal that strikes

³¹ Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, Volume 3, Oxford 1978, p. 22.

³² Marx, *Contribution*, p. 21.

³³ For evidence and discussion see I. Mészáros, 'Marx's "Social Revolution" and the Division of Labour', *Radical Philosophy* 44, Autumn 1986.

back at those who wish to exploit it. Hence, they will be alert to any signs of a transforming irony in the present situation.

There is, in the light of the preceding discussion, an obvious direction in which they should look. For events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union represent the resumption of a historical trend. This is the formation of the capitalist world market, a process of whose reality Marx was himself keenly aware but which has seemed to lapse for much of the twentieth century.³⁴ Its resumption now is not so much an incremental addition as a crowning point or the closing of a circle. It is not with a mere quantitative extension of the scope of capitalism that we have to deal but with a qualitative shift or, to invoke another old dialectical figure, with a quantitative change which passes over into a qualitative one. What is happening is the inauguration of the virtually unrestricted rule of the world market for the first time in history.³⁵ With this capitalism becomes what it had never been before, a truly global system with no serious rivals in view. It has no longer to reckon with relations of contradiction between itself and other modes of social organization, a fact most vividly symbolized in the ending of the Cold War. All contradictions are now, as it were, displaced within, becoming forms of self-contradiction. To say this is to acknowledge the instantiation in reality of the framework of analysis postulated by Marx in his dealings with the world market. We are witnessing the creation of the totality within which alone all contradictions can come into play engendering systemic crises. Marx's social theory is directed to, and grounded in, the logic of a totality self-driven by its own internal tensions. This uniquely appropriate matrix and object of reference is now being constituted before our eyes. In such a perspective it is not with the death of Marxist theory that we have to deal but with the objective possibility of its regeneration.

In the Spirit of Marx

There is a great deal of work to be done if this possibility is to be realized. The bulk of it belongs not to any kind of philosophical inquiry but to social science and in particular to political economy. What is needed above all is an inquiry that will achieve for contemporary capitalism what Marx achieved for that of the nineteenth century. The ground rules for such an inquiry as well as many points of entry into it may still be drawn directly from his work. The indispensable contribution is the general conception of capitalism as a system structured by contradictions which are insoluble in its own terms. The fundamental one, in Marx's view, is that between its inexorable promotion of the development of the forces and its own existence as an absolute barrier to that development. In more concrete terms the

³⁴ See Giovanni Arrighi, 'Marxist Century, American Century: The Making and Remaking of the World Labour Movement', *NLR* 179, January–February 1990, pp. 29–63.

³⁵ The major exception appears, of course, to be China. The complex and ambiguous pattern of development in that country raises issues that cannot be dealt with here. The main point of the discussion may still perhaps be allowed to go forward on the grounds that the significance of the development is largely confined to China itself. Hence, it does not seriously challenge the idea that inter-systemic contradictions, oppositions of rival models of global organization, have for the present been stilled.

main structural weakness lies in its inability to ensure the continuous realization of surplus value on which its viability depends. The inability finds expression in crises of profitability, of investment and of economic activity in general. Marx's insights in this central area have not lost their power and relevance but they have now to be fleshed out and applied in new conditions. They have in particular to be projected in detail on to the global screen of the international market. In that context an obvious focus for analysis is the complex set of interactions between the so-called 'First' and 'Third' Worlds. The need for it is ever more pressing as the basic relationship of exploitation assumes the gross form of the transfer of resources from the poorest people on earth to the richest. It is, moreover, acquiring ever more obscene embellishments, especially of a military kind. There is, for instance, the supply of arms to barbaric dictatorships, periodically interrupted in order to visit the results of still more up-to-date technology on their subjects. In the background is the ever-present reality of mass hunger and disease in countries which have become fully locked in to the world system and are helpless in the face of its logic.

Any attempt to extend and apply Marx's mode of analysis in this situation will have problems of great difficulty to overcome. It may, however, tackle them with the crucial assurance that the object of study now for the first time satisfies a basic presupposition of the theory, that it constitute an autonomous whole whose determinants lie within. This in itself should serve to place some traditional issues in a more genial and rewarding perspective. The most important of them is the question of the identification of the revolutionary subject. As a form of dialectical thought Marx's social theory must conceive of itself as being in the closest touch with the movement of social reality. Given its specific character as revolutionary theory, this means that its fortunes are inextricably tied to the existence and effectivity of an agent through which the new historic form it envisages is to be achieved. It has been apparent for a long time that Marx's own candidate for the role, the proletariat of what were in his time the most advanced capitalist countries, is wholly misconceived. The historical movement known as 'Western Marxism' is from one point of view a response to the awareness of this truth. In broad terms the response took two forms, that of trying to supplement Marx's candidate with other centres of agency, and that of abandoning the dialectical problematic altogether by relaxing the requirement for theory to be objectified in such centres.³⁶ In either case the unsatisfactory, often incoherent, character of the results has been a cancer eating away at the vitality of Marxist thought in the West. It should now be clear that failure of this kind was only to be expected on theoretical grounds in the undeveloped state of the object of analysis. There can be no hope of identifying the grave-digger of capitalism while it has yet to reach maturity, with many potentialities and resources still untapped. The question was being posed in a context in which it was in principle unanswerable. This is not to say that with

³⁶ Corresponding, roughly speaking, to the distinction among the archetypal 'Western Marxists' of the Frankfurt School between the positions of Marcuse and Adorno. See Joseph McCarney, *Social Theory and the Crisis of Marxism*, London 1990, chs. 2–3.

the emergence of the world system any easy answers will be available. It is merely that reality has moved to meet thought to the extent that a necessary condition for posing it fruitfully has fallen into place. It is a qualitative change from a historical situation in which even the best thinkers were condemned to beat their heads against a wall. Hence, it provides all the encouragement to tackle the question one can expect from general theory. For substantive progress one has to await the political economy of the world system that was referred to earlier.

The programme sketched above envisages, to put it crudely, both taking over a good deal from Marx's work and going beyond it in significant ways. At the very least it presupposes a willingness to address problems of which in the nature of the case he had little or no inkling, and to deal with them creatively by devising novel categories and hypotheses. A question that might arise at this point is whether or not the results could properly be characterized as 'Marxist'. It would be easy but unwise to dismiss it as merely a linguistic question in a trivial sense. For one thing, matters of terminology have themselves, for reasons that need not be elaborated here, a political importance. Moreover, some substantive lines of thought in the preceding discussion suggest that the terminology in question would definitely not be appropriate. Marx was, as everyone must be, a child of his time and the passage from his time to ours involves, it was argued, a qualitative leap. His is the science of immature capitalism and the problems of the mature form could at best be anticipated by him, with whatever depth of insight, not experienced as a living reality for theory to encompass. The specific nature of the theory in question is also significant. For, as we have seen, dialectical thought can least of all afford a sentimental cult of the founders. It is required, on pain of losing its identity, to move in expressive harmony with the movement of reality itself. Hence, it must be endlessly adaptive and dynamic and resist whatever would in any measure tend to tie it down, all forms of fixation and inertia. In particular, its relentlessly historical character makes it averse to giving the hostages to fortune implied in labelling by reference to the time-bound framework of an individual life, however remarkable. This is surely the inner truth of Marx's own notorious denial that he was a 'Marxist'. It may be well to follow his example in this respect. If it entails the disappearance from the intellectual scene of any substantial presence designated as 'Marxist' this would, one has to say, be just too bad. What matters is the existence there of a vigorous body of dialectical theory in the service of socialism. It will be more truly in the spirit of Marx if, whatever it is called, it incorporates as much of the substance of his thought as was suggested here than any amount of theorizing which piously retains the name while abandoning that substance.

Lessons of History

It has been argued here that recent events testify to the vitality of the Hegelian Marxist philosophy of freedom and exhibit the explanatory power of the materialist conception of history. They also serve to put in place the framework of totality on which any theory that is socialist and dialectical depends. Some hints were given as to the lines along

which such a theory might be developed. The main responsibility for developing it does not, it was noted, belong to philosophy. Nevertheless, some questions of a philosophical kind do arise in connection with the project. The chief one may be stated as follows: What is the nature of the human community that realizes freedom? To this question Hegel and Marx give contrasting answers. The contrast is all the sharper against the background of their shared understanding of the significance of the question. They agree that freedom indispensably requires an appropriate social setting. It is the self-determination of essentially social beings, not of the isolated individuals of some forms of liberal thought. Beyond this it is impossible to hold the two of them even loosely together. For Hegel the community of freedom is the rational state, a political and juridical order whose members encounter one another primarily as citizens and bearers of rights. This order coexists with the familiar arrangements of civil society; that is, of market capitalism, curbing their excesses and reconciling their contradictions. For Marx the community of freedom is the *Aufhebung* of civil society and the capitalist state. It is a transformed social world in which people are related not as right-bearing citizen consumers but as 'freely associated producers'. The producers retain a public power and public authority for certain collective purposes. But these are emphatically not, as in Hegel, the uniquely appropriate focus of emancipated social life.

It is difficult not to suppose that recent world-historical events can shed some light on the rival merits of these views. To pursue the supposition is, admittedly, to engage more fully with the internal affairs of the dialectical tradition than we have done so far. The justification must be in part that the issue has already been the subject of much comment, usually to Hegel's advantage at the expense of Marx.³⁷ Moreover, if the attempt made here to commend that tradition has been successful such in-house concerns do have a proper claim on our attention. Anyone now disposed to take it seriously will naturally wish to know which version to follow in such an important area. In any case, some at least of the issues that arise have, as we shall see, a general significance, going beyond dialectics, for the political theory of freedom.

If one views the history of Communist regimes as constituting a kind of practical test of the ideas of Hegel and Marx, there are some other obvious conclusions to be drawn. Though they fall on both sides of the divide they perhaps need not, since they are relatively uncontroversial, detain us long. It is, to begin with, difficult to resist the verdict that Hegel has the better of things in one very important respect. This has to do with his basic insight that freedom has to be embodied as justice and, hence, as a constitutional system incorporating explicit and effective guarantees of rights. Any attempt to realize socialism without such an embodiment seems bound, in the light of the best judgement now available to us, to end in disaster. To suppose otherwise must seem, from our present standpoint in historical time, to

³⁷ For a forceful expression of this view, see R. Sakwa, 'The Hegelian Triumph', *THES*, 12 July 1991.

be merely utopian, the very antithesis of dialectical thought. We can all the more afford to be brief here since the point has already been widely taken on the Left. Indeed, the idea of 'socialism with rights' is currently the focus of much intellectual effort there. The outcome of it must have great significance for the future of socialist theory.

There are, however, elements in Hegel's thought which are now more starkly revealed in a similarly unfavourable light. At the most general level they involve his view of the state and belief in its potential for the rational supervision of society. Doubts on this score are likely to concentrate on the role of the bureaucracy as the supposed 'universal class' which stands above all merely local and partial interests. The history of Communist regimes is surely the final nail in the coffin so far as the intellectual credibility of such ideas is concerned. The evidence from it decisively reinforces what we already know about the functioning of all actual bureaucracies. It avails little for the Hegelian to plead here the differences between the public service of the rational, constitutional state and that of the irrational tyrannies of Eastern Europe. This would have as much point in the present context as a claim by Marxists that in some non-actual world freedom outside any juridical order is possible for human beings. What we have to deal with is the practical bearing of events, the direction of the spin they impart, with whatever force, to the propositions of theory. From this perspective Hegel's state and its agents seem as abstractly utopian as Marx's structureless freedom. Both conceptions suffer from the defect that they work directly against the grain of our understanding of what is happening in contemporary history.

Bodily Powers

The theme of Hegel contra Marx on the nature of the free society deserves to be taken a little further. This can be achieved by considering Hegel's position not through further confrontations with empirical reality but theoretically, in terms of his own favoured method of immanent critique. If one does so it emerges that capitalism cannot possibly form part of the solution to the problem as he conceives it. To show this, of course, by no means serves of itself to vindicate the socialist alternative. Nevertheless, it removes a significant obstacle on the way to that goal. Moreover, the manner of Hegel's failure is peculiarly suggestive in the context of the debate as a whole.

The fundamental problem is that Hegel's understanding of freedom cannot accommodate an institution which is central to, indeed partly definitive of, capitalist society, the institution of wage labour. The argument to this conclusion can only be presented schematically here in its bare essentials.³⁸ The first point to note is the distinctive twist Hegel gives to the primitive idea of freedom referred to earlier. This is

³⁸ For a full discussion along the lines suggested here, see C.J. Arthur, *Dialectics of Labour: Marx and his Relation to Hegel*, Oxford 1986, ch. 8. Particularly valuable is Arthur's demolition of Hegel's attempt to distinguish, within the terms of his assumptions, between wage labour and slavery.

his insistence that for freedom to have any substance it must be translated 'into an external sphere', objectified in 'things' over which the individual's rights are acknowledged by others similarly placed.³⁹ Freedom requires the mutual recognition of private proprietors. The obvious expression of this vision in a form of society is, perhaps, the system of 'simple commodity production' with a market in goods though not in labour.⁴⁰ It is not, however, where Hegel wishes to arrive, and the route to his preferred destination involves a sustained forcing of the discussion from its natural bent. The first signs appear almost immediately when it becomes evident that the property condition is in principle satisfied by recognition of ownership rights in one's body and its powers, of one's legal status as a free labourer. Now the initially powerful rhetoric about the need for freedom to be realized in an external, objective sphere begins to sound hollow. It is, however, by no means the last place in the argument where the pressure of apologetics makes itself felt.

As a prelude to what follows it should be noted that Hegel is emphatically not, any more than is Marx, a philosopher for whom human beings are spirits only contingently lodged in bodies. On the contrary, the idea of our necessary embodiment is part of the very fabric of his thought.⁴¹ It emerges forcefully in the section on Property in the *Philosophy of Right*. 'My body', he tells us, 'is the embodiment of my freedom', and so 'If another does violence to my body, he does violence to me.'⁴² It follows that my rights in my body and its powers represent a peculiar sort of proprietorship. It is a matter of, in Hegel's own terminology, 'inner possessions', 'inward property'.⁴³ The question that now arises is how property so intimately related to the self can be alienated without giving rise to a form of self-alienation. That in turn would surely be incompatible with freedom which is in its root meaning for Hegel, as we have seen, precisely a remaining at home in unrestricted control of the self. The difficulty is increased by some other features of the situation of which he is well aware. The first is that the alienation of bodily powers normally occurs under compulsion. Those who engage in it have no other property to bring to the market and, hence, no other means to the satisfaction of their needs in civil society. A second feature is that the alienation in question is peculiar also in that the alienating subject cannot thereafter remain aloof from, and indifferent to, the use of what is alienated. On the contrary, the alienator of bodily powers has to be present throughout, exercising his or her personal capacities in subjection to the will of another. The self must be active in its own forced alienation—a paradigm case, one might suppose, of Hegelian unfreedom. It is hard to see a way out for Hegel here. The alienation of 'the embodiment of my freedom' can scarcely avoid being the negation of that freedom.

³⁹ *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, pp. 40–41.

⁴⁰ It is this system that seems in fact to be presupposed by advocates of Hegel's economics, at least in their less guarded moments. See, for example, R.D. Winfield, 'Hegel's Challenge to the Modern Economy', in W. Maker, ed., *Hegel on Freedom and Economics*, New York 1987.

⁴¹ See Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, Cambridge 1975, ch. 3.

⁴² *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, pp. 43–4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

The problem ultimately is that the ontological status he accords to what is alienated in wage labour renders it impossible for his philosophy of freedom to assimilate the practice. Wage labour is as such the surrender of an integral aspect of the self, a part of the substance of the personality, to external control, and so it must contravene the basic meaning of freedom as self-determination. At this point a strategic gap appears in his justificatory theory of capitalism, the economic system wholly dependent on the sale and purchase of labour power.

An Inner Dialectic

The position is no more satisfactory when one turns from this level of theory to Hegel's understanding of how the system works in practice. He has a deep grasp of the economic logic of a society based on private ownership of the means of production. Given that logic, such a society will be a most unlikely setting for the emancipated existence which is the implicit teleology of history, a fact of which Hegel is at least partially, and uneasily, aware. The logic is that of capital accumulation, generating gross inequalities, 'a spectacle of extravagance and want'; more specifically, 'the creation of a rabble of paupers' and 'at the other end of the social scale, conditions which greatly facilitate the concentration of disproportionate wealth in a few hands'. In such circumstances, Hegel believes, 'poverty immediately takes the form of a wrong done to one class (*Klasse*) by another.'⁴⁴ As this language suggests, he is far from approving of such a state of affairs. Indeed, the institutional proposals of his political theory are designed to remove or mitigate its worst features. That is to say, they are intended to prevent the power of the owners of capital from controlling the whole of public life and to prevent the modes of thought that accompany and enable the accumulation process, the calculating spirit of prudent egoism, from pervading all social relationships. Hegel's remedies have, however, an archaic flavour. They rely on what are for the most part relics of feudalism—the system of estates, the corporations, the hereditary monarchy, the rooted, unchanging life of the agricultural class. Such clinging to the past sits oddly with his historical sense and with his awareness of the deeper forces at work in his own world. Feudal institutions must be unsuitable instruments for domesticating the dynamics of capitalist society, flimsy barriers against that tide of modernity of which Hegel was one of the first major interpreters.

His unease over his own solutions is closest to the surface in the central case of poverty. That poverty is central is due at least in part to his recognition that it is altogether incompatible with the enjoyment of freedom as a social being.⁴⁵ The special difficulty it presents stems from the fact that he grasps it as a structural feature of civil society, one that goes on being reproduced even in times of 'unimpeded activity' and industrial expansion.⁴⁶ The condition is, of course,

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 123, 150, 277–8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 149–50.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

exacerbated in times of economic crisis. These are episodes which Hegel sees, in terms that anticipate Marx and Keynes, as arising from 'an excess of production', and, more precisely, from 'the lack of a proportionate number of consumers who are themselves also producers'. Some palliatives are considered and rejected before he gloomily concludes that civil society 'despite an excess of wealth' is unable out of its own resources 'to check excessive poverty'.⁴⁷ What he then goes on, rather strikingly, to envisage is that it will be driven by its 'inner dialectic' beyond its own limits to seek markets and colonies abroad as an outlet for surplus population and goods.⁴⁸ This, however, cannot possibly be a solution to the problem as Hegel perceives it. Imperialist expansion is not a recourse available to all individual civil societies, and has limits set by geography even for the most successful. Invoking it comes close in any case to an admission of failure since it is to accept that the Hegelian community is not an indefinitely self-sustaining whole in which all systemic contradictions have become *aufgehoben*. It is not, that is to say, the true, enduring home of human freedom.

It is, perhaps, in muted recognition of this fact that Hegel should treat the imperialist theme in so casual and perfunctory a way, a mere gesture which is never followed up and given substance in his work. His final comment on the matter is that 'the important question of how poverty is to be abolished is one of the most disturbing problems which agitate modern society.'⁴⁹ It is a problem which in those words he bequeaths to others to solve. This is itself, as various commentators have remarked, virtually a unique occurrence in his writings.⁵⁰ It is in the highest degree uncharacteristic that he, one of the most self-confident and relentlessly discursive of thinkers, should leave so important an issue hanging in the air, beyond the normally voracious grasp of the system. The explanation, as Marxists have repeatedly pointed out in such contexts, is that we here come up against the bourgeois horizons of his thought. What ultimately cramps and stultifies it is the fact that the true realm of freedom cannot be built on the foundations of the private accumulation of capital. This is, however, a truth which Hegel only partially and fitfully perceives and which he can never fully acknowledge, still less draw in to the centre of his theoretical framework.

It is undeniably instructive to see a great thinker reduced in this way to evasion, inconsequentiality and, ultimately, silence. No greater tribute to the power of capital in the intellectual sphere could be conceived. Yet if Hegel's solutions are spurious, the problems he had in view are genuine and enduring. Mass poverty remains a fact of life under advanced capitalism and particularly in countries such as the United States and Britain where the triumph of 'the principle of civil society' has been most complete. All that is remarkable there is the

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 151–2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

⁵⁰ S. Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, Cambridge 1972, p. 154; A. Ryan, *Property and Political Theory*, Oxford 1984, p. 136.

practised smoothness with which apologists for the system manage to ignore its existence.

Meanwhile, the international scene with its division of 'First' and 'Third' Worlds presents a spectacle of extravagance and want on a scale Hegel could scarcely have imagined. Yet, once he had absorbed the shock, he would surely be able to recognize it as the appropriate outcome of the 'inner dialectic' he discerned in the society of his time. The argument of the present article has been that recent events in Europe have shifted this dialectic to a new and decisive phase. It is within the global order taking shape as a result of those events that it must run its course. It need not be feared that the tradition of thought Marx founded when he set Hegelian dialectic the right way up has been rendered obsolete or irrelevant by the working out of the historical process which has been its true object from the beginning. On the contrary, there is now everything to fight for so far as that tradition is concerned.