

MARXISM: RELIGIOUS FAITH AND BAD FAITH

ANTONY FLEW

Bowling Green State University

A “CULT OF PERSONALITY”

It is remarkable, and should be remarked far more often than it is: both that substantial and, we are told, increasing numbers of professing social scientists nowadays proclaim their attachment to the theories and putative methods of a nineteenth century predecessor; and that there is, apparently, only one particular predecessor able to inspire such widespread and continuing devotion—such a “cult of personality,”¹ you might say.

This is a phenomenon which should make anyone sincerely committed to enquiry both suspicious and curious. One discouraging yet possibly instructive parallel is with the applied pseudo-science of psychoanalysis; where we hear first of the great divide between Freudians and Jungians, and then of further faction fights among rival disciples of these founders. In the social sciences, however, such party loyalty is mainly if not only for one particular *Victorian Sage*.² Still more peculiar, and still more deserving of remark, is the fact that the devotion extends beyond the wide limits of one area of study. For in this unique case all the author’s works on every subject, and often too his political policies, are treated with a similar respect, and taken to be similarly authoritative.

Contrast the natural sciences—and, above all, the standard-setting, paradigm science of physics. There not even the greatest contributors attract this kind of posthumous, partisan devotion. Their contributions are quietly added to the ever expanding corpus of at least provisionally established truth; while their names appear in the current literature and in the textbooks solely in stock descriptions of eponymous principles, laws, or effects. Even in biology the enormous contribution of Darwin—work to which Engels in his address at the graveside dared to compare that of Marx in social science³—has not

inspired loyalties of the same sort. For although almost all biologists presently subscribe to the Neo-Darwinian Synthetic Theory of Evolution, and although there were once Social Darwinists, no one now takes Darwin's works as authoritative even in biology, much less in anything else. As for the incomparable Newton, most of his writings have never been and most likely never will be published at all. For they deal not with physics but with religion.

My suspicions aroused by the existence and extent of this contemporary "cult of personality," I propose to develop and to support, although I cannot hope with tolerable brevity to prove, two suggestions. In so far as these two suggestions are correct, there is something rotten in the state of the social sciences. The first suggestion is that, whatever may have been true in earlier and more innocent periods, these continuing Marxist loyalties today constitute a religious rather than a scientific phenomenon. The second is that, at any rate in our time, the maintenance of the doctrinal and behavioural commitments of this new godless religion—its "unity of theory and practice"—calls for a deal of bad faith, both academic and political.

(a) With my first suggestion the crux is that what is right in Marx was by no means peculiar to him, while what was distinctive is not right. The predictions based upon his theories have not been fulfilled, while the policies which he recommended have not produced the results which he promised. To this predicament the devout may respond in two quite different ways.

One is to try to make out that he never actually made the claims which have been falsified. There is plenty of scope for this kind of response: first, because Marx wrote so much, often unsurprisingly saying one thing at one time and, at another time, something else entirely inconsistent; second, because his writings are on occasion obscure and, it appears deliberately, evasive; and, third, because—unless you count the *Manifesto*, which is scarcely composed as a theoretical document directed towards scientific colleagues—neither Marx nor Engels ever produced a crisp, clear cut and unambiguous statement of exactly what it was which in their correspondence they always referred to as "our view" or "our theory" or the like.

The contrast with Darwin is as complete as it is revealing of the true character and concerns of both men. For, years before he ventured to publish anything about evolution by natural selection, Darwin had for his private, purely scientific purposes written a "sketch of my species theory;" a sketch which was intended to force him to recognize the difficulties which, if they could not be overcome, would demand the amendment or abandonment of that theory. (Is it possible to point to any of the passages in all the massed volumes of MEGA in which Marx accepted that anything constituted such a difficulty for "our view?")

(b) The second possible response to the falsification of the predictions, and the non-fulfillment of the utopian political promises, is to admit everything, or almost everything, yet still to insist upon de-

fiantly maintaining all the old commitments. Two notorious specimens of this kind are provided by György Lukács and C. Wright Mills. It was, of course, Lukács who once insisted that the validity of the supposedly distinctive method of Marx could, and should, survive the falsification of all the findings thereby yielded.⁴ Wright Mills too, calling himself “a plain Marxist” and commending above all the *method* of Marx, is, it appears, equally reluctant to judge by results.⁵ Understandably unwilling or, more likely, unable to offer a clear account of what that putative method was, he proceeds to list the seventeen “most important conceptions and propositions of classic Marxism.” With one exception all these are then dismissed as “false”, or “unclear”, or “imprecise”, or “misleading”, or “unfruitful”, or “careless”, or “confused”, or “quite clearly wrong.” Number II, that sole exception, is correctly put down as a tautological truism.⁶

So, at the end of the day “the plain Marxism” of C. Wright Mills simply is his invincibly stubborn commitment to (what only a Greek can without affectation describe as) Marxist *praxis*. He continues to avow his total solidarity with “the new world” extending already from China and the USSR to Cuba.⁷

THE SECULAR CRUSADE OF OUR CENTURY

When Bertrand Russell returned from visiting the USSR in 1920 to write *The Theory and Practice of Bolshevism* he became perhaps the first to describe what was not yet labelled Marxism-Leninism as a new secular Islam.⁸ Since then several critics have urged, that what Marx and Engels and their twentieth century followers have loved to call “scientific socialism” is a religious system rather than a scientific theory, and that its claims to be scientific are both as baseless, and advanced for the same propaganda reasons, as those of Christian Science. Lewis Feuer, for instance, picked out the Mosaic myth as “the invariable ingredient” of all revolutionary ideologies; pointing out similarities between the conversion experiences both of modern revolutionaries and of the more traditionally religious.⁹ Again, Sidney Hook has often argued that “‘Marxism’ today signifies an ideology in Marx’s original sense of that term, suggestive more of a religious than of a strictly scientific or rational outlook on society.”¹⁰

Two things have not perhaps been brought out so fully. First, that the apocalyptic eschatology, the utopian historicism which has been of such decisive importance in winning converts to Marxism,¹¹ was originally derived, by what Marx was pleased to call a philosophical analysis, from the Hegelian secularization of a Christian philosophy of history.¹² The lifelong atheism of the Founding Fathers (Marx and Engels) irrecoverably deprived such reassurances of their only sensible foundation—the promises of a provident Creator.¹³

The second thing to emphasize is that there are numerous close resemblances between the various desperate defensive expedients favoured by today’s intellectual Marxists and many of the equally des-

perate apologetic manoeuvres performed by apologists for the Christian religion. One of the most ancient as well as the most outrageous is that summed up in the Patristic slogan "*Credo ut intelligam*" [I believe in order that I may understand]. A sacred system is immunized against hostile criticism by insisting that the necessary prior understanding is vouchsafed only to the totally committed.

This is a tack taken by Althusser and by Lukács, among many others: "The application of Marxist theory to Marx himself appears to be the absolute precondition of the understanding of Marx;"¹⁴ and "A non-Marxist cannot understand ... to do so requires actual participation in the revolutionary movement."¹⁵ Whatever might be said about tokens of this type of manoeuvre in a religious context, to offer them as science is an indecency. If this is what is meant by "Marxist social science," then the word "Marxist" in that expression is as much an alienating adjective as "Christian" in "Christian Science" or "People's" in "People's Democracy."

Another traditionally religious way of dealing with what an honest scientist would rate as, at best, a difficulty and, at worst, a falsification is for the devotees, when such material is somehow forced upon their attention, to treat it as a salutary test of the strength of their faith, the firmness of their commitment. This was the option ostentatiously preferred by my own sometime school friend Edward Thompson when he decided to write "An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski," reproaching him for his apostasy.¹⁶ Very understandably, Thompson scarcely attempted to confute contentions that the distinctive Marxist propositions are false, and the consequences of implementing Marxist-Leninist policies lamentable. Instead Thompson had the effrontery to fault Kolakowski for not having remained, despite all temptations, strong in the faith. He should, it seems, have continued to labour, with Thompson and his comrades, both for unilateral Western disarmament and for the consequent extension of what Moscow likes to call "The Socialist Commonwealth."

Another leading client of this second traditional religious tactic is Steven Lukes. He employs it to dispose of evidence about the actual effects of Marxism-Leninism in practice. These, he says, "an egalitarian socialist," which he himself pretends to be, must treat "as a challenge, rather than a source of despair."¹⁷ Again, in his most recent work, Lukes makes it clear from the beginning that no criticism, however damaging, is to be permitted to result in root and branch rejection: "This book is," he assures us, in a revealingly religious phrase, "not just another anti-Marxist tract."¹⁸

Lukes does, however, have some reluctant disapproving words "for Stalin's terror, the purges and the trials, the mass deportations and the vast network of labour camps, for the social catastrophe of Mao's Cultural Revolution, for the 'murderous utopia' of Pol Pot's Cambodia, and for the grim, surveillance-minded, demoralized world of contemporary 'actually existing socialism,' above all in the USSR and Eastern Europe."¹⁹

But no reference to these now admitted horrors and miseries of “actually existing socialism” is to be allowed to inhibit the drive to impose that same system everywhere; to promote, as Lukes has it, “the cause of socialism.” Nor has he even one good word to say for any who have fought to prevent such catastrophes. For him, as for Thompson and so many others, all resistance is nothing but the “capitalist imperialism and neo-colonialism ... presently visible behind the moralistic facade of United States foreign policy, especially in South East Asia and now in Central America.”²⁰ Rightly presenting his work as both theoretically and practically important, Lukes remains, apparently, too bigoted and too indifferent to the actual effects of socialism to allow that work to result in any substantial change in his own convictions and practice.

IGNORING THE OBJECTIONS

The previous section displayed and denounced two favourite traditionally religious tactics for preempting or diverting formidable criticism. But the more common practice, when such criticism is not being forced into attention, is simply to ignore it. Thus the author of a recent series of studies of fourteen *Thinkers of the New Left* first lists the names of several of the most powerful critics of Marxism, from Weber to Popper, and then asks himself a rueful question: Since all these “have made *no impact whatsoever* on the fundamental items of left-wing belief,” and have apparently failed “even to *attract the attention* of those whom they have sought to persuade;” then “how can *he* hope to make an impact?”²¹ He goes on to give case after case of that refusal even to attend. Thus “Althusser praises the labour theory [of value] and purports to be persuaded by it.”²² So what does the prophet Althusser make of the overwhelming critical literature, from the early marginalists, on through such giants of the Austrian school as Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk and Ludwig von Mises? Nothing. All profane pagans are silently ignored.

Althusser is perhaps an egregiously scandalous and certainly a demented figure. By contrast several contributors to the *Dictionary of Marxist Thought* edited by Tom Bottomore do take rather more notice of objections. Yet even at their best they too still choose to emasculate or ignore the most powerful. Nor do they ever so much as entertain the thought that the whole system ought to be abandoned utterly, rather than here and there amended. Thus, in their entry “Critics of Marxism,” the editors manage to mention Popper, but not *The Open Society*, only *The Poverty of Historicism*, his feeblest work. They themselves conclude with genuflections: both to “the distinctive explanatory power of Marxist thought ... notwithstanding some unresolved problems;” and to “its capacity to generate not a religion, but a body of rational norms for a socialist society ...”²³

Again, the article “Lenin” takes care not to mention Sidney Hook or any of the others maintaining that the success of the October coup

in the Russian Empire falsifies a characteristic and surely fundamental claim in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: "... no social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have been developed ..."²⁴

In professing social scientists all such evasive responses to strong and relevant objections have to be construed as indications of academic and political bad faith. Descartes once remarked that, in determining what people sincerely believed, he preferred to look to what they did rather than to what they said. His advice is equally sound with regard to sincerity in general. Hence, in order to prove that they are indeed sincerely pursuing some purpose, the one thing above all which people have to do is to be constantly concerned to monitor their success or failure in fulfilling that purpose. If ever and whenever this monitoring reveals that they are not succeeding, all truly sincere purposers will there and then make that sincerity plain by their readiness to adopt fresh tactics offering better promise of success.

Dropping down now from abstract and general to concrete and particular, let us suppose that someone professes to be in business in order, no doubt among other things, to turn a profit; or suppose, again, that the captain of a sports team says that he is playing, no doubt again among other things, in order to win. Then what credence could we give to these professions if there is no care to keep, in the one case, accounts and, in the other, the score?

In order to discuss the methodology of Karl Marx, I shall now relate these modest revelations of what should be familiar logical linkages to the two main *methodological* recommendations of Sir Karl Popper. As everyone knows Popper makes proposals which are of course close in kin the one to the other, for the spheres of both theoretical science and practical policy. In each case Popperian methodology can be seen as the direct and necessary outcome of sincerity in the appropriate purposes. It is the more worthwhile to represent these recommendations in this way in as much as he himself seems never to have done so. This negligence, and the consequent failure to deploy the most powerful supporting arguments, has probably to be explained by referring to his generous yet unrealistic reluctance to recognize, in any opponents, discreditable distractions or even sheer bad faith.

The aim of theoretical science is truth. Given this aim the critical approach must follow. The person who truly wants the truth cannot and will not embrace unexamined candidates. He must and will be ever ready to test, and test and test again. But testing for truth is in this context precisely what criticism is. The purposes of practical policies, and of the institutions established for the implementation of those policies and the fulfillment of those purposes, are as multifarious as human desires. Yet parallel considerations apply here too. In this case criticism is just probing the effects and effectiveness of the policies in question. How, therefore, can anyone who has indeed been

promoting some policy solely in pursuit of some particular cherished end be indifferent to evidence that that end is not being achieved, or be unwilling to alter course in the hopes of securing better success?

INSINCERITY IN BOTH THEORY AND PRACTICE

It would, I submit, be intolerably invidious to go now, in a fourth and final section, to apply these uncomfortable morals about academic and political bad faith directly to particular, named contemporaries. Instead, in order to show that "Evasion and obscurity are present from the beginning,"²⁵ I will return to the Founding Fathers. (a) In the first part of his obituary address, mentioned earlier, Friedrich Engels asserted: "Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history." This part concluded with the claim: "*So war dieser Mann der Wissenschaft*" [Thus was this man of science]. In the second Engels spoke of Marx as a revolutionary; working tirelessly, we are asked to believe, for the enrichment of the poor and the emancipation of the oppressed.

In an oft-quoted rebuke to Malthus, Marx wrote: "A man who tries to *accommodate* science to a standpoint not derived from science itself ... but from outside interests that are alien to science itself, such a man I call *gemein*" [cheap]. It was, nevertheless, a charge of which he was himself all too often guilty.

Look first at *Capital*, the magnum opus which was, and still is, supposed to provide the long promised²⁶ scientific proof for the sweeping historical theses of the *Manifesto*, for its "philosophy of history." Perhaps the most fundamental of these was the Immiseration Thesis; that, in the words of *Capital*, "The accumulation of wealth at one pole is ... at the same time the accumulation of misery, the torment of labour, slavery, ignorance, brutalization at the other ..." Faced with falsification Marx simply suppressed the data. Hence, in the first edition, various available British statistics are given up to 1865 or 1866, but those for the movement of wages stop at 1850. In the second edition all the other runs are brought up to date, but that of wage movements still stops at 1850.²⁷

Or suppose we look at the correspondence, never forgetting that this was subject to at least two systematic prunings before its eventual publication. The Marquis de Vauverargues once noted that "For the philosopher, clarity is a matter of good faith." His maxim is equally true for the scientist. So we call in evidence a letter to Engels, dated August 15th 1857. It is especially notable in as much as it also reveals something of what Marx had in mind when he spoke of dialectics (or the dialectic method). In the works published during his lifetime those are (or this is) sometimes commended but never so frankly explained. But here we read:

I took the risk of prognosticating in this way, as I was compelled to sub-

stitute for you as correspondent at the Tribune ... It is possible I may be discredited. But in that case it will still be possible to pull through with the help of a bit of dialectics. It goes without saying that I phrased my forecasts in such a way that I would prove to be right also in the opposite case.

So war dieser Mann der Wissenschaft!

(b) But now, what about the second part of that obituary address, and the charge of political bad faith? The most damning evidence on this count is that of the consistent and persistent refusal of Marx to make any serious attempt to answer those critics who argued that the enforcement of full socialism, Marxist style, would inevitably result, as in fact it has, in a vastly intensified and more universally repressive form of oriental despotism; or of, as it is euphemistically labelled by Marxists, "the Asiatic mode of production." The fact that Marx so swiftly abandoned his studies of that phenomenon is doubly significant: first, because it could not be encompassed within, and therefore constituted a falsification of "our view" of a progressive, unilinear, historical development; and, second, because it provided the best available evidence of the likely political and social effects of establishing a totally centralized command economy.

Criticism on this count in fact began very early, even before the first publication of the *Manifesto*. Already in 1844 Arnold Ruge, who was "still a democratic, not a socialist revolutionary," protested that the realization of such socialist dreams would be "a police and slave state."²⁸ In the year of the *Manifesto*, when Engels explained its ideas to the Vice-President of Louis Blanc's party, that luminary responded: "You are leaning towards despotism."²⁹ The fullest contemporary development was to come in 1873, in Bakunin's *Statehood and Anarchy*.

It is illuminating to compare this failure, or this refusal, with the indifference shown by most of our socialist contemporaries, even those who repudiate the Marxist name, towards the charges that total socialism must inevitably become totalitarian; and that a pluralist economy is in fact a necessary condition of pluralist politics, though certainly not sufficient. The motives are in both cases, presumably, the same.

Such Hayekian theses³⁰ are, of course, nowadays accepted, not to say relished, by the chief enemies of both individual freedom and authentic rather than People's Democracy.

Consider, for instance, the statement issued in 1971 by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Moscow. With its eyes then mainly on Chile and France, it sketched a programme for achieving, through "United Front" or "Broad Left" tactics, irreversible Communist domination: "Having once acquired political power, the working class implements the liquidation of the private ownership of the means of production ... As a result, under socialism, there remains no ground for the existence of any opposition parties counterbalancing the Communist Party."

In my own country the usual response today to all such objections, from those still pretending to be democrats as well as socialists, is to raise the snide question: "What about Chile?" Its frivolous irrelevance reveals that for these people, as—on his own admission by Regis Debray—for President Allende, democracy is no more than a temporary and disposable means toward the supreme end of irreversible Leninist domination. They do not sincerely care about democracy or about other liberal and humane values. Neither, I submit, did Marx.

1. This is the standard English translation of the Russian phrase employed by Stalin's successors to characterize whatever they are prepared to admit as evils in the period of his dictatorship. It is, and is of course in that context intended to be, a very indefinite description.
2. John Holloway, *The Victorian Sage* (London: Macmillan, 1953).
3. I have in *Darwinian Evolution* (London: Granada Paladin, 1984), III 3, examined this proud boast at some length, concluding—mainly because of the truth of the second claim, that Marx was always before all else the revolutionary—that it is altogether insupportable.
4. G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin, 1971), p. 1. Mills too takes the same line. How can people professing to be any sort of scientists accept as serious and honest colleagues those who would assess an investigatory method by anything but its fruits?
5. C. Wright Mills, *The Marxists* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), pp. 96ff.
6. It states: "*The opportunity for revolution exists only when objective conditions and subjective readiness coincide.*"
7. Compare the treatment of "Marxism and History" in B. Ollman and E. Vernoff (eds.) *The Left Academy* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1982). The authors allow "Marxist historians" to reject any and every major historical thesis of Marx, provided only that they continue to give total support to the maintenance and extension of Marxist-Leninist despotism throughout the whole world.
8. For a reappraisal of this book, see my "Russell's Judgement of Bolshevism," in G.W. Roberts (ed.) *Bertrand Russell Memorial Volume* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979).
9. Lewis Feuer, *Ideology and the Ideologists* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).
10. Sidney Hook *Revolution, Reform and Social Justice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), p. 95. Compare R.G. Wesson *Why Marxism?: The Continuing Success of a Failed Theory* (London: Temple Smith, 1976), p. 217: "Marxism is an ideology in the Marxian sense—that is, a cover for unconfessable interests."
11. See, for instance, Wesson *Loc.cit.*, p. 46; and, for a rather more topical instance, compare Nikita Khrushchev: "Communism lies at the end of all the roads in the world. We shall bury you."
12. The key paragraph is in the Introduction to the (unwritten) *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*. See *Karl Marx: Early Writings* translated by R. Livingstone and G. Benton and introduced by L. Colletti (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 256.
13. For a fuller treatment see the section of my *Darwinian Evolution* recommended in Note 3, above. Contrast another contribution to *The Left Academy* which sees nothing odd in the presupposition of the question: "What in the world is blocking mankind from achieving the paradise for which it seems biologically destined?" (p. 187). How can atheists believe such comfortable eschatological falsehoods, and after Darwin too?
14. Louis Althusser, *For Marx* translated by B. Brewster (New York: Vintage, 1972), p. 38.
15. Quoted in L. Kolakowski, *The Main Currents of Marxism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), p. 298.
16. In E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978).

17. "Socialism and Equality," in L. Kolakowski and S.N. Hampshire (eds.) *The Socialist Idea: a Reappraisal* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), p. 95.
18. Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), p. xii.
19. *Ibid.*, p. xii.
20. *Ibid.*, p. xii.
21. Roger Scruton, *Thinkers of the New Left* (London: Longman, 1985), p. 5: emphasis original.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
23. Can this be a genuflection towards *A Critique of the Gotha Programme*? For all the earlier works of Marx are full of denunciations of those who would ask for or provide "cookbooks for the future."
24. The inexpugnable fact that Lenin, as Trotsky was later to concede, played an indispensable part in both the initiation and the triumph of that coup also at the same time constitutes an equally knock-down refutation of any other philosophy of history pretending that either the activities of great men, or the operations of whatever else is in respect of social forces a matter of chance, cannot have a decisive influence upon historical development.
25. C.B. Martin, *Religious Belief* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959), p. 2.
26. Volume I of *Capital* was originally published in 1867. Marx signed his first contract to produce such a book in 1845. See Leopold Schwartzschild, *The Red Prussian* (London: Pickwick, New Edition 1986), p. 109.
27. See, for instance, Bertram Wolfe, *Marxism: One Hundred Years in the Life of a Doctrine* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1967), pp. 322-2, and *passim*. Compare also D. Felix Marx as *Politician* pp. 161-2 for an account of how, in his Inaugural Address to the First International, Marx supported this same, crucial, false contention by misquoting W.E. Gladstone as having said in his 1863 budget speech the diametric opposite of what with perfect clarity and truth he actually did say.
28. Schwartzschild *Loc.cit.*, p. 80.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
30. See, for instance, F.A. Hayek *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1944).