



Notes to Literature

Weekly
reading
booklet

#10 : Karl
Marx, *The
German
Ideology*
(c.1845)

NL

NOTES TO LITERATURE

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Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *The German Ideology: Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy (Student Edition)*, translated by C.J. Arthur. Lawrence & Wishart Ltd, 1987.

Thompson, E. P. *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978.

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Karl Marx

Excerpts from *The German Ideology* (c.1845)

PREFACE

Hitherto men have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be. They have arranged their relationships according to their ideas of God, of normal man, etc. The phantoms of their brains have got out of their hands. They, the creators, have bowed down before their creations. Let us liberate them from the chimeras, the ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away. Let us revolt against the rule of thoughts. Let us teach men, says one, to exchange these imaginations for thoughts which correspond to the essence of man; to take up a critical attitude to them, says the second; to knock them out of their heads; and-existing reality will collapse, says the third.

1. A. Idealism and Materialism

The Illusions of German Ideology

The Old Hegelians had comprehended everything as soon as it was reduced to an Hegelian logical category. The Young Hegelians criticised everything by attributing to it religious conceptions or by pronouncing it a theological matter. The Young Hegelians are in agreement with the Old Hegelians in their belief in the rule of religion, of concepts, of a universal principle in the existing world.

Only, the one party attacks this dominion as usurpation, while the other extols it as legitimate.

Since the Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men (just as the Old Hegelians declared them the true bonds of human society) it is evident that the Young Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness. Since, according to their fantasy, the relationships of men, all their doings, their chains and their limitations are products of their consciousness, the Young Hegelians logically put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical or egoistic consciousness, and thus of removing their limitations. This demand to change consciousness amounts to a demand to interpret reality in another way, i.e. to recognise it by means of another interpretation. The Young-Hegelian ideologists, in spite of their allegedly "world-shattering" statements, are the staunchest conservatives. The most recent of them have found the correct expression for their activity when they declare they are only fighting against "phrases". They forget, however, that to these phrases they themselves are only opposing other phrases, and that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are merely combating the phrases of this world. The only results which this philosophic criticism could achieve were a few (and at that thoroughly one-sided) elucidations of Christianity from the point of view of religious history; all the rest of their assertions are only further embellishments of their claim to have furnished, in these unimportant elucidations, discoveries of universal importance.

It has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, the relation of their criticism to their own material surroundings.

First Premises of Materialist Method

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under

which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way.

The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. Of course, we cannot here go either into the actual physical nature of man, or into the natural conditions in which man finds himself - geological, hydrographical, climatic and so on. The writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men.

Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.

The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production.

This production only makes its appearance with the increase of population. In its turn this presupposes the intercourse [*Verkehr*] of individuals with one another. The form of this intercourse is again determined by production.

From E.P. Thompson, “An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski” in *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (1978)

My feelings have even a more personal tone. I feel, when I turn over your pages in *Encounter*, a sense of injury and betrayal. My feelings are no affair of yours: you must do what you think is right. But they explain why I write, not an article or polemic, but this open letter.

It would be impertinent in me to speculate too far upon the experiences which have led you to this point of negation. It may not be as nice as “Westerners” assume for a Pole or a Czech to leave his friends and colleagues, and his context of engagement, and come to “the West”. Your arrival in West Berlin coincided with the ascendance of a peculiarly impulsive and intransigent German revolutionary youth movement. Your arrival in California coincided with a culture of “radicalism”, which had serious and courageous components, but which was surrounded by a halo of hysteria which—caught up and magnified in the lenses of the sensationalist media—reproduced itself across half the world as a “youth culture” of self-indulgent emotionalism and of exhibitionist style. From Paris to Berkeley, from Munich to Oxford, the “West” offered a supermarket of avant garde products, some branded as “Marxism”, each cutting the price against the other. But how many of these products, when unpackaged, contained only old and discredited arguments under a new label, or a horrific make-up kit for the revolting young bourgeoisie (a fast sports-car, a villa in the Appenines, and the Thoughts of Mao-Tse-Tung) to act out their transient, fashionable pantomime? Posters of Che Guevara, juxtaposed against mini-skirts, “Mao tunics”, and military leather jackets, decorated the most modish, swinging boutiques, in the King’s Road and in Royal Leamington Spa; for a year or two, intoxicated by “May 1968” in Paris—or, rather, by this event as assimilated in instant myth—cohorts of leftist students imagined that, by some act of occupation of a few administrators’ offices, they could announce in the heart of repressive capitalist society a “red base” which would bring an instant

voluntaristic proletarian revolution looming out of the streets.. That was the year of the gauchistes, the year when the tragedy of Joanna Southcott's annunciation of the impending birth of the Shiloh was reenacted, but this time as a rich kid's revolutionary farce; and in both cases the pregnancy of the millenium was diagnosed, at last, as dropsy.

I grant the irrationalisms of that year. It was a bad year for one with your exacting intellectual temper to come to the "West". From your later references to "the blind enthusiasm for the meaningless idea of global revolution" (see p. 335) one can detect how these experiences seemed to you. And yet there are other, and more hopeful, ways of seeing that experience: the challenge to Gaullism, the great strikes in the French motor industry, the first large cracks in the massive, ritualized traditionalism both of French academic institutions and of the routinized politics and routinized ideology of the P.C.F.

And then, again, I must ask against what *perspective* you observed these phenomena? Did you consider that what was remarkable in the German youth movement was not its impulsive form and its lack of bearings, but that these children of Hitler's legionaries had taken to the streets, and in this affirmative way, at all? Did you remember, while shrugging off the hysteric harmonics within Californian culture, that these were resonances only from a profound and healthy human chord—a chord which signalled the decomposition of that state-endorsed ideological conformism (chauvinism, hysteric anti-communism—with its rituals of denunciation and of exorcism—and mindless technological consumerism) which had dominated American college culture during the high years of the Cold War? It is from that matrix of crew-cut, clean-limbed playboys, of mother-pampered, "christian scientific", systems-conditioned, ambitious, morally-adaptive and intellectually-null college boys of 1946-60 that, one after another, the astonishing cast of Watergate has come. You found the enthusiasms of West Coast revolutionaries in 1968 to be "blind." And perhaps, at this point and at that, I would share your judgement.

But what of that? It has always been your work, in Berkeley as in Warsaw, to help the blind to see. Enthusiasm—and an enthusiasm generous enough to act against racialism, to declare against war, to submit to the ministrations of Mayor Daly's helmeted (christian scientific?) state priests—is a better starting-

point, one would have thought, than that earlier campus culture which generated men and women who, like propositions from a page of Talcott Parsons, have no vocabulary in which lies, bribery, espionage upon citizens, corruption, can be encompassed at all.

Forewarned by an experience sufficient for any life-time, you need only glance at some of the “Marxisms” currently on offer to identify them as manias. And to this I assent. I would criticize you only for this: that you have assumed that the loudest, the most strident, the most modish or the most “reputable” voices are those that are most significant. You were perhaps unaware of the great “law of development” of intellectual life in “the West,” in this stage of competitive consumer society, that cultural modes must change, like sartorial fashions, with dizzy speed from one year to the next; that in ideas as in structure that determines acceptance, and that, moreover, very many intellectual workers—even men and women whose work is to teach youth, to write, to present television—literally do not remember positions which they adopted ardently and with vituperation against all opponents two or three years before.

Indeed, this law seems to me to apply most particularly to the intellectual Left. From voluntarism to determinism, from “red bases” on campuses to exclusive dependence upon proletarian revolt, from non-violence to aggression, from apologetics—in the name of supra-nationalist universals—for the Common Market to glorification of the Provisional I.R.A.: between all these positions people oscillate, adopting each with equal fervour, never dropping their voices for reflection in between. Indeed, these contradictions coexist in the same minds. Consistency is a vice of the square and out-of-date. It can’t be reconciled with the “contradictions of reality”, nor with the imperative to “do one’s own thing”. Consistency is an old bore.

Further Reading Suggestions

Recommended Secondary Literature:

- * Althusser, L., Balibar, E., et al. *Reading Capital* (1965)
- * Federici, S. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (1998)
- * Harvey, D. *A Companion to Marx's Capital* (2010)
- * Sperber, J. *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (2013)

You can find a full list of suggestions for further reading and secondary literature on all of the primary texts in these booklets on the website:

<https://www.notestoliterature.com/twelve-books-to-have>

About Notes to Literature

Notes is an e-learning project that offers personalised higher-education tuition in European literature, history and philosophy. At its core are 12 short courses on modern and classical authors, including (among others) Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, Karl Marx, and James Joyce. The courses can be taken on a one-to-one or a small group basis, and starting dates are flexible. Just sign up for modules of interest on the website. Notes was set up with the specific idea of creating a short series of courses that would provide adult and young adult learners with a foundational, integrated and critical study of the history of Western thought and literature. This idea reflects our belief that creative and critical response to this tradition has an important role to play in understanding our current selves and predicaments, as well as in imagining and fashioning our possible futures.

If you would like more information about Notes to Literature, please do get in touch with me at jonathan@notestoliterature.com or visit the website: notestoliterature.com.

If you are a school, or a company, and would like to inquire about arranging courses for your students or employees, please reach out. I can provide further details on the different kinds of approaches and services I offer depending on the particular learning contexts.

If you would like to pursue further independent reading on any of the authors in the booklet, or if you are setting up a reading group, I'm always happy to send on reading lists and guided reading questions that might be helpful for your discussions.

And of course, if you are interested in taking a course with Notes, I'd be delighted to hear from you. I offer free no-obligation meetings to discuss your goals, talk about some aspects of my approach, and think about how the courses could be tailored for you.

Happy reading.



About Me : Jonathan Gallagher

I received my doctorate in 2019 from the University of Edinburgh, where I taught several undergraduate courses, ranging from medieval and early modern literature, to Romantic, Modernist and Late-Modernist poetry and drama. My doctoral research examined the relationship between processes of state-formation in early modern England and the spectacular flourishing of religious poetry witnessed during the same period. This work has been published by leading academic journals in my field, and tries to show that religious poetry was vitally and critically responsive to broad changes in social relations and practices of rule in 17C England.

In my teaching, as in my research, I'm drawn to examining intellectual history and literary art in the context of given social and political conditions. With that in mind, in 2022, I founded Notes to Literature. My hope is that Notes will grow into a distinguished provider of personalised adult education in the humanities. The plan is to go about this one client at a time.

You can learn more about Notes and me here: <https://www.notestoliterature.com/my-work>

<https://edinburgh.academia.edu/JonathanGallagher>