

# Marxist Philosophy in Britain: An Overview

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Scholarly interest in Marxist philosophy has fluctuated dramatically in the past fifty years. Before that, there was little scholarly work in Britain on Marxist philosophy or on Marxism more generally. In the nineteen fifties there were important contributions by economic theorists<sup>1</sup> and social historians<sup>2</sup> but academic discussion of Marx's philosophy or even of his political theory was minimal and mainly by critics.<sup>3</sup> There were only a few philosophers who adhered to Marxism and these were mostly associated with the British Communist Party. This was an orthodox party aligned with the Soviet Union in its political and theoretical standpoint.<sup>4</sup> It was never a large political party, unlike those in some other European countries such as Italy or France, and had only a limited impact on British intellectual life.

## The New Left and Marxist Humanism

The year 1956 was a turning point. The Soviet invasion of Hungary and Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin had a major impact on the left. These events were catalysts which led a number of people to break with the Communist Party. Some abandoned Marxism altogether, but others began to develop Marxism in new and innovative ways. This group formed what came to be called the 'new left'. This was primarily an intellectual movement. Its most important and enduring vehicle in Britain was the journal *New Left Review*.<sup>5</sup> A number of major intellectual figures emerged from this movement at this time, including the historians E. P. Thompson and Perry Anderson, and the philosophers Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. MacIntyre and Taylor soon abandoned Marxism and the left. Anderson has been the dominant force in *New Left Review* from its foundation right down to the present. In the 1960s, under his influence, the journal played a leading role in introducing the work of many 'western Marxist' and continental European thinkers to an English-speaking audience.<sup>6</sup>

The British Communist Party at the time was authoritarian and bureaucratic. Its ideology was a doctrinaire version of Marxism closely based on Soviet sources. The thinkers of the new left were reacting against this. They criticised received Party orthodoxy and began to rethink some of the fundamental tenets of Marxism. They began to explore aspects of Marx's theory which had been ignored, or even positively excluded from discussion by the Communist Party orthodoxy. In particular, Marxism began to be seen not only as an economic and historical theory but also as a humanistic outlook, with an important moral, social and even aesthetic dimension. These new interests were greatly stimulated by the first translations into English of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and other of Marx's early writings which began to appear in the late 1950s. There was intense discussion of the concept of alienation and other humanist themes in Marx's early works. There was a new interest in the philosophical roots of Marx's ideas. Hegel was no longer treated only as an aberrant

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Dobb, Joan Robinson; also Paul Sweezy in the USA.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Hill, E. J. Hobsbawm, Rodney Hilton.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, John Plamenatz, H. B. Acton.

<sup>4</sup> The main Communist Party philosopher in Britain in the years after World War II was Maurice Cornforth.

<sup>5</sup> *New Left Review* was founded in 1960 from an amalgamation of two earlier new left journals: *New Reasoner* and *Universities and Left Review*. It is still being published, though its intellectual and political character has changed considerably.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson was responsible for coining the term itself (Anderson 1976).

idealist influence on Marx. He was seen, rather, as an important source of many of Marx's most fruitful ideas.

The new left started as a small movement among a few intellectuals on the left. It rapidly gathered strength as it united with other strands of left wing activity which grew in the 1960s. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the Anti-Apartheid movement were particularly influential in Britain in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These were soon augmented by the impact of the US civil rights movement, the student movement, growing protests about the War in Vietnam and, later, the beginnings of the women's movement.

### **The High Tide of Marxism**

Many of these strands of left activity faltered and declined at the end of the 1960s. However, the intellectual impact of the rise of the left in the 1960s was delayed. As Hegel says, 'the Owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk'.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the 1960s, Marxism could no longer be dismissed by academics in the west as only the ideology of the Soviets and their allies, it had become an influential component of a wider intellectual life. A new generation of young teachers, who had been radicalized as students in the 1960s and who came into academic life in the early 1970s, fought to have Marxist and other left ideas included in the curriculum in philosophy and other subjects.<sup>8</sup> Their influence was soon evident not only in philosophy and political theory, but in every area of the humanities and social sciences. Marxism had become a component of the mainstream of British intellectual life. The tide of Marxism in Britain had reached a high point.

In this period, the need for more rigorous and philosophically defensible interpretations of Marxism began to be felt. Two very different forms of Marxist emerged in response: structuralist and analytical Marxism. These closely reflected the endemic split within British philosophy between 'continental' and 'analytical' approaches. However, there were also significant areas of common ground between them. In particular, both shared a profound hostility towards Hegelian philosophy and its influence on Marx, and both turned their back upon Marx's early work and refocused attention upon his later economic writings.

### **Structuralist Marxism**

The most influential structuralist Marxist was the French philosopher Louis Althusser.<sup>9</sup> His work had an enormous impact upon those working in the continental tradition. He maintained that there is a radical, 'epistemological break' between Marx's youthful and his mature thought. In his early writings, according to Althusser, Marx is still under the influence of Hegel and Feuerbach. His thought in this period is philosophical and humanist in character, it is grounded in a theory of human nature. However, at a certain point, Marx breaks decisively with his early humanist and Hegelian philosophical perspective.<sup>10</sup> He creates a 'new science'. This involves a structural social and economic theory that rejects all concepts of human nature or the human subject and interprets individuals as mere functions ('supports') of social relations.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hegel 1942, Preface.

<sup>8</sup> The journal *Radical Philosophy* was founded with this aim in 1972. It is still being published though its character has changed considerably.

<sup>9</sup> Althusser 1969, Althusser and Balibar 1970. Other important structuralist Marxist thinkers include Poulantzas 1973 (political theory) and Godelier 1972 (social anthropology).

<sup>10</sup> Althusser initially dated this 'break' around 1845.

<sup>11</sup> Althusser 1969.

Unfortunately, the attempt to fit Marx into this framework proved unworkable. In particular, the Hegelian and humanist strands in Marx's work are undeniable. Moreover, they are not confined to his early work, they are present throughout. The idea of alienation from work and from economic activity is an abiding theme of Marx's critique of capitalism and the market. Althusser was gradually forced to acknowledge this, and increasingly to accept that his description of Marx's theory was more an account of what he believed Marx ideally ought to have said than an objective interpretation of what Marx actually says.<sup>12</sup>

### **Analytical Marxism**

Analytical Marxists have been equally hostile to the Hegelian influences in Marxism, but from a very different perspective. Analytical Marxism involved the attempt to use the techniques of analytical philosophy to reinterpret (or, as they put it, 'reconstruct') Marxism.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, it has never been made clear precisely what these techniques are. However, the philosophers who advocate them are rooted in the empiricism and atomism which have long predominated in English-language philosophy; and they share a hostility in principle to dialectical modes of thought. Much of the work of analytical Marxism has been in the areas of ethics and political philosophy. The inconvenient fact that Marx explicitly affirms the dialectical character of his thought was ignored, as were concepts such as alienation which do not fit easily into the analytic picture.

Intellectuals in the English speaking world have, for the most part, been wary of Marx. He is radical and critical, an 'abomination' to the bourgeoisie as he himself put it. And, what is worse for the English at least, he is German. Analytical Marxists tried to tame and domesticate him. In the 1980s they had some success and Marxism was accepted into the higher reaches of the British academic establishment (Americans remained more wary). However, there was a price to pay. Marx was presented as an egalitarian liberal of a sort that was familiar to parochial English speaking academics. No mention was made of the Hegelian assumptions which alone makes sense of his thought, nor of the dreaded dialectic. Marx was reincarnated ('reconstructed') as a recognisable sort of liberal, of either the Rawlsian (Kantian) or utilitarian variety, concerned primarily with issues of justice, equality and the social good.<sup>14</sup>

### **The death of Marxism**

The rise of Reagan and Thatcher and their aggressive free market policies put the left in the west onto the defensive. With the intensification of the cold war in the 1980s and then the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe communism in 1989, the left suffered a world wide defeat. Capitalism and liberal democracy were triumphant. No other economic or political system seemed to exist or to be possible. Fukuyama (1992) famously declared that we were at the 'end of history'. Marxism and all it stands for was dead and buried.

The intellectual response was swift, the owl of Minerva took wing with unusual speed. Interest in Marxism in the western world all but vanished. It was dismissed as outdated and refuted. Ideas which had been central to discussion in philosophy and the social sciences only a few years earlier were suddenly rejected as outmoded and irrelevant. Discussion of Althusser's work all but ceased. Many Structuralist Marxists reinvented themselves and reappeared as 'post-structuralists' and 'post-modernists' of various kinds. Eventually Derrida

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<sup>12</sup> Althusser 2006.

<sup>13</sup> The most influential philosophical work of analytical Marxism is Cohen 1978. See also Elster 1985, Roemer 1986, Ware and Nielsen 1989.

<sup>14</sup> For a Marxist critique of analytical Marxism see Sayers 1984, Sayers 1998.

(who had been a student of Althusser) reaffirmed his commitment to Marx.<sup>15</sup> This was an important stand at the time, even if somewhat obscure in its formulation and difficult to reconcile with some of his other views. A few tried to follow his lead and resurrect Marx as a 'post-Marxist', a post-modernist, a deconstructionist, etc.. So far such work has been more 'post-' than Marxist; it has produced little that is recognisably Marxist in character.

Many analytical Marxists transformed themselves into Rawlsian or other sorts of liberal political thinkers. Marx was not so much repudiated as quietly discarded. Mention of Marx was simply dropped. There is now very little significant new analytical Marxist work being done in the western world. Analytical Marxism is all but dead.

## **Revival**

In sum, by the end of 1990s the tide of Marxism had ebbed away: there was almost no philosophical discussion of Marxist ideas in the English speaking world, either by analytical or continental philosophers. Fukuyama's triumphalism seemed to have been vindicated. However, that situation was short-lived. A number of movements kept the left alive during these difficult times. There is every sign that they are now growing in strength and confidence, and this is leading to a slow but steady and unmistakable revival of the left.

The most active and dynamic groups on the left in recent years have been concerned with issues that have been problematic for traditional Marxists and socialists more generally. Perhaps the most important of these is the environmental movement. This has grown greatly in strength and influence. Its relation to Marxism has been problematic. Many in the environmental movement see Marxism as part of the problem rather than the solution. They criticise Marxists for having an uncritical faith in economic development and technological progress. Marxism, they say, sees technology as an all-conquering human force: it does not sufficiently acknowledge the environmental problems it brings with it. The record of the Soviet Union and other Communist societies on environmental matters is cited as an indication of this. Others, however, have argued that there is no inherent reason for Marxism to be blind to environmental issues. Moreover, the threat to the environment should not be seen only as an issue of technological development and limited of natural resources. It is rooted ultimately in the uncontrolled exploitation of technology by the anarchic and unrestrained operation of a capitalist system which has no concern other than profit. Marx's philosophy, some argue, provides the only satisfactory basis for critically understanding these forces and responding to them.<sup>16</sup>

Another important area of recent political activity on the left has been concerned with "identity" politics: issues around the social effects of gender, race, ethnic and cultural differences. These have also been problematic areas for Marxism. Marx's social and political theory is often criticised for focusing too much on class and ignoring other dimensions of social difference.<sup>17</sup> However, the influence of these arguments has resulted in a tendency to go to the opposite extreme and ignore the fundamental role that class continues to play in contemporary social life. This is now beginning to be recognised, but a significant dialogue between these different points of view has yet to develop.

Perhaps the greatest influence leading to a revival of interest in Marx has come from the 'anti-capitalist' movement. This is a loose collection of small groups and individuals who organise demonstrations and protests all over the world against the destructive impact of global capitalism and its institutions. The movement is still fragmentary and amorphous. It

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<sup>15</sup> Derrida 1994.

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of these controversies see Hayward 1995.

<sup>17</sup> For an overview of these arguments in the field of feminist philosophy see Jaggar 1983.

has no unified theoretical perspective for its critical stance towards global capitalism, nor a programme or positive vision of an alternative. It cannot accurately be described as Marxist or even socialist in character. And yet it has directed critical attention towards the impact of global capitalism and this is inevitably leading to a revival in interest in Marx's ideas. For Marxism still remains by far the most comprehensive and illuminating theory dealing with these issues.

Perhaps the most discussed body of work to emerge from these concerns is that of Hardt and Negri.<sup>18</sup> Their ideas have emerged from the Italian Syndicalist movement and they locate them within the Marxist tradition.<sup>19</sup> However, they argue that Marxism must be revised to take account of new conditions which have developed in the post-industrial period. Post-industrial forms of work using computers and information technology are replacing the industrial factory. Work is becoming flexible and transitory; old specializations are being replaced by 'transferable skills'. Networks are replacing massed workers. The industrial working class is ceasing to be the main revolutionary force. It is being superseded by a dispersed and amorphous 'multitude' of the poor and dispossessed, which now confronts the 'empire' created by global capitalism. These ideas have generated considerable debate and discussion. Many writers have been sceptical of various aspects this analysis and have defended more traditional Marxist accounts.<sup>20</sup>

A revival of Marxist work in the area of philosophy is now also unmistakably under way. The main forum for such work is the journal *Historical Materialism* (founded 1995). Its success is an indication that a revival of Marxism is under way. It holds a large annual conference in London each winter that has been particularly successful in attracting the participation of Marxist scholars from Europe and North America. The Marxism Specialist Group of the Political Studies Association publishes a journal, *Studies in Marxism* (founded 1983), and organises regular conferences. Another important forum for Marxist ideas in Britain is the 'Marx and Philosophy Society' (founded 2004).<sup>21</sup> This holds regular seminars and conferences that have attracted substantial audiences who have engaged in a high level of debate. This has provided an important arena for scholarly work in Marxist political theory.

It is difficult to discern the main focus of Marxist philosophical work in Britain. Issues of globalisation, the environment, identity and class have all been much discussed. At a more abstract philosophical level, there has been a revival of interest in Marx's early writings, in the themes of alienation and humanism and the roots of Marx's thought in Hegel and German Idealist philosophy.

It is hard to predict how these studies will develop. However, it is already clear that talk of the final triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy is premature. The modern world is beset with deep problems and conflicts, and movements of protest and resistance are growing. Marxism still provides the most comprehensive and powerful theory with which to understand the problems of modern society and to guide a response to them. Its revival is likely to continue and to strengthen.

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<sup>18</sup> Hardt and Negri 2000, Hardt and Negri 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Virno and Hardt 1996

<sup>20</sup> See Balakrishnan 2003, Callinicos 2006 and recent articles in *Historical Materialism*.

<sup>21</sup> [www.marxandphilosophy.org.uk](http://www.marxandphilosophy.org.uk).

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