

Marx, Reason, and the Art of Freedom, by Kevin M. Brien. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987. \$32.95. Pp. xvi, 260.

Hegel was surely right to say that philosophy "is its own time apprehended in thought." He also believed that philosophy responds only after the event: "the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk." That is more questionable. In our time, a veritable

Berlin Wall has stretched across the intellectual no less than the political landscape, dividing Marxist from non-Marxist thought. Although the real Berlin Wall is only now being breached, its intellectual counterpart has been coming down for some time. Since the sixties, indeed, there has been an increasing dialog across the great divide. On the one side, Marxism is more and more recognized to be an essential and indispensable part of the intellectual mainstream; and on the other, Marxism has developed in new and fruitful ways by adapting and incorporating aspects of other schools, like existentialism, structuralism, and analytical philosophy.

Brien's book is an important and impressive example of this. It is an ambitious and wide ranging exploration of some of the major themes of Marxist philosophy, centered around the concept of freedom. Brien's approach is well anchored in a detailed treatment of the work of Marx (both early and late), Engels and others in the Marxist tradition (Ollman, Althusser, Mészáros). However, an unusually broad spectrum of other views is also explored and brought to bear in the argument. The ideas of the Hegelian philosopher Brand Blanshard, the feminist Nancy Chodorow, the physicist David Bohm, the social theorist Erich Fromm, and even the Zen thinker D. T. Suzuki, are discussed with sympathy and incorporated skillfully as the argument develops.

The result is an original, richly drawn and challenging work. Its main purpose is to develop an account of freedom and unalienated activity. However, his argument ranges far more widely than such a brief description suggests, to include detailed consideration of Marx's method, the idea of internal relations, feminism, human needs, and many other topics.

Brien gives a humanist interpretation of Marxism. He begins with an account of human reality in terms of the Heideggerian concept of "being-in-the-world." He wants to rid this concept of its phenomenological overtones and interpret it in purely ontological terms. According to Brien, we have the possibility of transcending our situation: "human beings are always more than antecedent conditions may have made them be, by virtue of their capacity to make what they become by their own activity" (45). This rules out any purely determinist and economic account of Marxism, and obliges us to acknowledge that there is a measure of indeterminacy in social and economic life.

Marxism, Brien argues, seeks to overcome the alienation — the divisions and separations — imposed by capitalist social relations both in practice and in theory. Unalienated activity is freedom as a "mode-of-being": a condition in which we are not divided from others or from ourselves by social relations. Perhaps the most valuable part of the book is Brien's extended exploration of this notion. He portrays it as a condi-

tion in which not only our economic needs, but also our basic "existential needs" are met. These include the needs for community, for meaning, and for self-fulfillment. He draws on Kant to portray the unalienated condition as one in which we treat others as ends in themselves, and not as mere means. However, he rejects Kant's individualism and his universal and ahistorical concept of Reason.

Many of these themes are familiar in the tradition of Marxist humanism. They are often presented as specific to Marx's early work and incompatible with the later "scientific" dimension of Marx's (and Engels') thought. Brien, however, rejects such humanism as one-sided. An important aspect of his argument is his claim to provide an interpretation which integrates the "critical" and the "scientific," the early and the later Marx, and Marx and Engels.

In short, Brien attempts a highly ambitious and far reaching synthesis. Clearly there are perils in such a project. Can it avoid the merely eclectic tacking together of an assortment of incompatible ideas? Brien is aware of this danger: he argues his case clearly and carefully at every stage. Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether Brien successfully demonstrates that Marxism can coherently incorporate the quasi-existentialist picture of freedom that he describes.

In rejecting determinism, Brien portrays capitalism as a purely oppressive and divisive social system, heading for "breakdown." Such "breakdown," he argues, will create an "existential vacuum," out of which can emerge revolutionary new forms of social consciousness, not determined by capitalism. This picture enables him to question the view that the proletariat necessarily has the primary revolutionary role, and also the theory that socialism will automatically emerge out of capitalism as the inevitable next stage. To be sure, the experience of the 20th century has forced a rethinking of these aspects of traditional Marxism. That is beyond dispute. But we must be careful not to throw out the baby with the bath water. Like so many other Marxist humanists, in abandoning "determinism" in this way, Brien is effectively abandoning the whole of Marx's social theory of classes and theory of history. With all this gone, the analysis of social change and the criticism of capitalism rest only on the moral notions of "existential needs" and "alienation."

There is a more philosophical issue as well. Brien sees the human impact of capitalism as purely alienating, and its ultimate destiny as mere "breakdown." It is questionable, however, whether Marx's theory of history can be understood in these terms. The new order does not emerge out of a "vacuum," but from forces which are created and developed in the old society. The new society, as Marx puts it, develops in the womb of the old. Revolution is not simply a "breakdown" of the old order; it is also the process which brings forth the new. It is impos-

sible to understand all this in terms of a theory which sees capitalism as a *purely* negative social form; and one which has no determining influence whatever on the new society which emerges out of it. On the contrary, if we are to do justice to the complexity and power of Marx's thought in this area, we must recognize the *contradictory* character of capitalism. We must see that there are both positive and negative aspects to it. Indeed, in Hegel's words, we must "see the positive in the negative."

Of course there are problems with such a position, some of which Brien describes; but a strong case can be made that it is Marx's position, nevertheless. And, if it is, then there are far deeper difficulties for Brien than he recognizes. It may be that there are real differences and incompatibilities between Marxism and existentialism — in which case, the synthesis that Brien is seeking is ultimately impossible, and a fruitful dialog and interaction is the most that can be hoped for.

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