

**Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of  
Dialectical Materialism**

**James D. White**

London: Macmillan, 1996

Reviewed by Sean Sayers

The main purpose of this study is to argue that the 'Marxism' which became the orthodoxy in the Soviet Union under the titles of 'dialectical' and 'historical materialism' has little to do with Marx's ideas properly understood. This is not a particularly novel or surprising claim. White, however, argues for it in an unusual way. The book falls into the two parts which are alluded to in the title. The first describes the way in which Marx's early philosophy developed out of the romantic and Hegelian strands of classical German philosophy. White then goes on to show how Marx's ideas were adapted and interpreted, or rather misinterpreted, in Russian revolutionary circles at the end of the nineteenth century to form the basis for what was to become Soviet Marxism.

The relation of Marx's thought to the work of previous philosophers is well trodden ground. White's main original point, in what is otherwise a somewhat routine and laboured account, is that, in his youth, Marx was far more sympathetic to and influenced by romanticism than is usually appreciated or than Marx himself would later wish to acknowledge. By 'romanticism', in this context, White means an outlook that values what is natural and simple over what is more developed and complex. In social thought, this involves seeing earlier, simpler and more primitive conditions as giving a better model for social life than later and more sophisticated ones. It seeks the social ideal in an earlier 'natural' state which is corrupted and destroyed by subsequent social development.

Marx's philosophy, like Hegel's, is usually portrayed as hostile to such romanticism, which it rejects as conservative and backward looking. Indeed, according to White, Marx soon abandoned his early adherence to romanticism. However, White maintains, typically romantic modes of expression linger on in Marx's thought and testify to its enduring impact in his work.

White makes his case by trying to show that there are characteristically romantic echoes in the ways in which Marx uses the terms 'universal' and 'particular'. However, these terms were common currency in German philosophy at the time. The mere fact that they occur in Marx's writings is not sufficient to establish any conclusions about the philosophical character of his thought. Romantic ideas were influential throughout this period and Marx

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could not but have been influenced by them, even in criticising and opposing them. But to suggest that Marx was an adherent of romanticism in a more positive way is unsupported by the sort of argument that White uses. For the thesis that White wishes to establish is a philosophical one which can only be demonstrated in a philosophical fashion: through an inward and philosophical consideration of Marx's philosophy *as* a philosophy, which is lacking here.

## Marx and Russia

In the second part of the book, White goes on to show how Marx's ideas were transmitted via Engels, and taken up in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century. White gives a detailed account of Marx's studies of Russian society and his involvement with Russian socialists from the 1860s until his death in 1883. He then describes the reception of Marx's work in Russia up to and including Lenin's earliest works. This is the most valuable and successful part of this study; the book comes alive at this point.

The emancipation of the serfs in Russia in 1861 and the social developments it set in train sparked an explosion of interest in social conditions in Russia. Modern Russian social science dates from this period. In order to study these social changes and to follow the Russian debate about them, Marx taught himself Russian. As White shows, his knowledge of conditions in Russia was remarkably extensive and deep. He kept up with the growing literature on Russian economic and social conditions, and maintained contact with a large number of Russian economists and social thinkers. In 1877, when Danielson invited Marx to write on the subject of Russian agrarian relations, 'he could do so in the confidence that [Marx] was as familiar with all the available sources on the subject as any scholar in Russia' (p. 244). Yet the fruits of these studies, including the drafts for the piece that Danielson had requested, have not yet been published in English. Marx's voluminous notes and drafts are not even scheduled for inclusion in the 50 volumes of the English Marx-Engels *Collected Works*. They are still available only in Russian.

A particular focus of controversy in Russia at the time concerned the traditional form of communal ownership among the peasantry. Would it survive the abolition of serfdom and the advent of capitalist relations in the countryside? Could it form the basis for a progressive social order in the future? Or did the imperatives of economic

development mean that it must be swept away and that only capitalism could provide the basis for further social progress?

For Marx, these questions related to his wider investigations of pre-capitalist societies. These included his extensive studies of the early anthropological work of Morgan, Maine and others, which Engels draws on and quotes from in *Origin of the Family, Private Property and State*.<sup>1</sup>

Marx had become increasingly aware that there were extensive survivals of pre-capitalist forms in capitalist societies. In a letter to Engels of 25 March 1868, of which White makes a lot, he says, 'right in *my own* neighbourhood, on the *Hunsrück*, the Germanic system survived up till the *last few* years. I now remember my father talking to me about it from a *lawyer's* point of view' (Marx 1934, quoted p. 206). Such survivals posed problems for the ideas of capitalist development which Marx was working on in the early 1860s in connection with the second volume of *Capital*. For the assumption which had guided Marx's thought in this period was the Hegelian one that historical development was a progressive process in the course of which earlier forms would be swept away.

According to the story that White tells, Marx's Russian studies, together with his anthropological investigations, led to a questioning of this view which resulted eventually in a crisis in Marx's thinking and a transformation of his whole approach to social and historical questions. Indeed, White maintains, they led to a veritable 'turning point in Marx's conception of socialism' (p. 358). Marx came to reconsider his hostility to romanticism. Towards the end of the 1860s, he adopted the view that ancient communal social forms, such as had survived among the peasantry in Russia and other parts of Europe, could provide the basis for an ideal future socialist society. According to White, Marx

had not been able to see ancient society in this way before, because his judgement in this respect had been blinkered: he had always associated the search for a social ideal in the past with Romanticism, against which he and other Young Hegelians had campaigned in the days when the idea of the 'Critique [of Political Economy]' was first conceived. The letter [Marx 1934], therefore, signified a reorientation towards the Romantic movement, to which Marx had belonged in this youth. (p. 358)

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<sup>1</sup> Engels 1958. Marx's notes and extracts have been published in English in Marx 1972.

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Marx's new outlook, White suggests, was the reason for his inability to complete the remaining volumes of *Capital*. The new approach contradicted the assumptions which had guided Marx's work in Volume 1 of *Capital*, in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and, indeed, in everything he had written since his early youth. A radical revision of his basic philosophy was called for which Marx was not able to accomplish before his death in 1883.

The economic theory which Marx outlines in the well-known 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* envisages that historical development proceeds through a series of distinct and discrete stages. The working out of the potentialities of one stage creates the basis upon which the next develops. The implication seems to be that earlier social forms will be eliminated as a necessary precondition for the transition to the next historical stage.

No social order ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society.<sup>2</sup>

Capitalism, as Marx so graphically insists in the *Manifesto*, was sweeping away all earlier 'fixed and fast frozen' social forms and imposing pure cash relations with an unprecedented thoroughness and ruthlessness. Hence, the survival of ancient forms of communal social relations, even in a society as developed as the Rhineland in the nineteenth century, was a puzzle, as Marx comments in his letter.

There is no doubt that Marx's increased awareness of such facts, and the understanding of the character of these communal forms provided by his anthropological and Russian studies, revealed anomalies and problems for his social and historical theory. To acknowledge this is one thing. It is quite another thing to suggest – as White does – that these problems led Marx to abandon the general historical framework which had up until then guided his social thought and completely to reverse his historical approach. Although this conclusion is suggested and insinuated throughout, White presents no convincing evidence for it. His case turns almost entirely upon a dubious reading of this one letter and is flimsy in the extreme.

In any case, Marx died before he himself could resolve his thoughts in this area and complete *Capital*. The massive task of

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<sup>2</sup> Marx 1859, p. 21.

editing Marx's manuscripts fell to Engels. Engels's overriding concern was to produce a publishable version of the remaining volumes. Marx had completed substantial drafts for volumes 2 and 3, which he had planned to revise in the light of the anthropological and Russian material which White describes. Rather than trying to anticipate how Marx might have attempted to incorporate this into *Capital*, Engels chose to set it aside and base the posthumous volumes of *Capital* on the existing manuscripts of them that Marx had left insofar as this was possible. As White concedes, this was the only realistic alternative open to Engels. However, the upshot was that Marx's Russian studies were unknown to the founders of Russian Marxism and did not see the light of day until many years later.<sup>3</sup>

Both Marx and Engels avoided taking sides in the controversies about the political character of the Russian peasant commune in their few public statements on the topic. Nevertheless, the first generation of Russian economists and social thinkers had been in contact with Marx and knew of the complexities of his thinking at first hand. In the last years of the nineteenth century, however, a new generation of Russian revolutionaries emerged who had no contact with Marx himself and had no first-hand knowledge of his thinking about the significance of the peasant commune. These included Plekhanov, Struve and Lenin. Plekhanov's views were particularly influential. They were motivated primarily by the demands of the struggle with Narodism. In the name of Marxism, Plekhanov fiercely rejected any thought that Russia could avoid a capitalist stage of development and find a basis for progressive institutions in the peasant commune. Lenin endorsed this position, again in the name of Marxism, and it became fundamental to Soviet Marxism.

That such views have a basis in Marx's own work cannot be disputed. As White acknowledges, the ground for such an interpretation was 'prepared by Marx himself' (p. 366). Nevertheless, White maintains, Plekhanov and Lenin, and the Soviet interpretation of Marxism which followed from their work, was 'committed to a form of Marxism which came about not simply by the transfer of Marx's original ideas to a different historical and national environment, not simply by their reinterpretation, but by misrepresenting what they were and how they had originated' (p. 366).

Since the Soviet conception of Marxism has had such an influence on the way in which Marxism was subsequently perceived,

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<sup>3</sup> Regrettably, White does not recount the publishing history of these manuscripts.

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White concludes that Marx's ideas are still 'little understood' (p. 1). The system of dialectical and historical materialism which emerged in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century, and which has so influenced subsequent conceptions of Marxism, is a misinterpretation of what Marx really thought as regards both his general outlook and his account of Russia, perpetrated principally by Engels and Plekhanov. The intellectual origins of dialectical materialism do not go back to Marx, but rather to Engels and Plekhanov. The implications of this story, White concludes, are that what almost universally passes for Marxism is not in fact 'true' Marxism.

## What is true Marxism?

White's account of Marx's Russian studies makes for an interesting episode in the history of ideas, but whether it will yield the conclusions that White wants from it is more questionable. These are theoretical and philosophical in character. They concern the nature of Marxism. White claims to be using a 'historical' method to answer these questions, though, unfortunately, he does not explain what he takes this to involve. His main theme is that Russian dialectical materialism did not originate from Marx's own words, which are treated as authoritative on this matter.

But the question is: *which* of Marx's words are to be granted this status? Marx's words conflict. Right up to the end of his life, Marx's thoughts were in the process of development; they were unresolved on crucial matters, incomplete and contradictory. This is clear from the account that White himself gives. As White well shows, Marx's Russian studies were pointing in directions which seemed to conflict with the ideas of historical progress that had guided his previous work. How these apparent conflicts should be dealt with is a matter for interpretation, and different interpretations are possible.

In any case, such questions of interpretation raise philosophical issues which cannot be resolved by poring over the words of Marx as though these have sacred authority. Indeed, the very idea that Marxism is fixed and given by the word of Marx must be questioned. As Lenin says, 'we do not regard Marx's theory as something complete and inviolable; on the contrary, we are convinced that ... socialists *must* develop it in all directions if they wish to keep pace with life'.<sup>4</sup> Marxism is not a dead doctrine unchangeably laid down by Marx. As a genuinely historical phenomenon, it is a living and

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<sup>4</sup> Lenin 1969, p. 34.

developing philosophy which is continually being applied in new conditions, used in new circumstances and, in the process, continually being rethought, adapted and changed. The implications of this are well described by Lukács.

Let us assume for the sake of argument that recent research had disproved once and for all every one of Marx's individual theses. Even if this were to be proved, every serious 'orthodox' Marxist would still be able to accept all such modern findings without reservation and hence dismiss all of Marx's theses *in toto* – without having to renounce his orthodoxy for a single moment. Orthodox Marxism, therefore, does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the 'belief' in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a 'sacred' book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*.<sup>5</sup>

White, by contrast, is mesmerised by the 'results of Marx's investigations', particularly as these relate to Russia. He gives no convincing theoretical justification for his thesis that these imply that 'true' Marxism is a form of romanticism. One cannot but suspect that there is some hidden political agenda behind all this relating to the murkier depths of modern Russian politics, but White does not make this explicit. The Bolshevik era has passed into history. If Marxism is not to go the same way, Marxists should stop fighting its battles and develop Marxism as a living philosophy.

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<sup>5</sup> Lukács 1971, p. 1.

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