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The Hydra of Marxism

Marxism: 100 Years in the Life of a Doctrine. By Bertram D. Wolfe. New York: The Dial Press, 1965. xxii + 404pp. \$6.95.

IN 1896, after Böhm-Bawerk published his incisive critique of Marx's *Capital*, most thinking people in the West considered Marxism finished. During the following half century, no chair of Marxism was to be found at any Western university, no self-respecting philosopher regarded the exposition and refutation of Marxism as a task worthy of his serious effort. How wrong they—nay, we—all were! Today Marxism is one of the dominating intellectual and spiritual influences in the world. It has combined with Psychoanalysis (Fromm), with Existentialism (Sartre), with Weberian Sociology (C. Wright Mills), and has provided language and seeming justification for a concerted attack by intellectuals, artists, and beatniks on the values, order, and power of our society. A Marxist total critique of the existing society now goes for *ersatz*-religion in astonishingly wide circles, including our universities and government bureaucracy. Marxist attitudes toward life, future, revolution, etc. are taken for granted to such an extent that someone who does not share them sticks out like a sore thumb in New York, Berkeley, and even Washington. Yet we have no real grounds for complaint. While Marx wrote volume after volume (*The Critique of Hegel's Philoso-*

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phy of Law, 1843; the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 1844; *The Holy Family*, 1845; *The German Ideology*, 1846; *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 1847) to demolish the ideas of rivals and opponents, what have we done to demolish Marx? Böhm-Bawerk attacked a system which he esteemed essentially a structure of economics. His critique was devastating as far as economics is concerned, but Marxism turns out to have survived it, because Marxism is not a system of economics. True, Marx's analysis of our society—which he calls bourgeois society—is couched in terms of economics, but it is moral judgment and historical prediction rather than economic order that he is after.

Since World War II, serious studies of Marx and Marxism have multiplied. In Germany a whole spate of *Marxismusstudien* has been instigated and published by Irving Fetscher, in England by George Lichtheim, in France by Maximilien Rubel. In this country Robert Tucker and Herbert Marcuse have written on Marxism, and to them must be added authors writing in Mexico, Australia, and Switzerland. Nearly all of this contemporary work is being done by persons of Marxist sympathies, or else by those seeking to extricate their minds from former Marxist convictions. In so far as there is an intellectual battle, it is thus being waged largely on Marxist terrain, with Marxist or Marx-like arguments on both sides. Some years ago I called for another Augustine to battle against this modern Manichaeism. None has appeared so far, alas, and Marxist thought still occupies most of the field.

BERTRAM WOLFE'S *Marxism* is a fascinating book, written in the author's unmistakable lively style, full of historical sidelights and incisive in its judgments on Marx and the Marxists—but with all these

qualities it is still not the intellectual demolition of a false faith for which our time is crying. The book's arrangement is indicative of the author's thrust, which aims not at the opponent's heart. Part I, *Nationalism or Internationalism?*, and Part II, *Defensism, Defeatism, or Pacifism?*, deal largely with attitudes which Marx and Engels adopted toward current events in the second half of the nineteenth century and expressed in letters, speeches, and newspaper articles. What emerges is a psychological study of changing and often conflicting positions. Much of this will add to a new appraisal of Marx and even Engels, but the structure of Marxism remains untouched by these findings. What Marx and Engels thought about the Crimean War, or the danger of Russia, did not go into Marxism, but remains in the marginal field of personal history. The next part, *The Paris Commune, an Ambiguous Revolution*, is a little more central to the theme, since the myth of the Paris Commune does indeed constitute an integral element of Marxism. After that, Wolfe finally moves to the heart of the matter. Part IV asks, *Democracy or Dictatorship?*, Part V, by way of answer, points to *The Flaw in the Foundation*, the fundamental ambiguity of Marxism which renders a Leninist interpretation just as plausible as a Social-Democratic one. This part also deals with the Second and Third Internationals, each representing a possible use of the Marxist thought structure. The final part contains Wolfe's own judgments, a brilliant reckoning with Marxism as a political force.

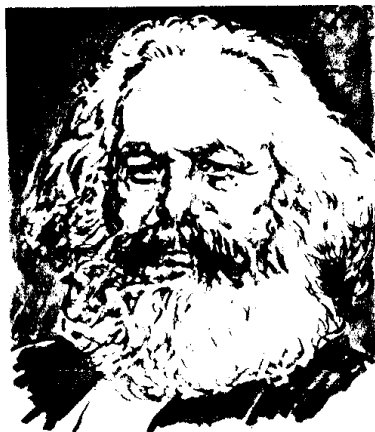
Hegel, with his lopsided idealism, probably stands in the way of a proper contemporary appreciation of the force of the human mind. Like Marx, modern Western man has recoiled from idealism and inclines to dismiss the notion that thought is the structure of social order or a cause of disorder. He prefers to look upon economic forces and property arrangements as ultimate realities compared with which the things of the mind are but derivative oscillations. This applies also to the interpretation of Marxism itself. In so far as Marxism is a

practical movement, we tend to regard it as the outgrowth of economic misery; in so far as it is a construction of ideas, we believe that it centers in the advocacy of an economic system. Böhm-Bawerk's effective but indecisive attack on Marx should have taught us that this interpretation misses the main point, as should our pathetic attempts to counter Marxism by praising capitalism. Professor Karl Wittfogel never tires of repeating, "You cannot defeat something with nothing." In the case of Marxism, we have nothing yet by way of an idea structure to oppose it, but that is partly a result of not comprehending what that something is that needs to be defeated.

Bertram Wolfe, whose *Three Who Made a Revolution* is one of the best introductions to Leninist ideology, has not achieved another monument of ideological analysis. The first half of *Marxism* makes it appear as if Marx's and Engels' views on patriotism, war, defense, and current events are the true key to Marxism. They are not. Marxism is a movement "of the book"; its canon of scriptures has effects independent of Marx's personality and intents. Marx has created a structure of ideas that offers itself as a credo to those who embrace it. Precisely because this structure has been laid down in a canon of scriptures it is capable of holding together a militant movement by way of an orthodoxy. We need not go here into the somewhat academic question of whether Lenin or Kautsky was Marx's right disciple. Maybe both were, given the deep ambiguity of Marx's ideas. At any rate, the task is to push behind Lenin and get to Marx as the one who originated the dogma of beliefs which alone made Lenin possible.

What were those beliefs? First, the belief in Man who, rather than being a creature in a Creation, sits on the throne as the Creator of Himself, beholden to nobody and nothing, his own master and lord, carrying the key to his fulfillment in his own pocket. For this Marx required an ontology that left of reality nothing but "nature and man" (Feuerbach's terms), and man a part of Nature That Was and Ever Shall Be. Much is made of Marx's materialism. Again, our

own bias tends to play this element up as if it were the core of Marxism. If it were, however, more pains would have been taken to establish it, or at least elaborate its applications in analysis and practice. Instead, Marx never uses his own materialism in deciding important questions or arriving at key conclusions. It was Hegel's idealistic oneness which made Marx's asserted materialism seem plausible, and a vague plausibility is still its only intellectual support. This materialism, however, has an important function in the idea structure: First, it appears to underpin a "scientific" predic-



Karl Marx
(1813-1883)

tion of the future and thus releases Marx's followers from the need to accept their future redemption on faith; Marx thus embraced Hegel's goal of putting away the "love of truth" and instead seizing "certain knowledge" concerning man's destiny. Second, Marx's materialism serves as a vehicle to do away with reason and spirit as the realm of human freedom. Materialism means, above all, the rejection of God or any transcendence, the rejection of the human soul as a "sensorium of transcendence" (Eric Voegelin's term), and the consequent denial of philosophy. Materialism means, next, the denial of a political order, and the consequent elimination of government and law as autonomous structures of order.

Both are construed as mere window-dressing to hide positions of economic class power. Thus materialism has nothing positive to say, but abounds in negations. Indeed, Marx's *Capital* itself can be summed up in two great negative pronouncements—the moral condemnation of the present-day society as a system dependent on exploitation, and the prediction of its certain total demise. Nowhere is an alternative elaborated. Marx points to no positive principles of order, be they political, social, cultural, or economic. His materialism sets up one single hope: that the future, known with alleged "scientific" certainty, will be the negation of everything that has made man miserable and produced evil. Because Marx claims to "know" the future, and because he asserts it to constitute the salvation of humanity, man's freedom to decide in history gives way to the only "correct" way of moving from here to there.

MARXISM owes its force to a combination of the materialistic ontology with the hope of a redemptory future and the ethics of revolutionary struggle. It offers comprehensive assumptions about what is, a prediction of a happy solution, and a practical and meaningful task for everyday action. Again, the task is not constructive. It consists of destroying whatever stands in Revolution's way. Marx left no prescriptions to his followers on how to build either a political or an economic order. To this day, there is no Communist political theory nor a theory of socialist economics. But Marx taught one main moral presupposition—the salutary duty of destruction. It is struggle, struggle, struggle, all our days, without reconciliation, peace, or let-up in sight. Every one of Marx's major concepts emphasized or entailed struggle. His *Capital* was not a scholar's analysis, but "the most formidable missile that has yet been hurled at the bourgeoisie" (letter of April 17, 1867). He never wrote except in the style of bitterest polemics. But he had succeeded in giving to mankind the idea of a mortal enemy of humanity, and the promise of that enemy's coming total defeat. Thus, the struggle that he preached had apparent meaning and could serve as a kind of amoral principle of action.

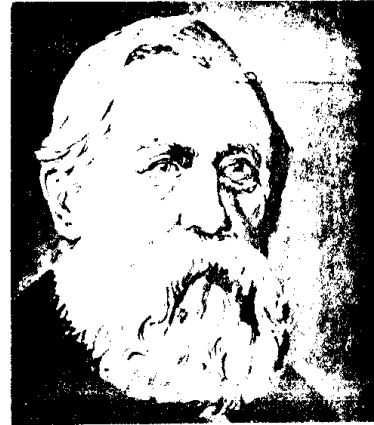
There is in the Western world no comparable combination of fundamental assumption, hope, and practical prescript. To be sure, we have a society that is a going concern; and it would not exist and function if we did not have certain common assumptions, and certain hopes, and knowl-

edge on how to act within a framework of ultimate meaning. In a sense, we are a *living* refutation of Marxism. But against a "movement of the book" one cannot prevail simply by pointing to one's own way of living or its implied values. Word must be met with word, idea with idea. And here our intellectuals turn out to be in the poorest imaginable shape. They shy away from those fundamental questions. They do not confront Marx's ontology with the truth of being, because they have stopped thinking about anything above the level of phenomena. And to the extent to which they do have ideas of a more fundamental nature, these ideas also imply the rejection of God and the hypostatization of history. Hence the attacks of Marx either on the plane of personal psychology, or economics, or practical revolutionary policy—all of which leave the Marxist dogma intact. The one glorious exception in the West, Eric Voegelin, finds himself under academic indictment by his colleagues for his un-materialistic and unpositivistic thinking.

Bertram Wolfe gives enough evidence in his book that the inhumanity of Marxism concerns him deeply. Again and again, he points to utterances by Marx and Engels which entail an inevitable disdain for freedom and justice. His judgments are pointed and spring from human compassion. But it takes him 250 pages before he gets around to an all-too-brief discussion of the *German Ideology*, the work in which Marx for the first time surrendered man to historical necessity. And nowhere in the book does Wolfe give the reader any more grounds on which to reject Marx than those of indignation. Indignation, of course, presupposes a standard of judgment, but when it appears merely in its emotional form it has a way of flaring up and dying away, like a puff of fire and smoke.

An ex-Communist has one enormous advantage over all other people in diagnosing Marxism: He knows what it feels like *from the inside*. He is familiar with the nearly unnoticeable accents, the language, the taken-for-granted premises, the experiences underlying it all. Thus, any report on the Communist world by one who has severed his allegiance with it is worth its

weight in gold. But a former Communist is also a man struggling to gain *terra firma* after his escape from ideological quicksand. Some succeed, others do not. Most of them find that non-Communist or anti-Communist Marxism is a cozy haven on the flight from The Party. One may personally be able to *oppose* Communism from this vantage point, but to refute it from there is impossible. The responsibility of former Communists is great, possibly greater than any man should be allowed to carry. Their quest for a re-gained world of sanity is representative of what all of us have to ac-



Friedrich Engels
(1820-1895)

complete if Communism is not to be our final lot. Maybe it would be wise for a still Marxist ex-Communist to confine himself to practical opposition and to leave the intellectual refutation to others. But if any one of them moves out of the Marxist ideology and takes a thrust at the master himself, let him be sure that he kills him. With giants and kings one does not try—one must do home the thrust all the way.