

Fallacy and Fantasy in Marxism

Main Currents of Marxism: Its Rise, Growth, and Dissolution, by Leszek Kolakowski. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978. Vol. I: "The Founders" 434 pp., Vol. II: "The Golden Age" 542 pp., Vol. III: "The Breakdown" 548 pp.

A sophisticated study of Marxism should reflect an appreciation of both philosophy and praxis—epistemology and political reality. Professor Leszek Kolakowski has achieved this, combining acute insight with an intimate understanding of historical context. The result is a massive, three-volume tome, no less useful than readable, remarkable for its scope and subtlety. In the Introduction, he likens his task to that of Thomas Mann, who had sought the roots of Nazism in German culture—indeed, in that culture at its very best; so Kolakowski—a former Professor of the History of Philosophy at the University of Warsaw—has lived the ideology of which he writes. And it is undoubtedly no coincidence that both writers were fated finally to settle in the Free World. Expelled from Poland for political reasons in 1968, Kolakowski is now teaching at Oxford. Nor does the parallel end there: for just as the author of *The Magic Mountain* had chosen as his ultimate topic not merely the misfortunes of some flawed men by Time itself, so the philosopher-scholar transcends analytical investigation to explore a passion. That passion—Marxism—is by Kolakowski's own account "the greatest

fantasy of our century": compassion, despair, and delusion combined in philosophy imbued with both hope and tragic error, blind to history and fact even as it exults the primacy of science. The characters in Kolakowski's nonfictional odyssey are at once heroic and pathetic, eminently sane as they perform their theoretical acrobatics in search of the kingdom of absolute equality on earth, that madness whose price is freedom itself. The magic of the promised mountain turned out to be magic indeed: a defiance of reality, a piece of lovely illusion.

To be sure, those who seek irrefutable proof that totalitarianism was the sole, inevitable consequence of Marx's theory will be disappointed: elliptical and often contradictory as that theory is, the Frankenstein of its creation might have been less bloodthirsty than Lenin, less primitive than Mao. But if that strong conclusion is unwarranted, even more so is the belief that present-day Communism has nothing to do with Marxism. After all, "it was Marx who declared that the whole idea of Communism could be summed up in a single formula—the abolition of private property," and that is the basic premise of the Soviet system; even though Marxism might have taken a more

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human face in some other possible world, "it cannot be said that Marxism was 'falsified' [by the Soviets] in any sense." Apparently blind to its implications, "Marx took over the romantic ideal of social unity, and Communism realized it in the only way feasible in an industrial society, namely, by a despotic system of government." As it turned out, the nationalization of the means of production brought not universal prosperity but universal rationing; the concentration of decision into the hands of the Chosen Few, who presumed to bear the conscience of the proletariat, and that not by democratic mandate but by theoretical fiat, turned out to mean neither eternal bliss nor even a chicken in every pot but slavery disguised in slogans. Yet Kolakowski does not wonder how it was possible to be so misled by as defective a theory as Marxism with its patently absurd claim to be able to predict man's future with scientific accuracy. Rather, he recognizes that just as this claim is "one reason why that theory is a fantasy, [it is] also why it is politically effective. The influence that Marxism has achieved, far from being the result or proof of its scientific character, is almost entirely due to its prophetic, fantastic, and irrational elements." Hence Kolakowski's equanimity in the painstaking effort of dissecting these elements and his willingness to find the nobility that may have inspired them. This is not to say, however, the Kolakowski is reluctant to expose contradiction as well as self-deception. In his first volume, which deals with "The Founders"—Marx and Engels—Kolakowski criticizes them both, bluntly, even ruthlessly. But he separates intention from result, passion from logic. Similarly, Thomas Mann could appreciate the high aspirations of Nietzsche's Superman while being equally sensitive to the fact that such a model would inspire lesser men with contempt for those who do not fit into a pre-defined master class. Given enough ambiguity, a lovely original vision becomes a bloody hallucination.

One may well question, of course, whether the vision of Marx was really as lovely as

Kolakowski seems to think. If not outright charitable, Kolakowski is sometimes all too sympathetic to the idealistic dialectician who married beautiful Jenny von Westphalen so young and was seduced by Hegel's peculiar conception of freedom. That conception, however, could easily be misapplied. By asserting that man is truly free only when the collective interest coincides with individual interest, Marx was evidently opening the door to tyranny. Yet Kolakowski, while noticing this, does not blame Marx too strongly. Neither does he accuse Marx of dishonesty for blatantly disregarding evidence relevant to his own theoretical pronouncements. One case especially is worth mentioning. According to Bertram Wolfe, the first edition of *Capital* contains statistics up to 1865 or 1866 *except* for those concerning the movement of wages; this is repeated in the second edition of 1873 where all statistics are brought up to date with the exception, again, of those on wages. As coincidence would have it, the omitted figures failed to support Marx's contention in that same work that wages decline under capitalism. Yet Kolakowski plays down this incident, remarking only that it is atypical for Marx, and adding that in any event Marx believed the essential feature of capitalist production to be not poverty but the loss of human subjectivity. Elsewhere too Kolakowski puts the best possible light on Marx's concern for the individual, insisting that Marx was keenly interested in personal freedom rather than social control—a contention, again, open to serious debate. Moreover, some will find Kolakowski's silence regarding Marx's quite virulent antisemitism in the early essay "On the Jewish Question" unjustifiable at best.

But whatever one may think of Marx's intentions and character, it is difficult to accuse Kolakowski of ignoring Marx's many philosophical faults, faults of both method and substance. He criticizes Marx's predictions for being wrong almost without exception and objectionable especially for having been declared apodictic when the meanest of logicians could discern nothing but the thin-

nest contingency—so thin, in fact, as to reveal falsehood at the slightest meeting with hard evidence.

Proof that Marx shared this weakness with many others is offered in Kolakowski's second volume. Entitled "The Golden Age," this part of the study testifies to the unwillingness of a host of Marxist followers, most of them intellectuals, to pay any heed to either evidence or clarity of thought. There is, for instance, Karl Kautsky, the Darwinist turned historical-materialist and determinist, whose work has one striking feature: "the complete lack of understanding of philosophical problems" (a whole section is devoted to "Inconsistencies in Kautsky's philosophy"). And Rosa Luxemburg, the author of an erroneous theory of accumulation who passionately believed in international revolution, her consistency no less embarrassing, it being "of the kind that can only come from extreme dogmatic rigidity and insensitivity to facts." And many others. The story unfolds, its characters shockingly inebriated with the liquor of secular salvation, flirting with terror while exulting liberation. The saintly Superman they solemnly predicted would rise from the heart of the hungry proletariat all too soon turned cannibal.

The ultimate midwife, of course, was none other than the sinister Lenin. Not that he appeared in an historical and ideological vacuum: Kolakowski sees the imperialist Soviet Union as a mere variation on the old authoritarian non-egalitarian theme of tsarist Russia. Thus the unholy trinity of party, state, and police—alone the instrument of proletarian consciousness, according to Lenin—took over the reigns of power in a country that had always endowed the State with almost mystical importance. Besides, statism, of course, was not incompatible with Marxism even quite strictly understood—Marx's own occasional protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. By way of retort to those who would allege that Lenin's view of the party's privileged position was unmarxist, Kolakowski points out that, on the contrary, the idea was

generally accepted among socialists—e.g., Kautsky, the Austro-Marxists such as Viktor Adler, and most of the social democratic leaders—to say nothing of *The Communist Manifesto* where it appears quite explicitly. The novelty of Lenin's thought, according to Kolakowski, lay elsewhere: in the conviction that the spontaneous working-class movement must have a bourgeois consciousness since it could not develop a socialist one, coupled with the idea that a progressive—that is, correct—revolutionary movement is defined not by being a movement of workers but by having the correct—that is, Marxist—ideology. Yet even this could, with some ingenuity, be found in Marx: Lenin only used it with unprecedented efficiency, turning it into a devastating revolutionary weapon.

What seduced so many, in the end, was Marx's conflation of progress and correctness, of fact and value—the fused dichotomy adopted and admirably exploited by Lenin. Hence Kolakowski works his entire study around the question he believes to have always been at the center of Marx's thought: the question concerning the place of human consciousness and will in the historical process. Is the future necessary and scientifically predictable? Then in what sense is any action "right" or "wrong" rather than merely determined? It is clear that Marx confused the normative with the descriptive; and "the natural consequence of this confusion was the idea that the success of a particular social movement was a proof that it was scientifically 'true,' or, in effect, that whoever proved to be stronger must have 'science' on his side. This idea is largely responsible for all the anti-scientific and anti-intellectual features of Marxism in its particular guise as the ideology of Communism." We need not be reminded of the brutal way in which sheer force was used in the attempt to reach the nirvanic goal—the success of the proletarian cause—time after time, first by Lenin and Trotsky (the authors of the concentration camp, patented by them in 1918), and then by Stalin, with no noticeable theoretical gap. But Kolakowski's

astute assessment of the transition should be cited in full:

There is absolutely nothing in the worst excesses of the worst years of Stalinism that cannot be justified on Leninist principles, if only it can be shown that Soviet power can be increased thereby. The essential difference between the 'Lenin era' and the 'Stalin era' is not that under Lenin there was freedom in the party and society and that under Stalin it was crushed, but that it was only in Stalin's day that the whole spiritual life of the peoples of the Soviet Union was submerged in a universal flood of mendacity. This was due, however, not only to Stalin's personality but also, if one may so put it, to the 'natural' development of the situation. When Lenin spoke of terror, bureaucracy, or an anti-Bolshevik rising by the peasants, he called these things by their names. Once the Stalinist dictatorship set in, the party (though attacked by its enemies) had no mistakes whatever to its discredit, the Soviet state was flawless, and the people's love for the government was unbounded. The change was natural in the sense that in a state where every vestige of institutional control over the government has been done away with, the latter's only justification was that, as a matter of foreordained principle, it embodied the interests and aspirations of the working people: this may be called an ideological form of legitimacy, distinct from the charisma which belongs to the hereditary monarchy or from a properly elected regime. The omnipotence of the Lie was not due to Stalin's wickedness, but was the only way of legitimizing a regime based on Leninist principles. The slogan constantly met with during Stalin's dictatorship, 'Stalin is the Lenin of our day,' was thus entirely accurate.

Those Leninist principles, moreover, were a



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direct result of Marx's indifference to ethical analysis, his genuine conviction that the future triumph of the proletariat is moral by definition. So the Prometheus that was Marx awakened from his dream as Kafka's Gregor Samsa—the cockroach Lenin. Kolakowski's double metaphor is very apt indeed, the resulting insect being no less repulsive (and perhaps more) for its all too human sensibilities.

Kolakowski's insight into the problems of socialism is matched by his assessment of moral degradation on the sunnier side of the Iron Curtain, his indictment no less acerbic. The title of the final volume, "The Breakdown," is therefore not only descriptive but normative as well: besides the eclipse of Marxism in the so-called Peoples' Democracies, there is the spectacle of Western decadence posing as progressivism. Thus Kolakowski dismisses Sartre as "a politician manqué, cherishing unfulfilled ambitions to be on the 'inside'"; he holds the Italian Marxist Togliatti in contempt for having slavishly followed every zigzag of Stalinist policy; and Gyorgy Lukacs is accused of nothing less than "intellectual degradation" in his art criticism for having

“ascribed to revolutionary maturity what he well knew to be the work of police repression.” Herbert Marcuse and his followers on the New Left are simply ridiculed as pampered upper-middle-class pseudo-intellectuals who would rather utter slogans about global revolution than work, their “ideological fantasies” nothing other than “nonsensical,” the extremists among them “virtually indistinguishable from Fascist thugs.” Yet Kolakowski appreciates the crisis of faith of which such movements are symptomatic, a crisis that he attributes to the very nature of democracy.

The perceptiveness evident in his social commentary does not, however, carry over fully to his understanding of capitalism as an economic and political system. For example, in criticizing Marx’s analysis, Kolakowski attributes the success of capitalism to its ability “to limit exploitation by progressive taxation, partial control of investment and prices, welfare institutions, increasing the social consumption fund, etc., even while private ownership of the means of production continues and exploitation has not been abolished.” Whatever the effectiveness of government welfare institutions (and the reasons for pessimism are not unfounded), the argument has been made too often and too well that progressive taxation and the control mechanisms Kolakowski refers to do not necessarily enhance—indeed, are probably an obstacle to—the goal of greater and more universal welfare. It is true, however, as a point of criticism of Marx, that he failed to appreciate both the extent to which socialism would infiltrate capitalism by peaceful means and the decreased polarization of social and economic classes

in the West. In this, as in many other observations, Kolakowski is perfectly correct and felicitously lucid.

It is altogether to his credit that his lucidity does not compel him to be prosaic. For at bottom Kolakowski is exploring the riddle of our time, seeking as he is to understand the reason why a monumental fantasy has held so many in its spell to the point of obscuring the reality of holocaust. And it should come as no surprise that the answer he finds—tentative as that answer may be—could have been suggested by the philosopher who fascinated Thomas Mann. Friedrich Nietzsche—who had proclaimed that man must triumph *uber alles*, man perfected and self-sufficient, unencumbered by superstition and idolatry—had a message perhaps unfit for democracy. And just as Mann saw the symptoms of totalitarian racism in the shortsighted arrogance of his countrymen, so Kolakowski passes judgment not on Marx in particular but on human nature itself:

The self-deification of mankind, to which Marxism gave philosophical expression, has ended in the same way as all such attempts, whether individual or collective: it has revealed itself as the farcical aspect of human bondage.

It is left open whether the alternative is any deification at all or a Kantian respect for autonomy as an end in itself. Perhaps man is not able to resist his own bondage; but here we leave the world of scholarship and enter the province of prophecy. We may yet live to know. And then again, if Marxism has its way, we may not.