Variations on Marxism

Célestin Bouglé

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The philosophy of Marxism during my student days was exceedingly straightforward – or rather, simplistic. It was marked by fierce denials: the repudiation of anything resembling spiritualism, the rejection of anything smacking of idealism, the refusal to grant the slightest value or efficacy to doctrines, beliefs, or sentiments.

Should the Rights of Man or immanent justice be invoked, Paul Lafargue[(1)], Karl Marx's son-in-law, would rise to sweep aside these 'metaphysical charlatans'. And he would sharply rebuke Jaurès, the conciliator, for attempting to wrap idealism alongside materialism in the folds of his orator's toga, for daring to invoke Plutarch or Michelet in the same breath as Karl Marx. Had Marx himself not peremptorily declared: 'It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness'?[1] What grand constructs can be hatched from that egg!

Hence the necessity of seeking in the modes of production that sustain life the underlying reason not only for ways of governing or legislating, but for modes of thought: not only must law and religion be explained, but literature and philosophy must henceforth be accounted for, like material products, by the progress of industrial technology and conflicts of class interest.

Hold on tight: if the mathematical physicists of the 17th century rose to the notion of a natural law of absolute value, it was because of the progress achieved before their eyes by royal absolutism. As for the hypothesis of the unity of cosmic forces, it was supposedly a salon product – a product of those 17th-century salons where the idle bourgeoisie sought to dazzle one another with ingenious comparisons.

Such examples suffice. They serve as warning signs, signalling a grave danger: the peril one runs when attempting to account for the highest creations of the mind – religion, science, art – by a single concurrent force of the social milieu, by the productive forces of economic life alone. The disproportion between the single cause invoked and the value, complexity, and variety of

[1] K. Marx: *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S. W. Ryazanskaya, Progress Publishers, 1977, p. 21.

[(1)] **Translator's Note:** Paul Lafargue (1842–1911) was a Cuban-born French Marxist who married Karl Marx's daughter, Laura Marx (1845–1911), with whom he died by suicide. Along with Jules Guesde, Lafargue founded and led the *Parti ouvrier français* ('French Workers' Party') from 1880 to 1902 and played a major role in popularising Marxism in France. The French phrase *grues métaphysiques* (literally 'metaphysical cranes' or 'metaphysical prostitutes/illusions') was Lafargue's notorious jibe against bourgeois republican ideals.

the effects is blatantly obvious to all. And the interpreter, persisting in his reductionism, takes on the air of a clumsy Sisyphus.

From this stems a recoil before the abyss among Marxist philosophers, a step backwards. They reread their master and realise that his theses have indeed been abusively simplified. Marx himself never intended that.(2) Did he ever truly claim, at bottom, to exclude every kind of idealism from the philosophy of history? He too set himself an end, striving to replace the realm of necessity with that of freedom, and remained, as Saragat(3) puts it, a 'humanist'. In any event, he would have concurred with Engels in affirming that the economic factor operates only 'in the last instance'.[2]

Ultimately, we find ourselves before a Marxism that should be called not diluted, but enriched and made more flexible – ready to tolerate, welcome, and seek out nuanced explanations that would have sent a Paul Lafargue shuddering with horror in my student days.

What is most curious is that Russia itself – Soviet Russia – is collaborating in this intellectual enrichment and flexibilisation. Such, at least, is the impression that emerges from G. Friedmann's(4) thoroughly informed and nuanced book, *From Holy Russia to the USSR*.

He recounts an anecdote attributed over there to Stalin. Questioning his son one day about the history of England, Stalin heard him speak of 'merchant capital' and 'the third phase of struggle between the landed nobility and the urban bourgeoisie' – yet the child did not even know the name of Cromwell. Let Russian children therefore be given a more concrete, living history, in which human beings are seen living and acting. And let there be a truce to the abuses of this 'merchant capital', which had become the stock-in-trade of Pokrovsky's(5) early books.

Let there be a truce, too, to all the efforts expended to force and lock great writers into a single class, to declare them incapable of seeing anything beyond or above the economic interests of their group, of which they are treated as mere automaton mouthpieces.

Reading our new literature textbooks, Yermilov(6) declares in *Pravda*(7), one would think that 'the Russian classics were nothing more than zealots solely preoccupied with the material welfare of their social group'. It is high time to recognise that they were able more than once, through the vigour of their personal thought, to break free from this infernal circle to attain human values. It is high time to proclaim that the unionised worker of the USSR also has the right to seek intellectual and moral sustenance in more than one author from the era of Holy Russia.

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[2] F. Engels to J. Bloch, 21 September 1890.

(2) **Translator's Note:** Shortly before his death, Marx accused Guesde and Lafargue of 'revolutionary phrase-mongering' and famously confided to Engels that if their positions represented Marxism, 'what is certain is that I myself am not a Marxist'.

(3) **Translator's Note:** Giuseppe Saragat (1898–1988) was an Italian socialist who later served as President of the Italian Republic from 1964 to 1971. During the interwar period, he opposed Mussolini's fascist regime from exile in France (where he published *L'humanisme marxiste* in 1936) and forged close ties with French socialist theorists.

(4) **Translator's Note:** Georges Friedmann (1902–1977) was an influential French sociologist and one of the founders of industrial sociology, whose research examined how mechanisation and technology shape organisations and the experience of labour. He published *De la Sainte Russie à l'U.R.S.S.* in 1938.

(5) **Translator's Note:** Mikhail Pokrovsky (1868–1932) was the leading Soviet Marxist historian of the 1920s, who rejected the role of individual agency in history in favour of schematic economic determinism.

(6) **Translator's Note:** Vladimir Yermilov (1904–1965) was a Soviet literary critic notorious for his dogmatic attacks on fellow writers, including the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930) prior to the latter's suicide.

(7) **Translator's Note:** *Pravda* (1912–) was the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union between 1912 and 1991.

Bravo. And thank you for this breath of ‘humanist’ fresh air. In France as well – and Georges Friedmann knows this better than anyone – it could usefully sweep away a few remnants of ‘vulgar sociology’.

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