

CRITIQUE OF MARXISM

George Gunn

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Karl Marx (1818-1883) introduced to the world a way of thinking about both economic and social theories that was strongly influenced by Hegelian philosophy. Though Marx and Engels are usually credited with being the “founders” of Marxism,¹ other important contributors to this system include: E. Bernstein, K. Kautsky, A. Bebel, F. Mehring, and G. V. Plekhanov.² Marx’s formal training had been in law (universities of Bonn and Berlin); however, he was more interested in philosophy, and was particularly drawn to Hegel’s dialecticism. The struggle of the working man against the wealthy landowners of Prussia in his day led Marx to seek a different kind of society in which labor was rewarded more equitably, and class distinctions were abolished. On the face of it, these goals sound admirable and may even appear to have some affinity to Biblical teaching. However, Marx’s ideal society, known as “Communism,” is a dangerous and deceptive counterfeit of the society God desires for the world.

I. Economic Theory

Marx’s economic theory is based on the value of wage labor. For Marx, the capitalist system was doomed to failure since the landowners who made a profit on the basis of the work of the laborers, would eventually produce an oversupply of goods that would exceed the laborers’ ability to purchase such goods. This would bring about a collapse of the capitalist

¹ C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 74.

² Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley, vol. 3, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Leiden, Netherlands: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Brill, 1999-2003), 425.

system. . According to Evans, “Marx predicted that capitalism will collapse because it creates an ever-increasing class of property-less workers (the proletariat). As wealth is centered in a small number of capitalists, overproduction, due to the lack of purchasing power by the masses, will become a crisis.”³ For Marx, there was no avoiding this crisis and ultimate collapse, so long as the capitalist system of economics continued. The inequity between land owners and wage laborers created by capitalism was seen as a fatal flaw. The collapse was an inevitable outcome of the capitalist system.

His complaint was that exploitation is built into the capitalist system of production, because labour is bound to sell its power to capital on the market, but then has no say over what is produced, how it is produced or where the profit goes. The class associated with the ownership or control of capital makes profit, Marx said, at the expense of the class which thus has ‘nothing to lose but its chains’.⁴

But Marx’s analysis of capitalistic economy is overly simplistic. According to Schwarz, Marx failed to take into consideration at least seven key factors that work to allay such a collapse that Marx envisioned. These factors are: (1) The dynamic nature of money, (2) The role of psychology in the economy, (3) The relation of advertising to distribution, (4) Consumer credit, (5) A continually expanding market, (6) “People’s Capitalism,” and (7) The role of government and legislation.⁵

Some have sought to establish a Biblical basis for Marxism both in Jesus’ words to the rich young ruler that he was to sell all he had and give to the poor (Matt. 19:21), and in the early church’s practice of sharing all things in common (Acts 4:32-37). However, as to the former, this was not a general teaching addressed to all, but a specific instance intended to reveal the rich

³ Evans, 73.

⁴ Sinclair B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 413.

⁵ Fred C. Schwarz, and David A. Noebel, *You Can Still Trust the Communists to be Communists* (Christian Anti-Communism Crusade, 2010), 39.

young ruler's problem with covetousness; and, as to the latter, the example of the early church cannot be taken as normative for doctrinal purposes. In fact, other examples show Lydia, a wealthy merchant woman (Acts 16:11-15, 40), not being instructed to sell her possessions, and Philemon, a land owner and slave owner, receiving no instruction to sell his properties.

II. Social theory: class struggle/warfare

Marx and Engels' program for bringing worldwide communism, as expressed in the Communist Manifesto, depends upon the working class (proletariat) despising and rebelling against the landowner/producing class (bourgeoisie). This class envy provides the motivation for the proletariat to risk life and limb to become involved in revolution in hopes of establishing a better (i.e. communistic) society. Indeed, the plight of the underprivileged and oppressed can at times find a sympathetic ear from the Christian. As Ferguson and Packer note, "... class difference still divides capitalist societies, producing asymmetries of power and resources. And the capitalist system still depends upon this imbalance for its very existence. Christian concerns with justice and equity sit uneasily with capitalism, particularly in its more naked forms."⁶ However, the existence of "class difference" should not be considered particularly unchristian. Jesus Himself said, "The poor you have with you always" (Matt. 26:11; see also Deut. 15:11). Paul returned Onesimus to his master, Philemon, and he did not instruct Lydia to sell her house and give all the money to the poor. Instead, he took advantage of her gracious offer of hospitality. No doubt the early church in Philippi benefitted greatly from the property holdings of Lydia, the capitalist! In Christ, both slaves and free are united into one body and are equal before

⁶ Ferguson and Packer, 414.

God, and yet, slaves remained as slaves, freemen remained as freemen, and apparently capitalist landowners remained as capitalist landowners (1 Cor. 7:20-22).

III. Philosophical theory:

Marx's formal training was in law, rather than in philosophy, and it may be legitimately questioned whether the title "philosopher" is even properly attributed to Karl Marx.

Nevertheless, he liked to "dabble" in philosophy and was particularly drawn to the philosophies of Georg Hegel and Auguste Comte. Both Hegel and Comte contributed significant features to Marx's system of communism.

A. Georg Hegel – Dialecticism

Georg Hegel (1770-1831), German idealist philosopher, developed a system of logic that has come to be known as "dialecticism." Rather than reasoning linearly, as Aristotle, from major premise to minor premise to deduction, Hegel saw the entire physical universe as consisting of matter in motion – opposing forces constantly pushing at each other. This constant motion of opposing forces produces a sort of dualism. When applied to philosophy, these opposing forces take the form of "thesis" and "antithesis." Logical progress is made when thesis and antithesis are juxtaposed and produce a synthesis. The synthesis is a more accurate representation of the ideal than either the original thesis or antithesis. Marx found in Hegel's dialecticism a philosophical counterpart to his proletariat-bourgeoisie struggle. But, whereas Hegel was a theist, and even believed in the divinity of Christ, Marx was purely materialist and atheistic, rejecting Hegel's metaphysical outlook. Marx wrote in *das Capital*:

My own dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. For Hegel ... the thinking process is the demiurge (creator) of the real world, and the real world is only the outward manifestation of "the Idea." With me, on the other

hand, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind and translated into terms of thought.⁷

Marx's attempt to wed materialism to Hegelian dialecticism is fatally flawed, as it is internally inconsistent. Absolute belief in materialism should be seen by the Marxist as a thesis which cannot be adhered to absolutely! If materialism is a valid thesis, then supernaturalism should be an equally valid antithesis. Whatever synthesis is considered a suitable conclusion cannot be absolute materialism.⁸

B. Auguste Comte – Altruism

Comte (1798-1857), French philosopher and founder of the discipline of sociology, contributed to Marxism the notions of “community” and “altruism.” Though the term “community” preceded Comte in the English language,⁹ it was Comte's unique use of this term in a sociological context that came to be an important concept in Marxism. “Altruism,” on the other hand, is a term that was coined by Comte himself, and becomes an indispensable feature in his notion of the community. As for Comte himself, he was a deeply troubled man. Biographer Boris Sokoloff refers to him as “The ‘Mad’ Philosopher.”¹⁰ “During his lifetime, Comte exhibited violent rages, manic grandiosity, homicidal and suicidal tendencies, delusions of God-like omnipotence, paranoia, and a genuinely sick compulsion to control others.”¹¹ Comte called for the reconstruction of humanity in which individuals would give up their rights for the sake of the good of the community. This giving up of individual rights he termed “altruism” (selflessness), from the French *autrui*, “of others.” Though the terms “selflessness” and

⁷ Cited in David A. Noebel, *Understanding the Times* (Manitou Springs, CO: Summit Press, 1991), 139.

⁸ Ibid, 139-40.

⁹ “Community” entered the English language in the 14th century.

¹⁰ Boris Sokoloff, *The "Mad" Philosopher, Auguste Comte* (Vantage Press, 1961).

¹¹ Geri Ball, *The Turning of the Tide – In a Nutshell* (Chico, CA: The Patriot, 2011), 17.

“altruism” are frequently used in a Christian context, Comte (and Marx) meant something different by the term. In a Christian context the term “selflessness” generally connotes the idea of a willingness to give up one’s comfort and/or possessions for the sake of benefitting someone else from the motive of love. Comte’s idea was that one should surrender his self-identity and rights as an individual for the sake of the good of the community. Comte’s idea flies in the face of the whole notion of man as created in the image of God and “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” In Marxism, the individual loses his identity as a “self” and is called upon to give altruistically for the good of the community. When Christianity adopts the notion of altruism, it runs the risk of destroying principled Christian individualism. Ball summarizes:

Comte held that individualism and individual rights must be abolished. He asserted that our egoism [individualism] is “the main source of human misfortune.” (Comte, *The Catechism of Positive Religion*, p. 216.) Comte declared, “All human rights ... are as absurd as they are immoral.” (Comte, *The Catechism of Positive Religion*, p. 230.) Men have no individual rights and there “will be the substitution of Duties for Rights....” Each individual “has duties, duties towards all; but rights ... can be claimed by none.” It is necessary to direct man’s activities in the service of Humanity. (Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, pp. 400, 402.)

The mad philosopher Auguste Comte coined the term “‘altruism’” (Andreski, *The Essential Comte*, p. 9.) In Comte’s view, we must “dedicate ourselves to a life of Altruism.” “... that the thought of self is conquered or transcended, – is essential to altruism.” (Caird, *The Social Philosophy and Religion of Comte*, pp. 53, 202.) Comte called for a new morality that “would be based on ... altruism....” (Standley, *Auguste Comte*, p. 87.)

Comte’s aim was to replace love of God with love of the Supreme Being – “Humanity” – and to substitute pure self-sacrifice for self-actualization through Christ. Comte wrote, “It [the sweetness of the incorporation into the Supreme Being – Humanity] is unknown to those who being still involved in theological belief ... have never experienced the feeling of pure self-sacrifice.” (Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, p. 444.)¹²

¹² Ball, 17-18.

IV. Exegetical Implications: Deconstructionism (Feminist & Liberation Theologies)

Despite the apparent incompatibility of Marxism with Christianity, certain movements within the pale of Christianity have sought to incorporate a Marxist interpretation of Scripture into their exegesis. Derrida's deconstructionism provided a framework within which these Christian Marxist exegetes could reexamine traditional Scriptural interpretations. Gary Phillips, himself a deconstructionist interpreter comments:

The most prominent of American Marxist critics, Fredric Jameson, has developed an exegetical method which is recognizably deconstructive (e.g. 110–19; Marxism, according to him, must accept the “sectoral validity” of other methods in order to develop its own adequately [10]). (Cf. also Spivak's demand for “class deconstruction,” [263]. The perception of an affinity between Marxism and deconstruction is not confined to Marxists themselves; cf. Butler, a decidedly non-Marxist critic, 110–20, and, more generally, the attention to liberation issues in so influential a treatise on deconstruction as that of Culler.)¹³

In the 1960s and 1970s both Feminist Theology and Liberation Theology utilized a deconstructionist approach to read their own versions of class struggle into the Scriptures and thus validate their respective theologies. Ferguson and Packer explain:

During the 1960s, however, the period of ‘cold war’ between East and West, one tension-reducing effort emerged which came to be known as the ‘Christian-Marxist dialogue’. Motifs from the writings of the ‘young Marx’ were rediscovered (especially ‘alienation’), and their common ancestry in Christianity formed the basis of discussion. While some Christians were brought face-to face with some temporarily forgotten social demands of faith, some communist-country participants found authentic Marxist tools with which to criticize their dogmatic and repressive regimes. Although sporadic attempts were made (mainly in the USA) to continue the dialogue, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968) symbolically marked its demise.

In a sense, however, the dialogue was relocated in Latin America, in the liberation theology of the 1970s. For once again Marxian themes—alienation, exploitation, praxis—were explored for their commonality with Christian concerns. But this time the background was political action in situations of oppression and poverty rather than mere intellectual debate. The urgent question became how far Christians could join hands with

¹³ Gary A. Phillips, ed., *Semeia 51*, (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1990), 87. The work by Culler cited in this paragraph is: Culler, Jonathan, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982.

Marxists in the struggle against domination, using the same forms of class analysis and cultivating the same hopes of revolution.¹⁴

Conclusion

Marxism is a beautiful masquerade. Dressed in the beautiful costume of fairness and equity, offering the hope a utopia in which all men labor to their ability and every need is met, beneath its mask are hidden the ugly motives of class envy and strife, the deceptive philosophy of dialecticism, and the self-destroying concepts of community and altruism. Though at times deceptively taking on the appearance of Biblical truths, it has led historically to the dangerous exegetical practice of deconstructionism yielding the bitter fruit of both Feminist and Liberation theologies.

¹⁴ Sinclair B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 413-14.

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