

Hobsbawm and Rubel on the Marx centenary, but where is Marx?

THEORY / PRACTICE

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With the approach of the centenary of Marx's death (March 1883), "specialists" are publishing their summations of the 64 years of Marx's life as well as the world impact Marxism still maintains 100 years after his death. Two such works in English are already off the press:

1) *Rubel on Karl Marx*,¹ edited by Joseph O'Malley, consists of five essays by Maximilien Rubel, editor of the volumes of Marx issued by the prestigious French *Bibliothèque de la Pleiade*. Rubel's edition of Marx's works (to which we'll return) attempts to rival the "official" Russian-East German projected 100-volume collected works. Most of Rubel's essays appeared originally as introductions to the three volumes that have thus far appeared.

2) *Marxism in Marx's Day*,² is Volume I of *The History of Marxism*, edited by the English historian, Eric J. Hobsbawm. It consists of eight essays by international scholars plus three essays and a Preface by Hobsbawm, whose contributions range from "Marx, Engels and Pre-Marxian Socialism" (Chapter 1), through "Marx, Engels and Politics" (Chapter 8), to a final Chapter 11 on "The Fortune of Marx's and Engels' Writings."

Marx and Engels are here presented, if not as identical twins, surely as equal co-founders of Marxism — an attitude characteristic of established Marxism, whether of the period of the Second or of the Third International. Hobsbawm is in the tradition of that same superficial attitude, although on this centenary of Marx's death, when we finally do have substantially all of Marx's works, it is surely time to put an end to this "tradition." Isn't it time to focus on the fact that Marx's heirs kept the voluminous writings that had not been published in Marx's lifetime in that same unpublished state until the Russian Revolution unearthed them? And that soon thereafter — i.e., in Stalin's time — their publication was once again "arrested"? Isn't it time to end the myth that Marx and Engels are very nearly "one" and, instead, let us hear Marx, himself, as he continuously developed his ideas for 40 long creative years?

THE STRANGE AFFINITY BETWEEN RUBEL AND HOBSBAWM

What is needed here is to see how such opposites as Hobsbawm and Rubel, who hold to politically opposite conclusions, nevertheless display an equally superficial attitude to Marx's own discoveries. How does it happen that neither Hobsbawm (who treats Marx and Engels as equal co-founders) nor Rubel (who maintains that

not only are they not "one" but that Engels alone is the "founder of Marxism" and that, had Engels not invented "the legend of Marxism," there would be no Marxism) allow Marx to speak for himself?

Ignoring that Marx's life, activities and writings add up to a dialectical yet rigorous body of thought that constitute "Marxism," Rubel proceeds on his merry way to attribute his own view on Ethics to Marx, while Hobsbawm, who holds to the "scientific attitude" of Marx (i.e., "Economics" and some history), concludes that Marxism adds up to method alone, not deeply rooted in Hegelian dialectics. Therein, indeed, lies their strange affinity: both are anti-Hegelians.

Hobsbawm does include one essay on philosophy — "Marx, 'Philosopher,'" by Istvan Meszaros. Rubel's essays don't have that single redeeming feature. The question is why Rubel's editor, Professor O'Malley,³ who knows both Hegel and Marx's "addiction" to Hegel, glosses over all the contradictory statements in Rubel? In his present Introduction, he declares: "Rubel is one of the world's foremost authorities on Marx" (p.vii).

It is true that Rubel, as editor of the independent French collection of Marx's writings, has brought out some heretofore unpublished works which included needed corrections to those Engels published.⁴ It was

especially great to see the re-establishment in toto of the genuine French edition of Marx's Volume I of *Capital* — that is, the one Marx himself checked, edited, and expanded. Unfortunately, though not one-sided in the manner of the Stalinist version, Rubel's is just as one-sided in its vision of Marx, and a great deal more arbitrary in the selections he has made than the liberties Engels allowed himself. Thus, Rubel's Volume II of *Capital*, while it does include some sections and paragraphs Engels left out, takes impermissible liberties with what Rubel chooses to single out. And he leaves out a great deal more than Engels did.⁵

Evidently, the fact that Maximilien Rubel is "an independent Marxist" (independent, that is, of Marx) carries enough attraction for Prof. O'Malley that not only does he not criticize Rubel's substitution of a self-created ethical Humanism for Marx's Humanism as the dialectics of revolution, but he goes to some length to praise Rubel's "Ethics" as if that were Marx's Marxism.

1. *Rubel on Karl Marx*, edited and translated by Joseph O'Malley and Keith Alcorn, Cambridge University Press, 1981.
2. *The History of Marxism*, volume I, edited by Eric J. Hobsbawm, Indiana University Press and Harvester Press (London), 1982.

3. Joseph O'Malley has given us a profound, scholarly, superb translation and editing of Marx's Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right." Perhaps I should have caught a whiff of his dependence on Rubel's "scholarship" when I read that work and called to Prof. O'Malley's attention the fact that he wrongly attributed the end of Marx's creative years to 1878, whereas new moments had been discovered anew by Marx in his *Ethological Notebooks*, 1850-1852. (See my letter of Aug. 30, 1979 included in the *Reveals Origin and Development in the U.S.*, available on microfilm from the Wayne State University Labor History Archives Library.) In my forthcoming work *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (Humanities Press and Harvester Press, 1982), I have detailed Marx's New Moments in the 1850s and 1860s.

4. See Kevin A. Garry's comparison between Engels' editing of Marx's French edition of *Capital*, Vol. I, and Marx's own 1875 edition, *News & Letters*, October, 1981.

5. Nothing is quite so unwarranted as the so-called volume on Philosophy, Vol. III of Rubel's edition, which has just come off the press in France. But that is not what we're concerned with in these essays, which were written long before.

The unfortunate result is seen in the very sequence of the five essays, which are not presented in the order in which they were written, but begin (and in a fundamental sense end with the same view) with "The Marx Legend or Engels, Founder of Marxism."

THE SINGLE ARTICLE ON PHILOSOPHY

Does the single article on philosophy in Hobsbawm's collection of 11 essays plus Preface save his book from the myths about Marx? Hardly. First, Istvan Meszaros, does not deal with that subject at all. It is true that — in a non-polemical way, concentrating on Marx alone and refusing to limit himself to the young Marx as "philosopher" — Meszaros makes clear that "Marx never stopped stressing the gigantic character of Hegel's achievements, brought to realization at an immensely important juncture of historical development in the aftermath of the French revolution in response to the most complex and dynamic interplay of social forces — including the emergence of labor as a hegemonic movement — in world history."

Furthermore, in showing that the mature Marx, like the young Marx, rooted his dialectic in the Hegelian dialectic, Meszaros opposes the one-sidedness of interpretations which claim that Marx moved away from Hegelian idealism as if that meant a shift from philosophy to "science."

In sharp contrast to the pragmatism and the general scientific orientation that pervades the rest of the Hobsbawm collection, Meszaros writes: "... the speculative verbal supersession of philosophy by 'Theory,' 'Theoretical Practice,' by the so-called 'rigorous scientific concept of experimental reasoning,' and the like, can only lead to a conservative rejection of the unity of theory and practice and to the sceptical dismissal of Marx's values as 'unrealizable dreams'." (p.109).

In documenting his insistence that the young Marx's attitude to philosophy (that one "cannot supersede philosophy without realizing it") characterized the mature Marx as well, Meszaros makes a powerful critique of Lukacs' view that there is an "identical Subject-Object" not only in Hegel, but in Marx. Meszaros writes

that it was precisely Marx's critique of that "identical Subject-Object" which "helped Marx to reconstitute the dialectic on a radically different footing." "In Marx," F. stresses, "the movement is open-ended and its fundamental intent is subversive, not reconciliatory." "Quite unlike Hegel," Meszaros concludes, Marx concentrates on "the unity of the ideal and the material, mediated through the dialectic of theory and praxis."

The one weakness of the Meszaros contribution, to this writer, is that it centers around philosophy only "in general," rather than delving into the dialectics of revolution. The "historians" and theorists of political economy proceeded to fill the loophole thus created which allows them to act as if they are the revolutionary realists and true heirs of Marx. In truth, they are the ones — as their editor, Eric J. Hobsbawm, proves all over, again by not taking issue with post-Marx Marxists — who practice the most vulgar reductionism not alone of dialectics to "flexibility," but of revolution to statist class-collaborationism.

AHISTORICAL HISTORY

Because he is the editor as well as the author of three essays plus the Preface, it is Hobsbawm who gives his stamp to the entire work, and it is in the final chapter that he attempts to summarize the whole Marx legacy and its relevance for our age. The very title of that summation, "The Fortunes of Marx's and Engels'

Writings," tells the ahistoric, empty rhetoric of this noted English historian; Thus, the revolution of 1917, in which Prof. Hobsbawm certainly believes, is mentioned somewhere, but is not seen as the ground for the total change in attitude toward Marx's works, which had remained until then entombed in the Second International's vaults. Instead, he begins with Ryazanov, the scholar entrusted to head the Marx-Engels Institute.

Along with this disregard of the historic, revolutionary motivation for creating the Institute, is the disregard of the philosophic transformation of no less a person than the leader of 1917, Lenin, who was the only one to break with his philosophic past and turn directly to Hegel, not for any scholastic reason, but because of the compulsion that arose from the outbreak of World War I and the Second International's betrayal.

It was this actual historic compulsion to grapple with Marx's origins in the Hegelian dialectic which continued after the revolutionary conquest of power. In the early 1920s Lenin urged the editors of *Under the Banner of Marxism* to call themselves a "Society of the Materialist Friends of Hegelian Dialectics," and to make sure "to print excerpts from Hegel's principal works." And, of course, it was Lenin who inspired the establishment of a Marx-Engels Institute.

While it was the famous scholar-editor Ryazanov who became the first head of that Institute, it was Lenin, not Ryazanov, who had laid the ground for a serious study of Marx, for the publication of all his works, and for never forgetting that the Marxian dialectic is rooted in the Hegelian dialectic. There is no doubt that, both in erudition and in seriousness of excavating many unknown works of Marx, Ryazanov had a name none could equal. But there is also no doubt that Ryazanov displayed the usual intellectual arrogance not only to Lenin but to Marx, as can be seen in his attitude to Marx's work during the last decade of Marx's life — and to the *Ethnological Notebooks* in particular, which he dared to characterize as "sheer pedantry" without ever having read them.⁶ It was this attitude that contributed to their remaining unpublished until our own age.

There can be little doubt today about Stalin's outright revisionism of Marxism, and the total transformation into opposite of the first workers' state into a state-capitalist society. That, however, is not the reason behind Ryazanov's presumptuous attitude to the last writings of Marx. The removal of Ryazanov from his post in 1931 was part of the Stalin retrogressionism. But it was Ryazanov who, when he unearthed Marx's last writings in 1923, set the attitude to that legacy.

THE MYTH OF MARX AND ENGELS AS ONE, AND 'ANTI-DUHRING'

It is not just Ryazanov whom Hobsbawm treats so uncritically. What is far more serious is that he has not a single word of criticism of any "official" post-Marx Marxist, and that Engels is treated very nearly as indistinguishable from Marx, himself. It is true, of course,

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6. I deal with Ryazanov's 1923 Report on all the new writings he had discovered, in my forthcoming book. The report is available only in Russian and German. However part of his report, but not including the reference to "sheer pedantry," is quoted in *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx* by its editor, Lawrence Krader. See especially pp. 355, 357, 374.

that without Engels we would not have had Volumes II and III of Capital; and it is true Engels was Marx's lifelong collaborator. It is not true that their close collaboration differed only to the extent that there was an agreed upon "division of labor" between them or that the difference was only a question that Marx was a genius and the others were, at best, only talented. Engels himself admitted that. Now that we do have the over 500 pages of Marx's Ethnological Notebooks as against the few paragraphs Engels cites in his Origin of the Family, in which he claims he is presenting their joint views, the myth must surely be ended, and the truth disclosed. This is not for academic reasons, but because of the urgency and relevance for our age, when a whole new Third World has emerged and a new Women's Liberation has moved from an Idea whose time has come to a movement, and because Marx laid the ground for penetration and action on both of these problematics.

It is a question not only of the Origin, published after Marx's death, which Engels claimed was a "bequest" of Marx, but of Engels' famous Anti-Dühring, which was published during Marx's lifetime when no claim was made that it represented both Marx and Engels. It was only in the editions published after Marx's death that Engels suddenly claimed the work represented both of them. This, unfortunately, became the ground of Engels' "Marxism" which was accepted by all post-Marx Marxists as such. Here is what Hobsbawm claims: "There is no evidence whatever that Karl Marx expressed or felt any reservations about such works as Engels' Anti-Dühring, which is today often considered to embody specifically Engelsian positions."

The actual facts about Anti-Dühring begin in 1858 when Marx, after reading Dühring's review of Capital, called Engels' attention to that professor most critically (Letter of Jan. 8, 1858); but got no response from Engels. It was not until 1875-76, when Dühring's works got a following in the socialist movement and Wilhelm Liebknecht appealed to Engels to answer Dühring, that Engels turned to a review of all of Dühring's writings.

But, far from submitting a plan for his work to Marx, he simply asked Marx to write a piece, not on Dühring's philosophy, but on his political economy. This Marx did; Engels cut it; and, without acknowledging Marx's contribution, it was made into Chapter 10, "Out of the Critical History."

Serious study and documentation about Marx's limited knowledge of Engels' Anti-Dühring has been done by Terrell Carver in his essay, "Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, and Dialectics," which was published in the September, 1980 issue of Political Studies. Why does Eric Hobsbawm persist in the "official" myth? Hand in hand with philosophic indifference to the distinctions between Marx and Engels goes Hobsbawm's ahistorical attitude to questions of polemic.

Whenever this historian reaches a fundamental "polemical" divide, he searches not for its meaning, but for how to escape taking a position. The isolation of "scholarship" on Marx from the Russian Revolution was not the only instance. By skipping from the 1920s all the way to 1956, he avoided a single word about the very first opposition to Stalin by no less a person than Lenin's co-leader of the Russian Revolution, Leon Trotsky. Hobsbawm's attempt to disregard all differences within Marxism by claiming that his work is not "polemical" doesn't stand up when another state arises — Mao's China — and Hobsbawm finally uses the term "polycentric Marxism," which he has assigned to a future volume.

Thus far, the English reader has only the first volume of The History of Marxism, — which was supposed to center on "Marxism in Marx's Day." The question is: Where, then, is Marx? We don't see him. What we are given are today's interpretations by a select few who deal with some aspects of Marx's multidimensional new continent of thought and of revolution. Far from expanding the expression, "polycentric Marxism," Hobsbawm has used it as a way to take back his own admission — that he hasn't paid attention to Marxists who have "attracted insignificant numerical support" — by also claiming: "but this statement implies no judgement about the relative contributions of the various organizations, large or tiny, to the Marxist analysis."

Hobsbawm's way of omitting history that he calls "polemical" is hardly distinguishable from expunging history as it is being made. Historians have ever been more adept at rewriting than at writing history. For that we must return to Marx and let him speak for himself.

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