

**Cyril Smith**

## **Marx, Hegel, the Enlightenment and Magic**

[Outline of a talk to be given at Birkbeck College, London, on November 29, 2001. Two books are important for this. Loren Goldner's essays 'Vanguard of Retrogression: Postmodern Fictions as Ideology in the Era of Fictitious Capital', (Queequeg Publications, PO Box 672355, New York, NY 10467) anticipate some of the ideas I shall be exploring. Although Glenn Magee appears to be disinterested in Marx, his book 'Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition' (Cornell 2001) will change many previously-held ideas about Hegel.]

A careful study of this topic is very badly needed, but this paper is not yet such a study, just an outline of what a paper worthy of this title ought to contain, a programme for future work. Our starting-point must be the direct opposition between the body of doctrine which came to be known as 'Marxism', codified in the First, Second, Third and Fourth Internationals, and the ideas of Karl Marx. After separating these two, I want look at the relation between 'Marxism' and the body of ideas known as the Enlightenment, chiefly those of the French eighteenth century thinkers. Then I should turn to the earlier tradition sometimes called 'Hermetic', which includes magic, astrology and alchemy. I want to show how, when modern rational science defeated this outlook, it also lost something of value: its attitudes to humanity and nature. Following the work of Magee, I would then point out the deep immersion of Hegel in that old mystical tradition, and his direct opposition to the ideas and methods of Enlightenment thinking. Finally, I should return to Marx to see how his demystification of the mystics preserved the core of their profound insights.

Marx worked to demonstrate that to live humanly, in a manner 'worthy of and appropriate to our human nature' (Capital, Vol. 3), would mean a free association of human individuals, an association in which 'the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all'. He showed that a human way of life is incompatible with private property, wage-labour, money and the state, but is actually in accord with nature, and how humanity, at whose heart lies free, creative social activity, emerges from what appears to be the blind activity of nature.

Marx is not responsible for a 'doctrine' of any kind, neither a teaching about what the world ought to be, nor an explanation of the way the world worked. His conception of humanity as socially self-creating clashes with anything which purports to be such a 'doctrine' or 'theory'. For 'doctrine' means separating the 'teacher' from the ordinary person, a separation which is itself a symptom of the sickness of the way of life of modernity. Where people treat each other and themselves, not as free, self-creating subjects, but as things, while entities like money and capital are crazily accepted as subjects, people are necessarily cut off from the understanding of their own lives.

But the theoretical framework called 'Marxism' purported to be a doctrine, sometimes even a 'complete and integral world outlook'. When the 'Marxists' claimed to be 'scientific', they had in mind an analogy with the natural sciences. In this, they saw themselves as inheritors of the tradition known as the Enlightenment, which in the eighteenth century fought against the old ideas of religion and superstition to lay the basis for the modern rational science of nature. The 'Marxists' explained that those eighteenth-century thinkers were unable to attain a scientific view of history, but that 'Marxism' had provided that extension.

Let us look briefly at some of the main characteristics of the Enlightenment way of thinking. The thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when modern bourgeois society was taking shape, took for its standpoint 'the single individual in civil society'. From the point of view of this social atom, the natural world and society looked like collections of discrete bits and pieces, machines made up of smaller machines. When the 'single individual' thought about this mechanical world, he thought of himself as yet another machine, quite unchanged by interaction with the rest. In trying to think about these assemblies of atoms, many problems arose, and the best way to answer these was to break them into separate sub-problems.

The individual got his knowledge of the world by logically decoding the messages conveyed to him through his senses. Otherwise, the knowing subject and the object of knowledge were utterly different and separate from each other, as were Nature and humanity. Freedom, which for this outlook means the removal of 'external' restrictions on the individual, did not exist in nature, where movement was rigidly determined. To be 'objective' you had to expunge everything subjective, like feeling, will or free, creative activity. This was how reason, the equipment of each individual human, worked in opposition to superstition of all kinds.

This outlook made possible modern natural science, but what did it have to say about human society? Humanity was part of this blind rushing about, and whether humans were put here by an absent Deity, or got here by chance, their social relations could only be understood as external to subjectivity. Political economy and later sociology studied a social machine, made up of atoms driven by self-interest. The social order and its history were governed by laws as fixed as those which ruled the solar system. This was the account which modern natural science gave of itself and its origins, although by the end of the eighteenth century, Rousseau and Kant had begun to illuminate its weaknesses.

But the real story was much more complex, as we find if we look back a few centuries to the Renaissance. As Western Europe emerged from its Dark Ages, new trends began appear, even within the Church. A line of heretical monks, like Joachim (1135-1202), Eckhart (1260-1327) and Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), courageously undermined the prevailing Scholastic dogma. These influences brought into early modern times many older ideas, like those Gnostic traditions that had never entirely disappeared, despite persecution by the Church. They merged with heterodox Jewish and Islamic ideas and neo-Platonic trends, and were sometimes connected with communistic and millenarian movements throughout the late middle ages.

Towards the end of the fifteenth century, translation of Greek authors, preserved until then only by Islamic scholars, opened up new ways of thought in terms of very old ones. The writings of Hermes Trismegistus and the Hebrew mystical texts known as Kabbalah were widely studied. They had for centuries formed the basis for alchemy, astrology and natural magic, but now, and for the next three centuries or more, they were the background to the thinking of the leading figures in European thought in the run-up to modernity. It was this intellectual world that actually saw the birth of modern science.

As a scientific picture of the world, many of the results obtained by the work of alchemists and magicians look somewhat bizarre today. But the triumphs of the new scientific rationalism can blind us to what is important in the world outlook of the Hermetists. First of all, they saw that the contrasts and oppositions between the divine and the human, and between spirit and nature, were not unbridgeable. The cosmos was a whole, united by a series of internal relations, correspondences and 'sympathies' between its parts. In the most important of these, the connection between humanity and nature, the human individual was a microcosm whose structure corresponded to that of the macrocosm and included the whole world within itself.

This was an active connection: when God created the world, he had not completed the job, and to rectify the remaining imperfections required human subjective activity. Indeed, the question of why God created the world could only be answered in terms of his need for humanity to do this work. Through his own personality and imagination, the Magus called down cosmic forces, which his knowledge enabled him to direct. This was the Great Work of creation, in which the scientist participated and identified himself with the world, even with God. (You had to be careful: in the wrong hands, this knowledge could bring demons instead of angels into the picture: big trouble. So to become an 'adept' required a long apprenticeship, in which false ideas were purged.)

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Enlightenment denounced such notions as superstition and swept them aside or forced them underground. But they did not entirely disappear. Not only did Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry preserve some of their symbols, but Hermetic ideas as a whole remained current. Their adherents included people like Fichte, Schelling, Goethe, Shelley and Blake. And now we know that Hegel was deeply immersed in these notions, especially through the writings of the sixteenth-century shoemaker-mystic, Jakob Boehme, a follower of Paracelsus.

Seeing nature as part of God's active being, and humanity at the centre of nature, Hegel opposed the mechanical world-picture of the Enlightenment. His encyclopedic system claimed to present the path to Absolute Knowledge. This work completed God's creation, in a circular movement in which Spirit created itself, unfolding in nature, history and the state. The knowledge so gained was the path to freedom and self-consciousness. Far from denying or hiding his debt to the Hermetics, Hegel openly identified his 'speculative' philosophy with their mysticism. Opposing Enlightenment thinking at every point, the Phenomenology of Spirit, the prologue to his system, was designed to overcome formal rationality, which walls us off from the truth. Science [Wissenschaft] can then enter 'the

realm of pure thought', which, Hegel explains in the Introduction to the Science of Logic, 'is the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence, before the creation of nature and of a finite mind.' Reason, inseparable from the Will and a part of Being, is the realm where Nature and human spirit live.

Marx's work begins and ends with the 'critique of Hegel's dialectic and philosophy as a whole'. But this process of demystification is NOT a matter of rejection. All this needs to be traced out in detail, but here all that we can do is draw attention to three well-known texts.

Let's begin with the famous 'critique of religion', to be found in the Introduction to the 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State' (1843).

'The basis of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being encamped outside the world. Man is the world of men, the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, an inverted world-consciousness, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopedic point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal source of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realisation of the human essence, because the human essence has no true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a fight against the world of which religion is the spiritual aroma. Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and also the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people.'

Karl Marx is not an atheist, merely saying 'No' where religion says 'Yes'. His fight against all mystification preserves its truth and makes it available to everybody.

When, in 1845, Marx scribbled down his Eleven Theses on Feuerbach, this is how he began:

'The main defect of all hitherto-existing materialism - that of Feuerbach included - is that the Object [der Gegenstand], actuality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object [Objekts], or of contemplation [Anschauung], but not as human sensuous activity, practice [Praxis], not subjectively. Hence it happened that the active side, in opposition to materialism, was developed by idealism - but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, differentiated from thought-objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity. In *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, he therefore regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and defined only in its dirty-Jewish form of appearance. Hence he does not grasp the significance of 'revolutionary', of practical-critical, activity.'

The doctrine which called itself 'Marxism' was never able to handle this. Plekhanov, the man who formulated the main ideas of 'Marxism' - 'dialectical materialism', 'historical materialism' etc. - never brought himself to discuss this text, and nor did his most famous pupil, VI Lenin. Marx criticises materialism as it had grown up in the eighteenth century and which Ludwig Feuerbach had tried to re-establish in the early 1840s. The defect of this outlook, Marx explains, is that it is unable to grasp the object of knowledge except in opposition to knowledge and to the knowing subject. It could not understand the activity of knowing the world in terms of the rest of human social and individual activity.

Finally, we might return to Capital, Chapter 7, Section 1, second paragraph, dealing with the labour process, 'independently of any specific social form'. Here, in this account of material creation, is not a scrap of mystery, but a detailed study would reveal many Hermetic echoes. Regulating and controlling the 'metabolism' between humanity and nature, the labour process means 'confronting nature as a force of nature' to satisfy our needs. In changing nature, we simultaneously change our own nature, 'subjecting the play of its forces to our own sovereign power'. Then comes the famous passage about the architect and the bee, in which one phrase is taken directly from Paracelsus. Changing the form of natural materials actualises a conscious purpose, to which you have to subordinate your will.

Finally, a paper would have to attempt to summarise the accounts that each of the five standpoints - Hermetics, Enlightenment, Hegel, Marxism and Marx – gives of its own ideas. Just what does each think it is doing?

The Enlightenment thinker wants to bring clarity to the thought of his fellow-citizens, including a vision of a future form of social relationship. The reason with which each is equipped will enable each of us to liberate ourselves from priest and tyrant. 'Marxism' adds to this the notion of the Party, which ought to arm itself with the theoretical equipment needed to make a revolution. When this machinery is operational, the masses have to be persuaded - hopefully by fair means - to follow the Party's lead into the socialist future. Thus, neither Enlightenment nor 'Marxism' could explain where it itself came from.

The Hermetic Magus used his knowledge in magical and alchemical activities to bring about changes in the world of which he or she is an integral part. Hegel believed that his ability to give philosophical expression to the movement of Spirit was part of the unfolding of Spirit. The Hermetic and the Hegelian each sought to unite his ideas with the world. But this feat was only possible for one who had undergone a special and rigorous initiation, the adept in one case and the trained philosopher in the other.

Marx's aim is not the advocacy of a doctrine of his own. His critique of the theoretical forms in which the existing, inhuman order are enshrined open the path for practical action to transcend that order. Unlike a 'theorist', Marx unites his ideas with what exists, but negatively, through the practical-critical removal of the obstacles to universal human

self-liberation. His ideas self-consciously strive, not to reflect passively what is, but to become 'the mouthpiece of the real movement' for free association.

That is why his ideas are not designed for the specialist, but for everyone.

### **Post-Script**

In yet another attempt to clarify what I am trying to do, here is a post-script to my outline:

For a long time, humans have been trying to understand the world and their own place in it. This has generally taken the form of some kind of religious or mythical account which helped to shape the way people lived. In modern, more 'enlightened' times, the attempt is made to explain the world without such stories, dismissed as mere superstition. But that leaves open the question: 'In what kind of world is it possible for conscious humanity to exist?'

In the orthodox versions of the three big religions, Almighty God, who was, naturally, bound up with the almighty powers on Earth, created the whole show and wrote the script. Those who complained about how dreadful it was, were fobbed off with a story about free will, which was just God's alibi, a way of putting all the blame on us. (Buddhism is quite another matter, I'm told.)

Side by side with orthodoxy went heretical trends: Christian heretics, (Eriugena, Joachim, Eckhart, Nicolas, Bruno, Boehme), Sufis and Kabbalists. Their God was engaged in creation as a collaboration with human creative activity. This was the basis for alchemical and magical notions. Hegel's God was the heretical one. So, despite his repeated assurances that he was a good Lutheran, Hegel could describe human Spirit as self-creating and God as part of the outcome of its history.

The point is this: orthodoxy leaves no space for human freedom, for subjectivity. The Almighty - whom the mathematician Paul Erdos always called 'the Supreme Fascist' - has the whole thing sown up. But the atheists, who just dismissed this whole discussion as superstition, the Enlightenment materialists especially, also left no space for subjectivity. We are just matter in motion, governed by the laws of Nature. Spinoza had no trouble identifying the laws of nature with God's will, and Hegel shows that Enlightenment and superstition actually agree with each other.

Marx takes the side of the heretics and Hermetics, of course. Like them, he knows that humanity is collectively self-creating. The heretical-Hermetic-Hegelian tradition grasped human creative activity only encased in a divine package. Marx, focussing attention on material labour, could allow God to fade away into history, and open the path to universal human emancipation, the unity of subjectivity and objectively free social practice.