

Whatever Happened to Karl Marx?

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How the mighty have fallen. The prophet (sometimes the god) of the socialist and communist left seems to have fallen in much of the world as state socialism has disintegrated in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The Red Scare is not very frightening anymore.

And what was a god for millions served as a devil for other millions. Our human need to name our demons and fears seemed, in the West anyway, to be met by Marx and his team. We all have some memory of the "McCarthy era," defined as it was by red-baiting and flushing out those commies under our couches. Korea, Viet Nam, Berlin, Cuba, John Foster Dulles, J. Edgar Hoover. Thousands of political careers were energized by the looming specter of this devil prowling our world.

William Martin's fine new biography of Billy Graham, *A Prophet with Honor* (William Morrow, 1991), shows in detail how the famous evangelist's simple gospel of Jesus Christ was so often preached against a litany of the horrors of Marxist communism. Graham has come a long way since the Fifties and Sixties. The list of lesser religious leaders, evangelists and authors who felt called to a ministry of combatting Marxism for its godless tyranny is long indeed. The voices were shrill, the research thin or nonexistent.

Hal Lindsey's multi-million selling *Late Great Planet Earth* (Zondervan, 1970) is to the Bible prophecy movement what Billy Graham is to mass evangelism. Lindsey identifies communist Russia as the fulfillment of biblical prophecies about "Gog," "Magog," "Rosh" in Ezekiel and other texts. And even without a biblical proof-text he boldly predicts that "Internal political chaos caused by student rebellions and Communist subversion will begin to erode the economy of our nation" (p. 184). For Lindsey and scores of other interpreters of prophecy, Marxist success in the world (along with Zionism and formation of the European Common Market) was crucial to their arguments (and book sales).

Fortunately, a new devil has been found, Islamic Fundamentalism (Iran, Iraq and Libya above all). Of course the devil is really America (or more precisely its Republican leadership) for others. Wait a minute: the devil is those Liberals who just won't go away with their ACLU, NEA, etc.. Unfortunately the real devil of biblical revelation somehow gets ignored in all this sound and fury. Lies, accusation, division, violence and death are the characteristic signs of the presence of the cosmic enemy described in the Bible. Political, economic, sexual and cultural lies ravage our planet and our people but it's easier just to damn Saddam, or George, or Botha, or Schlafly. Too easy.

I don't mean to wallow in cynicism, take cheap shots from hindsight, or make light of the actual threat posed at various times by any of these or other substitute devils. I only wish to urge us to learn to be less shrill, less certain, less combative, less simplistic in our efforts to overcome evil and promote the good in our world. Our chaotic times require reflection, depth, understanding, truth and love. Pouring gasoline on the flames is not Christian. No matter how big your rallies and demonstrations and budgets, no matter how booming your voice or slick your propaganda, any witch-hunting is anti-Christian. It is the ideological terrorism of ignorant wimps, too lazy and full of hate to learn and do the truth.

So whatever happened to that old devil Karl Marx anyway? He died in 1883, shortly before his 65th birthday, but he has continued for another century to have a powerful influence through his writings such as *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Kapital* (1867). Russia and China attempted to build Marxist societies in two of the most populous and powerful regions of the world, to say nothing of the importance of Marxist thought in Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia and Western as well as Eastern Europe. His disciples such as Lenin, Stalin and Mao extended, revised and applied his thought to widely different situations.

Actually, I'm not so sure we've heard the last of Marx yet but while he lies still on the table we can attempt a brief autopsy. Marx was a social philosopher, a social scientist, of considerable merit as well as power. He not only thought and wrote in great depth (e.g., *Das Kapital*), he expressed his thought in vivid, accessible journalistic fashion for a broader audience (e.g., *The Communist Manifesto*). Over against the simplistic, abstract pseudo-scientific pronouncements of the statistical sociologists (is anybody else out

there getting sick of the vulgarization of modern analysis by George Gallup, George Barna and all the other obsessive poll-taking generalizers?), Marx developed a coherent, global theory of social reality. Jacques Ellul, Christopher Lasch and Robert Bellah are, in their own unique ways of course, among the few carrying on this tradition of the great sociologists going back to Marx, Weber and Durkheim.

Jacques Ellul, in my view the greatest social analyst of the 20th century, was "converted" to Marx on reading *Das Kapital* as a poor undergraduate in Bordeaux in the early Thirties. Marx seemed to provide him with the answer to what was happening in the political and economic situation of the time. Within a couple years, however, Ellul was still more profoundly converted to Jesus Christ on reading the Bible. His profound appreciation for Marx continues to the present but has been qualified by (a) the failure of Marxism to address the deepest human and spiritual needs of life, (b) a conviction that Marx's analysis was in the 20th century superceded by the global development of the technological society, and (c) the bastardization and exploitation of Marx's thought by virtually all of his 20th century followers.

In *Jesus and Marx* (Eerdmans, 1988. pp. 6 - 10) Ellul reviews five positive aspects of Marx which were not totally lost in the communist movement of our century: (1) the concern for justice and equality in society, (2) the special concern for the poor, (3) the stress on the link between thought and action, praxis as well as theory, (4) the concern for the material side of life along with the critique of a disembodied philosophy or religiosity, and (5) the stress on militancy and community over against a lazy individualism. Christians all too often betrayed their Lord in failing on each of these five important points. No wonder Marxist rhetoric has had greater appeal to the poor and marginalized.

Marx's determination to be a rigorous social scientist as well as an active reformer is an important model in our century of attempts to separate values from facts, responsible engagement from detached objective analysis. Marx's 11th "thesis on Feuerbach": "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it." Unfortunately, from at least Lenin onward, this quest to change the world degenerated into a justification for terrorism and authoritarianism to achieve the party's (not the proletariat's) goals. Still, Marx had a point about thought and action.

Marx's materialist philosophy stood his predecessor Hegel's idealism on its head. Since incarnation is at the heart of Christianity, this materialist corrective is much needed. I would even say that Marx was right, for the most part, in following Feuerbach's criticism of religion as being a projection of material conditions. Thus an obsession with a heavenly afterlife can be "the false expression of a true consciousness." We are conscious that something is terribly wrong in this life and we know that something better must be possible; but then we project this into an afterlife and accept our intolerable situation. Religion serves as the "opium of the masses," dulling our pain as well as fogging our vision. This is surely not the whole explanation for religious ideas and practices, but there is some truth here.

So too, political theories and platforms, art and music, social custom and tradition are but reflections of the material conditions of life, specifically economic class and ownership of the means of production. Despite the importance of these insights, Marx fails ultimately because this view is too narrow and reductionistic. Ideas (notably his own) often do have material consequences as well as non-material sources. As a Christian, I would argue that among many and varied causes and sources of social reality, the truth (and conversely the lie) that is spoken and lived out has the greatest impact on our history. God's revelation of the Word (the Truth) in Jesus of Nazareth is the supreme example. Marx's materialist reductionism is unacceptable.

Marx was a "dialectical materialist." History consists of the interaction of thesis and antithesis, producing a synthesis which then encounters a new antithesis, and so on. Dialectics is a powerful method of analysis because it illuminates the course of history (and of biblical revelation as well). The great weakness of Marx's dialectic is its progressivism. That is, Marx believed that an evolution toward a utopian classless state which would see the "withering away of the state" was not only possible but assured by the dialectical progress of history. With Ellul, I think that dialectical tension is essential for "life" not "progress." We need it (not an unchallenged totalitarian condition) but we don't expect salvation or progress from it.

Marx was fundamentally accurate in assessing the development of industrial capitalism in the 19th century. But part of his negative legacy to our century, according to Jacques Ellul again (*Hope in Time of*

Abandonment, Seabury Press, 1973, pp. 48-49), is fomenting an "age of suspicion." Lurking behind anyone's speech or action is one's economic class. We cannot accept anything for what it appears to be--we immediately refer it to this unacknowledged class bias. This same cynical habit of thought is practiced by those influenced by Freud, Nietzsche, as well as a host of 'isms and 'ologies of other sorts (too often including an excessive and unfair Christian suspicion of non-Christians).

No Christian wants the truth of Jesus Christ to be judged by the failures of his followers; and analogously it is not fair to reject Marx simply because his followers have failed in various ways. Surely part of the reason for the passing of Marxist regimes this decade is the fact that it has not been possible to live with the violence and hypocrisy of their leadership. Anytime a country's border patrols must train their guns inward to prevent their own people from leaving, you know something is not going well. But I will not argue here in depth for the superiority of Jesus to Marx because of the superior record of "Christian" societies to Marxist ones. This case can be made but more important is the fact that that Jesus was more realistic than Marx in that he made no guarantees of perfection in this life. The naivete and utopianism of Karl Marx's thought put him in a completely different class from Jesus as a commentator on human reality.

In the 20th century, it is not capital and economic class but "technique" and the associated growth of the bureaucratic nation-state that shape international as well as local life. Technique, the subject of Ellul's extensive sociological writings, is "raving rationalism," the quest for measureable effectiveness, the surrender of the qualitative to the quantitative, the conquest of the natural by the artificial---not only in electronic or machine technologies but in organizational techniques, bureaucracy, economics, politics, religion and all other sectors of life. This way of thought and action has been growing exponentially throughout the 20th century, invading every corner of the globe and every corner of our personal life.

Throughout the 20th century this technique has been quietly asserting itself not only in the United States and Japan but in the Communist world. Communist ideology has had to yield to technical imperatives. While the rhetoric remained fierce, the reality has been convergence of East and West. Soviet and Eastern European Marxism died in full retreat before an imperialistic technological invasion. We can predict a similar fate for Chinese Communism and for the separatist ethnic movements now ravaging Eastern Europe. No version of Marxism and no version of separatist nationalism is powerful enough to resist eventual integration into an interdependent, global technological web.

That old devil Karl Marx is pretty much gone. As we have seen, there are some good things along with many very bad things to say about his legacy. But now as we are on to other devils in Baghdad and elsewhere, let's remember that crucial biblical characterology of Satan: lies, accusation, division, violence and death. We could start with a little interior exorcism and then keep an eye especially on that tyrant with the beneficent smile, Technique, as it extends its sway over the people of our planet.

For further reading:

Klaus Bockmuehl, *The Challenge of Marxism: A Christian Response* (InterVarsity, 1980).

Jacques Ellul, *Jesus and Marx: From Gospel to Ideology* (Eerdmans, 1988)

David Lyon, *Karl Marx: A Christian Assessment of His Life and Thought* (InterVarsity, 1979).

Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Pelican, 1967).

David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (Harper, 1977).