

MARXISM AND THE LOGIC OF FUTURAL DISCOURSE: A BRIEF REFLECTION

For many, it has always been something of a problem to make sense of truth claims about future states or events as these are enunciated in the major philosophical and religious traditions. To say, for instance, that one believes in the classless society or the coming Kingdom of God continues to be a source of genuine befuddlement and distrust. Prognostications like these, if they deserve this status at all, seem to belong to the sphere of mere assertion. Indeed while many find it possible at least to understand the view of human nature proposed by such traditions (eg. Christianity and Marxism), they often flounder when these same traditions engage in discourse about the shape of things to come. But discourse about the future seems to occupy a crucial role for genuine adherents of both the traditions. Christianity without the Kingdom of God or a Marxism understood without the classless society, would probably be unacceptable to mainstream followers of both the traditions. Both, it seems, are indispensable ingredients in the self-understanding of the two "believing" communities.

What I propose in this paper is a way of treating "futural discourse" or "eschatological imagery" in such a way that its intelligibility is clarified. I propose to do this by focusing upon the notion of the classless society. My goal is to show that the classless society is a transformative symbol - an invitation to action - and if understood thus, certain difficulties in Marxist interpretation can be readily overcome.

Images of the Classless Society

The precise nature of Marx's view of the classless society is debatable since he left us with neither a specific programme nor a detailed blueprint. His references, for the most part, are cautious generalizations. Nor, some argue, is this really surprising, since Marx was a materialist not an idealist. David McLellan writes :

If all ideas were a product of contemporary social reality, then a detailed

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projection of these ideas into a distant future was bound to result in idealism - ideas that were completely imaginary since they lacked an empirical reference.¹

Indeed Marx preferred to use the term "communism" for the movement that would overcome the capitalist order as distinct from the society and that would gradually emerge. Hence, in *The German Ideology*, he writes :

Communism is not for us a condition which ought to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to conform itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present condition.²

Extrapolating from this, it is fair to assume the classless society is not to be construed as communism as such, but is better understood as being non-capitalist, or better perhaps, post-communist. What we have here is an image of the future primarily based on the *via negativa*. To avoid idealist projection, Marx refuses to delineate the specific contours of both the communist and classless societies. His unwillingness to predict the future is also evident in his and Engels' criticism of the utopian thinking current among some contemporaries.³

Despite this obvious reticence, Marx on occasion does refer explicitly to his *hopes* for a classless society. If he refuses to provide a blueprint, he nonetheless offers a specific number of images that give us some sense of what he intends and wants. Above all, Marx proposes that the classless society will not be encumbered by the class repression of the old regime. The political and religious superstructure will wither away, since it will no longer reflect the ruling class' monopoly on society's means of production. Nor will it be needed to legitimize their rule. There will, moreover, be no alienation of labour. What is produced will affirm one's self and society's collective needs in which one finds one's true nature and goal (i.e., species being). The product of one's labour - an expression of one's self - will no longer be sold on the open market but used to meet the legitimate *needs* of other, not for profit, but for their betterment as persons. Marx writes :

I would have had the satisfaction of having acted as an intermediary between you and the human species, that is, of your feeling me to be a completion of your own being and a necessary part of yourself; that is, I would know my value to be confirmed in your thought and love....

For commentators like Robert Tucker the classless society envisaged by Marx (or what Tucker calls "ultimate communism"), is essentially aesthetic in spirit. It involves, if anything, the re-constitution of our perception of the world in such a way that utility gives a way to appreciation and

beauty. Tucker writes :

He (Marx) declares that 'The cultivation of the five senses is the work of the whole history of the world to date'. The positive transcendence of private property will complete the work of history. It will mean the liberation of the human senses to appreciate man-made objects for what they inherently are rather than perceiving in them only objects of utility and potential possession.⁵

Thus far, we have noted two apparently irreconcilable tendencies in Marx's thinking about the classless society. On the one hand, he refuses to talk in any explicit way for fear of falling prey to the danger of idealism. On the other hand, he clearly offers a vision of a classless community, one that is based on humanity's species being and non-alienated labour. What are we to conclude ? That Marx is subject to the inevitable inconsistencies that are part and parcel of a great man's thought ? Or that he could be consistent if he dropped the idea of the classless society and held instead to his social analysis ?

At this point, I simply want to propose that Marx's account of the classless society is not only appropriate but an integral part of his whole ideology. Before, however, I elaborate, I want to discuss another problem in Marxist interpretation - one related to Marx's view of the future.

The Ambiguity of Action : The Nature of Dialectic

The question of how a classless society will actually come about is one that goes straight to the heart of Marx's understanding of dialectic *per se*. Marx was undoubtedly one of the most uncompromising dialecticians in the history of human thought. Nonetheless one senses a frequent tension in his vision of the future as perpetual dialectic and his view of the future as absolute de-alienation in the classless society. While his appreciation of the dialectical method encourages the view that all historical states are surpassable and provisional, that is, that all historical periods ultimately contain their own negation, his hope for a classless society leads, at times, to the anticipated *arrest* of the historical dialectic. Marx writes :

It is the definitive resolution of the antagonism between man and nature, and between man and man. It is the true solution of the conflict between existence and essence, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species. It is the solution of the riddle of history and knows itself to be this solution.

As for how this state will ultimately come about, Marx equivocates again. On the one hand, Marx proposes that in order to "achieve" the classless society, society must acknowledge the laws of social development and

act in accord with their inner telos and destiny. By acquiring control of the forces of production - the forces responsible for social relations - Marx assumes the repressive forces of religion, culture, and the state, will finally wither away. This view of Marx - a view championed by Sartre and Luckas - underscores the need for human commitment and praxis.⁷

But another view has Marx placing considerable more emphasis on laws outside of human consciousness crucial for the development of a classless society. As early as 1845 in *The German Ideology*, Marx writes, "there is a world in which consciousness and being are distinct; a world which continues to exist when I do away with its existence in thought"⁸ Commentators like John Hoffman imply that by deemphasizing Marx's concern with a dialectic of nature, interpretations like those of Sartre and Luckas fail to make seriously Marx's own claims about natural laws and exist independent of human consciousness. As Hoffman notes, Marx himself concurred with Engel's exposition of the dialectic of nature in his *Anti-Duhring*. According to Hoffman, he also rejected a view of nature that was non-dialectical because it failed to account for the novelty and productivity crucial to explain humanity's own development. Indeed with the introduction of Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1860), Marx wrote to Engels and referred to Darwin's classic as actually containing the natural historical foundation of his own outlook. Marx also makes an interesting reference to natural law in *Capital*, volume 1.⁹

Intrinsically it is not a question of the higher or lower degree of development of the social antagonisms that result from the natural laws of capitalist production. It is a question of these laws themselves, of these tendencies working with iron necessity towards inevitable results.¹⁰

Of particular interest here, is the reference to laws which move with "necessity towards inevitable results", something, it seems, substantially at odds from the emphasis on praxis in the former interpretation. The corollary of this is that human freedom (i.e., praxis) is radically curbed and the classless society is here understood as the inevitable outcome of the march on nature and history.

A Pragmatic and Transformative Symbol

I want to return, if only briefly, to reflect on the role of the classless society in Marxist futural discourse. I want to suggest that it serves as a transformative symbol. Understood thus, it can't be seen as an empirical prognostication; nor can it be seen as the kind of symbol that diverts one's

attention from the class struggle at hand.

My reflections here are largely indebted to the penetrating insights of C. Peter Slater, whose excellent book, *The Dynamics of Religion*, throws much light on the role of symbols in ideological systems both secular and religious. Slater contends that when *lives* by a specific set of symbols, that is, when one is guided by a master story or narrative (what he interprets as a shifting cluster of primary and secondary symbols), the symbols can't be seen as merely static or indicative. Symbols, he says, are also essentially transfigurative and directed towards the future. Slater writes :

If persuading someone to see the wisdom of a religious way of life is like sharing a joke, what we need are not pointers to what is always hidden but ways of transforming the other's vision of what is already potentially present.¹¹

Assuming this, Slater argues it's not that surprising that most traditions, secular and religious, are short on the specifics of "transcendent end states" (i.e., what a classless society or a Kingdom of God etc., will actually look like). This is because transformative symbols constitutive of traditions are essentially *pragmatic* and *eschatological*. Indeed Slater writes, "Lack of specificity in symbols of the end invites participation in the shaping of the end".¹² This, he claims, is the distinctive character of "religious" stories :

Whatever the sense of time or place adopted by the story teller, it becomes religiously significant when it is perceived as something from which we must move or which must be transformed.¹³

In this regard, too, the Marxist story is essentially religious because it calls, in effect, for the *total* transformation of our current society, that is, complete liberation from the oppression of the ruling class; it also invites our own involvement in bringing this change about. As for key principles and maxims that guide us to this end, these are to be found in the constitutive principles offered by each tradition. According to Slater, while love and justice have played this role in the Christian faith, "equality and fraternity" have served this function in revolutionary Marxism.¹⁴ Of importance here, too, is Slater's claim that constitutive principles used to guide "believers" always presuppose an organic continuity between adopted means and ends. It's not enough to start practising virtue on the first day of the Kingdom or to exhibit fraternity after the revolution. Means and ends in religious narratives always imply each other.

Our discussion thus far has significant implications for what I call the logic of futural discourse. If we take Slater seriously, the classless society should not be understood as an empirical proposition. To fault

Marxism simply on the basis that classless society has not come about, is not to understand how this concept works. It's to confuse, in effect, the empirical discourse of positivism with that of exhortation (i.e., moral recommendation). Or as Wittgenstein might say, it amounts to faulting a tennis player for not scoring goals.

In my opinion, Marxist discourse, while truly empirical in some respects, is ultimately governed by a pragmatic moral imperative. Its *primary* goal - as Marx once said - is not to understand, but to transform our current world. Praxis, then, is central, and this means working towards a goal that takes its cue from a vision of the classless society. This means, too, that to interpret Marxism with undue regard to its futural thrust is to risk abstracting from moral imperatives that invite our own response. Understanding Marxism means *acting* in accord with the moral principles of equality and fraternity consistent with the vision of a classless society. To play for a moment on Kant's formulation, principles without visions are empty, visions without principles are blind.

The classless society, then, is no mere empirical prognostication. According to Marx, it can't and even oughtn't to be, since to project such an image into the future is to fall into the idealism that his dialectic rejects. Its role, instead, is best understood as regulative moral principle - tied to the principles of equality and fraternity - and constitutive for directing current social praxis. Understood thus, the classless society can only be interpreted as a perpetual dialectic always falling short of its own moral perfection, since to be a human being is, by definition, always to be imperfect.¹⁵

As for those strands in Marx which tend to treat the classless society as the inevitable outcome of the dialectics of nature, these, I think, must be re-examined with a view to reinterpreting their underlying intention from the moral pragmatic viewpoint. This means that rather than interpreting the classless society in terms of the horizon of a dialectics of nature (i.e., as its necessary and inevitable outcome) a dialectics of nature must now be understood in terms of the classless society itself understood as a moral and regulative ideal (i.e., not a future state). To borrow a theological term, the dialectics of nature ought to be demythologized or anthropologically interpreted in order to reveal the truth about praxis that lies disguised in the objectifying thought forms of a dialectics of nature. By "objectifying" here, I refer to a process either seen or interpreted as independent of action, but the meaning of which is essentially tied to human responsibility and praxis.

At this point, I would venture to say that existentially interpreted

(i.e. understood anthropologically) the *necessity* implied in a dialectics of nature could be re-interpreted as *unconditional allegiance to the principles enshrined in the perpetual quest for a classless society*. This, I think, is the moral and pragmatic counterpart of a dialectics of necessity, and something that accords with Slater's emphasis on the transformative power of the classless society as symbol.

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NOTES

1. David McLellan, *Review of Politics*, vol. 31, "Marx's View of the Unalienated Society" (U.S.A. : 1969), 459.
2. See H. Acton, *What Marx Really Said*, (New York : 1967) 115.
3. See, for instance, Engel's letter to A. Bebel. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, (Moscow : 1956), 352-59.
4. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, ed. D. Struick (New York : 1964), 157.
5. Robert Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, (Cambridge : 1961), 158.
6. T.B. Bottomore, tr. and ed. *Karl Marx : Early Writings* (London : 1963), 155.
7. See, for example, Jean - Paul Sartre, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* ed. Jonathan Ree and tr. Alan Sheridan - Smith (Briston : 1976).
8. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Holy Family*, (Moscow : 1956), 255.
9. See John Hoffman, *Marxism and the Theory of Praxis*, (New York : 1975), esp. 45 ff.
10. *Ibid.* 144
11. Peter Slater, *The Dynamics of Religion*, (New York : 1978) 70.
12. *Ibid.*, 70

13. *Ibid.*, 55.
14. *Ibid.*, 81. Slater argues that constitutive principles like equality and fraternity are characteristically exemplified in the constantly changing stories of the leading "saints" and shapers of the world's major traditions (e.g. Mao and Bethune in Marxism).
15. Note, too, Marx's remarks on the finitude of reason : Human reason, which is anything but pure, having only incomplete vision, encounters at every step new problems to be solved.
Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, (New York; 1963), 132.