Chapter Thirty-Six

Herbert Marcuse: From Marxism to Pessimism

Marxism is in most of its versions an optimistic philosophy; so it is, for example, in Herbert Marcuse’s earlier writings, when Hegel is castigated because his philosophy ‘ends in doubt and resignation’. But the later Marcuse himself ends in a state of doubt, if not one of resignation: ‘Those social groups which dialectical theory identified as the forces of negation are either defeated or reconciled with the established system’. This theme has been elaborated at length in *One Dimensional Man*, and it is worth enquiring whether on examination this transformation of Marxism into a pessimism does not reveal something about the character of Marxism and not just something about Marcuse’s own intellectual development. To carry through this enquiry it is necessary to note certain features of Marxism.

Lukács, long ago in his essay on ‘The Change in Function of Historical Materialism’, argued that the time had come for historical materialism to engage in self-scrutiny. The central thesis of historical materialism is that every major philosophical doctrine has features which show it to be the characteristic product of some specific form of social life. Of what

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2 Marcuse 1960, p. 248.
3 Marcuse 1960, p. xiv.
specific form of social life then is Marxism itself a characteristic product? Of that nineteenth-century form of bourgeois life, in which the economic on the one hand and the political and cultural on the other were so sharply distinguished and segregated that the two could be taken to stand in an external causal relationship, such that the economic basis determined (in some sense) the political and cultural superstructure. That is to say, Marxist theory in its account of the political and the economic reflects the special relation of the non-interventionist state to the free-market economy, and in some hands (most notably those of Engels) has hypostasised certain features of that relationship into eternal characteristics of all forms of social life. But we can be rescued from this error by distinguishing those features of Marxist method which are valid only in their original nineteenth-century context from those which have validity in the present.

If Lukács is correct, a central feature of Marxism ought to be its capacity to renovate itself by self-scrutiny and self-criticism; and, equally, if Lukács is correct, we must be able to provide a criterion by which we may distinguish between those parts of Marxist theory which merely reflect the age in which it was first conceived and those parts which are more permanently valuable. In fact, no Marxist – nor anyone else – has ever produced an adequate version of such a criterion. But it is clear that, if such a criterion can be produced, it will be concerned with the relation between the empirical content of Marxism and its theoretical and conceptual form. Lukács indeed wanted to make Marxism’s theoretical form entirely independent of the particular contingent empirical content which Marx gave to it; but never in his own writing did he succeed in doing this and he soon abandoned the attempt. If Marcuse perhaps resembles the younger Lukács in trying to make Marxist theory over-independent of the results of empirical enquiry, it may be that Marcuse’s errors have also included the smuggling of an arbitrary empirical content into his otherwise Hegelian version of Marxism.

It is perhaps chiefly as an interpreter of Hegel that Marcuse excels. His early work, Hegel’s Ontologie und die Grundzüge einer Theorie der Geschichtlichkeit, is a scholarly anticipation of the theories of Reason and Revolution, which is certainly the best statement in English and one of the best statements in any language of the connection between Hegel’s logic and his social theory. Yet Hegel is

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5 Marcuse 1932.