Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism
James D. White
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Reviewed by Sean Sayers

The main purpose of this study is to argue that the 'Marxism' which became the orthodoxy in the Soviet Union under the titles of 'dialectical' and 'historical materialism' has little to do with Marx's ideas properly understood. This is not a particularly novel or surprising claim. White, however, argues for it in an unusual way. The book falls into the two parts which are alluded to in the title. The first describes the way in which Marx's early philosophy developed out of the romantic and Hegelian strands of classical German philosophy. White then goes on to show how Marx's ideas were adapted and interpreted, or rather misinterpreted, in Russian revolutionary circles at the end of the nineteenth century to form the basis for what was to become Soviet Marxism.

The relation of Marx's thought to the work of previous philosophers is well trodden ground. White's main original point, in what is otherwise a somewhat routine and laboured account, is that, in his youth, Marx was far more sympathetic to and influenced by romanticism than is usually appreciated or than Marx himself would later wish to acknowledge. By 'romanticism', in this context, White means an outlook that values what is natural and simple over what is more developed and complex. In social thought, this involves seeing earlier, simpler and more primitive conditions as giving a better model for social life than later and more sophisticated ones. It seeks the social ideal in an earlier 'natural' state which is corrupted and destroyed by subsequent social development.

Marx's philosophy, like Hegel's, is usually portrayed as hostile to such romanticism, which it rejects as conservative and backward looking. Indeed, according to White, Marx soon abandoned his early adherence to romanticism. However, White maintains, typically romantic modes of expression linger on in Marx's thought and testify to its enduring impact in his work.

White makes his case by trying to show that there are characteristically romantic echoes in the ways in which Marx uses the terms 'universal' and 'particular'. However, these terms were common currency in German philosophy at the time. The mere fact that they occur in Marx's writings is not sufficient to establish any conclusions about the philosophical character of his thought. Romantic ideas were influential throughout this period and Marx
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could not but have been influenced by them, even in criticising and opposing them. But to suggest that Marx was an adherent of romanticism in a more positive way is unsupported by the sort of argument that White uses. For the thesis that White wishes to establish is a philosophical one which can only be demonstrated in a philosophical fashion: through an inward and philosophical consideration of Marx's philosophy as a philosophy, which is lacking here.

Marx and Russia

In the second part of the book, White goes on to show how Marx's ideas were transmitted via Engels, and taken up in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century. White gives a detailed account of Marx's studies of Russian society and his involvement with Russian socialists from the 1860s until his death in 1883. He then describes the reception of Marx's work in Russia up to and including Lenin's earliest works. This is the most valuable and successful part of this study; the book comes alive at this point.

The emancipation of the serfs in Russia in 1861 and the social developments it set in train sparked an explosion of interest in social conditions in Russia. Modern Russian social science dates from this period. In order to study these social changes and to follow the Russian debate about them, Marx taught himself Russian. As White shows, his knowledge of conditions in Russia was remarkably extensive and deep. He kept up with the growing literature on Russian economic and social conditions, and maintained contact with a large number of Russian economists and social thinkers. In 1877, when Danielson invited Marx to write on the subject of Russian agrarian relations, 'he could do so in the confidence that [Marx] was as familiar with all the available sources on the subject as any scholar in Russia' (p. 244). Yet the fruits of these studies, including the drafts for the piece that Danielson had requested, have not yet been published in English. Marx's voluminous notes and drafts are not even scheduled for inclusion in the 50 volumes of the English Marx-Engels Collected Works. They are still available only in Russian.

A particular focus of controversy in Russia at the time concerned the traditional form of communal ownership among the peasantry. Would it survive the abolition of serfdom and the advent of capitalist relations in the countryside? Could it form the basis for a progressive social order in the future? Or did the imperatives of economic