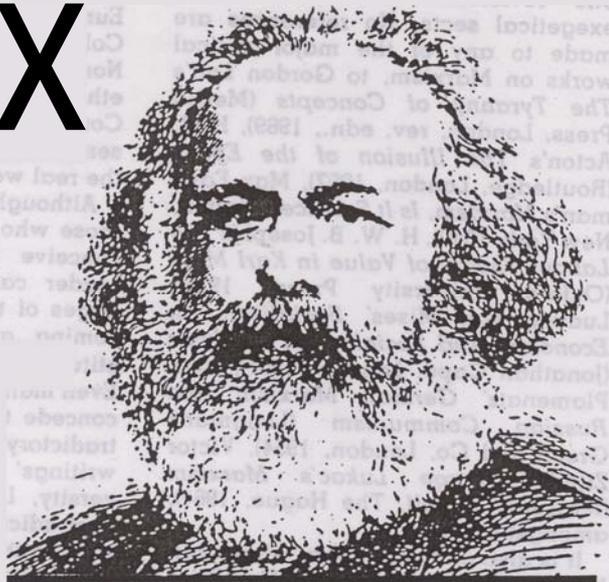


SANITISING MARX

by Chris R. Tame

Republished by the
Libertarian Alliance,
Suite 35
2 Landsdowne Row
London W1J 6HL
England



Edited by Professor Tom Bottomore of the University of Sussex, *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1983) is part of a strong, and growing, stream of Marxist works emanating from leading British publishers (such as Routledge, Macmillan, Croom Helm, Allison and Busby, Allen and Unwin, etc.). It is a compilation of entries on the major concepts of Marxism ('abstract labour', 'surplus value', 'alienation', etc.), and its major theorists (Lenin, Mao, Habermas, Adorno, etc.). The entries are written by a combination of Marxist-oriented academics or 'Marxist scholars' (Bottomore, Lukes, Stanley Diamond, Desai, McLellan), outright Marxist publicists (Mandel, Miliband, Sweezy) and Communist activists (like Monty Johnstone, described in the list of contributors as 'of London', but actually a major activist in the British Communist Party, and a member of its Theory and Ideology Committee).

The volume is highly representative of the character of the new apologetics for Marxism and Communism. The crude, vulgar approach of old has largely been abandoned (left to sects

like the New Communist Party or the Spartacist League) for a more subtle, and more insidious form of what, despite its academic credentials, remains propaganda.

Intellectual gymnastics and discreet understatement abound throughout the book. Although one contributor, Steven Lukes, is prepared to admit that Marxist denigration of the 'formal freedoms' of bourgeois democracy constitute 'formulations ... theoretically in error and .. practically disastrous', a veil of silence descends on the reality of the millions slaughtered and oppressed by such mistaken 'formulations'. That Marx's vehement anti-individualism, his opposition to 'atomistic' egoism and self-interest, might be challengeable and might have something to do with the horrors of Marxist practice are thoughts apparently beyond the pale. Indeed, Lukes even speaks of Marx's opposition to individual freedom as a 'wider and richer view of freedom'.

Even when an apparently critical stance is taken, the full horrors of Marxism are not allowed to impinge upon the sensibilities of the reader. 'Frictions were unavoidable', writes

V. G. Kiernan, Professor Emeritus, University of Edinburgh, regarding Soviet nationalities policy. What a splendid synonym for brutal mass coercion and genocide. While it is permissible to criticise Stalin as a 'ruthless and unscrupulous politician', Lenin's role in the creation of the machinery of totalitarian oppression, and his repeated approval of mass murder and repression, are completely glossed over by Neil Harding (University College of Swansea). Instead, his alleged 'disturbance' at the tsarist-style abuses are noted, and he is described as a 'dedicated' and 'extraordinary' man.

In some cases it is impossible for the contributors to ignore criticisms. In the entry on 'Asiatic Society', Wittfogel's classic *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (1957, current edition Vintage Books, New York, 1981), and the importance of its analysis of despotic regulatory states which are not based on a system of private property rights, can hardly be ignored. But the full extent of Marx's, Engels', and subsequent Marxists' 'sin against science' (in Wittfogel's phrase) is insufficiently emphasised.

In other entries real intellectual scandals are swept under the carpet of history. The entry on 'Darwinism' correctly admits (an admission still not widespread in the Marxist and even general literature) the myth concerning Marx's alleged attempt to dedicate *Capital* to Darwin. But it discreetly ignores the scandal of Marx and Engels' hypocritical attempt to cash in on the prestige of Darwinism, and of the continuation of this practice by subsequent Marxists, such as Maurice Bloch and Steven Rose, up to this day. Nor does the entry mention the erratic and frequently idiotic directions of Marx's anthropological thought. (A definitive analysis of this issue has recently appeared in Leslie Page's *Marx and Darwin: The Unveiling of a Myth*, Centre For Liberal Studies, London, 1983.)

Particularly scandalous, however, is the entry on 'Judaism'. Julius Carlebach of the University of Sussex asserts that 'Although we know that Marx was not averse to using offensive vulgarisms about some Jews ... there is no basis for regarding him as having been anti-semitic'. Yet, as even a brief quotation in the entry shows, let alone a complete reading of Marx's essay 'On the Jewish Question', Marx's critique of Judaism and the Jews for their embodiment of capitalism, anti-social egoism and materialism is of the very essence of both socialist and national socialist anti-semitism and is remarkably similar to Hitler's observations in *Mein Kampf*. Carlebach's observations on this point are doubly strange since in his own book on the subject, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1978), he flatly states that Marx's

LIBERTARIAN REPRINTS

An occasional publication
of the Libertarian Alliance

Number Seven

This review article first appeared, under the title "Bottom Marx", in *ECONOMIC AFFAIRS*, Volume .4 Number 3, April-June 1984.

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY!

second essay on The Jewish Question is 'anti-semitic but not offensive' (p. 349), 'must be regarded as an anti-semitic document' (p. 357) and 'is cast in the same mould as those of Luther and Hitler' (p. 352).

The section on Marx's life is also typically sanitised. That Marx's abominable behaviour and character provide an insight into the nature of his ideas, their moral and psychological premises, is an observation one would search for in vain. None of the critical biographical material on Marx (like Leopold Schwarzschild's *The Red Prussian: The Life and Legend of Karl Marx*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1948, Nathaniel Weyl's *Karl Marx: Racist*, Arlington House, New Rochelle, New York, 1979, or Saul K. Padover's *Karl Marx*, New American Library, New York 1980, or Lewis Feuer's essay, 'The Character and Thought of Karl Marx', *Encounter*, December 1968), is included.

One biographical omission is of extreme theoretical importance. While there are entries for Ludwig Feuerbach and Moses Hess, there is no such entry for Marx's other fellow Young Hegelian, Max Stirner. When mentioned parenthetically his significance is either misrepresented (by Irving Fetscher of the University of Frankfurt), or glossed over (by Gareth Stedman Jones, King's College, Cambridge). Only in David McLellan's entry on the 'Young Hegelians' is his significance in any way hinted at. Yet it was Stirner's thought that stung Marx into a major change of course, to adopt the guise of 'historical materialism' for his essentially moralistic critique of capitalist individualism. Stirner's thought constituted - as it still does - such a challenge that Marx had to devote the major portion of *The German Ideology* to a vituperative counter-attack (see N. Lobkowitz, 'Karl Marx and Max Stirner', in F. J. Adelman (ed.) *Demythologising Marxism*, Boston College Studies in Philosophy, Vol. II, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, 1969, and my 'Stirner in Context: The Profanization of Hegelianism and the Genesis of Marx's Historical Materialism', in *New Libertarian*, Vol. 4, No. 7, April/June 1980, for a survey of the literature on this question).

In spite of the editor's declared intention to take 'account of different interpretations and criticisms', the most radical criticisms of Marxism are notable for their absence. The section on the 'Peasantry' (Elizabeth Dore, American University, Washington DC) contains no reference to David Mitrany's critique, *Marx Vs The Peasant: A Study in Social Dogmatism* (University of North Carolina Press, 1951). Mihailo Markovic's entry on 'Self-Management' lists no critical references on the subject whatsoever. A section on 'Critics of Marxism', by the editors as a whole, while briefly mentioning Bohm-Bawerk, contains no reference to the principal 'Austrian School' marginalist/subjectivist critique of Marxism, nor to its attempted

demonstration of the impossibility of rational economic calculation under socialism. Barone, Pareto, Hayek, von Mises, Hoff, Polanyi, Paul Craig Roberts, Don Lavoie, etc. will be looked for in vain. Although Schumpeter is mentioned, the bulk of the entry deals with rival 'sympathetic' revisionists of Marxism and exegetical sects. No references are made to any of the major critical works on Marxism, to Gordon Leff's *The Tyranny of Concepts* (Merlin Press, London, rev. edn., 1969), H. B. Acton's *The Illusion of the Epoch* (Routledge, London, 1967), Max Eastman's *Marxism, Is It Science?* (Norton, New York, 1940), H. W. B. Joseph's *The Labour Theory of Value in Karl Marx* (Oxford University Press, 1923), Ludwig von Mises' *Socialism: An Economic And Sociological Analysis* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1951), John Plamenatz' *German Marxism and Russian Communism* (Longmans Green and Co, London, 1954), Victor Zitta's *George Lukac's Marxism* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1964), amongst others.

It is also noticeable that when anti-Marxist scholars (and Nobel Prize winners!) are mentioned they are labelled 'ideologists' (p. 66). The liberal position is also misrepresented at least once, when Mihailo Markovic declares that 'All [my emphasis] ideologues (*sic*) of laissez-faire agree with Malthus ... that men are really inert, sluggish, averse from labour, unless compelled by necessity'. What about such liberal and libertarian writers as Ayn Rand, Murray Rothbard, Nathaniel Branden and Peter Breggin, simply to begin with?

The fundamentally propagandistic and misleading character of the *Dictionary* is underlined by the tortuous apologetics and evasions practised by many of the contributors. In an entry on 'Lysenkoism' (a bogus Marxist biological theory) Robert M. Young ('of London' but in fact a contributor to the Communist Party journal *Marxism Today*) complains that the phenomenon was 'successfully used as a stick with which to beat socialist and Communist ideas'. That this intellectual 'beating' might be justified apparently never crosses his mind. He even manages to convey the impression that *capitalism* was to blame! 'Lysenko rose as a peasant or proletarian scientist', he writes 'partly because bourgeois scientists in the Soviet Union were so unwilling to cooperate'. And the lessons of Lysenkoism, in his eyes, apparently have more significance as a stimulus to criticism of the 'more subtly mediated patronage system of Western research' than as a lesson on the inherent defects of a statist and collectivist system.

Occasionally, the mask of intellectual sophistication slips enough to reveal the old-style face of vulgar Marxist propaganda. One almost relishes the nostalgic overtones of the passage about 'The heroic struggle of the Soviet Army and people (which) made

a decisive contribution to the Allied victory over fascism'. They don't write them like that very often these days! These lines come from the Trotskyist writer, Ralph Miliband, who also manages to account for the 'Stalinoid' nature of the Eastern European states by the 'impact of the Cold War'. It's all *our* fault, you see. None of the contributors questions the ethical and economic essentials of Communism, nor hints that these essentials might explain its failures in the real world.

Although there are none so blind as those who will not see, it is hard to conceive how any open-minded reader can wade through the 587 pages of this *Dictionary* without becoming aware that Marxism constitutes an utter intellectual sham. Even many of the contributors have to concede the 'ambivalences and contradictory tendencies of Marx's own writings' (Roy Bhaskar, City University, London), ambivalences and contradictions which result in a squabbling array of disciples and sects intellectually, and sometimes literally, at one another's throats.

What is one to make of a body of allegedly scientific analysis which at one moment professes to be based not on a 'subjective moral demand but on a theory of history' (p. 152), while simultaneously admitting to 'unambiguous moral valuations' (p. 153)? What is one to make of practitioners of an alleged science of society who dismiss as a 'degenerate variant of Marxism called 'economic determinism' (Gajo Petrovic, University of Zagreb, p. 14) exactly what whole generations of other Marxists have held to be its very essence? What are we to do with a 'science' whose central concept, 'class', is never properly defined or elucidated? Again and again central working concepts are interpreted in starkly contradictory ways. In Marx's own work and subsequent 'clarifications' (*sic*), for example, as this volume demonstrates, the state is at one moment held to be the executive committee of the ruling class, and at another an autonomous entity (pp. 57, 432, 465).

What all this sophistry reveals is the fundamentally religious and dogmatic character of Marxism. The simultaneous belief in contradictory axioms, the ability to explain away blatant errors and predictive failures, the ability to ignore the real world, the unwillingness to concede the existence of any fundamental intellectual failure - all these features emerge unmistakably from entry after entry. Like other outmoded beliefs, Marxism might live on in some form for centuries. But if it cannot do any better than is revealed in this dictionary, it is hard to see it retaining a grip on those scholars who aren't blinded by *a priori* hostility to individualism and capitalism.