

3CR 24 February 2018

Marx Bicentenary series

I: *The German Ideology*

This morning we're beginning our build-up to the birthday boy on 5<sup>th</sup> May.

Over the weekend of 17-18 March, we're off to see *Young Marx* as a cinema transmission from the National Theatre in London. It's billed as a knockabout farce. If it's any good as slapstick, it'll be like *The Life of Brian*. So don't even contemplate going if you think of Marx as God the Father.

Politically, what's significant is that the National Theatre thinks that it can attract an audience to any kind of show about Marx. That tells us something about the state of British politics where Corbyn and the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer both say we've got a lot to learn from him.

What *Young Marx* won't do is to track his intellectual development. That's what we'll be doing. Last year, we focused on *Das Kapital* for its 150<sup>th</sup>. Our next three sessions will delve into how Marx became Marx. We'll do so through three pieces of writing between 1845 and 1848. They'll introduce historical materialism, political economy and revolutionary politics. We'll tie each session to developing a revolutionary practice for today.

Let's get underway with *The German Ideology* from 1845-6. This one's something of an oddity. It wasn't published until 1932 when it ran to 500 printed pages. In 1859, Marx wrote that he and Engels had

... abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of the mice all the more willingly since we had achieved our main purpose – self-clarification.

The Left in Australia needs some of that. *The German Ideology* provides a sound starting place.

Before moving into those substantive matters, we need to say a couple of more things about the text itself. First, I wouldn't encourage anyone to read the lot. The essential part takes up fewer than 80 pages, and deals with Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach 'offence' had been to argue in the 1840s that human beings keep on making Gods in our own image and likeness – not the other way around.

Feuerbach's name will sound familiar to 3CR listeners even to those who may never have heard of *The German Ideology*. One reason is because in 1886, Engels wrote a 20,000-word book review which became *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of German Philosophy*. This pamphlet is a necessary supplement to what he and Marx had written about Feuerbach thirty year earlier.

I'll give just two reasons from the natural sciences. In 1857, a chemist, William Perkin, made the first coal-tar dye. Engels used this industrial process to knock down one of the props for the Philosophical Idealism of Immanuel Kant:

If we are able to prove, Engels writes, the correctness of our conception of a natural process by making it ourselves, ... then there is an end to the Kantian ungraspable 'thing-in-itself'.

Two years after Perkin's chemical dye, Darwin and Russell proposed that natural selection could explain qualitative changes between species.

These upheavals in chemical practice and in the life sciences were but two of the transformations of which materialists had to take account. Yet, in 1886, Engels protested that even the most brilliant of the natural scientists were what he called 'shame-faced' about materialism. They kept slipping back into forms of Philosophical Idealism, leaving room for God-bothering and even spooks.

However, there is another passage from Engels in 1886 which demands our full attention – which it too rarely receives around the Left. It connects to another reason why ‘Feuerbach’ rings a bell, namely, Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach’.

Activists who’ve never read a line of Marx’s ‘Theses’ or of Engels’s pamphlet can sprout some version of ‘Thesis Eleven’:

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world differently, the point is, to *change* it. There’s no arguing with that. The danger comes when this truth is reduced to a slogan and then used to insist that revolutionaries have to make a dumb choice: either interpret the world, or change it. If we learn anything from Marx and Engels, it is that we can’t succeed at one without the other. The more we find out how to change the world in the ways we want it to change, the better able we are to interpret its hidden workings. That’s what Engels said about our ability to make artificial colourings.

Equally, the more scientific we make our ways of interpreting the world, the more effective our efforts at changing it are likely to become. Neither comes easily. In the ‘Preface’ to the French edition of *Capital* (1872), Marx reminds us:

There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits.

It should go without saying that we won’t reach even the foothills of Marx’s scientific analysis if we can’t get past parroting ‘Thesis Eleven’.

Here Engels again rides to the rescue. When he discovered the ‘Theses’ in an old notebook, he published them with this warning:

These are notes hurriedly scribbled down for later elaboration, absolutely not intended for publication, ...

Surely it’s daffiness to build a revolutionary practice on a few scribbled notes?

A solution is at hand. Engels went on to say that those scribbled notes were invaluable as the first document in which is deposited the brilliant germ of the new world outlook.

So put the ‘Theses’ aside until you’ve studied the chapter on ‘Feuerbach’ in *The German Ideology*. Only after we have absorbed its historical materialism will we be able to ‘interpret’ the Theses’. Indeed, Thesis Three’ reminds us why we should do so: ‘the educator must be educated.’

Here’s a further example of why it’s essential to read the ‘Theses’ through the chapter on Feuerbach. In 1999, the philosopher Peter Singer published a slim book called *The Darwinian Left*. He claims to be offering an alternative to the Marxist Left. He builds his case against Marx on a few words torn out of Thesis number Six:

... the human essence in its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.

On the basis of this ‘scribbled note’, Singer accuses Marxists of ignoring the connections between our species and the rest of the natural world.

Three comments are called for.

First, it is slovenly even for a Professor at Princeton to try to construct an edifice on so slight an acquaintance with an author. Yet, Singer’s doing so is commonplace among scholars. Many never bother to go to the original source but quote from a quotation in some one’s else’s book.

Secondly, when Marx speaks of a ‘human essence’ he is playing with the vocabulary of Feuerbach’s 1843 bombshell, *The Essence of Christianity*. Singer carries on as if Marx were as ignorant as he is that ‘Essence’ is a technical term among German philosophers. Feuerbach uses it to oppose the ‘abstract’ thinking that places ‘the essence of nature outside nature, the essence of man outside man ...’

Thirdly, Marx and Engels, over and over, stress that humankind is part of the natural world. Unlike his talk of the rights of animals, they proceed from 'other animals'. Hence, Singer's criticism falls flat.

Marx and Engels welcomed Darwin's *Origins of Species* even as they criticised its one-sidedness. The basis of their criticisms is in *The German Ideology* where the 'brilliant germ' for historical materialism finds its first expression. Marx opens with a typical piece of satire:

'Once upon a time' he writes, 'an honest fellow had the idea that people drowned in water only because they were possessed with the idea of gravity. If they were to knock this idea out of their heads, say by stating it to be a superstition, a religious idea, they would be sublimely proof against any danger from water.'

It's now all too easy to feel superior to this 'honest fellow'. However, comparable instances of Philosophical Idealism are rampant around the Left.

Perhaps the most frequently heard example is that 'Neo-liberalism is a big, bad idea which goes around the globe doing evil.' As a set of ideas, Neo-liberalism has been a very good idea for the global corporates and their warfare states.

In the social domain, there are no intrinsically 'good' or 'bad' ideas. Ideas are either good for workers or good for bosses. Neo-liberalism as an idea does have effects in as much as it provides a focus and hence confidence for the agents of capital. And it helps to confuse the rest of us.

The same false start applies to how the Left is responding to other kinds of 'wrong thinking' – racism, chauvinism, populism, reformism – the list goes on.

The first point to make is the one that Theodor Adorno made about anti-Semitism:

People are not so stupid as to respond to the brazen wink of propaganda unless it strikes some chord in their own experience.

Bad ideas arise from social practice. That applies to Islamophobia as much as it does to joining the Happy-Clappies.

What does Marx tell us about how to rid ourselves of religious illusions? We need to alter the conditions that make those illusions necessary. The only way to do that is through self-emancipation. No one can do it for us. To suppose that we can change anyone's mind by abusing them through a megaphone is one more instance of Philosophical Idealism.

Not believing in 'God' is no certain defence against God-structured thinking. It is hard to accept that there's no purpose in the universe. Many atheists find it impossible to accept that there's none in human existence. We give purposes to living out of our social action. We can set goals for ourselves as individuals, as a class and as a species. But those purposes are not innate in our minds and they don't drop out of the sky. They come from social practice and from it alone, to quote Chairman Mao.

There's nothing inevitable about socialism or communism. If we ever get there, it will be because of ceaseless struggle.

The Marxist biologist Stephen Jay Gould exposes evolution as 'perfect adaptation' as god-structured thinking for atheists. No, evolution produces a series of 'rough fits'. Even the human eye is a bit of a mess – which is why it fails the test of design as proof of a benign creator.

A further instance of Philosophical Idealism is our activating the categories. How often do we slip into saying something like

History tells us ... Science proves .... and closer to home, The Accord did this, that and the other bad thing ...?

No. History and Science do nothing. The Accord did nothing. Only real living human beings make history, make discoveries, or take profits.

We're all struggling to keep our noses above a supersaturated solution of bourgeois bullshit. The more we think that we're immune to Idealisms, the more likely we are to fall victim to one or other of its manifestations.

Every worthwhile idea in Marx and Engels is grounded in historical materialism. That's why our critique of political economy and our revolutionary practice depends on absorbing the first 80 pages of *The German Ideology*. Once we've done that, we can 'interpret' the 'Theses on Feuerbach'.

In particular, we shall have deepened our grasp of the First Thesis which sets down that we can understand reality only by engaging with it 'as *sensuous human activity*, as *practice*'. Now that is 'Thesis Eleven'.

Humphrey McQueen

Solidarity Breakfast, 3CR

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