Christoph Henning, *Philosophie nach Marx: 100 Jahre Marxrezeption und die normative Sozialphilosophie der Gegenwart in der Kritik*
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SANDBLASTING MARX

A Marx revival seems to be under way, predating the current disarray on Wall Street, even though no clear-cut political options yet seem to propose themselves. Sensible opportunists have welcomed any sign of sympathy for Marxian positions, without wanting to alienate the new converts (or returning fellow-travellers). The big ideological issues—anarchism, the party, economic planning, social classes—are still mainly avoided, on the grounds that they remind too many people of Communist propaganda. Such a reminder is unwanted, not so much because it is accompanied by the memory of deaths and violence (memory is fragile in postmodernity) as simply and less dramatically because such topics now appear boring.

On the face of it, then, it does not seem plausible to welcome a book which, somewhat in the Althusserian vein of yesteryear, implacably denounces the idealistic deviations and doctrinal errors, the ideological misappropriations and misguided revisions of thinkers widely supposed to have some Marxian pedigree or relevance for younger would-be Marxists today. Christoph Henning's *Philosophie nach Marx* is a comprehensive, six-hundred page indictment of everyone from Kautsky to present-day left liberals of Habermasian or Rawlsian stripe, and it is well worth standing up to its innumerable provocations. It is a tireless catalogue of what I will call Marx-avoidance, which for all its unremitting zeal remains oddly non-partisan. Henning does not seem to speak from any easily identifiable political or ideological position, although his philosophical bias would seem

to be a kind of Wittgensteinian Kantianism, appropriate enough for this intellectual operation.

The reader needs to be warned, however, that the word 'theory', now generally taken, at least in the West, to signify post-structuralism or Frankfurt School Hegelianism and quizzed for its exhaustion or demise, or attacked for its perniciously elitist abstraction, is used quite differently here, as a term for Marx's work itself, whose object according to Henning was *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*—by which he means not civil society (that fatigued war-horse to which left liberals and radical democrats alike still appeal), but rather capitalism as such: a system to be confronted in its totality, rather than from any purely political or philosophical, or even from any narrowly economic, perspective. Henning's emphasis, however, remains focused on Marx's work itself, whose 'content and character have rarely been adequately grasped either by its enemies or its defenders'. This perspective will occasionally remind us of Horkheimer's plaintive confession: 'I pledge allegiance to critical theory; that means that I can tell what is false, but cannot define what is correct'. But such frankness, hoping to convert seeming weakness into aggressive counter-attack, does not exempt the Frankfurt School from the force of Henning's critical juggernaut; on the contrary, it will become one of its principal targets.

Henning's critical panorama divides into two unequal segments: the first covers the fate of 'Marxism' or Marxist theory from the death of Marx to the October Revolution. This is familiar ground, but Henning's analysis of the respective shortcomings of social-democratic and communist theory has interesting new things to tell us. The second and longer part of *Philosophie nach Marx* sets out from the 'social philosophy' of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and brings us up to the present, with a wide-angle view of its successors today, where Henning distinguishes four dominant schools: Habermas, Rawls, normative 'economic ethics' and neopragmatism. But although his review of all this is roughly chronological, it avoids any purely historical account by organizing its material around nine systematic *Kernpunkte* or 'key points'—an awkward formula which might better have been rendered as Althusserian *problématiques*, or versions of the medieval 'crux' around which debates traditionally revolved, pressing on an unresolved conceptual dilemma.

This is an excellent framework, but before we outline it, the limits of Henning's enterprise need to be indicated. For one thing, the social philosophy canvassed in its second part is, with the exception of Rawls, exclusively German. It is true, of course, that the only foreign intellectual scene with which English-speaking intellectuals are generally familiar, in its broad outlines and principal players, is French. The richness of Italian or German intellectual life is mostly a closed book to them, with the exception of a few

well-known stars, who collaborate with such provincialism by reorienting their footnotes and references around an Anglophone sociology or philosophy that has become hegemonic. Here the theoretically minded reader will miss discussions of Foucault and Derrida, Deleuze and Badiou, Agamben and Negri, Rorty and Giddens. This is a matter for regret, since it would have been good to have a review of these thinkers in the Henning manner, which, however truly damaging or unremittingly negative, is never basely partisan in the fashion of Althusserian denunciations of old (or even of the perhaps still related anti-theoretical inquisitions and denunciations of the present).

Particularly in the area of sociology, on the other hand, the English-language reader will discover unfamiliar references: the philosopher Rudolf Eucken (1846–1926), for example, or René Koenig (1906–92), founder of the Cologne school of sociology, whose critique of sociological discourse is fundamental for Henning. But they will readily imagine their own equivalents, for the debates are everywhere analogous. (One could think of such transpositions as a literary historian might of the unfamiliar formal patterns of a history of music or the visual arts, whose very non-translatability may yield insight into the dynamics of comparable but dissimilar historical processes.) In any case the names of Kautsky and Habermas, or Heidegger and Horkheimer, are central enough in the history of ideas to warrant attention in their own contexts, however local these may seem to a parochially Anglophone 'West'.

Henning's handling of the concept of social philosophy also needs a gloss. It includes everything from straightforward political and economic manifestos of the early years of revolutionary or parliamentary Marxism, through the sociology of Weber and Luhmann, all the way to outright (or 'pure') philosophy, in Heidegger and Adorno, since the latter is as implicitly political and social as the former is philosophical. Indeed the book's basic argument is that social and political analyses have been sapped and vitiated by their 'ontologization', that is to say, by their translation and above all sublimation into purely philosophical arguments and issues. This is Henning's version of the more frequent and vulgar reproach of 'idealism', which has become something of a ritual insult. Henning does seem to have a philosophical basis for his own bias against philosophy; it is, as has been suggested, a discreet Wittgensteinian Kantianism. In short, the corpus will consist of the social sciences, as they impinge on philosophy (or at least on thought), and philosophy and its contemporary acolyte theories, as these encroach on the social sciences. If the latter seem to have a pronouncedly philosophical cast, is this to be attributed to German intellectual traditions antithetical to either British empiricism or a younger American

pragmatism? If so, that would be yet another reason to work through these unfamiliar German materials.

To be sure, social philosophy is a latecomer—sociology itself only really emerges as a discipline at the very end of the 19th century, with Weber and Durkheim. There will therefore be a welcome and extended prologue dealing with the more overt fortunes of Marxism itself, in social democracy, communism and Marxist economics, before we reach 'bourgeois' developments. Henning's non-partisan but implacable critique of Marxism's own native traditions (no one is spared) gives his book a breadth and variety of targets that mark it out as far more ambitious than any of the usual polemics.

We may now outline an inventory of his *Kernpunkte,* organized by roman numerals. Unsurprisingly, the immediate debates in the first heyday of social democracy turned on social reproduction (I) and the falling rate of profit (II). That both issues are still with us in the age of globalization should be plain, but can be documented by the frequency and intensity of the word 'crisis', in all its various meanings, in every kind of public discourse today, in which Marx is 'repressed' by a naturalization of the business cycles that 'ontologizes' them, to use Henning's language (I would rather say it flattens them out, de-dialecticizes them, and turns them into non-dialectical 'laws' or regularities). The notion of a 'falling rate of profit', meanwhile, leads to standard denunciations of Marx's distinction between price and value, and an excuse to leave Marxist economics behind forever. With Bolshevism the centre of gravity moves towards politics as such, which means that the third nodal point or crux will centre on the theory of imperialism (III), involving not merely the arc from Soviet foreign policy to theories of globalization, but also Lenin's and Hilferding's discussions of finance capital. The more purely political emphasis of Lenin and Stalin 'de-economizes and re-ideologizes' Marx's original problematic (Trotsky and Mao are given short shrift).

Thus abandoned to the professional economists, Marx is ready for burial at the hands of pre- and post-Marxist economists alike—from Smith to Keynes and Friedman, many a nominally Marxist economist covertly endorsing some of these non-Marxian paradigms. Here the crucial nodal point (IV) is the theory of money itself, which takes us back again to the opening chapters of *Capital*; while the accompanying non-Marxist developments in sociology founder, in all their variety of thematics—from Weber to Luhmann—on the fundamental crux of social classes (V).

With these now classical moves and positions established, the reader has been prepared to confront the seemingly more modern, or at least 20th-century, developments that start with the name of Martin Heidegger. The second part of the book will be accompanied by new *Kernpunkte*: VI, Hegel and Marx; VII, Marx's Critique of Religion; VIII, Marx and Ethics; and IX, Marx and Law. But they will also be organized in a supplementary fashion

around theses proposed by René Koenig that reinforce the 'anti-philosophical' bias of Henning's approach to his more modern texts. Koenig's eight theses are summarized as follows: (i) social philosophy is an alienating reaction against Marxism; (ii) as a reaction, it remains thereby secretly bound to Marxism; (iii) its origins lie in a Hegelian dialectic shorn of its negativity; (iv) it transforms an idealist philosophy of identity into an existential one; (v) it short-circuits historical origins into modes of being, and thinking into Being; (vi) it problematizes theory *in toto*, generating a crisis in philosophy; (vii) a loss of objectivity and scientificity ensues; and (viii) in their place comes an empty 'politics' of identity and self-affirmation.This last displacement can also be characterized as decisionism, fundamental to all forms of existentialism, and attributable to Fichte, who becomes the true villain of the story, rather than Hegel. In this tale of decline and fall, Heidegger occupies a privileged position by reason of the crucial role played in it by Henning's term 'ontologization', by which we may take him to mean, simply, turning a problem or a theory into philosophy; or perhaps one should say, a philosophy, for reasons that will shortly become apparent.

I have never placed much faith in that solitary footnote to *History and Class Consciousness*, at the very end of *Sein und Zeit*, which is supposed to document Heidegger's direct engagement with Lukács's work of a few years before. Lucien Goldmann's early argument to this effect always struck me as far-fetched, an exercise in wishful thinking meant essentially to appropriate Heidegger for the Marxian tradition (for Henning, to be sure, Lukács himself is highly ambiguous, always on the point of lapsing into 'philosophy', but generally too intelligently Marxian to succumb irrevocably), though discussion is certainly possible, not so much about the left National Socialist elements as about the implicit concept of revolution in general in Heidegger. But I do not think the *Seinsfrage* in his work, after the *Kehre*, is particularly incompatible with Marxism, which has proved compatible with so many other 'philosophies', inasmuch as it is not—here I agree with Henning—itself a philosophy.

But therein lies the problem with Henning's slogan, for the ontology of the pre-*Kehre* Heidegger was a phenomenology of the life-world; and if Marx's object of study is taken to be *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* in the most general sense, as the dynamics of capital on all its levels, then Marxism has an obligation to include that phenomenology, to which the 'pragmatic' Heidegger certainly made a fundamental contribution, if we divest it of its anthropological pretensions (the Ur-Germanic etymologies) and its oversimplified diagnoses of technology. His critique of modernity, whether 'irrationalist' or not, is as ambiguous as all such visions, from Burke and the Romantics on down, as Raymond Williams memorably demonstrated in *Culture and Society*. Its ethical and decisionist moments then remain open

to analysis, and will receive their appropriate attention at other stages in Henning's book.

For the philosophizing of social themes—let us rather from now on say, of the varied features and manifestations of capitalism—will not take only such narrowly ontological and existentializing forms. It will also have Hegelian variants, particularly in the traditions of the Frankfurt School (among whom, as Henning rightly notes, Habermas is not to be numbered). It is of course outrageous that his very limited comments on Adorno are included, not under the rubric of philosophy, but of religion; although his subtle reading of the works of the 'school' as a whole centres on Pollock's evacuation of Marxian economics in the name of an essentially political shift towards a theory of state capitalism. Without any mention of Marx's essay on the 'Jewish question', Henning's discussion of the relationship to religion is incomplete, to say the least. Yet I do agree with Henning's provocative conclusion that the Marx of *Capital* has no interest in religion whatsoever: '*die Religion um ihrer selbst willen war Marx recht einerlei*'. The critique of fetishism is the analysis of an illusion or a mirage, important for its structural findings, but not as the social diagnosis of a pathology that can be treated in and of itself—rather its causes must be made to disappear, with the end of the capitalist dynamics of commodity production.

Yet from another perspective this quite proper dismissal of the political significance of religion might well be taken to signal the return of that wholesale rejection of the superstructures which characterized so-called orthodox Marxism and which it was the task of a more contemporary 'Western' and 'philosophized' or 'ontologized' Marxism to restore. Is this simply the result of an Althusserian separation of the levels, or does it lapse back into the old 'materialist' dismissal of all of what were considered so many 'idealisms', from philosophy and religion all the way to ethics and the law? Politics has already been set to one side with a dismissal of its primacy in Leninism, as a displacement. As for culture in general, in whatever form, it is excluded altogether from this book. Above all, there is to be no immanent critical practice of philosophy or anything else, as if this invariably assumed that to identify a faulty idea or ideology was enough to change a society.

This is thus only in part a repudiation of 'pan-Marxism', as the Chinese call it—that is, of Marxism as a philosophy of everything, or philosophy *tout court*, the old 'dialectical materialism'. It is also, if more implicitly, a repudiation of the political fantasies and self-aggrandizement of intellectuals themselves, even if the argument never descends to the *ad hominem* levels to be found in the Bourdieu school—Bourdieu is himself attacked in passing. But perhaps it is better to grasp Henning's procedures in a dialectical manner. He himself frequently describes Marx's rectification of the Hegelian dialectic (in Hegel's spirit) as an insistence on 'the difference and yet identity

of two realms of being, a unity of opposites'. The model is not that of a reflection, or base-and-superstructure, but rather of metabolism—clearly the more fundamental linguistic figure in Marx's thinking. What Henning will therefore deplore as an absence of 'theory' is the lack of any explanation of the metabolic production of one phenomenon (a faulty concept, say) from out of another one (for example, the structure of the commodity).

I myself conclude that if autonomous philosophizing, and the illusion that the critique of the faulty concept will modify its structural origin, is to be rejected, the alternative is not best formulated in Henning's language—less philosophizing and more 'theory'—but ought rather to call for more philosophizing, that is to say, less non-Marxian philosophizing and more dialectics as such. We may take as an example what has been stigmatized as the re-entry of a bad Hegelianism into recent Marxian thinking, namely so-called Capitalogic and a resurrected 'theory of value', to be found respectively in Helmut Reichelt's pathbreaking *Zur logischen Struktur des Kapitalbegriffs bei Karl Marx* (1970), Hans-Georg Backhaus's *Dialektik der Wertform* (1997), and Christopher Arthur's *The New Dialectic and Marx's* Capital (2002)—a body of work seeking to show that Marx simplified his own thought in the changes he made to the second edition of *Capital* and thereby made less accessible the properly dialectical nature of his notion of value as the quantity of labour power, and so the origin of the famous fetishism of commodities. Here value becomes a historically unique phenomenon in which a unity-and-difference of the ideal and the material only becomes visible through a dialectical lens.

Henning seems to think little enough of these 'theological subtleties', and this is not the place to pursue them further. But there ensues an interesting consequence, namely that the formation of value can be understood 'philosophically' as well as 'theoretically' (in Henning's sense) or 'dialectically' (in mine). That many of the processes described in *Capital* are survivals, extensions and expansions of the process Marx called 'alienation' in his early writings seems unquestionable, as Stanley Moore's unjustly neglected *Three Tactics: The Background in Marx* (1963) has shown. The fundamental question is rather whether we should still call them that, whether we should still use this philosophical (or idealistic or metaphysical) word for the later 'mature' work. Althusser proposed building a firewall against such usage by positing the famous 'epistemological break'. The Hegelian Marxists however have mostly delighted in this continuity and taken it as an excuse to do the very thing Althusser feared, erecting an existential psychology or even a philosophy or a metaphysics on its basis (Heidegger, indeed, singling out the concept of alienation for ontological approval in his post-war *Letter on Humanism*).

But if the propensity to ontologization and philosophizing is to be named, I propose to call it thematization. For the minute one thematizes such a phenomenon, a process of autonomization sets in which turns it into the founding term for a new and semi-autonomous complex of concepts—call it a philosophy, if you like, or a 'world-picture' (Heidegger), an ideology or a world-view. These new thematizations then most often serve as the point of departure for a *Kulturkritik*, that is to say, a wholesale diagnosis of what is wrong with modern society, its culture, its psychology or subjectivity, its mode of living. Rather than call these discourses attacks on modernity, critiques of it, and the like, as is so often done, it is better to recognize them as a specific discursive form or genre, which passes itself off as an analysis of contemporary (or modern) society that could be viewed as a scientific proposition. Something like this can also happen to the Capitalogicians when they absolutize the diagnosis of fetishism and brandish, as I often do myself, Marx's own word *Verdinglichung* or reification. Any of these features of capitalism, when named in such a way as to lend itself to a terminology, can give rise to an idealistic hypostasis in the form of this or that culture critique; and it seems to me precisely this to which Henning so often and so properly objects. His labour has uncovered a rich and varied field of just such language pathologies for us to explore and to 'theorize' from a Marxist perspective.

I pass over the valuable concluding sections, which trenchantly dissect a variety of social democratic or 'Third Way' revisionisms, from Habermas or Rawls to business-philosophical and neo-pragmatist versions of their normative philosophies in Germany. For it is the Marxist deviations from Marx that are of most interest, rather than the outright and unabashed 'post-Marxisms', even if the critique of a return to norms and even to a kind of natural law—whatever function these may on occasion serve as buffers against the hegemony of the free market and its depredations—is probably always salutary and bears repeating worldwide.

Yet one cannot entirely endorse the programme with which the book concludes. Henning enumerates four basic features of the various misreadings—intentional or otherwise—of Marxist theory, today and yesterday. These are (1) a substitution of nature for society as Marx's basic object of study; (2) a misunderstanding of the way in which Marx uses the term 'law', as in the laws of capitalism; (3) a retranslation of Marx back into a philosophical discourse; and (4) an interpretation of the ensuing naturalistic world-view 'according to the hermeneutics of a *Lebensphilosophie*', as the expression of a praxis. Henning's identification of his project with Kant is intended to validate his work as a 'critique' that sets limits to what Marxism can do (as well as to celebrate its indispensable achievements). His invocation of Wittgenstein supposes an ambition to cleanse its language of false problems

and hypostasized solutions. This worthy task has the advantage of taking us back to the economic essentials without which Marx is not Marxist. But I must necessarily feel, as would any 'culture worker', that too much is being abandoned in this project, and not only in cultural analysis itself.

There is also the political, about which it can certainly be asserted that *Capital* has little enough to do with politics and has no political lessons to offer. Yet Marx was, like Lenin, a political strategist (and tactician) of genius, and it does not matter that several distinct and sometimes even antithetical strategies can be detected in his own positions at various historical stages. *Capital* is a book about capitalism; politics, on the other hand, has to do with the ways in which socialism might be achieved (and constructed). But this does not mean that our judgements on *Capital* are unpolitical. On the contrary, and without wanting to fall into the error of the substitution of the political for the economic which Henning describes here, such judgements and the analyses of its typical misreadings themselves—the omissions and repressions, the displacements and substitutions—are necessarily political acts.