

INTRODUCTION TO MARX

Christopher Yeomans

Those coming to Marx without a background in classical German philosophy can easily be led to underestimate the significance and extent of the influence of idealism on Marx's intellectual development. Though that influence is often localized in terms of Marx's lifelong attempts to appropriate and differentiate himself from Hegel, or by thinking of Marx's philosophy as a combination of German philosophy, French socialism, and British political economy, in fact the idealist strands of influence on Marx are both deeper and more varied than such framings suggest. From the importance of history to the relation between theoretical and practical reason, from basic conceptual foundations to the analysis of money, Marx's thinking is stamped in the currency of that idealism that was so richly developed by German philosophy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Paradoxically, the idealist strands in Marx's thought are never more clearly on display than when he is attempting to articulate the nature of his own materialism. There, it becomes clear that his materialism is not at all to be understood as a kind of physicalism, naturalism, or empiricism, but rather as a specific understanding of the primacy of practical, social, productive activity in all of human life and thought. But both the primacy of practical activity and the conceptual categories through which that activity is understood are notions deeply derived from the idealist tradition, as Marx himself well recognizes (see his "Theses on Feuerbach").

Karl Marx (1818–1883) was the son of a Jewish lawyer who originally took up the study of law at university, first at Bonn and then Berlin. But he studied in Berlin in the immediate aftermath of Hegel's death at a time of great debate over both the philosophical future of idealism and the political future of the lingering eighteenth-century political and social forms of German states, and this intellectual milieu set him on a new path that moved him not only away from law but also away from the possibility of university employment in any field. Thus began a peripatetic life of journalism, activism, and scholarship across a broad swath of western Europe in which his intellectual partnership with Friedrich Engels and his long-standing association with the communist movement were of particular importance. The range of Marx's writing is extraordinary, encompassing original contributions in theoretical philosophy, political commentary, popular tracts, literary criticism, and economics. At the time of his death he was only partially finished with his greatest work, *Capital*, a systematic political philosophy grounded in a precise economic theory of forces and relations of social production.

Perhaps the best place to begin to understand Marx's contributions to idealism is with the distinctively idealist problematic of recovering externalization. By this we mean the problem of understanding how the external, natural features of human life that seem to have a direction and causal structure of their own can be understood in terms of the active, self-directed self. This is an idealist theme that runs from Kant's incorporation thesis (i.e., the view that natural inclinations only become part of the will by being incorporated into rational principles) through Fichte's positing of the not-I by the I to Hegel's elaborate attempts to show how the chaos of external being is compatible with real internal determination or self-direction. It is a theme that is specified by different types of externality, from the immediate deliverances of the senses to the public existence of works of art to the economic existence of commodities generated by industrial production. In the idealist tradition, what is at stake here is autonomy. In the Kantian way of framing the problem, if all of my actions were grounded in natural inclinations produced by the causal nexus outside of my control, then I would not be the author of my actions and would therefore not be worthy of respect.

It is easiest to see the idealist strand in Marx by looking at the first type of externality, i.e., the sensible world. In all of its forms—the perceptual presence of the natural world, human need and desire, sexual relations, and nature as an object of natural science—this world is a social product of human activity, on Marx's view. Marx gives the example of cherry trees, which are the objects of perceptual awareness and knowledge but are historically recent arrivals to Europe, planted by human beings for the purposes of agricultural production (*The German Ideology*—McLellan, 2000: 190). This is a philosophical thesis, but it is also a revolutionary political stance, according to Marx. Communism treats *all* natural conditions as products of human activity and thus as conditions that are in principle subject to human control rather than being alienating, determining features of the environment to which we must respond.

In this respect Marx is even more of an idealist than Hegel, who accepts an extensive determining role for geography in particular with respect to the character of historical nation-states. In contrast, Marx holds that capitalism already reveals such local particularities to be dwarfed by the power of human production:

Hence the great civilizing influence of capital; its production of a stage of society in comparison to which all earlier ones appear as mere *local developments* of humanity and as *nature-idolatry*. For the first time, nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognized as a power for itself; and the theoretical discovery of its autonomous laws appears merely as a ruse so as to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production. In accord with this tendency, capital drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well as all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life. It is destructive towards all of this. (*Grundrisse*—Nicolaus, 1993: 409–10)

Communism as a political practice is connected with this idealism as a philosophical position because true communism will demonstrate the human and produced character of need and the rest of the natural world precisely by revealing its social character in the continuing act of intentionally producing and modifying need and nature. In this way the extensive freedom that idealism merely theorized and capitalism made possible will be realized by true communism as it makes explicit this social and thus human character of nature.

In extending this theme to freedom Marx takes over another form of the “recovery of externalization” problematic from idealism—the problem of the relation between activity and passivity and the valorization of the former. Particularly when Marx moves to clarify his

own thought by contrasting it with Feuerbach's materialism, he emphasizes the priority of activity over passivity—a valorization that has its form in the Kantian tradition as the priority of practical reason (i.e., reasoning about what *ought* to be the case) over theoretical reason (i.e., reasoning about what *is* the case). This is an aspect of Marx's thought that is obscured to us because in its political significance we have come so decisively to share this view that we do not realize how recent is the idea that human beings make their own world. So, for example, in one of his most famous formulations of his materialism, Marx says, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past” (*18th Brumaire*—McLellan, 2000: 329). It is common in philosophy courses to focus on the second half of the sentence as being the crucial and unique element to Marx's view, but then we too easily give short shrift to the first half, i.e., the idea that human beings make their own history at all. As a truism such as it is presented in Marx's claim here, this idea dates only to the French Revolution, and so was not even a century old at the time of Marx's writing.¹

The main way that Marx wants to distinguish himself from the idealists is not by rejecting the problematic of recovering externalization but rather by criticizing idealists for their misunderstanding of the nature of the externality that must be recovered. The allegory he provides in *The German Ideology* is illuminating:

Once upon a time a valiant fellow had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed with the idea of gravity. If they were to knock this notion out of their heads, say by stating it to be a superstition, a religious concept, they would be sublimely proof against any danger from water. His whole life long he fought against the illusion of gravity, of whose harmful results all statistics brought him new and manifold evidence. (*The German Ideology*—McLellan, 2000: 176)

What this humorously expresses is Marx's view that idealist philosophy and politics have fundamentally misunderstood the threat to human freedom. They have thought that threat to be the very existence and determining power of objectivity arrayed against the subject, rather than the specific character of objectivity at that particular historical juncture. In Marx's view, the idealists speak as if being itself were a threat and a challenge. Rather, the challenge is the way that nineteenth-century economic being makes it difficult to see that being as a medium for robust human activity and thus for freedom. Put in the language of Marx's early thinking, the challenge is not objectivity but alienation. As a result, we meet the challenge not by showing objectivity to be illusory (as in the allegory), but rather by changing objectivity so that our own activity is no longer hidden from us.

Thus one of Marx's most distinctive formulations of idealism is his specific conception of the nature of problematic objectivity and its relation to subjectivity. In Marx's early work this is put in terms of the notion of alienation—later (in *Capital*) it becomes commodity fetishism. Since Marx goes into detail regarding the fourfold nature of alienation in the first of the readings included here, we will not take up this taxonomy here. But it is worth noting the extent to which alienation consists of human beings creating the conditions that obscure their own activity and lead them to misrecognize it as an independent force facing them. So just as Marx argues against Feuerbach that the true materiality of the world is productive activity rather than sensible nature, he argues against Hegel that the true externality of the world is not objective being as such but alienation. In both cases, however, the specifically idealist valorization and articulation of social activity shines through Marx's account. This is particularly true in the latter

case, since the basic form of commodity fetishism is taking what is actually human activity to be a thing entrenched against such activity (i.e., the commodity produced by that activity).

But if the notion and structure of activity is derived by Marx from idealism, its content and aim are materialist. Though Hegel sees the extent and necessity of human self-creation, Marx claims, he understands that self-creation only logically, in terms of abstract thought. Instead, Marx wants us to see that human beings make themselves what they are by producing their own subsistence together. But the radical idealism of Marx's position is to be found in the claim that our own mode of activity obscures that activity to us, that it presents itself as a mere semblance of what it essentially is rather than that essence of our activity appearing in a recognizable way. Put another way, this is the idea that the essence of capitalism necessarily produces illusions about itself, and this notion of a necessary illusion produced by an activity goes back to Kant's notion of the dialectic of reason. Furthermore, when Marx attempts to flesh out the difference between the semblance of activity under capitalism and the true appearance of that activity under communism, he reaches for conceptual resources developed in the idealist tradition and most completely articulated by Hegel in his *Science of Logic*. This is clearest in Marx's *Grundrisse*, an unpublished manuscript he wrote to organize his thoughts before drafting *Capital*, but elements of it can also be found in the readings included here.

The first of these is found in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Consider one of Marx's fundamental claims about labor:

Labor does not only produce commodities; it produces itself and the laborer as a commodity and that to the extent to which it produces commodities in general. What this fact expresses is merely this: the object that labor produces, its product, confronts it as an alien being.

(McLellan, 2000: 86)

Two aspects of this are crucially idealist in the sense of being grounded in Hegel's *Logic*. The first is the idea that an activity (labor) generates both the agent of that activity (the laborer) and the product of the activity (the commodity) in the process of generating itself. The second is that such self-generation of the activity actually requires that its products (the laborer and the commodity) have a real independence from each other. We can bring Marx's distinctive formulation of idealism into sharper focus by considering the specific way in which the first idea is idealist, and yet the specific way in which Marx gives a materialist spin to the second idea.

The first idea is idealist both in the sense that it is holist (i.e., it sees the parts of the process of labor as being generated by the whole complex of which they are parts) and in the sense that it is concerned with conceptual relations of significance rather than with temporal relations of causation. Hegel in particular developed many models for holistic analysis in this sense, and both in the readings offered here and in later work Marx makes abundant use of such models. In fact, the single most productive line of interpretation of his *Grundrisse* might be to consider it as an elaborate attempt to try out as many of these models as possible so as to find the ones that worked best for his subject matter, political economy. And the model is clearly not concerned with temporal ordering, i.e., with one thing coming after another in a determinate series, perhaps in law-governed succession. It is, rather, concerned with why the laborer, the commodity, and the activity itself have the character and meaning that they do. To use a technical Hegelian term for such analysis, it is concerned with the way in which each of the three *reflect* each other. In the above passage Marx describes the particular character of the reflection of the capitalist labor process by characterizing all three elements of the process by means of the term "commodity." More generally this mode of analysis reveals its idealist colors in Marx's introduction of it via a

polemic against political economists who take these different elements as given facts rather than demonstrating the essential and necessary connection between them. But Marx's interpretation of the independence of these objects of reflection is clearly materialist:

The realization of labor appears as a loss of reality to an extent that the worker loses his reality by dying of starvation. Objectification appears as a loss of the object to such an extent that the worker is robbed not only of the objects necessary for his life but also of the objects of his work. Indeed, labor itself becomes an object he can only have in his power with the greatest of efforts and at irregular intervals. (McLellan, 2000: 86–7)

It is not merely that the independence of labor, product, and producer is a logical or perceptual semblance that obscures recognition or knowledge of their deep dependence; rather, that independence is real and takes the form of lack of possession both of the product and of the activity itself (since now a whole factory is required to work). Here we can see the relevance of the parable of the opponent of gravity: idealists think that the damage, as it were, of the semblance of independence can be remedied simply by debunking that semblance. But a philosophical demonstration won't prevent starvation any more than it will prevent drowning; what is needed is a political revolution that will eliminate that *real* semblance of independence and thus demonstrate the deeper *ideal* dependence.

The second example of Marx's use of Hegel's logical resources is found in *The German Ideology*. Here is how Marx sets out the structure of the relation between private property and individual workers:

[T]he productive forces appear as a world for themselves, quite independent of and divorced from the individuals, alongside the individuals: the reason for this is that the individuals, whose forces they are, exist split up and in opposition to one another, while, on the other hand, these forces are only real forces in the intercourse and association of individuals. Thus, on the one hand, we have a totality of productive forces, which have, as it were, taken on a material form and are for the individuals no longer the forces of individuals but of private property [...]. On the other hand, standing over against these productive forces, we have the majority of the individuals from whom these forces have been wrested away, and who, robbed thus of all real life-content, have become abstract individuals, but who are, however, only by this fact put into a position to enter into relation with one another as individuals. (McLellan, 2000: 193)

What is expressed here is a double movement of abstraction that Hegel calls *Doppelschein* or double seeming. In this double movement, the specific and varied productive capacities of individuals—their interest, talents, skills, physical and mental abilities, resources of all sorts—are removed from their direct control and transferred to a universal collection of such capacities, which Marx terms the "productive forces" (or, as a thing, "private property"). And this very movement also denudes each individual of their distinguishing characteristics, and so reduces them to "abstract individuals," i.e., pure particulars that can then be subsumed under the universal productive forces arbitrarily. In this case, the phenomenon at issue is factory labor in which the production process makes it the case that no specific task requires any specific skill and so can, in principle, be assigned to any particular laborer. But neither the productive forces nor the now abstract individuals have any real force or existence except by their relation to each other: individuals relate to each other by taking on these arbitrary roles in social production, and the productive forces are effective only because individuals work. But the two are related

to each other in such a way that any question of the aptness of any particular worker for their work or vice versa is ruled out from the start.

In Hegel's *Logic*, this *Doppelschein* is introduced as a theoretical problem for understanding the relation between the universal and the particular, and the advance from abstraction to what Hegel terms the "concrete universal" is primarily an advance in conceptual comprehension. But for Marx, this abstraction is important because of its material effects:

Thus things have now come to such a pass that the individuals must appropriate the existing totality of productive forces, not only to achieve self-activity, but also merely to safeguard their very existence. (McLellan, 2000: 194)

Since now individuals relate to each other only as abstractions, they can in no way rely on their own skills or resources for their own subsistence, i.e., for avoiding starvation, disease, etc. They rely on the collective power of the forces of production and yet they have no relation to those forces that connects to them in any deep and thus stable way. Every worker in industrial production is replaceable regardless of their skills or diligence, and the business for which one works might cease to exist due to market forces entirely outside the control of individual workers. This is the material face of abstraction, the *real abstraction* of capitalism now that social production is entirely unlimited by tradition or national boundary. It follows that we comprehend capitalism correctly by means of such abstraction, and thus the problem with such abstraction is not our failure to get our beliefs to track the world, but rather the actual helplessness it entails for individual workers.

Thus it is not surprising that Marx's response is a political solution:

It follows from all we have been saying up till now that the communal relationship into which the individuals of a class entered, and which was determined by their common interests over against a third party, was always a community to which these individuals belonged only as average individuals, only in so far as they lived within the conditions of existence of their class—a relationship in which they participated not as individuals but as members of a class. With the community of revolutionary proletarians, on the other hand, who take their conditions of existence and those of all members of society under their control, it is just the reverse; it is as individuals that the individuals participate in it.

(McLellan, 2000: 197–8)

The "average individuals" here are the "abstract individuals" from a few pages earlier, and the solution on offer here is the taking of "their conditions of existence and those of all members of society under their control." That is, the solution to the problem of abstraction that threatens the subsistence of each individual worker is to collectively take control of those forces of production and then to reestablish the necessary connection between real, concrete individuals and their role in social production. Thus Marx's endorsement of the socialist slogan: From each according to their ability, to each according to their need. As in the first example of the labor process above, then, we find an idealist formulation of the problem, a materialist formulation of the stakes of the problem, and a political formulation of the solution. Yet even in this political solution there is a holistic element that traces back to the idealist tradition: the solution consists in taking control of the totality of capacities, the unrestricted, infinite system of conditions that determines the specific, finite activities of individuals.

Finally, we conclude by saying a bit about the Marxist conception of history and its relation to idealism. The most important connection here is the notion of real contradiction, i.e., the

idea that reality—and not just our thought about reality—is contradictory. As an idealist notion Marx shares this with Hegel, and it is parallel to the shared conception of real abstraction that we just traced through *The German Ideology*. In both cases, a feature that is usually considered to be a feature of thought alone is taken to be a feature of both thought and reality. Once this is done, the value of the feature shifts as well. If one thinks of abstraction or contradiction as a feature of thought but not of reality, then any thought that has that feature fails to track reality in at least some respects. But if both thought and reality contain abstraction and contradiction, then abstract and/or contradictory thoughts may fully track the nature of reality. To restrict ourselves to contradiction, for both Marx and Hegel the idea that reality is itself contradictory implies that reality is historical. For Marx more than for Hegel, this historicity is understood in terms of the necessity of the development of reality—this is why Marx so often thinks of capitalism as itself the very mode of transition to communism, and communism thus as completed capitalism. But as in the previous two idealist themes that we traced, Marx gives a distinctively materialist spin to the form of historical contradiction. What are contradictorily opposed for him are not ideas but rather different aspects of human productive activity, e.g., the forces of production (the technical capacities for making things) and the relations of production (the social distribution of work and rewards). As he puts it in *The Holy Family's* polemic against idealism, history is a series of shapes of forms of production and property, not of absolute spirit. So art, religion, and philosophy (Hegel's three forms of absolute spirit) are not fundamental shapes of history, but rather epiphenomenal manifestations of the fundamental tensions within human social production.

To conclude we may say that Marx's relation to the idealist tradition begins by taking over the problem of recovering externalization and the extensive conceptual toolbox the idealists developed to solve that problem. Then his unique contribution comes from formulating a historically specific version of that problem and a more politically engaged solution.

References

- McLellan, David, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
 Nicolaus, Martin, trans., *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1993).

Note

- 1 For Marx, the idea comes from Giambattista Vico earlier in the eighteenth century. See *Capital I* (Ben Fowkes trans., Penguin, 1990: 493 n4). Before the eighteenth century, the term "revolution" meant cycles within history, not a fundamental break such as the French Revolution represented itself to be.