

The Philosophical Background of Communism

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It is probably true to say that to a great many of its adherents and sympathizers the chief attraction of communism is its eloquent protest against the manifest injustices of our present social organization. With that protest we Catholics have no quarrel, for it is but an echo of the words of Christ delivered from a mountain-side to succeeding generations, "Blessed are they that hunger and search after justice."

It is not on their criticism of the abuses of capitalism that we differ with communists, but on the solution which they propound. Further, we need not even reject all the aspects of that solution. As Catholics we are not primarily concerned with the economic or social teachings of communism, except where these indirectly affect the spiritual interests of men. What we are concerned with, and vitally so, is communism as a philosophy, as a world-view, as a substitute for religion. For communism does not claim to be merely another economic theory; it sets itself up as a complete and fully-rounded interpretation of reality, as a way of life for all men, and as holding the answer to every question the human mind can ask.

If this is so, an investigation of the nature of that philosophy and of the way in which it arose will have more than merely academic interest. It is the purpose of this article to sketch roughly the origin and development of the philosophy of communism, and to indicate some of its doctrines and their implications.

The method of this philosophy had its origin in the dialectical system of Hegel, a German philosopher of the early nineteenth century who was reacting against Kant, a German thinker who lived a generation before him. Kant had contended that all we can know is the appearances of things and not what those things are in themselves; for this reason he had argued against the possibility of constructing a rational metaphysics. Hegel, who was attempting to build a complete metaphysics, accepted Kant's conclusion that things in themselves are unknowable, and even went further, declaring that what is unknowable does not really exist. All that is real, then, is what is

known, what is thought, what is ideal. Since the real is the ideal, the method of dealing with reality will be the method of dealing with ideas. That method is the method of logic, or the "dialectical method." Now ideas, according to Hegel, develop by way of what he called thesis, antithesis, and synthesis; an idea is posited (thesis), it immediately gives rise to its opposite (antithesis), and then the two are combined in a unity which transcends their differences (synthesis). Since thought develops in this way, so also must reality, for reality is thought or idea. The goal of this development, a goal already immanent in the process, is the reconciliation of all opposites in the final synthesis, the Absolute, or Idea, or God; the principle according to which this development takes place is that of the dialectical process.

The disciples of Hegel used his method to reach conclusions which he would never have admitted. They stressed the continuity of the dialectical process, and drew from it revolutionary principles in the spheres of politics and religion opposed to the conservatism of their master. Most of these Hegelians, however, such as Bruno Bauer, Arnold Ruge, Max Stirner, and Moses Hess, have a place in the history of the communistic philosophy only because Karl Marx reacted against them, and in doing so was led to develop and clarify several of the points in his own doctrine.

The only one of these followers of Hegel who can be said to have had a positive influence on Marx was Ludwig Feuerbach, another nineteenth century German thinker. Feuerbach accepted Hegel's method, but rejected the idealism to which he had applied that method. Hegel was right, Feuerbach declared, in holding that reality develops according to the dialectical method of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis; but Hegel was wrong in conceiving the reality which thus progressively unfolds itself as ideal, as the Idea, or God. What Hegel called the Idea and what most men call God is nothing but man's own deification of his needs and his efforts. Man has made God to his own image and likeness, and has foolishly subjected himself to this projection beyond himself of his own ambitions and desires. And these ambitions and desires are based ultimately on man's material needs, for if God goes nothing is left but nature.

We may say, then, that Feuerbach retained the dialectical method of Hegel, but applied it not to an ideal-

ism but to a materialism, and to a materialism of which atheism was an essential and necessary part.

It was this dialectical materialism, atheistic in its very essence, that Marx and Engels inherited, intensified, and transmitted to later philosophers of communism. This materialism, it should be observed, was not of that crude variety according to which all such things as thoughts, acts of will, purposes, and sentiments are simply chemical or mechanical reactions. It held, not that all reality is necessarily material in itself, but that, if not material, it is absolutely dependent upon matter for its existence. It recognized the existence of what communists call "superstructures," such as religion, morality, philosophy, art, and science, but maintained that they are produced by and dependent on material conditions.

These very "superstructures," like everything else, have developed with the gradual unfolding of the dialectical process. They are the product of that strife between thesis and antithesis, between each thing and its opposite, that lies at the very heart of reality. Every element of the universe is at war, for every element, as *thesis*, calls forth its *antithesis*, and out of the struggle between them comes a *synthesis* which itself forms the thesis of a new combination, and so on forever. The history of the world is that of an endless conflict, and without this conflict all things would perish, for it is the law of their being and the condition of their existence.

It was this dialectical materialism which supplied the principle of the Marxian doctrines of the economic interpretation of history and of the class war. The proletariat and the Bourgeoisie stand to each other as thesis to antithesis, the ultimate synthesis of which will be the classless society.

Lenin claimed, and apparently with considerable reason, to be following the principles of Marx in advocating violence and revolution. Strife and conflict are synonymous with progress, so we should use these means to bring about more quickly and more effectively that synthesis of already warring opposites which will be the classless society.

This brings us to the end of our consideration of the philosophical background of communism. We have seen that the philosophy of communism developed from the dialectics of Hegel and the materialistic atheism of Feuerbach into the dialectical materialism of Marx, itself carried

further by Lenin's philosophy of revolution. From these beginnings it has come to be what it is today, an explanation of the universe, an incentive to revolutionary action, and a religion without God.



Autumn Rains

K. Mooney, '41

The bitter tears from heaven's face
To earth are pattering fast;
The skies above are sad to see
That summer cheer has passed.

The world, so lately lush and green,
Is shrouded now in gloom;
And raindrops on the window play
A melancholy tune.



Nearest the throne itself must be
The footstool of humility.

—Montgomery.

The chains of habit are generally too small to be felt
until they are too strong to be broken.—Johnson.

