Variations on Marxism*

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The philosophy of Marxism during my student days was exceedingly straightforward, or rather, oversimplified. It was marked by vehement denials: the repudiation of anything resembling spiritualism, the rejection of idealism, the refusal to assign any significance or effectiveness to doctrines, beliefs, or emotions.

Should the Rights of Man or immanent justice be mentioned, Paul Lafargue[1], Karl Marx's son-in-law, would stand up to dismiss these 'metaphysical charlatans'. And he would sharply reprimand Jaurès, the mediator, for attempting to drape idealism alongside materialism in the folds of his orator's robe, for daring to summon Plutarch or Michelet in the same breath as Karl Marx. Hadn't Marx himself assertively stated: 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness'?[2] From such a premise, what grand constructs might be imagined!

We must delve into the modes of production that sustain life for the underlying reason, not only for ways of governance or for legislating, but for modes of thought: not only must law and religion be explained, but literature and philosophy must also now be interpreted as material byproducts, rooted in the advancements of industrial technology and the class struggle.

Take note: if the mathematical physicists of the century have embraced the concept of a natural law of absolute value, it's because of the advancements in royal absolutism observed in their era. As for the hypothesis of the unity of cosmic forces, it likely emerged from the salons of the 17th century, where the bourgeoisie leisure class amused themselves with clever comparisons.

These examples are sufficient. They serve as cautionary signposts, warning of the peril in attempting to attribute the highest achievements of the human spirit – religion, science, art – to the solitary influence of the productive forces of economic life. The mismatch between the single cited cause and the value, complexity, and diversity of the outcomes is blatantly apparent. The interpreter, persisting in his reductionism, assumes the guise of an inept Sisyphus.[3]

From this emerges a reticence among Marxist philosophers, a step back from the precipice. They revisit their foundational texts and recognise that indeed, the theories have been excessively simplified. Even Marx himself didn't endorse such a narrow view.[4] Did he ever truly intend to banish all forms of idealism from the philosophy of history? He set a goal for himself, striving to replace the dominion of necessity with that of freedom, and as Saragat[5] noted, remained a

[1] **Translator's Note**: Paul Lafargue (1842–1911) was a Cuban-born French Marxist who married Karl Marx's daughter, Laura Marx (1845–1911), with whom he committed suicide. Along with Jules Guesde, Lafargue found and led the *Parti ouvrier français* ('French Workers' Party') from 1880 to 1902 and played a significant role in popularising Marxism in France.

[2] K. Marx: *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by S. W. Ryazanskaya. Progress Publishers, 1977, p. 21.

[3] **Translator's Note**: In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was a tyrant who angered the gods and was thereby punished for eternity to roll an enormous boulder up a hill that would roll back down anytime he approached the top.

[4] **Translator's Note**: Not long before his death, Marx accused Guesde and Lafargue of 'revolutionary phrase-mongering' and famously confided to Engels that if their stances were considered Marxist, then 'I myself am not a Marxist.'

[5] **Translator's Note**: Giuseppe Saragat (1898–1988) was an Italian socialist who became the first socialist president of Italy from 1964 to 1971. Leading up to WWII, he notably opposed Mussolini and was forced into exile. Saragat also helped forge ties between Italian socialists and other European socialist groups.

'humanist'. Without a doubt, he would have concurred with Engels that the economic factor only comes into play 'in the last instance'.[6]

Ultimately, we encounter a Marxism that should not be labeled as diluted, but rather as enriched and made more flexible, open to tolerating, embracing, and seeking out nuanced explanations that would have once sent shivers down the spine of Paul Lafargue in my student days.

What is most intriguing is that Russia itself, Soviet Russia, is contributing to this intellectual enrichment and mellowing. This is at least the impression given in G. Friedmann's[7] thoroughly informed and nuanced book, *From Holy Russia to the USSR*.

He recounts an anecdote attributed to Stalin.[8] When questioning his son about the history of England, Stalin was surprised to hear references to 'merchant capital' and 'the third phase of conflict between the landed gentry and the urban bourgeoisie' but not a word about Cromwell.[9] The call was for Russian children to be given a more tangible, animated history, where individuals are seen living and taking action. It was time to put an end to the repetitive invocation of merchant capital, a staple in the early works of Pokrovsky.[10]

It's also time to cease the excessive efforts to pigeonhole great writers into a class, to label them as incapable of looking beyond the economic interests of their cohorts, as if they were mere automatons speaking on behalf of their class.

Perusing our latest literature textbooks, one might conclude from Yermilov's[11] statements in *Pravda*[12] that the Russian classics were nothing more than zealots preoccupied with the material welfare of their social stratum. It is high time to acknowledge that they have often, through the strength of their personal intellect, broken free from this vicious cycle to touch upon humanistic values. It is high time to assert that the unionised workers of the USSR have the right to derive intellectual and moral sustenance from more than just a single author of Holy Russia.

Bravo. And thanks for the breath of 'humanism'. In France as well – and Georges Friedmann is more aware of this than anyone – a similar clearing of the remnants of 'vulgar sociology' would be most beneficial.

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[6] F. Engels to J. Bloch. September 21, 1890.

[7] **Translator's Note**: Georges Friedmann (1902–1977) was an influential sociologist known for his research on industrialism and the sociology of work. He is considered one of the founders of industrial sociology. Friedmann's work examined how technology shapes organisations and the experience of work itself. He wrote the 1938 book *De la Sainte Russie à l'U.R.S.S.*

[8] **Translator's Note**: Joseph Stalin (1878–1953) was a Marxist politician born in modern-day Georgia. Following Vladimir Lenin's (1870–1927) death, Stalin was the leader of the Soviet Union from 1924 until his death. Under Stalin, the Soviet Union rapidly industrialised and became a world power. He implemented the Great Purge in the 1930s, leading to mass imprisonment and executions of millions of Soviet citizens.

[9] **Translator's Note**: Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) was an influential English politician and military leader. Following the execution of King Charles I (1600–1649) and the exile of his son Charles II (1630–1685), Cromwell ruled as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England (1649–1660) from 1653 until his death.

[10] **Translator's Note**: Mikhail Pokrovsky (1868–1932) was an influential Soviet Marxist historian. He rejected the focus on 'great men' in history and instead focused on economic forces that drove historical change and developments.

[11] **Translator's Note**: Vladimir Yermilov (1904–1965) was a Soviet literary critic known for harassing the famous Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930), ultimately leading to his suicide. Yermilov is remembered for being severely critical of other writers.

[12] **Translator's Note**: *Pravda* (1912–) is a Russian newspaper that was the official paper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1912–1991).