

The  
Illusion of  
the Epoch



*H. B. Acton*

# The Illusion of the Epoch

Marxism-Leninism as  
a Philosophical Creed

H. B. Acton



Liberty Fund

Indianapolis

Amagi books are published by Liberty Fund, Inc.,  
a foundation established to encourage study of the  
ideal of a society of free and responsible individuals.



The cuneiform inscription that appears in the logo and  
serves as a design element in all Liberty Fund books is the  
earliest-known written appearance of the word “freedom”  
(*amagi*), or “liberty.” It is taken from a clay document  
written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

© H. B. Acton 1962

First published in 1955 by Cohen & West

Frontispiece courtesy of Mrs. Barbara Acton

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

07 06 05 04 03 P 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Acton, H. B. (Harry Burrows), 1908–

The illusion of the epoch: Marxism-Leninism as a  
philosophical creed / H. B. Acton.

p. cm.

Originally published: London: Cohen & West, 1955.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-86597-394-6 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Philosophy, Marxist. I. Title.

B809.8 .A32 2003

335-43—dc21

2003047473

LIBERTY FUND, INC.,

8335 Allison Pointe Trail, Suite 300, Indianapolis, Indiana 46250-1684

# Contents

Preface vii

Introduction ix

## PART ONE. DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM

### I Marxist Realism 3

1. Idealism and Phenomenalism 3
2. Marxist Criticisms of Idealism and Phenomenalism 12
3. Phenomenalism, Idealism, and the Religious Outlook 13
4. Lenin's Criticisms of Phenomenalism 17
5. The Marxist Account of Perception 28

### II Marxist Naturalism 44

1. Basic Ideas of Marxist Naturalism 44
2. Science, Philosophy, and Practice 47
3. Science and the Supernatural 57
4. Marxist Dialectics 63
5. "Metaphysics" 66
6. Nature's Changefulness 69
7. The Law of the Transformation of Quantity into Quality 72
8. Contradiction and the Negation of the Negation 85
9. Status of the Dialectical Laws 91
10. Marxism and Formal Logic 93

PART TWO. SCIENTIFIC SOCIALISM

- I Historical Materialism 99
    - 1. Anti-metaphysical, Positivistic Aspect of Historical Materialism 99
    - 2. Feuerbach's Theory of Religion and the Marxist Theory of "Ideologies" 108
    - 3. The Materialist Conception of History in Outline 124
    - 4. Examination of the Materialist Conception of History 132
    - 5. The Ideological Superstructure 162
  - II Marxist Ethics 169
    - 1. Marxist Social Science as a Form of Social Regeneration 169
    - 2. Ethics and the Materialist Conception of History 181
    - 3. Marx and Eugène Sue 194
    - 4. Marxism and Moralism 201
    - 5. Man's Lost Unity Restored 211
    - 6. The Supersession of the State 223
- Conclusion 237
- Reading List 259
- Index 261

## Preface

The following work arose from a Seminar which I gave in the University of Chicago in the summer of 1949. I am grateful to my wife for her help in removing obscurities, to Mr. R. N. Carew Hunt for generously putting his Marxist scholarship at my disposal and for reading and commenting on the major part of the manuscript, and to Professor E. E. Turner, F.R.S., for advice in connection with Part One, Chapter II, Section 7. The Aristotelian Society has been good enough to allow me to reproduce a passage that originally appeared in their 1951-52 *Proceedings*.

For this second impression I have corrected some misprints and expanded footnotes and references when new editions and translations of the books referred to have made this necessary.

Mr. Emile Burns's remark in *The Marxist Quarterly* (October 1955) suggesting that Engels did not regard equality as the chief element of the morality of the future raises the question of the importance of equality of reward in Marxism-Leninism. Marx applauded the Paris Commune for paying a working-man's wage to all revolutionary functionaries no matter how important, but he also said that during the period of socialism (as distinct from the ultimate communism) payment would vary in accordance with output. Lenin regarded differential rewards as unwelcome and temporary necessities. Stalin, however, said it was un-Marxist to advocate equality of incomes during the period prior to communism (see S. Dobrin, "Lenin on Equality and the Webbs on Lenin," *Soviet Studies* 1956-57). The conclusion I draw is that on the Marxist-Leninist view equality of incomes is impracticable before the advent of communism and unnecessary afterward, when there will be enough to satisfy all needs. Marxist-Leninists who live in non-Marxist societies will, of course, as Engels says, advocate equality

“as an agitational means in order to rouse the workers against the capitalists on the basis of the capitalists’ own assertions” (*Anti-Dühring*).

Mr. John Plamenatz (*The British Journal of Sociology*, June 1956) makes two interesting criticisms of what I wrote. He says that Marxists are not necessarily committed to “total planning,” but only claim to have knowledge which would enable the planners to decide what to control and what to leave alone. In practice this may be so (though even democratic governments find that their plans have to take in more and more of human life), but in principle I think the Marxist ideal requires nature to be wholly tamed and humanized. Mr. Plamenatz also criticizes my view that the Marxist distinction between basis and superstructure requires what are really inseparable factors to act causally upon one another. Social factors, he says, which may be distinguishable but incapable of existing in isolation, may be related to one another in such a way that some are more fundamental than others. There is not space for me to discuss this interesting point here. All I can say is that insofar as aspects are abstractions, they are fundamental or derivative in a *logical* sense, according to which what is not fundamental is what is logically derivative. Discussion of this topic, therefore, takes us into the realm of sociological concepts and their logical relationships.

Since the first impression of this book, the Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, has published translations in English of *The Holy Family* (Moscow, 1956, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1957), and of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (Moscow, no date, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1959). Reference should also be made to *Osnovy Marksistskoj Filosofii* (Moscow, 1958), the joint work of a number of Soviet philosophers. A summary and brief discussion of it may be read in J. M. Bochenski’s *Die Dogmatischen Grundlagen der Sowjetischen Philosophie* (Reidel, Dordrecht, Holland, 1959). The Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, has also published (no date given) *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism, Manual* (described as translated from the Russian and as edited by Clemens Dutt). This is also a joint work, but by a different set of Soviet authors. I do not think that either of these books renders necessary any alteration of my account of the Marxist-Leninist philosophy.

H. B. Acton

Bedford College, July, 1961

# Introduction

Marxism is such an important influence in the contemporary world that there is no need to apologize for trying to understand and assess it. In Great Britain the tendency has been to consider it primarily as a body of economic and social doctrine, and to concentrate attention on such parts of it as the accounts of surplus value, historical materialism, the class struggle, the alleged decline of capitalism, the struggle for markets and imperialism. This is natural enough, since these are the elements of Marxism that are most obviously relevant to policies of action. Marxism, however, is much more than a system of social and economic doctrines. It is also, in a wide sense of the word, a philosophy. When we talk about a philosophy in this way we mean a system of thought and conduct comprising views about the most general and significant features of the universe, and about the principal purposes of human life. In the German language the word *Weltanschauung* is used for such a system, but the translations “world-outlook” or “world-view” do not seem to have established themselves in English, so that we had better continue to use the word “philosophy,” which is, indeed, widely understood in this sense. It will be seen that a philosophy comprises views about the most general and significant features of the universe. Such views are often called metaphysical, and the study of them metaphysics. A philosophy, in the sense we are considering, also comprises an account of the principal purposes of human life, and this is its ethical part. Thus a philosophy consists of a metaphysics and an ethics that is generally supposed to depend on it. Some philosophies are fundamentally religious, and people may thus talk of the Christian or the Buddhist philosophy. Some philosophies, again, have been carefully reasoned out and defended by arguments, as were those of Plato, for example, or of Epicurus or Spinoza. Marxism is an anti-religious philosophy first formulated by Marx and Engels, who did not, however, attempt such a closely reasoned account of their view as a whole as

Plato or Epicurus or Spinoza did of theirs. The economic and social doctrines of surplus value, historical materialism and the rest are believed by Marxists to gain in depth and significance by belonging to such a system, and in countries where they can decide what is taught in schools and universities Marxists see to it that their philosophy informs the whole curriculum. It is this philosophy in its most general terms as metaphysics and as ethics that I wish to discuss in language that presupposes no technical training in philosophy.

Contemporary British philosophy is not at all sympathetic toward philosophical systems of any kind, and is especially opposed to those of them that provide reasons for policies of individual or social action. Metaphysical theories according to which, for example, the universe is all matter, or all mind, or both, or neither, are criticized on the ground that their propounders unwittingly misuse language and appear to be saying something important about the world when they are really talking nonsense, or recommending a peculiar vocabulary, or following a linguistic trail that ends up in the wilderness, or stressing an analogy that other people may not wish to stress. It is further argued that, even if metaphysical theories about the universe as a whole were not fundamentally misconceived, they could still provide no grounds for one sort of social policy rather than another. The philosophers who accept these views believe, therefore, that they have exposed the illegitimacy of *all* metaphysical theories about the universe as a whole, and of *all* practical policies in so far as they are supposed to be based on such theories. The result is that, though they are themselves called philosophers, many of them do not very often discuss philosophies in the sense in which I have been using the word. Even if they do, it is usually by the way and in very general terms, so that Marxism, as one of them, is thus left to be dealt with by economists, social theorists, or historians. I think it is possible that some economists, social theorists, and historians might welcome an attempt on the part of a philosopher to discuss the philosophy of Marxism in some detail instead of merely stigmatizing it as one disreputable member of a thoroughly disreputable class. In any case, the educated public are entitled to expect that some philosopher will try to interpret this philosophy on its merits, with a view to its consistency and suggestiveness, in case there are

things of importance to be said about it apart from the criticisms that apply no more to it than they do to other metaphysico-ethical systems.

Now the writings of Karl Marx, and of his faithful supporter Friedrich Engels, form the basis of two socialist movements that are bitterly opposed to one another, the reformist Marxists on the one hand, who are often known today as Social Democrats, and the Communist Party Marxists on the other hand, who regard the government of the U.S.S.R. as the chief vehicle and director of Marxist policy. It is this latter form of Marxism that I shall discuss. There has been, so to say, an apostolical succession from Marx and Engels themselves, through Lenin to Stalin and the spokesmen who have succeeded him. The exponents of this form of Marxism call it "Marxism-Leninism." Indeed for a time, I believe, they contemplated calling it "Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism," but were happily deterred by the cumbrousness of the expression. But whatever we call it, its exponents are right, it seems to me, in regarding it as based on and continuous with the doctrines and directives that Marx and Engels handed on. Certainly both Lenin and Stalin were most assiduous in using the writings of Marx and Engels as their chief theoretical guide. It is not inappropriate, therefore, to give the name "Marxism" to the whole tradition that Marx and Engels inaugurated and which Lenin and Stalin have continued. Indeed it has on occasion an advantage over the term "Marxism-Leninism" in that it enables us to avoid the awkwardness of calling Marx and Engels "Marxist-Leninists" before Lenin had been born.

I have not dealt with the doctrines of the Marxist philosophy in the historical order in which they were published. What I have called the Marxist metaphysics, and what they themselves call Dialectical Materialism, is regarded by Marxists as fundamental, and I have therefore given over the first part of the book to a discussion of it, leaving the social theory and ethics, which they call Scientific Socialism, for the second part. Nor have I been concerned to keep a historical order within each part, but have chosen those statements of a view that seemed best designed to introduce it, whether they were by Marx, Engels, Lenin, or Stalin. I have frequently referred, however, to such early writings as the *Holy Family*, the *German Ideology*, and the *Paris Manuscripts*. These are the writings that philosophers are likely to find of most interest be-

cause in them Marx—and in the *Holy Family* and *German Ideology* Engels also—discusses philosophical issues raised by Hegel and Feuerbach. Marx's doctoral dissertation was on the philosophies of Democritus and Epicurus, and at one time he had hoped to become a professor of philosophy. In these early writings we can sometimes see fundamental features of Marx's thought more clearly than in the later ones. I agree, therefore, with those scholars who have used these works to throw light on the argument of *Capital*. Their influence on later Marxism was, of course, only via Marx and Engels themselves, since the *Paris Manuscripts* and the *German Ideology* were only published in their entirety in the nineteen-thirties, and the *Holy Family* was extremely rare until it was republished about the same time. These early writings, then, are valuable as aids to the interpretation of the general drift of the Marxist philosophy, and that, as well as their intrinsic interest, is what has led me to refer to them so often.

In a work of this sort it is essential to base one's interpretations on detailed references to the texts. When I know of English translations I have referred to them, and have generally, though not always, used them in quoting. I have had to make my own translations of passages from works that have not been translated into English. This documentation of the Marxist classics has led to so many footnotes that I have been very sparing with other references. I have not, for example, given references to those views of Fourier which, I believe, must have greatly influenced the Marxist ethics. Nor, again, have I discussed the views of other expositors and critics of Marxism at the length that they deserve, so that the number of my references to the writings of Hans Barth, Karl Popper, Hook, and Bober, to mention only a few—all of them writers on Marx himself rather than on Marxism in the sense in which I am using the word—is small in proportion to their importance and to the benefit to be derived from them. In brief, I should say that the chief aim of this book is to expound and interpret the philosophy of Marxism, that the next aim is to criticize it, and that a subsidiary aim is to show its kinship with some other philosophies.

The book commences, then, with an account of Dialectical Materialism. The word "materialist" is often used by preachers and others to stand for someone whose life is spent in the pursuit of material wealth for his own satisfaction. In this moral sense of the word a material-

ist is a selfish seeker after comfort and luxury. I need hardly say that it is not in this sense of the word that Marxists regard themselves as materialists. Nevertheless, there is an important connection between their moral beliefs and their materialist theory. For while they advocate the pursuit of objects more valuable than food and drink, they put great stress upon the ways in which higher values are rooted in such essential physical needs. Thus, while their opponents sometimes accuse Marxists of having low aims, Marxists, for their part, are apt to reply that the idealism of their critics is impracticable or even hypocritical. This, however, is a matter that must be left over for discussion in Part Two. In the meantime it is sufficient to say that "materialism" is not primarily understood in the moral or rhetorical sense just indicated.

Involved in their description of themselves as materialists there are, I think, three main contentions. In the first place, Marxists hold that material things exist independently of perception of, or thought about, them. This is the view which philosophers call Realism. In the second place, they hold that matter existed before minds existed, and that minds have developed out of matter. This is a view about the world that philosophers have sometimes called Naturalism. In the third place, they hold that matter is not adequately understood in mechanical terms, but needs to be understood in dialectical terms. This is the main respect in which Marxist materialism differs from other forms of that philosophy. In Part One I shall discuss each of these views in turn.



# Part One

---

## *Dialectical Materialism*





---

# Marxist Realism

## *1. Idealism and Phenomenalism*

“Naïve realism,” writes Lenin, is “the instinctive, unconscious materialist standpoint adopted by humanity, which regards the external world as existing independently of our minds.”<sup>1</sup> He also says: “The ‘naïve realism’ of any healthy person who has not been an inmate of a lunatic asylum, or a pupil of the idealist philosophers, consists in the view that things, the environment, the world, exist independently of our sensation, of our consciousness, of our *self*, and of man in general. . . . Materialism deliberately makes the ‘naïve’ belief of mankind the foundation of its theory of knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> From these sentences it is clear that Lenin believed it was important to say that a physical world exists independently of any single mind, and independently of all human minds.

To say these things, however, is to say what everyone (apart from a few Christian Scientists and perhaps some visionary philosophers) regards as obvious. Is it not quite certain that mountains, seas, and nebulae exist whether anyone is observing them or not? It is true, of course, that there are some material things, such as bridges and spoons, which owe many of their features to the men who made them. But surely they, no less than things which men have had no part in shaping, exist, once they are made, independently of their being perceived? Indeed, once this question is raised, the simple answer seems to be that what distinguishes perception from imagination or hallucination just is that what we perceive is something independent of our perceiving, whereas what

1. *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. English translation in *V. I. Lenin: Selected Works*, vol. 11, p. 127 (London, 1939).

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 135–36.

we imagine or are deceived about somehow depends on some activity or defect within ourselves. We are thus inclined to say that unless the object perceived is something that exists independently of our perception, we are not really perceiving at all. Perceiving (which includes seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, or a combination of these) just *is* becoming aware of something independent of the perception.

This is taken for granted by the vast majority of people, but by Marxists and by other philosophers who hold a realist theory of perception it is proclaimed as an important truth. It is almost as though someone were to make a parade of enunciating some such platitude as that fishes live in water. It would only be worth while asserting this if someone had denied it, and the reason for asserting the realist platitude is that in modern times some men of obvious ability and seriousness have denied it, or have appeared to do so. The non-Marxist realists are mainly concerned to show that the denial of this platitude is an error. Marxists endeavor to show that its denial is not only mistaken as a matter of theory but is practically harmful too.

The circumstances in which the realist platitude came to be denied may be briefly described as follows. In the seventeenth century a number of writers, of whom Thomas Hobbes was the ablest and best known, inspired, in part, by the growth of mathematical physics, revived in a modified form the materialism which had been advocated in the ancient world by Democritus and the Epicureans. These ancient materialists had held that the physical things that to sight and touch appear solid and undivided are really composed of large numbers of ultimate, indivisible particles. In the heavier bodies the particles, which were called atoms, were closely packed together; in the lighter ones there was more empty space between them. They also held that souls were composed of similar but smaller atoms capable of slipping in between the larger atoms that composed living bodies. At death, both the atoms that formed the body and those that formed the soul became disarranged and at last dispersed, forming new bodies and new souls. These philosophers combined with their materialism a moral and psychological theory known as hedonism, according to which all living beings necessarily sought pleasure and avoided pain, the moral terms "good" and "bad" being therefore names for the pleasant and painful respectively. Thus, on their view morality consisted in the in-

telligent pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain. Materialists of the seventeenth century thought that this system of ideas, which in ancient times had been mainly a brilliant speculation, was supported by the mathematical physics of their own day. They believed that the behavior of things like rivers and billiard balls depended upon the nature and arrangement of the minute physical parts that composed them, so that an understanding of the larger scale things depended upon a knowledge of these material elements. As views such as these spread from scholars to the wider educated public, there were some who came to talk as though the sole realities were atoms and the space in which they moved, and everything else mere appearance or illusion. Heat was really a certain sort of agitation of particles, sound was really a movement of the air, and there was good authority for maintaining that even light was corpuscular in nature. Some of "the wits" of the time associated with this view about nature a cynical version of the morality of pleasure quite foreign to anything that Epicurus had taught, but nevertheless based on his views. Free-thinkers, atheists, and men of the world thus found a philosophy on which could be supported their denials of the existence of God, of the immortality of the soul, and of the freedom of the will.

It was in refutation of views of this sort, as well as in refutation of the skepticism that prepared the way for them, that Berkeley constructed his "idealist" philosophy. This may be seen in his *Philosophical Commentaries*, the notes and arguments he recorded in preparation for his first books. Entry number 824, for example, reads: "My Doctrine rightly understood all that Philosophy of Epicurus, Hobbs, Spinoza etc. wch has been a declared enemy of Religion Comes to ye Ground." The sub-title of his *Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* runs: "Wherein the chief causes of error and difficulty in the Sciences, with the grounds of Scepticism, Atheism and Irreligion, are inquired into." That of the *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* begins: "The design of which is plainly to demonstrate the reality and perfection of human knowledge, the incorporeal nature of the soul, and the immediate providence of a Deity." His *Alciphron or the Minute Philosopher*, written later in life, enlarged the scope of the argument to take in the hedonism and egoism of Mandeville, the cynical author of the *Fable of the Bees*. Throughout Berkeley's life it was "the modern free-thinkers"

he had in mind, “the very same with those Cicero called minute philosophers;<sup>3</sup> which name admirably suits them, they being a sort of sect which diminish all the most valuable things, the thoughts, views and hopes of men; all the knowledge, notions, and theories of the mind they reduce to sense; human nature they contract and degrade to the narrow low standard of animal life, and assign us only a small pittance of time instead of immortality. . . .”<sup>4</sup> The master strokes in Berkeley’s idealist arguments were his denial of “material substance” and his assertion that the existence of the objects of sense experience was not distinct from their being perceived. The significance of this assertion may be seen from entry number 799 of the *Philosophical Commentaries*, which reads: “Opinion that existence was distinct from perception of Horrible Consequence it is the foundation of Hobb’s doctrine etc.” The arguments by which he hoped to establish idealism are complex and subtle, but for the purposes of our discussion of Marxism it must suffice to enumerate the following main contentions.

(i) It may well be, Berkeley argues, that whenever we feel something hot there is normally a rapid movement of material particles in the hot thing. If, however, we attend to our experience of heat it will be seen that it is quite a different sort of thing from the movement of invisible particles. In order to attach any meaning to the view that heat is a movement of invisible particles we must first have had experience both of visible things in motion and of sensible heat, i.e., of the heat we feel when we touch something hot. So also with the movements of air which come to be called physical sound, and the movements of corpuscles which Newton held to be the basis of our experience of colors. Berkeley thus distinguished between the temperatures, sounds, and colors which we directly experience, and any entities, such as invisible particles, not directly experienced that may be regarded as their basis. The former he called “sensible qualities” (today they are generally called “sense data”), and the alleged unexperienced basis of them—not the atoms or particles themselves, but the entities supposed to *have* the size, shape, and motion of the par-

3. Cicero uses *minutus* pejoratively to mean “petty,” and applies the epithet to philosophers who deny the immortality of the soul.

4. *Alciphron*, First Dialogue. 10.