Hegel, Marx, Engels, and the Origins of Marxism

A review of Marx After Marxism: The Philosophy of Karl Marx by Tom Rockmore

By David North
2 May 2006

The following is the first of a two-part series. The second part will be posted tomorrow.


Tom Rockmore, who teaches Philosophy at Duquesne University in Pennsylvania, begins his book Marx After Marxism: The Philosophy of Karl Marx, with the following statement:

“It is, or at least should be, obvious that as a political approach Marxism has failed as a historical alternative to liberal capitalism. After the rapid demise of the Soviet bloc in 1989, and the break up of the Soviet Union in 1991, the opposition between totalitarian Marxism and liberal capitalism, a major influence in much of the twentieth century, dissolved. As a result, the modern industrialized world entered into an involuntary Pascalian wager firmly based on liberal economic and liberal democratic principles. At the time of writing modern economic liberalism literally has no real rival in the industrialized world” (xi).

Rockmore’s pronouncement of the death of “political Marxism” is typical of the outlook that prevails in academia: that is, the end of the U.S.S.R. signified the end of Marxism. But what is the basis of this assertion? Nothing more than the unstated premise that the politics of the old Soviet bureaucracy represented Marxism. This premise says far more about the social and political outlook of the professorial fraternity than it does about Marxism. On what basis have academics established equivalence between the reactionary nationalistic politics of the Kremlin and the world scientific outlook of Marxism? Generally, they simply ignore this question entirely. From their lofty heights they look upon the real political struggles waged over many decades by revolutionary Marxists against the Kremlin oligarchy as mere “sectarian squabbles” for which tenure-track professors have no time. It was enough for them to recognize that the power of the Kremlin bureaucracy was, at least until 1991, real. In other words, the bureaucracy controlled a powerful state, and also had the ability to dispense considerable patronage—some of which was used to finance international symposia which stylishly left academics were always glad to attend.

Understood as the theoretical foundation of revolutionary socialist program and practice, Marxism played no role in the policies of the Soviet regime since the late 1920s—that is, since the formal expulsion of Leon Trotsky and his supporters in the Left Opposition from the Soviet Communist Party. The Kremlin’s repudiation of the Marxist origins of the Soviet regime was sealed in blood during the 1930s with the campaign of political genocide that it directed against all remnants of the Marxist and revolutionary intelligentsia and working class within the U.S.S.R. The Moscow Trials and the associated purges which resulted in the murder of hundreds of thousands of revolutionary socialists was the spearhead of the program of international counter-revolution directed by Stalin and his associates from the Kremlin.

As early as 1933, following the Stalinist betrayal of the German working class that made possible Hitler’s seizure of power, Trotsky called for the overthrow of the regime of the Kremlin bureaucracy through a political revolution. The issue for Trotsky was not vengeance, but the preservation of the U.S.S.R. He warned repeatedly that unless overthrown by the working class, the policies of the Stalinist regime would lead to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Trotsky’s insistence that Stalinism was a regime of crisis, that the nationalist program of the Kremlin bureaucracy was both economically and politically bankrupt, that the autarkic economic policies of the bureaucracy could not in the long run shield the U.S.S.R. from the pressures of a world economy dominated by capitalism, and that the fate of the Soviet Union depended upon the victory of socialist revolution in the advanced capitalist states of Western Europe and North America were essential components of the Marxist program of the Fourth International.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 represented a tragic confirmation of not only the perspective of the Fourth International, but also of Marxism as a science of political perspective. It would have been appropriate for scholars who claim to be specialists in the social sciences—who, for the most part, never even imagined that the Soviet Union could disappear overnight—to acknowledge that the Marxist analysis upheld by the Trotskyist movement had proven to be extraordinarily farsighted.

However, such manifestations of intellectual humility were not to be found. Instead, the demise of the U.S.S.R. led to a veritable eruption of publications proclaiming the death of Marxism. These works fall into two broad categories. In the first category, there are the products of the unabashed ideological defenders of capitalism from the political right (such as Fukuyama and Pipes), for whom the end of the U.S.S.R. simply proves the impossibility of any alternative to the existing bourgeois order. In the second category are to be found a wide range of works from leftist academics, who still hold open the vague possibility of social change at some point in the distant future—but who insist that it will not be Marxism that provides the theoretical substance for any future social transformation.

**Pseudo-Hegelianism versus Marxism**

What, then, is the alternative to Marxism? There exists a substantial body of new academic literature that argues for a revival of various forms of pre-Marxian philosophy and politics. It claims that the emergence of young Dr. Marx in the early 1840s aborted the development of alternative...
left-progressive philosophies and social movements. As the work of Marx developed on the basis of a withering critique of Hegel, it is argued that the damage done by Marx’s attack must be repaired. Having been stood on his feet by Marx, these writers argue, it is now necessary to turn the old idealist philosopher back on his head. Hegel’s work provides sufficient ground, they write, for the development, within a contemporary context, of progressive social theory and practice. Some of the works that argue along these lines are explicitly hostile to Marx; others suggest that Marx either added little to Hegel or exaggerated his own originality; and still others make the case for a fusion of Hegelianism and Marxism, generally to the detriment of the latter.

Professor Errol Harris writes in his Spirit of Hegel (New Jersey, 1993) that “it is not Hegel who stands on his head, but Marx and Engels, who cut off the head, and then imagine that the decapitated torso of the dialectic is still capable of life and movement” (11). He adds: “Nobody would suggest that Marx’s own doctrines were derisory, but his criticisms of Hegel were often extraordinarily obtuse and blinkered, based as they were on a gross misunderstanding of Hegel’s ‘Idealism.’”

In Hegel’s Philosophy of Freedom (New Haven and London, 1999), Professor Paul Franco argues that it is in Hegel, not Marx, that answers to the problems of the contemporary world will be found: “For the past thirty years or so, there has been a tremendous revival of interest in Hegel’s social and political philosophy. At first largely motivated by the quest for the origins of Marx’s project, this revival of interest has begun to focus on Hegel as a thinker in his own right, and one with perhaps something more profound to offer than Marx” [ix]. As for the latter, Franco refers to Marx as the “epigone” of Hegel (77).

The Canadian academic, David MacGregor, has written several books devoted to establishing Hegelianism as the principal theoretical foundation upon which democratic and socially-progressive projects must base themselves. In The Communist Ideal in Hegel and Marx (Toronto and Buffalo, 1990), MacGregor asserts that “Marx’s misinterpretation of the Hegelian Ideal set him against Hegel’s theory of the state and may have prevented him from coming fully to grips with the contemporary reality of liberal democracy only now being seriously confronted by his latter-day followers (who have much to learn from Hegel). This book points to an understanding of the liberal democratic state that tempers Marx’s critique with the insights of Hegel’s political theory” (3-4). MacGregor states frankly that it is his aim to “rescue Hegel’s thought from the interpretation imposed upon it by Marx. I will argue against Marx’s claim that that the Hegelian dialectic must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell” (11).

In his later Hegel, Marx and the English State (Toronto, Buffalo and London, 1992), MacGregor expands his criticism of Marx, accusing him of having “mishandled a crucial component of the Hegelian legacy. He replaced Hegel’s concept of private property, which includes the right of the worker to the product of labor, with the notion of surplus value and the negation of private property under communism. This meant that Marx’s ideal society lacked not only a state, but also most of the institutions in civil society required to ensure personal freedom and prevent arbitrary rule by a dominant elite” (7).

In yet another work, Hegel and Marx After the Fall of Communism (Cardiff, 1998), the social-political essence of MacGregor’s critique of the well-established Marxian conception of the Hegel-Marx relationship emerges even more clearly: “The concept of private property forms the controversial nub of the relationship between Hegel and Marx ... Hegel sought to preserve the institution of private property while Marx urged its overthrow ... I maintain that Hegel would have agreed with Marx’s critique of capitalist property. Yet, unlike Hegel, Marx failed to probe the positive side of property rights; instead, he recommended the abolition of property in favor of common ownership of the means of production” (116-18). For MacGregor, Hegel’s political theory provides the intellectual impulse for a viable alternative to the revolutionary socialist aspirations of Marx—that is, the revival of the liberal social welfare state, in which an ecletic social-market system is directed by a high-minded and public-spirited bureaucracy.

Professor Warren Breckman’s Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory (Cambridge, 1999) argues along similar lines. He maintains that the fall of the Soviet Union and associated regimes in Eastern Europe have resulted in the discarding among academic social theorists of Marx’s uncompromising opposition to capitalism and bourgeois “civil society.” Breckman writes, “[T]he one major area of agreement is that Karl Marx’s total rejection of the concept of civil society is inadequate to expanding democratic life within complex societies. Here, it is the consensus that is new, not the insight itself. For the shortcomings of Marx’s critique of civil society are now openly acknowledged even by those who remain sympathetic to some conception of socialism, retain elements of a Marxist critique of capitalism, or, minimally, as in the case of Jacques Derrida, ‘take inspiration from a certain spirit of Marxism’” (2). Breckman further notes that “if the present debate takes for granted the need to go beyond Marxism, one of its chief characteristic moves has been to look behind Marx for inspiration and theoretical guidance. . . . This post-Marxist interest in pre-Marxist social theory has significantly enhanced the prospects and relevance of Hegel, the master thinker whom the young Marx triumphantly claimed to have overcome” (3).

Were its motivation not so politically and intellectually suspect, a revival of interest in Hegel would certainly be a welcome development. But attempts to develop social and political theory on the basis of Hegel or any other major figure in the pre-1840 world of German classical idealism, without reference to (or by means of a misrepresentation of) the subsequent intellectual development carried out by Marx and Engels—whose work arose historically out of the massive socio-economic transformation of Europe as well as critical scientific advances that followed Hegel’s death in 1831—represent a major step backward, theoretically and intellectually, and can only serve reactionary political ends.

Historical falsification and misrepresentation

Like the above-cited works, Rockmore’s book also proposes to discover a new agenda for radical social change by annulling the theoretical impact of Marxism. But the approach he takes is somewhat different from the others works. While the other books propose to free Hegel from the grip of Marx, Rockmore contends that it is Marx who must be liberated from his ideological imprisonment within Marxism! The real Marx, proclaims Rockmore, was a devout Hegelian idealist. That Marx had been almost universally understood to be a materialist, Rockmore argues, is the product of a grotesque falsification and fraud perpetrated by none other than Friedrich Engels, a philosophical simpleton who, lacking the university training necessary for serious theoretical work, removed all the Hegelian subtleties present in the real Marx’s thinking and created the ideological monstrosity known as Marxism!

“Marxism, which derives from Engels,” writes Rockmore, “turns on its ideological imprisonment within Marxism! The real Marx, proclaims Rockmore, was a devout Hegelian idealist. That Marx had been almost universally understood to be a materialist, Rockmore argues, is the product of a grotesque falsification and fraud perpetrated by none other than Friedrich Engels, a philosophical simpleton who, lacking the university training necessary for serious theoretical work, removed all the Hegelian subtleties present in the real Marx’s thinking and created the ideological monstrosity known as Marxism!

“Marxism, which derives from Engels,” writes Rockmore, “turns on its account of the relation of Marx to Hegel, which in turn determines a view of Marx as leaving Hegel behind. I believe the Marxist view of Marx is both substantially inaccurate, and that it impedes a better view of Marx’s position, including his philosophical contribution. I will be arguing that to ‘recover’ Marx, we need to free him as much as possible from Marxism, hence from Engels, the first Marxist” (1).

Rockmore is not the first to argue that there existed differences between Engels and Marx. At different times it was advanced by writers as diverse as Georg Lukács, Lucio Colletti, Jean Hypolite, George Lichtheim, various representatives of the Frankfurt School, Leszek Kolakowski, and, more recently, Terrell Carver. The mere fact that Engels outlived Marx by 12 years has been sufficient to give rise to claims that the survivor
exploited his position as executor of Marx’s literary estate to substitute his own views for those of his late associate. The alleged differences between the views of Marx and Engels have assumed by now something of a mythic status. None of the claims advanced by the writers listed above can withstand careful analysis, and Lukács later revised his own position on this question. But however one might object to their arguments, it would still be necessary to acknowledge that they approached the works of Marx, Engels, and Hegel with a necessary degree of intellectual seriousness. Nothing of the sort can be said of Rockmore.

The general tone of sloppiness and cynicism that pervades this entire work finds characteristic expression in the manner in which Rockmore purports to “answer” those who might assume on the basis of their life-long collaboration that Marx and Engels shared a common philosophical-theoretical outlook.

“A main reason to believe that Marx and Engels are the joint authors of a single shared doctrine,” writes Rockmore “lies in the close association of the former with the latter. That is a little like saying that people who hang out together must think alike” (8).

“Hang out together”? That may be a fair description of what Professor Rockmore does with his pals in the Philosophy Department of Duquesne University. It is hardly an appropriate way to describe the relationship between Marx and Engels. The intimate intellectual and political collaboration of Marx and Engels spanned 39 years, from 1844 until Marx’s death in 1883. During that time, they maintained direct contact with each other either through written correspondence or personal meetings on virtually a daily basis. The contemporary edition of the Marx-Engels Collected Works includes 10 volumes (each containing between 500 and 600 pages) of correspondence. These letters, which allow the reader to follow the intellectual development and interaction of these two extraordinary men over four decades, testifies to a degree of philosophical solidarity, moral kinship, and personal friendship for which one can hardly find an equal in history. Where differences arose—whether over theoretical, political or personal matters—there exists a documentary record of the disputes.

Aside from their joint authorship of the critical formative philosophical works of Marxism—in particular, The German Ideology which represented the first detailed elaboration of the materialist conception of history—Marx provided a detailed written account of Engels’ role in the elaboration of their common theoretical world outlook. Rockmore’s attempt to portray Engels as the wicked anti-Hegelian who covered over Marx’s enduring allegiance to German idealism, is shattered by what Marx himself had to say on this very subject in his 1859 Preface to A Critique of Political Economy:

“Friedrich Engels, with whom I maintained a constant exchange of ideas by correspondence since the publication of his brilliant essay on the critique of economic categories (printed in the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher) arrived by another road (compare his Condition of the Working Class in England) at the same result as I, and when in the spring of 1845 he too came to live in Brussels, we decided to set forth together our conception as opposed to the ideological one of German philosophy, in fact to settle accounts with our former philosophical conscience. The intention was carried out in the form of a critique of post-Hegelian philosophy. The manuscript, two large octavo volumes [The German Ideology] had long ago reached the publishers in Westphalia when we were informed that owing to changed circumstances it could not be printed. We abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of the mice all the more willingly since we had achieved our main purpose—self-clarification. Of the scattered works in which at that time we presented one or another aspect of our views to the public, I shall mention only the Manifesto of the Communist Party, jointly written by Engels and myself, and a Speech on the Question of Free Trade, which I myself published. The salient points of our conception were first outlined in an academic, although polemical, form in my Poverty of Philosophy...” (Collected Works, Volume 29, New York, 1987, p. 264).

Marx’s reference in just one paragraph to “the same result as I,” “our conception,” “our former philosophical conscience,” “our main purpose—self-clarification,” “our views,” and, finally, “the salient points of our conception” clearly establishes the very high level of theoretical agreement between himself and Engels.

Though Rockmore does refer to Marx’s Preface to the Critique, he does not cite this crucial passage. This is not the only occasion as we shall establish when Rockmore ignores, in a manner so blatant that it smacks of intellectual dishonesty, statements by Marx which contradict his own thesis.

In his zeal to discredit Engels, Rockmore asserts that Marx’s lifelong collaborator simply lacked the level of education necessary for a proper understanding of Marx. Engels was a mere “philosophical autodidact” who “was not concerned with philosophical subtleties...” (9). Rockmore reminds his readers that “Marx studied philosophy, in which he held a doctorate at the university. Yet Engels did not earn a college degree. He studied philosophy only sporadically, and simply lacked the requisite training, not to mention the philosophical talent, to do high-quality philosophical work of his own. He also lacked the sophisticated appreciation of philosophical doctrines and sheer philosophical inventiveness of Marx. As a philosopher, he was at best a talented amateur with an interest in the topic” (10).

What an unpleasant combination of professorial snobbishness and pompous self-satisfaction! While Professor Rockmore obviously places great weight on academic credentials, it would be very hard to establish on the basis of the history of philosophical thought that there exists any correlation between the ability to undertake serious philosophical work and the possession of a university doctorate, let alone a tenured position in a university philosophy department. If Rockmore’s standards were to be applied as a basis for determining who may be judged a serious philosopher, quite a few rather well-known names would have to be removed from Western intellectual history—including those of Spinoza and Descartes. As we are informed by Desmond M. Clarke in his excellent new biography of the founder of Cartesian rationalism, “Descartes’ formal education had been narrowly scholastic, and it had certainly not provided a basis for the fundamental reform of human knowledge that he eventually undertook” (Descartes: A Biography, Cambridge, 2006, p. 37). And while Rockmore’s use of the term “autodidact” (self-taught) is intended pejoratively, one might note that many of the greatest thinkers and writers in history may be included in that category.

But in any case, Rockmore’s presentation of Engels’ intellectual preparation, not to mention the breadth and depth of his knowledge, particularly of philosophy, is downright false. By the time Engels completed his studies at the Elberfeld gymnasium, he had attained a level of education that, if I may hazard a guess, Professor Rockmore rarely encounters among his own doctoral candidates. According to his school report of September 1837 (when he was not quite 17), Engels had achieved such a degree of proficiency in Latin that he “finds no difficulty understanding the respective writers either of prose or poetry, namely, Livius and Cicero, Virgil and Horace, so that he can easily follow the thread of the longer pieces, grasp the train of thought with clarity and translate the text before him with skill into the mother tongue.” As for Greek, the school report stated that Engels “has acquired a satisfactory knowledge of morphology and the rules of syntax, in particular good proficiency and skill in translating the easier Greek prose writers, as also Homer and Euripides, and could grasp and render the train of thought of a Platonic dialogue with skill.” The writer of this report also expressed admiration for Engels’ work in mathematics, physics, and “Philosophical

For a work that hinges on the claim that Engels lacked either the training or skill required to undertake serious work in the sphere of philosophy, it is shocking that Rockmore makes no reference whatever to the episode in Engels’ early career that established him, even before his initial encounter with Marx, as an outstanding figure in German intellectual circles—that is, Engels’ refutation of Friedrich Schelling. An aged philosopher by the time he was called to Berlin in 1841 to counter the influence of Hegelianism among radical-democratic students, Schelling’s arrival in the Prussian capital caused an uproar. His lectures were viewed as a major philosophical event and drew an immense audience that included, among others, the young Kierkegaard, Bakunin and Engels. Schelling, who in his youth had roomed with Hegel and had at one time counted him among his closest friends, repudiated his objective idealist system and turned sharply toward philosophical subjectivism and irrationalism. Moreover, the early renown of Schelling had been eclipsed once Hegel emerged as the dominant figure in German philosophy. But in the aftermath of Hegel’s death in 1831, the Prussian state authorities became increasingly troubled by the revolutionary conclusions that students were drawing from the late philosopher’s works. Schelling was given the task of stopping the spread of the radical Hegelian contagion.

In the struggle to defend the reputation and legacy of Hegelianism, it was none other than Engels who emerged as the major figure. Three works written by Engels in 1841—Schelling and Revelation, Schelling on Hegel, and Schelling, Philosopher in Christ—were hailed by the Left-Hegelian youth as the decisive refutation of Schelling from a Hegelian standpoint. That Rockmore chooses to ignore these texts—which would immediately expose the absurdity of his claim that “Engels knew neither philosophy nor Hegel well” (162)—is nothing less than intellectual dishonesty. Rockmore simply ignores or glosses over events and texts that undermine his own flimsy thesis.

Rockmore asserts repeatedly that Engels was a “positivist,” convinced that philosophy had been entirely superseded by science and had lost all intellectual relevance. Engels, according to Rockmore, “consistently treats Hegel as if the latter’s philosophy were pre-scientific nonsense” (15). Upon reading such outrageously false statements, one has the impression that Rockmore believes that in the prevailing climate of anti-Marxist political and intellectual reaction he is freed from all traditional standards of scholarship. Whether a particular statement is true or false, or whether it can be supported on the basis of written texts and the historical record, is of no importance whatever. What he strives for is not intellectual clarification and theoretical precision, but the fulfillment of a pre-conceived ideological agenda.

It would not be difficult to fill up dozens of pages with quotations in which Engels paid tribute to the genius of Hegel, whom he memorably described as “the most encyclopedic mind of his time” (Marx-Engels Collected Works, Vol. 25, New York, 1987, p. 25). Engels’ appreciation of Hegel found its most evocative expression in his brilliant pamphlet on Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy. There, Engels referred to Hegel as “Olympian Zeus” who presented “a wealth of thought which is astounding even today. The phenomenology of mind (which one may call a parallel to the embryology and paleontology of the mind, a development of individual consciousness through its different stages, set in the form of an abbreviated reproduction of the of the stages through which the consciousness of man has passed in the course of history), logic, philosophy of nature, philosophy of the mind, and the latter in turn elaborated in its separate, historical subdivisions: philosophy of history, of law, of religion, history of philosophy, aesthetics, etc.—in all these different historical fields Hegel worked to discover and demonstrate the pervading thread of development. And as he was not only a creative genius but also a man of encyclopedic erudition, he played an epoch-making role in every sphere. It is self-evident that owing to the needs of the ‘system’ he very often had to resort to those forced constructions about which his pygmean opponents make such a terrible fuss even today. But these constructions are only the frame and scaffolding of his work. If one does not loiter here needlessly, but presses on further into the huge edifice, one finds innumerable treasures which still today retain their full value” (Marx-Engels Collected Works, Volume 26, Moscow, 1990, p. 361-62).

How is it possible, given the existence of this and countless other passages authored by Engels, that Rockmore can claim that Engels dismissed Hegel’s work as “pre-scientific nonsense”? Rockmore must assume that neither his editors, nor the academic community in which he navigates his career, will be troubled by his gross falsifications. In works dealing with Marxism, there seems to be no expectation of scholarly rigor. The prevailing motto is, rather, “Anything goes!”

Rockmore’s assertion that Engels was a positivist who maintained that the development of science rendered philosophy superfluous is no less false. Indeed, Engels wrote precisely the opposite. He repeatedly warned that the work of even the most brilliant natural scientists is limited to the extent that they lack serious acquaintance with the history of human conceptual thinking as it finds expression in the development of philosophy. The “art” of conceptual thinking essential for the correct interpretation of the results of empirical research, Engels insisted, can be acquired only through the painstaking study of the history of philosophy. In a crucial passage, Engels wrote:

“Empirical natural science has accumulated such a tremendous mass of positive material for knowledge that the necessity of classifying it in each separate field of investigation systematically and in accordance with its inner inter-connection has become absolutely imperative. It is becoming equally imperative to bring the individual spheres of knowledge into correct connection with one another. In doing so, however, natural science enters the field of theory and here the methods of empiricism will not work, here only theoretical thinking can be of assistance. But theoretical thinking is an innate quality only as regards natural capacity. This natural capacity must be developed, improved, and for its improvement there is as yet no other means than the study of previous philosophy” (Collected Works, Volume 25, p. 338).

I cannot resist citing another passage, in which Engels presents a conception of the relevance of philosophy that is the absolute opposite of the position attributed to him by Rockmore:

“Natural scientists believe that they free themselves from philosophy by ignoring it or abusing it. They cannot, however, make any headway without thought, and for thought they need thought determinations. But they take these categories unreflectingly from the common consciousness of so-called educated persons, which is dominated by the relics of long obsolete schools), or from uncritical and unsystematic reading of philosophical writings of all kinds. Hence they are no less in bondage to the understanding of their science than to philosophy, and Engels, accordingly, insists that the study of philosophy is indispensable for the study of science.”

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

http://www.wsws.org