

Marx's Declaration of Intent (Online Article)

Historical Note

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Content

Marx's Declaration of Intent

Perhaps Marx's clearest early formulation of immanent dialectical critique is contained in a letter to his friend Arnold Ruge, written in September 1843 and published in February 1844 (it is now also known under the title "For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing"). In the letter, Marx explicitly rejects the contemporaneous socialist programs for political reform as doomed to failure because they are dogmatic attempts to prefigure the future. He rejects philosophy for the same reason, namely, as presenting ready-made solutions of how the world ought to be. Such attempts and solutions are viewed by Marx as utopian, i.e. as artificial, ideal social and political forms which are unsuitable and unrelated to the social reality they are meant to be applied. Marx holds that men can change society only insofar society itself makes possible their goals and program, only insofar social reality itself "strives towards thought" (61)[1]. He is adamant that "the new world [can be found] only through criticism of the old", i.e. that new social and political forms that are suitable to replace the present ones can only be found if we somehow derive them from the present via critique. (13) Marx's conviction suggests that he believes that the present holds the key to its possible future, that it contains potential pointing beyond its present form.

The key that Marx considers a potential link between present and future is reason. The following passage is illuminating: "Reason has always existed, only not always in reasonable form. The critic can therefore start out by taking any form of theoretical and practical consciousness and develop from the unique forms of existing reality the true reality as its norm and final goal." (14) What the passage means is that the historically specific (unique) forms of consciousness and activity that make up existing reality, either theoretical forms like religion and philosophy or practical forms like politics, tend towards another reality which conditions them as their final cause or goal. Existing reality is therefore pregnant with another reality, the present is pregnant with the future, but it needs the midwife that is immanent dialectical critique and praxis to facilitate the birth. The future reality is reason, i.e. what rationally ought to be. For radical philosophers, socialists and communists in Marx's time, what ought to be and what they want to bring about is a fully rationally-organized society of maximum human freedom and well-being. What they fail to see, according to Marx, is that while existing reality is not yet manifestly rational, it has aspects which contain and express the possibility and the need for reason. These aspects are undermined by the currently irrational form they have, and by other reactionary aspects of existing reality. In other words, existing reality is self-contradictory rather than internally consistent. By identifying these aspects and the possibility for reason they embody, Marx believes that one simultaneously identifies what needs to be done to manifest the reason they embody, and can work through their self-contradictory irrational form to overcome it.

An example in the letter to Ruge illustrating Marx's conception of reality as self-contradictory and pointing beyond itself is his discussion of the state. Marx considers the modern bourgeois state of his time to be the repository and the embodiment of the historical development of human reason in the realm of practice: "precisely the political state in all its modern forms contains [...] the demands of reason" and is "the catalogue of [mankind's] practical struggles". (14) In other words, the modern state in its various iterations (US, Britain and France) is the result of the historical practical struggles of humanity to achieve a more rationally organized mode of existence. It thus reflects and embodies these struggles and their outcome, including their shortcomings. Its current form is self-contradictory precisely because it embodies both the ideal aspirations of radical bourgeois thought (Enlightenment) and their lack of fulfillment: for instance, it has elements of both representative democracy and of feudal estate representation. (14) Democracy points towards what rationally ought to be, and feudalism to the irrationality of the past. According to Marx, the self-contradictions of the state need to become an object of criticism because they form a tension pointing beyond itself. The representative aspect of the state points to the necessity and possibility for the whole society being organized according to representative lines, i.e. to the necessity and possibility of a fully democratic and free society. Criticism should champion representative democracy over the estates' system, and in the process transform into a mass political movement championing the full democratization of society. (14)

The state is not the only self-contradictory aspect of existing reality. Marx views social reality as a totality whose various spheres express in their specific forms the self-contradiction of society as a whole. At this early point of his thought, he understands this general self-contradiction as the self-contradiction between society's need and capacity to be structured to serve humanity as its principle, and society's alienation from the humanity that constitutes it in the service of something inhuman. Marx terms this contradiction as "the difference between the rule of man and the rule of private property". (14) Society struggles to structure itself to maximize human well-being through the realization of human reason and freedom, but it also operates in the interests of private property which contradict the collective human interest. Beyond the state, the social self-contradiction expresses itself in religion, philosophy and the politics of the socialist movement itself.

Because the phenomena of each social sphere express the contradiction of the whole, Marx believes that dialectical critique can take any of these spheres as its starting point for arriving at a comprehensive critique of the present that grasps the desirable future that must replace it, becoming a concrete transformative politics in the process. (14) He believes that dialectical critique should take up all these spheres, becoming a critique and transformation of reality in all its aspects. Immanent dialectical critique aims to translate religious, philosophical, political and economic problems into social problems concerning the fate of humanity directly: "Our whole task can consist only in putting religious and political questions into self-conscious human form". (15) The underlying social human problem must be posed directly in order to be worked through and overcome.

Marx's political insight is that people's present struggles already unconsciously embody the nature of the rational and free society people want and can accomplish, so that what is required for this accomplishment is to achieve consciousness of its nature and possibility: "the world has long been dreaming of something that it can acquire if only it becomes conscious of it." (15) In the present, consciousness is occluded by the given phenomenal economic, political and ideological forms of society which are naturalized and whose potential is thus hidden. These phenomenal forms are the only reality we have access to – however, unlike bourgeois thinkers who accept these forms at face value, we can move beyond them to a more advanced state of consciousness by working through their self-contradictions. [2] Marx, following Hegel, understands that reality is not something independent of us, but rather, a set of transient, changeable social practices which point beyond themselves in being self-contradictory. Immanent dialectical critique is the attempt to work through

the given self-contradictory practices in order to advance social consciousness to a concrete political consciousness aware of the rational and free society it wants and of what it must do to realize it[3].

To clarify further: Marx espouses the ideals of freedom and self-development, and I think it is safe to add that people are drawn to Marxism only if they have some ideals that they believe bourgeois society fails to realize. However, these ideals are not formulated in Marxist theory: Marx does not try to give an account of the good or ideal life and society. He instead found these ideals already formulated in the radical bourgeois thought of thinkers like Rousseau, Hegel and the American and French revolutionaries. By the time Marx came on the scene, these ideals had already been formulated and already animated people's struggles for a better life; people wanted society to live up to its promise of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," and of "liberté, égalité, fraternité," and they were already forming parties and waging struggles to realize those ideals. In other words, it is society that formulated the ideals, not Marx.

What Marx did was to grasp these ideals as part of a self-contradiction of bourgeois society that pointed beyond itself. He realized that bourgeois society constitutively prevents the realization of its ideals, failing by its own lights, while simultaneously creating the potential for a new kind of society that would meet them. This potential appears desirable precisely because it fulfills the ideals people already have, so that it is not necessary to introduce any external normative standard. [4]Marx's critical theory was formulated to clarify to people the steps that their self-interested struggles for life, liberty and happiness pointed towards and required for their fulfillment, to make people conscious of what they need to do politically to succeed in these struggles and bring another society into being. Marxism was meant precisely to clarify people's political imagination and provide a concrete aim or vision for their struggles, namely, the aim of the revolution, of the transitional dictatorship of the proletariat, and of communism itself.

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From the collection of articles "[What is Marxism?](#)"

[1] All page numbers are from *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd Edition, W. W. Norton & Company, 1978.

[2] Not everything can be understood dialectically, e.g. the German society of Marx's youth is viewed by him as only worthy of rejection and contempt, not as pointing beyond itself. (55-6)

[3] By the time of the Manuscripts, Marx identified the rational and free society aimed at as communism. Later on, the consciousness of this society's necessity, desirability and possibility became class consciousness, and the mystical consciousness opposing it became bourgeois ideology.

[4] As Marcuse put it, "The principles of liberalism are valid... but the concrete forms of society that have developed since the nineteenth century have increasingly frustrated the freedom to which liberalism counsels allegiance. ... Social theory was faced with the alternative either of abandoning the principles of liberalism so that the existing social order might be maintained, or of fighting the system in order to preserve the principles. The latter choice was implied in the Marxian theory of society." *Reason and Revolution*, 1941, pp. 397-8

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