

Marx & Modernity: Mind, Culture & Activity

Talk by Andy Blunden at University of Witwatersrand, February 2011

1. Marx's and Hegel's Concept of Mind

IN THIS LECTURE I want to introduce you to a few innovations in social theory and psychology which we owe to Karl Marx and which are a part of the philosophical foundations of education. Marx was of course not a philosopher or an educator, but a communist, and I don't want to detract from the revolutionary political character of his legacy. However, both education and philosophy are domains in which Marx's ideas have proved to be most enduring. But Marx's ideas are only going to be of use to you to the extent that you see learning as a means of self-emancipation.

**“History does *Nothing!*
... It is *people* who do all that”**



Also, what I am about to say builds on the talk I gave yesterday on the achievements of philosophers prior to Marx. I will just refer to these here without explanation.

Like Hegel, Marx did not see the world in terms of an individual confronting a world of Nature. And nor in the more philosophical terms of an opposition between a subject and an object. Rather, like Hegel, Marx began from a subject-object, that is human beings who create social conditions and are in turn products of those social conditions. Human beings create themselves by creating and recreating the conditions of their own lives. Marx did not see human beings as being determined by “laws of history” or dominated by economic laws or great institutions. But at the same time, he recognised social and historical processes as objective; freedom is attainable therefore only through revolutionary, social action, in which people create the conditions for their own freedom, collectively, together with others.

So in these respects Marx differed sharply from Hegel. For example, Marx said in a polemic against the Young Hegelians: “*History* does *nothing*, it ‘possesses *no* immense wealth’, it ‘wages *no* battles’. It is *man*, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; ‘history’ is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve *its own* aims; history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims.” This contrasts with Hegel who deified History. According to Hegel: “The state is the march of God on Earth.” In other words, Spirit acted through human activity. But Marx went further than this. Marx did not recognise any idea as governing the lives of human beings, whether God, or the State or the laws of economics.

Also, Marx was the first to see that it was the proletariat, at the time little more than human dust, who would emancipate themselves and in the process make a better world for everyone. Hegel on the other hand, in common with all his contemporaries, had taken it that only the educated political elite could be a vehicle of social reform.

Hegel believed that history was rational, that is, intelligible. Marx would agree with that. But what this meant for Hegel was that social formations would ultimately come to grief because of logical contradictions at their heart. This Marx did not accept. Marx did not see history as predetermined in any way, in fact. We could express Marx's idea of reality with the idea that modern society is made up of *real illusions*. We are all actors in a shared drama, but the narrative is not the product of whim or subjective fancy, but has powerful roots in human needs. Disenchantment is a social and historical task which has to be understood in terms of real human needs.

Nonetheless, it is fair to say that Marx believed that a social formation stands or falls, in the end, according to its effectiveness in meeting the needs it engenders in the people who participate in it. But one must beware of oversimplifications in this area.

There are seven ideas to which I want to draw to your attention, each taken from a particular excerpt from Marx's work.

FIRSTLY, we will look at *Theses on Feuerbach*, where Marx is able to recover what is revolutionary and critical in Hegel by taking the substance of human life to be Activity. Here Marx clearly marks

himself off both from materialists who saw human beings simply as products of their environment, and idealists who regarded only thinking as really creative activity. This short document marks the beginning of the modern Activity Theory.

Next, we turn to the first chapter of *The German Ideology*, where Marx spelt out the foundations of a materialist theory of history in which human beings are active agents in creating their own history.

Thirdly, we will look at the “Method of Political Economy” in the *Grundrisse*, in which Marx shows how concepts first arise as forms of social practice, before they can be acquired by theorists. Theorists may then reconstruct reality as a combination of abstractions, rising from the abstract to the concrete.

Fourth, we will come to the key insight which underlay *Capital*, the identification of the commodity relation as the economic cell form of bourgeois society, as he puts it in the Preface to the First German edition of *Capital*, and then briefly sketch Marx’s demonstration of the ideological impact of commodity production on human life in Chapter 1 of *Capital*.

Then we will note that in the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx shows how people participate in social and historical battles by utilising the available symbolic culture.

And finally, we will observe how, in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx saw his role, not as teaching the working class what it must do, but rather, providing the working class with its own voice.

1. *Theses on Feuerbach*

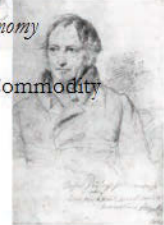
2. *The German Ideology*

3. *Grundrisse: The Method of Political Economy*

4. *Capital: Preface & 5. Chapter 1: The Commodity*

6. *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

7. *The Communist Manifesto*



2. Theses on Feuerbach and the Concept of Activity

IT IS WORTH knowing that the concept of Activity had 60 years of history in German philosophy before Marx took it up. It was introduced by the philosopher of history, Johann Gottfried Herder as part of his critique of Spinoza. While claiming to overcome Cartesian dualism with a materialist monism, Spinoza did so at the cost of free will. Herder introduced a concept of Nature, active, full of striving and contradiction, of Activity, to overcome Spinoza’s determinism.

Johann Fichte, a critic of Kant, made the Ego his central concept, but the Ego was pure activity. Thus practice played the key role, bridging the subject-object dichotomy. Moses Hess was a young follower of Fichte, at the time an ultra-Left communist, and it was Hess who introduced the young Marx to the concept of Activity, which Marx made the foundation of his critical method as formulated in the Theses on Feuerbach.

The Theses were written in 1845, and were found by Engels in Marx’s papers after his death and were first published in 1888.

THE TARGET of the Theses is Ludwig Feuerbach, and Thesis 1 is directed against philosophical materialism. For the materialists, he says, “the Object [is] conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity.” Marx refers here to the stance of natural science in which the object is taken as a thing which exists independently of human activity, so that by

Theses on Feuerbach

Herder – Fichte - Hess



“Practical-critical Activity”

experiment and observation, the properties of the thing can be discovered. But this ignores, says Marx, “the active side ... which has been developed by idealism.” That is, we have to regard the Object not as a thing (as natural science does), but as a form of practice. Instead of studying space and time, we should study the relevant practices of measurement.

When, in Thesis 2, Marx says that “whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a **practical** question” it is important to see that Marx is not just claiming that practice the criterion of truth. You don’t need philosophy to know that “the proof of the pudding is in the eating.”

Practice is not the test of truth, but is the *substance* of truth. It is not something with which we *compare* our theory, but rather is the *realisation* of our theory, even when we don’t like it!

Some of the consequences of applying the natural scientific standpoint to human affairs is brought out by the famous question: “who is to educate the educators?” The classical materialist approach to education begins from the understanding that people are products of their environment. But this forgets, says Marx, that it is people who change conditions. So the doctrine that people are products of their circumstances presupposes the superior status of those who understand and control circumstances while others are subject to those circumstances.

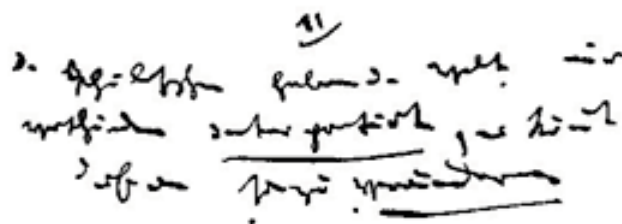
This leads to his criticism of Feuerbach for exposing the fact that Christianity is nothing but a rationalisation for very earthly institutions. Marx says that Feuerbach’s is a typically Christian attitude, as if religion could be overcome by logical argument. Religious belief meets the needs of people suffering as a result of contradictions in social life, and cannot be abolished by logical persuasion. The conditions which give rise to religion have first to be revolutionised.

SO WE ARE LED to Thesis 8: “All social life is essentially **practical**. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.” Pin this up on your bedroom wall. You cannot solve any problem of social life by looking inside the head or human nature, or by the study of social structures. The real object is human practice, which is both subjective and objective, the activity in which human beings produce and reproduce the world and themselves. Problems of the mind and problems in society have to be approached this way, as forms of social practice.

A LAST WORD on Thesis 11: “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” This has often been interpreted to mean that philosophy is now redundant, that all that makes sense now is the practical work of fighting against capitalism or whatever. But this would be quite wrong. Marx is saying that the point of philosophy is to change the world. If we understand by philosophy the critical and reflective concern with ideas, then the need for philosophy is eternal. The more complicated our lives become, the more the need for philosophy. But philosophy which is not for the purpose of finding out how we can live humanly is worthless windbagery. “Thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.” Practice is not the test of truth it is the very substance of reality itself.

8.

“All social life is essentially practical.
All mysteries which lead theory to
mysticism find their rational solution in
human practice and in the
comprehension of this practice.”



Handwritten text in German cursive script, likely a translation or interpretation of the quote above.

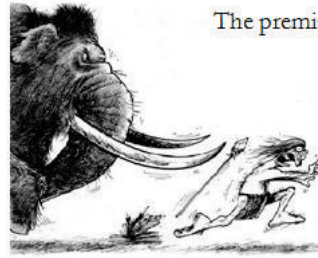
The point of philosophy

3. German Ideology and premises of materialist method

THE VAST manuscript which comprises the *German Ideology* was written mainly as a work of self-clarification and was not published during the lifetimes of Marx and Engels. The ideas which are sketched in the *Theses* are further developed, particularly in the first chapter. Marx puts forward what he regards as the first premises of his method, namely: “They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity.” Note the absence of any appeal to History or Nature or any such abstraction, nor any mention of class struggle or economics or any further specification. Marx set out from a very fundamental level.

The German Ideology

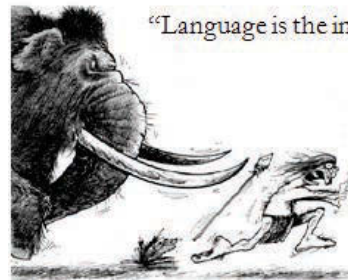
The premises of the materialist method



THIS IS now a further specification of what is given in the *Theses* in that it spells out precisely the three foundational elements of every concept: individual human beings, their activity and the material conditions. By material conditions we understand all those conditions such as land, means of production, natural conditions, and so on, as well as the artefacts people create and use in the course of their activity, including language. “Language is the immediate actuality of thought” he says, but he adds:

“Just as philosophers have given thought an independent existence, so they were bound to make language into an independent realm.”

Thought and Language



“Language is the immediate actuality of thought”

“Just as philosophers have given thought an independent existence, so they were bound to make language into an independent realm.”

So language is to be understood as a part of the material world which is produced and reproduced through the activity of human beings and constitutes their culture, the anthroposphere. Language exists only in one or another material form, as words and their syntax, and whether spoken or written or carved in stone, as part of material culture.

Culture is a mass, a constellation of artefacts, material things which have, built into them, a myriad of interconnections, and “affordances” (to use a modern word here); culture is not something imaginary, but a mass of real, material given things, which can be changed only with considerable physical effort. At the same time, any element of culture, any artefact, is what it is only because it is construed in a certain way in human activity.

It is notable that nowadays people either confine culture to language (ignoring machinery, buildings, bodies and other mundane elements of culture), and treat language as a strictly communicative device with an ephemeral existence, or take culture as given, ignoring the fact that its efficacy is realised only through its use in appropriate forms of activity, by people who know how to use it.

Note also that the human individuals themselves rank in Marx’s principles as one of the three foundations.

“They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.”

Although Marx and Engels could not complete this thought until after Darwin published his work in 1859, it is clear that human beings *produce themselves* and the physiology of the human body is itself the product of at least a million years of labour. The human body is itself a part of the “material conditions” created by human labour.

A word here about “labour” which is rightly regarded as a central category in Marx’s thought. While it is true that for Marx the production and reproduction of the means of life is the central and archetypical form of labour, labour should never be limited to any particular kind of labour. Nowadays, people engage in all sorts of activity and the complexity of the productive process itself makes it no longer feasible to draw some kind of arbitrary line between one concrete kind of labour and another. This is all the more important when we are concerned with problems of education, culture, psychology and so on. The distinction between productive and unproductive labour retains its meaning in political economy, but these distinctions cannot be sustained in relation to the concrete character of the labour itself. This is an important qualification. Everything that Marx has to say about labour is as true of the school teacher or computer programmer or hospitality worker as it is of the farmhand or factory worker.

4. Method of Political Economy: Ascent from Abstract to Concrete

IN 1857, living in exile in London, Marx was deeply immersed in his study of political economy. A manuscript from this time known as the *Grundrisse* was not translated into English until 1973, but shed a brilliant light on the thinking which led to *Capital*. In particular I want to turn to the section entitled “Method of Political Economy” in the Introduction.

Firstly, Marx points out the difference between, on the one hand, the process of by means of which the concepts of the science are arrived at and, on the other hand, the reconstruction of the world in theory, as a combination of abstractions. He describes the difference between two phases of movement which concepts undergo in the course of development of a theory.

Firstly, when the subject matter is first apprehended, we begin with categories representing the concrete facts as they are presented to observation. But examination of these facts proves that these categories which we use to represent the facts, are altogether useless for making sense of the material, for giving a scientific account of it. Attempts to uncover explanatory principles just lead in circles. Over time, *analysis* of the data leads to more and more general categories, thinner and thinner abstractions. This completes the first phase of development, the determination of the abstractions underlying the data. The determination of these abstract concepts marks the completion of the first historical phase of the development of the science, the pre-history of the science in fact.

Secondly, the genuinely scientific process makes its beginning from these abstractions, retracing the journey back to reconstruct the data from which the first process had begun, “but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations.” Beginning from concepts representing the simplest and most abstract concept, the theorist is able to logically reconstruct the very complex process which underlies the appearances which are given to us in experience.

Marx says: “Along the first path the full conception was evaporated to yield an abstract determination; along the second, the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought.” This sheds light on the process of science and allows us to make sense of the history of science and draw out a better understanding of its concepts. It also sheds important light on the nature of scientific concepts and how genuinely scientific concepts differ from the abstract generalisations which arise from the immediate representation of appearances. The abstractions which made the beginning for real science are very ‘thin’ abstractions, that is, all concrete content have been evaporated from them, in contrast to the concepts by means of which the data is first apprehended and which have to be reconstructed by science. It must be noted that this conclusion is in contradiction to mainstream theories of science, which do not recognise the unique character of the concepts which make the beginning for science, what characteristics of a concept mark it off from just any abstraction.

In relation to political economy, Marx saw that the concept of exchange value was not just a product of theory, but was a *real abstraction*, in that it had crystallised out over history and taken on an

The Method of Political Economy



“The concrete is the concentration of many determinations
...
It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process
of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure,
even though it is the point of departure in reality.”

objective material form, namely *money*. Exchange-value was not product of the thinking of the theoretician but the product of the objective development of activity, down through history. Once exchange-value had been produced as an objective, sensuous commodity, a theoretician can then acquire the concept as a thought-form: first, the emergence of the relation in the material culture of the society, then the formation of a theoretical concept of it, in the writing of theorists. This is true of all concepts and abstractions: concepts are produced by the differentiation of systems of activity which then make it possible to reflect this activity in thought and acquire the concept as a thought form. The key to this process is the *ideal* properties of things, whereby a form of activity is objectified by creating artefacts and by investing objects with social significance, so that the objects then act as symbols of the social relation of which they are the bearers.

When Aristotle had thought about exchange value in 300BCE, money hardly existed, far less all the social relations based on the market and capital accumulation which invested money with its significance. So it was impossible for Aristotle to reason out the full content which this category would acquire 2,000 years later. The social process itself, which eventually reorganised the whole of society in line with the requirements of a money economy gave new content to the concept of exchange-value. Likewise, natural science only advances in the tail of advances in the development of forms of activity which bring to light new problems, new instruments, new demands. The seeming advance of thought is a reflection of the advance of the whole social process. A perfectly good concept is empty except insofar as the forms of activity which invest it with content are given to us.

The problem is though, from *which* abstractions can the whole process be reconstructed?

5. Preface to Capital and Germ of bourgeois society

IN THE PREFACE to the first edition of *Capital* Marx points out that for more than 2,000 years no-one has been able to get the bottom of the how the value of a commodity is determined. Comparing political economy, with its “power of abstraction,” with anatomy with its microscopes, he says that “in bourgeois society, the commodity-form of the product of labour - or value-form of the commodity - is the economic *cell-form*.” This is a clear allusion to the origins of Hegelian philosophy in Romantic Science, which required that a science begin from the simplest, archetypal phenomena which belongs to its subject matter. Exchange of commodities is, says Marx, the simplest social relation which characterises bourgeois society. Once you disclose the nature of the commodity relation, everything else follows by necessity.

This is of the utmost importance, because it shows us not only how to understand capitalism, but how to make a beginning in *any* science: you have to identify the simplest social relation which manifests the phenomenon you wish to investigate. By identifying the cell of the organism you want to understand you can reconstruct the whole phenomenon according to its own internal nature. This was the lesson which Vygotsky took from his reading of *Capital* a lesson which escaped the attention of all his contemporaries, and allowed him to found a Marxist psychology – not by analogies or by arbitrarily assembling quotations from Marx and Engels, but by adopting the fundamental method which Marx applied to political economics to problems of psychology.

The point is that with the simplest relation of bourgeois society you form a concept of bourgeois society which is immediately and intuitively clear to anyone. All the consequences of production for exchange can be unfolded from a consideration of this relation and all the phenomena of capitalism become comprehensible on this basis. Specifically, the commodity relation is like a virus: every activity and relation it comes into contact with it transforms into one like itself. Domestic labour, business management, entertainment, love and care, health, relaxation, research, education, all forms of knowledge and expertise in fact – everything, is transformed into a commodity, or as we say nowadays, it is commodified. With commodification every aspect of human life has a price put on it

Preface to *Capital*



“In bourgeois society, the commodity-form of the product of labour — or value-form of the commodity — is the economic cell-form.”

and is bought and sold on the market. In Chapter One of *Capital* Marx set about showing exactly how human life is transformed by the process of commodification.

6. Capital, Chapter 1 and The fetishism of the commodity

I DON'T WANT to go into the analysis of the commodity in any depth, let alone the rest of the three volumes of *Capital*. But let us look at this relationship which constitutes the germ of bourgeois society. The buyer and seller confront each other as *independent* producers; they do not share a common purpose, they relate to one another as independent subjects. In the process of atomising and fragmenting society, this relationship at the same time, engenders the notion of equality:

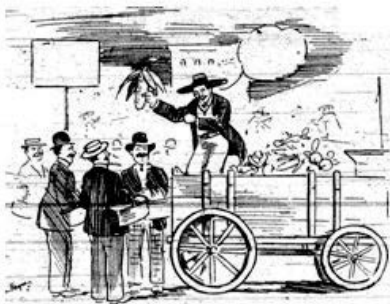
“The secret of the expression of value, namely, that all kinds of labour are equal and equivalent, because, and so far as they are human labour in general, cannot be deciphered, until the notion of human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice. This, however, is possible only in a society in which the great mass of the produce of labour takes the form of commodities, in which, consequently, the dominant relation between man and man, is that of owners of commodities” (*Capital*, Chapter 1).

The Commodity

“The secret of the expression of value, namely that all kinds of labour are equal and equivalent, because and so far as they are human labour in general, cannot be deciphered until the notion of human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice. This, however, is possible only in a society in which the great mass of the produce of labour takes the form of commodities.”

But the commodity relation also mystifies human relationships. All labour, all production, entails objectification, that is, the creation of things which are bearers of human powers, but when that power is invested in a commodity, and becomes the property of another, a stranger, we get *alienation*: that is, the producer is alienated from their own product. When commodities, including the workers' own labour power, are exchanged for money, then it seems that this money is now the real bearer of human power. The accumulation of capital leaves the producer confronting a great concentration of human power which is their tormentor. But given class consciousness, this power can be seen to be nothing but their own labour being used against them.

The Commodity



Alienation and Fetishism

MARX compares the attribution of social power to commodities with “fetishism,” the religious belief in icons and relics having spiritual and magic powers. But this power must be described as a “real illusion,” because although it rests on nothing but mind, it remains nonetheless a real social power. In order to throw off this illusion, it is necessary to muster a social power which expresses the actual will of the producers, as a class, and find some other way to produce the means of life, which does not rest on the separation of the producer from their product and does not

allow the disposition of the common wealth to become a power unto itself.

Commodity production and exchange simultaneously *atomises* the social bonds which would otherwise bind people together in the common process of production of their own lives, but through the development of the world market and the promotion of the concept of all producers as free and equal agents, creates *new bonds* of fraternity. But which tendency is to predominate? That depends.

7. Eighteenth Brumaire and History

HOW DID Marx answer the question of free will and determinism? the idea of laws of history and so on? How does the idea of people being both creators and products of their own life play out on the historical stage? Marx says in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”

18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte



“Men make their own history, but under circumstances given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. ... they anxiously conjure up spirits of the past, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes.”

So we do have freedom, but not an unconditional freedom. We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before, but for that privilege we also share in the limitations of the material conditions we have inherited from the past, and must disenchant ourselves from the beliefs and practices of the past.

Marx uses a dramaturgical metaphor to describe how political struggles are played out. Marx continues:

“And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language. Thus Luther put on the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789-1814 draped itself alternately in the guise of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, ...”

So in this way Marx prefigures concepts that we associate with more recent times, such as narrative and availability, semiotics and role-playing. In order to fight out political struggles, historical personages cast themselves as the heroes in dramas already available within the culture. Others can then choose to accept this narrative and cast themselves in supporting roles, either for or against the hero or other players in the drama; the players then improvise the plot as they play it out. Eventually, investing the narrative with new, contemporary content.

In this same work, which is a study of the revolutionary uprisings of 1848 in France, it is noteworthy that Marx tracks the role played by dozens of social strata, identifying themselves in a variety of dramaturgical ways, but expressing interests defined by wealth, economic sector, political radicalism, age, gender and every imaginable sociological category.

So it is clear that Marx does *not* see politics as the direct expression of economic interests. There is a highly mediated and complex process intervening between economic interests and political partisanship. People identify themselves in a number of ways, mediated by their participation in the economic and other aspects of social life and the whole constellation of cultural heritage and activity.

Individuals can and do change history, but they have to be able to summon up the ghosts of the past in their service in a way which is convincing to others. But just as Engels said in his speech on Marx's graveside:

“Just as Darwin discovered the law of development or organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; that therefore the production of the immediate material means, and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been

evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case.”

The Manifesto of the Communist Party

8. The Communist Manifesto

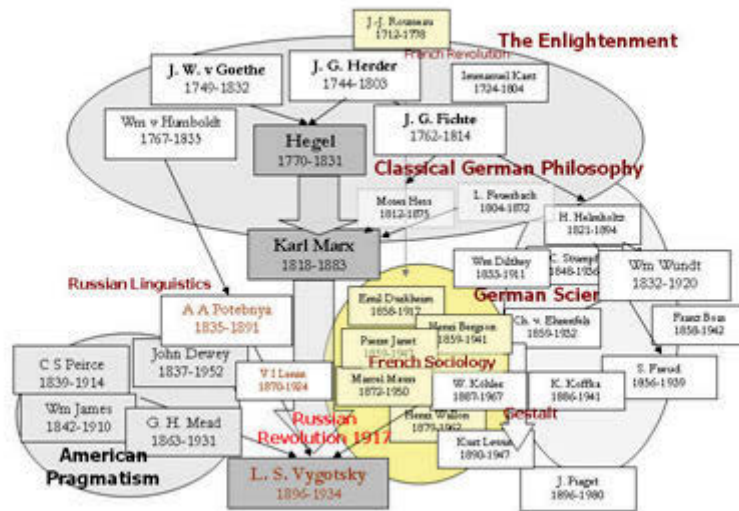
TO CLOSE, I just want to recall the founding and most famous work of Communism, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, which Marx wrote in 1848, just before the 1848 Revolutions swept across Europe. The Communist Party was a product of Marx’s imagination, 50 years before workers were to establish political parties of their own. The *Manifesto* was in fact commissioned by a small secret society called the Communist League. With the *Manifesto*, Marx gave to the proletariat of the world a voice which was genuinely their own. As a program for the socialist revolution, the Manifesto is full of contradictions and ambiguities, and it can be read as the founding document of reformist social democracy, anarcho-syndicalism, Stalinist state socialism or democratic communism. These ambiguities reflected the embryonic stage of development of the workers’ movement at the time. All these tendencies were present in it. After the experience of the International Workingmen’s Association, and of Paris Commune, Marx was able to amend the program and make it more explicit. He was conscious that it was not he, Karl Marx, who was writing the program and history of the workers’ movement, but the movement itself. But he had the ability to see and hear what was developing in that movement and give voice to it.

“the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”

References

Theses on Feuerbach, 1845. The German Ideology, Volume I, Chapter 1, 1845. The Method of Political Economy, The *Grundrisse*. Introduction, 1857. Capital, Preface to the First German Edition, and Chapter 1, Volume I. Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Chapter 1, 1852.

In Conclusion



<http://lchc.ucsd.edu/mca/Paper/Genealogy-CHAT.htm>