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MARXISM AND BEHAVIORISM: IDEOLOGICAL PARALLELS

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Marxism, as a philosophical system, attempts to provide an accurate analysis of man and his social institutions. Behaviorism, as a system of psychology, claims that its method is fundamental to an understanding of human nature. Both systems justify their claims on the grounds that they are employing methods which are scientific in character. Marxism bases its method on historical analysis, maintaining that history unfolds in an orderly, predictable manner and that a proper analysis of it reveals scientific laws. The general methodology of the natural sciences is the model for behaviorism. Behaviorists point to the successes of the natural sciences and claim that they employ the scientific method thoroughly and more consistently than any previous or current psychology. Moreover, they claim that behavioristic psychology has been mindful of and faithful to the scientific goals of predictability and control of the subject matter and has advanced the study of human psychology to the extent that it can call itself objective and genuinely scientific.

My use of the term "Marxism" in this paper will refer to the thought and writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. I will take B. F. Skinner to be the principal representative of behaviorism. It is my contention that both Marxism and behaviorism as complete views of man (which they both claim to be) are forms of dogmatic ideology. I take the term "ideology" generally as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it "ideal or abstract speculation; in a deprecatory sense, unpractical or visionary theorizing or speculation." I would emphasize the term "visionary" in this definition and apply it to both Marxism and behaviorism to emphasize the fact that both systems extend their visions

into political programs, that is, both envisage their systems as potential social systems which vastly improve human conditions.

I take the term "ideology" specifically to apply to a system of thought in which the political dimension is connected to the whole system in such a way that it serves as a moral postulate for the entire system and, in effect, closes it off such that to question the presuppositions is to betray vital moral-political purpose. While this characterization has long been conceded by many to be true of Marxism (we frequently hear of Marxist ideology) it has not been widely extended to the system of behaviorism. Yet I believe that behaviorism suffers from a similar flaw, one in which a methodological rigidity is tied to a social theory and as a consequence inhibits the development of creative intellectual activity.

I propose to examine Marxist and behaviorist thinking and draw what I think are significant parallels. I shall do this by developing three separate points:

- (I) Marxism and behaviorism as sciences
- (II) Marxism and behaviorism as social philosophies
- (III) Marxism and behaviorism as ideologies.

I

Marxism claims to apply a scientific method to the study of social phenomena. The method employed is one developed by Hegel, who attempted to account for human social development by interpreting it to a process of dialectical ascent. He believed that the natural world, including human society, was a phenomenal manifestation out of which the Ideal (the rational essence of reality) develops to a state of perfect self-realization through a se-

ries of contradictions whose resolutions advance the development and status of the Ideal to its perfect state.¹

Marx adopted this method and modified it. He criticized Hegel for abstracting the content out of his philosophy, attempting to account for reality in a wholly abstract fashion, imputing content and meaning to a purely ideational realm while failing to recognize the substance and effect of material reality.²

Marx and Engels applied Hegel's method to social-economic history. They were convinced that the real content of history was located in economic development and that this development took place in the form of class struggle:

It was seen that all past history with the exception of its primitive stages, was the history of class struggles: that these warring classes are always products of the modes of production and exchange, in a word, of the economic conditions of their time; that the economic structure of society always furnishes the real basis starting from which we can alone work out the ultimate explanation of the whole superstructure of judicial and political institutions as well as of the religious, philosophical and other ideas of a given historical period.³

The science of man for Marx and Engels is economics interpreted in an historical context. This science provides, they maintain, what we today expect from any legitimate scientific discipline, predictability. Human history is subject to the rule of laws as is the natural material world. "He (Darwin) dealt the metaphysical conception of nature the heaviest blow by his proof that all organic beings, plants, animals and man himself are products of a process of evolution going on through millions of years."⁴ A study of history reveals the social economic laws to which mankind is subject. Thus the future course of human social events can be charted and predicted once the historical laws are understood. Marx

comes to see his efforts as a genuine contribution to the study of human affairs, a contribution which takes the form of an objective social science. "These two great discoveries, the materialistic conception of history, and the capitalistic production through surplus value, we owe to Marx. With these discoveries socialism becomes a science."⁵

Modern physical science is the major source of inspiration for behaviorism. Its advocates point to the advances in the physical sciences and claim that its method applied to human behavior can yield similar progress. Concomitant with this desire to emulate the methods of the physical sciences is a rejection of psychology prior to behaviorism as being laden with vague metaphysical terminology. I refer to B. F. Skinner's book, *Behavior of Organisms*, 1938. In this work Skinner registers his dissatisfaction with the progress of psychology. Riddled with imprecise and subjective terminology, dominated by burdensome theoretical constructions, psychology for Skinner requires a method which is free from obscurantist and introspective accounts of human behavior.

There is a striking parallel between Skinner's concept of the efficiency and economy of his method and Marx's view of his own method. Both are concerned to rid their inquiries of excess speculative, theoretical baggage. In the *German Ideology* Marx makes this claim the premise of the materialist conception of history:

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstractions can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions of their life, both those which they find already existing and those by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way.⁶

Skinner in his description of the conception of modern behavioral science

sees its advance as contingent upon its ability to displace methods which resort to explaining behavior by some cause or process anterior to behavior. "When a science of behavior had once rid itself of psychic fictions: either it might leave their places empty and proceed to deal with its data directly, or it might make replacements,"⁷ Empirical data is Skinner's tool. "There is only one way to obtain a convenient and useful system and that is to go directly to the data."⁸

Both Marx and Skinner are striving for an objective approach to their respective subject matters in order to yield empirically verifiable laws which can be used to predict and control the course of human affairs. They take positions of primary materialism, that is, they reject any attempt to account for any human phenomenon by appealing to any concept of mind. Marx's dialectical materialism replaces German metaphysical idealism, Skinner's scientific materialism replaces the mind-matter dualism presupposed by such prominent predecessors as Freud and James.

In both Marxism and behaviorism man's role becomes that of interpreter of the forces that shape him. This is accomplished by analyzing the disposition and dynamics of material forces. For Skinner: "The task of a scientific analysis is to explain how the behavior of a person as a physical system is related to conditions under which this individual lives."⁹ For Marx: "The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature."¹⁰

These two quotes illustrate a similarity in what Marx and Skinner conceive to be the object and purpose of their study. Both men consider themselves as scientists, as objective interpreters of the natural order, eschewing mystification of man's relation to nature.

This view, however, has a significant political implication. Scientific understanding provides the possibility of prediction and control and thus leads to a technology of human affairs. This technology in Marxist terms is a revolutionary activity, in Skinnerian terms a behavioral technology. The scientific objective detachment of Marx and Skinner is linked to social-political commitment. Indeed, the social goals are the ultimate justifications for both systems.

To conclude: there are three factors which inhere in Marxism and behaviorism which makes the systems parallel in their claims for scientific objectivity. First, both view their methods as being scientific, dealing with strict empirical data and shunning speculation. Second, they both see man as an interpreter of himself as a strict physical-material entity: and third, they both view their systems as alternatives to outmoded and benighted idealistic or mentalistic conceptual schemes.

II

In the first section I mentioned the technological implications of the two systems as being the most effective instruments of social change. The impetus here is a kind of moral-social idealism, a realization of the vast disparity between man as he is and man as he could be, and a revulsion from the spectacle of human destructiveness and the institutionalization of greed and exploitation.

Genuine knowledge provides man the opportunity to divest himself of the ugly and brutal conditions which have so long determined the lives of so many. Marxism and behaviorism are prescriptive in disposition. Both claim an absolute right to be believed, that is, they both see their programs as being absolutely essential in order to bring about an improved social order and they both see their detractors as obscurantists or sentimentalists. Skin-

ner's view is that the development of "behavioral technology" is the best guarantee of avoiding massive social upheaval:

A behavioral technology comparable in power and precision to physical and biological technology is lacking, and those who do not find the possibility ridiculous are more likely to be frightened by it than reassured. That is how far we are from preventing the catastrophe toward which the world seems to be inexorably moving.¹¹

Marx is not quite as gloomy. He doesn't see the world as moving inexorably toward catastrophe, yet in his own time he foresaw a massive class struggle, one in which the proletariat, the exploited class of propertyless laborers would seize social power from the propertied capitalist exploiters.¹² Marx's view of history is pervaded with moral indignation. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* Marx describes the social and economic conditions which lead to the dehumanization of working class people. His work is not only a critical social analysis but is also a moral indictment of a social system which he believes is based upon ruthless exploitation and greed.

The implicit moral idealism in Marxism and behaviorism identifies the causes of social evil as being due to external environmental imbalances which are aggravated by man's own ignorance of their existence and perpetuated by his misconception of himself as a self-determined agent of social change. Once however, he has perfected the tools of social analysis and developed a human engineering science, the conditions which threaten his well-being can be eliminated. With Marx, for example, a reorganization of the means of production brings this about:

With the seizing of the means of production by society, production of commodities is done away with, and simultaneously, the master of product over producer . . . then

for the first time man, in a certain sense is finally marked off from the rest of the animal kingdom and emerges from mere animal conditions into really human ones.¹³

This kind of human ideal described above by Engels is to a large extent shaped by the concept of human perfectability. Human perfectability is, of course, one of the overriding themes of the Enlightenment. "Our hopes for the future condition of the human race can be subsumed under three important heads; the abolition of inequality between nations, the progress of equality within each nation, and the true perfection of mankind."¹⁴

Marx grew up very much under the influence of Enlightenment ideals.¹⁵ He inherited the optimistic view of eighteenth century thinkers such as Condorcet who believed that the gradual advance of the human mind by means of science and art over superstition and ignorance would eventually liberate the human race from the evils of tyranny, injustice and war. This view, which essentially equated vice with ignorance, exalted the capabilities of the mind and interpreted moral social evils to be temporary obstructions which would yield to the forces of scientific advancement. Marx's social analysis produces a more insightful and realistic explanation of social change. He is aware of the non-rational economic and political forces which create inequities and of the pressures and tensions which arise when various groups compete for social and economic power. Yet he shares with Enlightenment thinkers the optimism of the outcome of this competition. His belief is that man can extend his mastery of the natural physical world to his own social world and in effect liberate himself from all the evils which have frustrated the complete realization of his humanity-

Skinner's views are also much affected by the concept of human perfectability. The very title of his book

Beyond Freedom and Dignity is a reflection of his view that concepts such as freedom and dignity are vestiges of a false and metaphysical view of human autonomy, a view he believes frustrates attempts to implement methods and practices by which men can rid themselves of social evils. "A scientific analysis of behavior dispossesses autonomous man and turns the control he has said to exert over to the environment."¹⁶ Once man abandons his tenacious but misguided commitment to the illusion of his autonomy he gains a previously unparalleled dimension of control over his own activity, a control which enables him to eradicate the sources of social evil. Indeed it is the concept of morality itself which has impeded the process of human perfection because the institution of morality presupposes a degree of personal responsibility and individual autonomy, a false presupposition which, for Skinner, results in a failure to examine and understand the true causes of human behavior and consequently results in a failure to remedy basic human maladies. Skinner's ultimate purpose in this respect is to formulate all human problems into technological problems. Then man can establish a process of identifying causal relations of human behavior to antisocial and destructive activities and a technique of adjusting those causes to obtain an extinction of the unwanted behavior. The domain of human affairs which has been traditionally considered ethical is thus transformed into a strict scientific one and thus man, in effect, delivers himself without obstacle to his own scrutiny, which is capable of identifying and eliminating his own imperfections.

Skinner's proposed transformation of morality into technology is very much analogous to Marx's vision of the withering away of the state once the productive capacities of society have been transformed. Implicit in both views is the idea that the greatest human goods

will be realized when man acknowledges his being acted upon and shaped by the material world and also acknowledges that by rearranging material conditions (for Marx, the termination of commodity production, for Skinner, a more consistent system of distributing pleasure and pain) a better world will come into existence.

To conclude: both Marxism and behaviorism envision an improved society which can be realized once man recognizes his stature as a material being, determined by the same processes that shape the rest of the world; and subjects his social world to an administration which reorders existing institutions and implements programs in light of man's material determination by natural laws. In effect, both Marxism and behaviorism offer man the opportunity to perfect himself, to realize his positive potentialities in a society which has effectively eradicated the unwanted and unwholesome side of his nature.

III

Marxism and behaviorism are theories of human nature. But unlike some theories of human nature, for example, stoicism, Thomism, or psychoanalysis, both Marxism and behaviorism require a social-political implementation of their theories. In order for there to be a better world, a socialist economic order, or a behaviorist technocracy must be brought into existence. In both cases there is the assumption that the quality of human social experience will be significantly improved because social institutions will be based on the recognition and satisfaction of genuine human needs and these institutions will be more knowledgeably and efficiently administered. For Marx, the new society eliminates the institution of private property, an institution he believes is responsible for creating dehumanized social relations. Its existence requires that persons treat each other as objects, as commodities to be used and possessed:

Private property has made us so stupid and one sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it, when it exists for us as capital or when we directly possess, eat, drink, wear, inhabit it, etc., in short when we *use* it.¹⁷

Private property extends the concept and practice of "using" to the ultimate sphere of human relations so that men cease to exist as creatures with any genuine content or value in themselves. Marx believes that if a society can be created in which the goal of "possessing things" can be eliminated then people will treat each other in an intelligent, compassionate, and humane way instead of exploiting and degrading one another.

Skinner's program for improving the quality of social experience involves the design of a science of human behavior. Advances in this science mean that social affairs can be subject to a much greater degree of rational management and control. When the power to predict and control is substantial and well organized then undesirable and destructive elements can be eliminated. In his book *Science and Human Behavior* Skinner proposes that the experimental method of the physical sciences be extended to the domain of human society. In fact he sees society itself as a type of experiment. "A given culture is, in short, an experiment in behavior."¹⁸ Society is analogously, a laboratory in which the institutions are designed to elicit the kind of social behavior that advances the standing of the institution. Skinner defines government as, "the power to punish" and law as, "statement of contingency reinforcement."¹⁹ Government and its constituent agencies thus secure compliance to their rules by administering a very complex system of punishments and rewards. Thus the situation becomes one in which institutions are highly successful in realizing their ends, unlike our present situation, in which

our institutions are at best meager, provisional successes, and at worst dismal unmitigated failures.

The widespread utilization of a science of human behavior by a society, claims Skinner, greatly increases the likelihood that its various social endeavors will be much more successful. What exactly is his measure of success? The successful realization of institutional goals. But what about more general, intangible goals? Skinner's general standard of success is survival. He draws a cultural analogy to physical evolution. Social practices which survive are evidence of success. "A scientific analysis may lead us to resist the more immediate blandishments of freedom, justice, knowledge or happiness in considering the long run consequences of survival."²⁰ One can't help but wonder what interest a society would have in surviving without these "blandishments."

The aim of both Skinner and Marx is the institution of a society relatively free of exploitation and destructiveness, and absolutely committed to creative and cooperative endeavors. Both, however, share what I believe is a conceptual flaw which permits their genuinely useful insights to be contaminated by substantial dogmatism. The flaw, I think, lies in their mutual disparagement of the theoretical dimension of intellectual activity. With Marx this disparagement manifests itself in a repudiation of philosophy itself. His rejection of philosophy, particularly German philosophy, arose from his conviction that its preoccupation with ideas betrayed commitment to the problems of the material world.

Since the Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men (just as the Old Hegelians declare them the true bonds of human society), it is evident that the Young

Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness . . . they forget, however, that they themselves are opposing nothing but phrases to these phrases, and that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are combating solely the phrases of this world.²¹

Skinner's opposition to theory takes form in his delineation of the procedure of scientific explanation. His aim is to formulate scientific explanation so that it is free from terms which cannot be operationally defined. Theory, for Skinner, means a set of lawfully connected statements and not an abstracted conceptual construction. "He (Skinner) criticizes the construction, in psychological theories, of causal chains in which a first link consisting of an observable and controllable event is connected with a final ('third') one of the same kind by an intermediate link which usually is not open to observation and control."²² A scientifically constructed explanation of a given phenomena thus ought to utilize terms which can be translated into direct observational data. "A reflex is not, of course, a theory. It is a fact. It is an analytical unit which makes an investigation of behavior possible."²³ The methodological goal is reduction. The further an explanation is from expression in sensory units the more likely it is to be laden with terms representing entities, qualities or relations which can neither be measured nor confirmed and thus the explanation becomes an abstraction from real analyzable quantities into less real unanalyzable qualities.

One of the weaknesses of this view is the fact that it easily degenerates into an overly mechanistic construction which fails to account for the creative and innovative aspects of human experience. Theoretical constructions serve as tools, as instruments to generate new interpretations of factual data. For Skinner it is as though raw sense data is simply there for the asking and

the major problem is to break it into simple, manageable, and measurable analytic units. These analytic units become the clear unquestionable building blocks of scientific explanation. Theory then is superfluous and adds only what must ultimately be discarded.

This is the point where Skinner's work is most vulnerable to ideological degeneration. The reaction against theory and against speculation and imagination and the exaltation of practice over theory, grossly inhibits the influx of new ideas. That raw sense data supplies certainty is a philosophical assertion that involves a number of difficult and complex epistemological and meta-psychological problems such as the ontological status of perceptions and their determination in time and space. To downgrade the role of theory in scientific explanations is to deprive the enterprise of opportunities for growth and development. Theory is needed for new and imaginative systematization of data, and the offering of fertile hypothesis which suggest new interpretations. "Theoretical terms cannot be replaced without serious loss by formulations in terms of observables only."²⁴

The parallel between Marx's disparagement of philosophy and Skinner's rejection of theoretical constructs points to a similar ontological view that reality is ultimately material, and that thought itself is a material activity. Thus it is matter and not ideas which determines the content and direction of human endeavor. Since it is matter which determines ideas and not the reverse, the political implication is that society should structure its institutions so that the people are related to the material world in a way which satisfies basic needs and impulses. And since ideas are the outcome of this system, there is a tendency to measure them as consistent or inconsistent with the social design. Those ideas which contradict the ends of the system are con-

sidered to be not only false, but pernicious and destructive. Truth then, becomes a standard of ideological purity and the intellectual virtues of honesty, clarity and creativity are overriden by the social requirements of loyalty and conformity. Thus, as I stated at the beginning of this paper, Marxism and behaviorism are dominated by a moralism that arises out of their re-

spective conceptions of the relation of the mind and thought to the other aspects of human experience, a moralism which takes its justification by the contention that human society is perfectible and that the readjustment of social institutions will bring about this perfection by eliminating destructiveness and exploitation,

FOOTNOTES

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3. Frederick Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works*, prepared by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), Vol. 3, p. 132.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
6. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels "The German Ideology," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, translated by W. Lough (New York: International Publishers, 1976), Vol. 5, p. 31.
7. B. F. Skinner, *Behavior of Organisms* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1938), p. 5.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
9. B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), p. 14.
10. Marx, "The German Ideology," p. 31.
11. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom*, p. 11.
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14. Antoine-Nicolas De Condorcet, *The Progress of The Human Mind*, translated by June Barraclough (New York: Noonday Press, 1955), p. 173.
15. Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 14-15, 85-89.
16. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom*, p. 205.
17. Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," p. 35.
18. B. F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior* (New York: The Free Press, 1953), p. 430.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 335, 339.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 436.
21. Marx, "German Ideology," p. 30.
22. Carl G. Hempel, "The Theoretician's Dilemma," in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, edited by Herbert Feigl, Michael Scriven and Grover Maxwell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), Vol. 2, p. 49.
23. Skinner, *Behavior of Organisms*, p. 9.
24. Hempel, "Theoreticians," p. 87.

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