

UNDERSTANDING AND OVERSTANDING MARXIST CRITICISM

ADAM SZABADOS

“Marxism is a highly complex subject, and that sector of it known as Marxist literary criticism is no less so.”¹ The difficulty in giving a short summary of Marxist criticism is that the school has been deeply affected by the dilemmas and failures of the Marxist political experiment, and its evaluation naturally cannot be separated from the point of view of the observer, whether he is a professor of a Western-European university, a Latin-American activist fighting for social justice, or a post-Communist Central-European student writing a research paper. I find it appropriate, therefore, to put my cards on the table and admit my personal bias toward the subject.

Being a Hungarian I lived my first seventeen years in a Communist country. Marxism was the air that people breathed in as early as kindergarten where we acted out the Bolsheviks` attack of the Winter Palace with blue ribbons and a plastic ship representing the river Neva and the ship Aurora. In my elementary and high school education I learnt Marxism as a philosophy and also as a methodology that interprets everything through the lenses of labor division and class conflict. I saw the cruelty and the dishonesty of realized socialism and experienced the fall of so-called Communism as a young adult rebelling against the lies and the oppression of the system. In this brief paper I therefore do not pretend neutrality. On the other hand, I am compelled to follow Vanhoozer`s hermeneutical advice² of both understanding and “overstanding” texts, of being at the same time a servant and a lord of the material in front of me. In other words, as a Christian it is my duty to be a loving host of Marxist criticism without submitting to its claims, thus demonstrating Christian hospitality to a political agenda that throughout its history considered my Christian faith to be its enemy and my sacred book, the Bible, as an object of heavy criticism. I hope that this approach will nevertheless still make a better contact with reality (to use Polanyi`s expression) than a pretended objectivity which remains detached from its subject in the end. Terry Eagleton`s book on Marxist criticism (from which the introductory quotation is from) is a good example of an interested presentation of the subject, my interested approach only differs from his in that I have different experiences and convictions when I come to this subject matter. A Marxist and a Christian have at least three things in common: they both want to be engaged

¹ Terry Eagleton: *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 1976), vi.

² Kevin J. Vanhoozer: *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 401-7.

with the object of their study, they both want to transform reality, and both of them are open about their agenda.

Since Marxist criticism is an inseparable function of Marxist ideology, I have to briefly summarize Marx's understanding of reality and his political agenda. In light of that ideology Marxist literary criticism becomes quite predictable, although, as we shall see, it is not entirely monolithic as a hermeneutic school. In the first part of the paper I explain the foundations of Marxist ideology, in the second part I shall apply these foundational principles in the area of criticism. In the appendix I list potential questions that a Marxist critic would ask from a biblical text like Judges 6-8.

MARXIST IDEOLOGY

Karl Marx – together with Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Engels, Bruno Bauer and several others – belonged to the influential German group of the so-called Young Hegelians. This group followed the dialectical philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel. Hegel's "intention was to show that philosophy and religion were reconcilable and thus to refute rationalist critics of the Kantian type while at the same time attacking the supernatural theologians who believed in a philosophically unprovable revelation".³ The Young Hegelians further radicalized their Master's idea of religion as "a prelude to philosophy" by denying the possibility of any supernatural revelation,⁴ thus going even further than those Kantian rationalists who only excluded historical revelation from the sphere of pure and reliable reason. David McLellan points out that the Young Hegelians were influenced by the French revolution but up until their split in 1842-3 "their approach to religion and politics was always intellectual".⁵ The growing demand for political action in a revolutionary social climate eventually led to the dissolution of the group. As a result a new philosophical school was born, prominent leaders of which were Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Despite some minor differences, the unity of thought between Marx and Engels was remarkable.⁶

Dissatisfied by the idealism and intellectualism of Hegelian philosophy, Marx introduced new ideas that basically turned Hegel's dialectical idealism

³ David McLellan: *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx* (London, UK: MacMillan Press, 1969), 2.

⁴ *Ibid*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid*, 7.

⁶ "It is true that never in the history of human thought has there been so close and so long a collaboration, so striking a like-mindedness between two understanding men as there was between Marx and Engels, but there is none the less a difference between the two – or at least a difference in emphasis. (...) Marx sees human history in economic terms, Engels sees it in evolutionary and scientific terms..." (R. C. Zaehner: *Dialectical Christianity and Christian Materialism*. London: Oxford University Press, 1971, 30-1.)

upside down. Influenced by the materialism of Democritus⁷ and Feuerbach's psychology of religion, Marx gradually turned his back to Hegel's idealism and applied his dialectics in a materialistic philosophical system. The acceptance of Feuerbach's thoughts as a foundation for a new dialectical materialism liberated Marx from the "unendurable debt of honour"⁸ that connected him to the Hegelian school, and set his feet on a more practical and political path that was less characterized by sheer intellectualism and more by efficacious action. According to Alasdair MacIntyre "Marx remained a Hegelian to the last; only he saw that philosophy was not enough".⁹ He wanted to move on from philosophy to practice. Marx's dialectical materialism retained Hegel's dialectical logic, but put it into a materialistic framework. Hegel formerly argued that the traditional logic of "'A is A' therefore 'A is not non-A'" should be understood as forming a synthesis in which "A becomes" is the abolition of the antithesis. Marx wanted to detach the dialectical way of thinking from a pure theoretical context and apply it to the socio-political context in which it can be validated. The antithesis for Marx was more and more a social antithesis between the ruling class and the exploited classes, between the working class and the owners of the means of production. Marx turned away from Hegel's religious-idealistic concept of development and laid the foundations of a materialistic dialectics that in a Democritean fashion takes only matter into account as foundational reality and, just like Feuerbach, sees God as a projection of the human consciousness. In *The German Ideology* Marx (together with Engels) declared his philosophical program in terms of a new materialistic starting point:

In direct contrast to German philosophy, which descends from heaven to earth, here one ascends from earth to heaven. In other words, to arrive at man in the flesh, one does not set out from what men say, imagine, or conceive, nor from man as he is described, thought about, imagined, or conceived. Rather one sets out from real, active men and their actual life-process and demonstrates the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of that process. The phantoms formed in the human brain, too, are necessary sublimations of man's material life-process which is empirically verifiable and connected with material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness no longer seems to be independent. They have no history or development. Rather, men who develop their material production and their material relationships alter their thinking and the products of their thinking along with their real existence. Consciousness does not determine life, but life determines consciousness. In the first view the starting point is consciousness taken as a living

⁷ "The atom is nothing but the objective expression of empirical science and of nature in general." (Johann van der Hoeven: *Karl Marx: The Roots of His Thought*. Assen/Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1976, 13.)

⁸ Sidney Hook: *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* (The University of Michigan Press, 1962), 220.

⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre: *Marxism and Christianity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 30.

individual; in the second it is the real living individuals themselves as they exist in real life, and consciousness is considered only as *their* consciousness.¹⁰

We cannot overestimate the significance of this shift from idealism to materialism. This becomes the basis of everything that Marx said about reality, history, religion and art. The clearest deviation from idealism is the reversal of the relationship between life and consciousness. It is not consciousness that determines life, but *life determines consciousness*. The implications of this reversal are immense. In Marx's words Hegel was "turned right side up again", but we can also argue that the new worldview that promised political liberation from impractical ideologies¹¹ actually resulted in a new "tyranny of concepts".¹² According to Gordon Leff Marx began with the same epistemological assumptions as Hegel, believing in an independent, self-subsisting reality that could be directly comprehended".¹³ But whereas Hegel only recognized its conceptual nature, Marx was interested in the real world that is outside consciousness, the reality that shapes consciousness, the social-historical-economic "being there" which he believed was reflected in the consciousness of real people. This new approach to life and consciousness made Marxism from the very beginning a political and transformational movement. If the basic reality is matter, and consciousness only reflects the material reality, than the philosophical interest of theoreticians must turn to real history, social needs, and even to political action to change the reality of people. In philosophical terms, Marxism is not about "is" but about "ought", not about thinking but about acting, not about simply describing reality but about prescribing a new, better world. Marxism will not use the promise of a better world as an ideological "opium" for the masses to make them accept the status quo, it is instead about moving history toward that better world through political action. The Marxist hope is not an otherworldly hope but a hope which can be realized in history – and without the hypothesis of "God". It is a hope that is part

¹⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: *The German Ideology* in Lloyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (eds.): *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967), 414-5.

¹¹ In the preface of *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers Inc., 1939, 1.) Marx and Engels thus begin the exposition of their distinct program: "Hitherto men have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be. They have arranged their relationships according to their ideas about God, of normal life, etc. The phantoms of their brains have gained the mastery over them. They, the creators, have bowed down before their creatures. Let us liberate them from the chimeras, the ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away. Let us revolt against the rule of thoughts."

¹² Gordon Leff: *The Tyranny of Concepts: a Critique of Marxism* (London: The Merlin Press, 1961; University of Alabama Press, 1969)

¹³ *Ibid*, 5.

of *real* history and a result of “a real movement which abolishes the present state of things”.¹⁴

I would argue that the conceptual tyranny of the Marxist vision of *dialectical materialism* that Leff is talking about comes from exactly the two factors that Marxism is 1) *dialectical*, and that it is 2) *materialistic*. (And that in Marxism the two concepts depend on each other.) Marx’s dialectical vision of history is a materialistic development of Hegelian dialectics. The abstract concept of “‘A is A’ is the same as ‘A is not non A’ is the same as ‘A is becoming’” has been translated by Marx into real-life terms as, to put it crudely, “history moves forward through the repetition of the antithesis of class conflicts resulting in new syntheses”. For Marx history can be explained as a dialectical development that is constrained by materialistic causes, chief of which is the form of ownership. Changes in ownership and in the mode of production describe the phases of history, and class struggle moves history towards its goal: Communism. The first stage of history in the Marxist vision is tribal ownership. “It corresponds to the undeveloped stage of production where people live by hunting and fishing, by breeding animals or, in the highest stage, by agriculture.”¹⁵ The second form is the ancient communal and state ownership, a stage in which some are citizens while others slaves. According to Marx and Engels the disruption of the ancient communal life in which there had not been private property created a new socio-economic situation where the means of production were not owned anymore by those who actually produced. This set class struggles (the engine of history)¹⁶ into motion. The third form of ownership is the stage of feudal property, the stage that is characterized by the class conflict between the nobility and the serfs. The fourth stage is the Capitalist society in which the development of the mode of production and the unjust division of ownership of the means of production result in the increased alienation of the oppressed class, the proletariat. In Marx’s vision of world-history Capitalism is the step that precedes the last stage of history: Communism. Communism is a classless society in which the means of production are owned again by the entire community and everyone participates in production by a just division of labor. In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels declared that this last phase can only be entered into by the revolution of the proletariat. “The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a

¹⁴ Marx-Engels: *The German Ideology*, 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 9.

¹⁶ “Marxism... views class conflict as the principal feature of historical change” (George Lichtheim: *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study*. New York, Washington: Frederick A. Paeger Publishers, 1961, 380.)

world to win.”¹⁷ According to Marx and Engels Communism has to be implemented by the transitional necessity of a “dictatorship of the proletariat”, a form of oppression that is supposed to bring liberation to the working class and “trembling” for the ruling classes. The concept of dialectical progress makes violence and tyranny justified and inevitable means for breakthroughs in world-history.¹⁸

If dialectical development became a concept of tyranny, the concept of *materialism* contributed to another form of tyranny: the reduction of human life and consciousness to a socio-economic construct. Marx’s materialism was embodied in the second pillar of his vision of history (the first one being dialectical development): the dichotomy of *base* and *superstructure*. “The base, in Marx’s model is the mode of production, and the superstructure is the political state with its laws and the culture with its science, philosophy, art, religion, morality, and customs.”¹⁹ Because the superstructure rests on the base, and not the other way round, the model implies that the base *determines* the superstructure. (Life determines consciousness.) Melvin Rader makes a distinction between fundamentalist and dialectical versions of the base-superstructure model, and wants to defend the dialectical version by introducing a third pillar into the Marxist building: “organic totality”. “Organic totality” would be the unifying factor that makes the base-superstructure relationship look less reductionist and more in harmony with other elements of reality. The fundamentalist version of the model emphasizes that according to Marx there is a one-way hierarchy between the two levels: the superstructure is a reflection of the base. Dialectical interpreters try to redeem the model by introducing a dialectical relationship into the interaction of the base and the superstructure, still retaining the assumption that in the end the base prevails. Rader contends that this latter version is the original one, and even that has to be seen in the “organic totality” that Marx wanted to achieve.²⁰ These categories will be very important for Marxist literary critics whose job would be extremely difficult in a fundamentalist-reductionist version of the base-superstructure model. It is probably not an accident that Rader lists two literary critics, Lukács György and Heller Ágnes, as examples for the few Marxists who dealt with the idea of organic

¹⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: *The Communist Manifesto in Essential Works of Marxism* (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), 43-4.

¹⁸ According to a group of internationally renowned historians, the Communist experiment resulted in the death of one-hundred million people in the twentieth century (Nicolas Werth, Karel Bartošek, Jean-Louis Panné, Jean-Louis Margolin, Andrzej Paczkowski, Stéphane Courtois: *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Harvard University Press, 1999), a price that by all standards seems too high for the abolition of class struggle. Especially in light of the obvious failure of the experiment in most parts of the world.

¹⁹ Melvin Rader: *Marx’s Interpretation of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), xix.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 3-10.

totality.²¹ Rader's thesis is weakened however by the fact that the majority of interpreters understood Marx as advocating for the fundamentalist version in which the superstructure is determined by the base.²² On the whole it does not seem to matter much which model Marx advocated for, since both the fundamentalist and the dialectical (even the organic totality) versions accepted the materialistic foundation of the model, the fact that consciousness is determined by life, the base ultimately prevails even if there is a mutual interaction between the two levels. And this necessarily ended up as the tyranny of the materialistic concept. Art (just like religion) was reduced to a conscious or unconscious reflection of (or a reflection on) the mode of production. If basic reality is matter, and life determines consciousness, thought and aesthetics is nothing else but a true or distorted reflection of the world on the one hand, or a rhetorical device as an ideological means in the hand of the ruling class on the other hand. Art has no real autonomy from the economic base.

MARXIST CRITICISM

Marxist literary criticism is not a form of criticism in the traditional sense (like Structuralism, Reader-Response criticism, Deconstructionism) but a form of political action. The Marxist approach cannot be interpreted within the classical triangle of author, text, and reader. Just as Marxism turned "from philosophy to practice" (Alasdair McIntyre), Marxist criticism turned from interpretation to appropriation, from aesthetic judgment to political agenda. Marxist criticism itself is very consciously political and utilitarian, it is best seen as one aspect of the Marxist experiment to bring about social transformation and to further the cause of revolutionary progress. As Terry Eagleton put it: "Marxist criticism is not just an alternative technique for interpreting *Paradise Lost* or *Middlemarch*. It is part of our liberation from oppression..."²³ "Marxist criticism analyzes literature in terms of the historical conditions which produce it; and it needs, similarly, to be aware of its own historical conditions."²⁴ In other words: Marxist critics come to the text to *do* something with it. They want to know how the text relates to the socio-economic reality that it was born of, and see how a piece of literature might serve (or hinder) the cause of the socialist revolution.

As a result Marxist criticism has selective and prescriptive tendencies, and a reductionist view of literature. A good example is Lukács György (Georg Lukács), Jewish-Hungarian literary critic who, beside his literary works, was also

²¹ Ibid, xxiii.

²² Rader himself lists these thinkers, including Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, Acton, Seliger, and partly Althusser, too. (Ibid, 3-6)

²³ Eagleton, 76.

²⁴ Ibid, vi.

heavily involved in Hungarian politics. “Georg Lukács is the only Marxist who lived and worked the bulk of his life (1885-1971) in places where the communist revolution had some performance.”²⁵ He took part in different Communist governments: in the short-lived “red terror” in 1919, the Stalinist puppet-government of the Rákosi-regime, and the Nagy-government during the 1956 revolution. Although Lukács gradually became more and more critical of realized Socialism, he remained loyal to the Soviet Union throughout his life and in order to escape execution or long imprisonment denied his agreement with the 1956 uprising. As a politician and a literary critic he himself was involved in the silencing of Hungarian intellectuals like Hamvas Béla, Bibó István and many others.²⁶ Lukács believed that literature should serve the cause of the Socialist revolution, or at least not be antagonistic to it. As opposed to certain “vulgar-Marxist” tendencies, he emphasized that it is not so much the content but the *form* of the literary work that determines its place in the ideological matrix. Form is ideologically pregnant. As Eagleton puts Lukács’s view, “In selecting a form, then, the writer finds his choice already ideologically circumscribed. He may combine and transmute forms available to him from a literary tradition, but these forms themselves, as well as his permutation of them, are ideologically significant.”²⁷ The ideological role of literary form is most thoroughly dealt with by Lukács in his influential works on the historical novel.²⁸ Lukács, following Hegel, considered the novel a “bourgeois epic”, but a form nevertheless that exposes the alienation of men in a “world abandoned by God”.²⁹ As a Marxist Lukács was optimistic and hence considered that art best which could capture the hope of a harmonious totality of life.³⁰ Rader considers this emphasis on totality a reminiscence of the original Marxist vision of organic totality.³¹ Eagleton, however, understands it as a Hegelian rather than directly Marxist emphasis for

²⁵ Roland Boer: *Marxist Criticism of the Bible* (London, New York: T&T Clark International, The Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 110.

²⁶ Strong censorship characterized the cultural life of practically all Marxist countries. E.g. in Hungary Aczél György implemented a system of three Ts: Tiltott (Banned), Tűrt (Tolerated), Támogatott (Supported). Literary works were evaluated as progressive or reactionary, revolutionary or counter-revolutionary. As a result, Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* or the works of Márai Sándor and Wass Albert were banned till 1989, references to God and Christianity were simply cut out from Communist editions of *Robinson Crusoe*, the name of God was written with small initials (Isten instead of Isten), etc.

²⁷ Eagleton, 26.

²⁸ G. Lukács: *Studies in European Realism* (London, 1972); *The Historical Novel* (London, 1962); *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1969). Listed in Eagleton, 86.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 27.

³⁰ A student of Lukács, Heller Ágnes, in her preface to the Hungarian edition of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* criticizes the work for the lack of practical direction out of the impasse of bourgeois societies. For her the ultimate either/or is the choice between Kierkegaard and Marx, between optimism and pessimism. Later Heller traded Marx back to Kierkegaard – and thus chose despair.

³¹ Rader, xxiii.

which Lukács was even criticized by Soviet comrades.³² The point, however, is that for Lukács there was good literature and bad literature, and the criteria to distinguish between the two were less aesthetic than socio-political. The optimal art form is that which through irony exposes the failures of the actual historical phase in which it is written and points forward to a vision of harmonious totality. This is what Lukács calls *realism*, the success of which depends less on the author's skills than on his position within history.³³ The three great periods of realism was ancient Greece, the Renaissance, and France in the early nineteenth century, the prime examples are Shakespeare and Balzac. Good realist works serve "the latent forces in any society which are from a Marxist viewpoint most historically significant and progressive".³⁴ According to Lukács realism has to be distinguished from two deviations: naturalism and formalism. "By naturalism Lukács means that distortion of realism, epitomized by Zola, which merely photographically reproduces the surface phenomena of society without penetrating to their significant essences. Meticulously observed detail replaces the portrayal of 'typical' features".³⁵ "Formalism reacts to the opposite direction, but betrays the same loss of historical meaning."³⁶ Joyce, Kafka, Beckett and Camus do not present objective reality anymore, in their works there is no reality beyond the self. Naturalism is abstract objectivity, formalism is abstract subjectivity. Marxists as realists are not interested in abstraction, they want to change the world!

Since the base-superstructure model is fundamental to Marxism, Marxist criticism has to face a major dilemma to which I alluded above. Does literature (and art in general) only reflect the economic base or does it try to criticize and change it? Marxist critics were wise enough not to deny the fact that artists often went against the establishment and were critical of the socio-economic relations that they lived in. But how does that fit into the materialistic framework of the Marxist vision in which the base (life) determines the superstructure (consciousness)? Without realizing the seriousness of the problem, Eagleton sees two extreme views among Marxist critics. According to the first one literature is nothing but the ideological reflection of the time in which it was born. Artists are the prisoners of a false consciousness. The other extreme is the view that art by definition challenges the ideology that maintains the status quo, and is therefore an ally to the socialist progress. "Reflectionism" (the first view) has been a "deep-seated tendency in Marxist criticism",³⁷ but most Marxist critics tried to find a middle ground. Trotsky wanted to come around the problem by saying that

³² Eagleton, 27, 53.

³³ Ibid, 29.

³⁴ Ibid, 28.

³⁵ Ibid, 30.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, 49.

artistic form always has a “high degree of autonomy”³⁸ from the base. Art can be a product and simple reflection of the economic relations of society, it can be an ideology that supports the base (the status quo of the mode of production), and it can also be a criticism of the economic structure. But even though Trotsky defended the relative autonomy of art, he also emphasized that art form is ultimately a social product.³⁹ The obvious autonomy of many literary works remains therefore unexplained within an economically deterministic Marxist framework. As Klaus Bockmuehl sharply remarked: “A simple, mechanistic understanding of materialism as a worldview will always encounter insoluble problems...”⁴⁰

A symptom of the above dilemma is the way Marxist criticism explained the role of individuals in literature. Since the individual is determined by social-economic forces, and his consciousness is ultimately a reflection of the reality that he lives in, the individual is not the focus of interest. How then should a Marxist critic deal with characters in literary works? The mainline answer was the doctrine of socialist realism. Socialist realism as a doctrine began with Marx and Engels and was perfected by Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, Prekhanov and Dobrolybov.⁴¹ “These men saw literature as social criticism and analysis, and the artist as a social enlightener; literature should disdain elaborate aesthetic techniques and become an instrument of social development. Art reflects social reality, and must portray its typical features.”⁴² The word “typical” is extremely important here. Individuals do not stand for themselves, and the critic should not see them as such, they stand for a social reality as examples of how the artist saw that reality. “The writer translates social facts into literary ones, and the critic’s task is to de-code them back into reality.”⁴³ But this “reality” is not the special existence of an individual but the social background of which he is a product. “For Prekhanov, as for Belinsky and Lukács, the writer reflects reality most significantly by creating ‘types’; he expresses ‘historical individuality’ in his characters, rather than depicting mere individual psychology.”⁴⁴ Marxist critics look at literary characters as typical examples of the actual phase of historical progress as the author saw it, and not as special existences with creativity and particular meaning, not even within the story of the actual literary piece. Since social transformation is a result of class-conflict not the creative power of individuals, and history is not shaped by great men and women but by the

³⁸ Ibid, 43.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Klaus Bockmuehl: *The Challenge of Marxism: A Christian Response* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1980), 89.

⁴¹ Eagleton, 43.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, 44.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

dialectics of economic relations, the task of literary criticism is to identify these dialectical relations instead of ascribing significance to people. Materialistic reductionism leads to the reduction of literary characters, too.

One interesting objection (if the space of this paper allowed me to elaborate it) would be to go through individual Marxist thinkers and literary critics and demonstrate how their particular creativity influenced history, even that of Marxist philosophy itself. It would be quite ironic to see how the suicide of Mayakovsky affected Vsevolod Meyerhold,⁴⁵ and as a consequence how Meyerhold's relationship to Bertold Brecht influenced the latter's taste that consequently made him strongly disagree with Lukács on the right forms of literature. The Italian Marxist genius Antonio Gramsci was acknowledged as a *highly original thinker* even within the Marxist tradition. It is hard to deny individual creativity. It would also be interesting to examine the phenomenon that including Karl Marx a large proportion of Marxist critics (Leon Trotsky, Lukács György, Heller Ágnes, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch) were Jewish people who left their fathers' religion. Could (unconscious) Jewish consciousness affect their way of being in the world? Is it possible that the main difference between the outstanding Hungarian-Jewish brothers Polányi Károly (Karl Polanyi) and Polányi Mihály (Michael Polanyi) was that whereas the latter (a Christian) acknowledged human creativity even in hard sciences, the former (a Marxist) eventually denied it?⁴⁶ Some Marxist critics like the Freudian-Marxist Louis Althusser and more recently the Lacanian post-Marxist Slavoj Žižek admittedly search for subconscious motives that shape history, an interesting sign that even Marxists cannot deny forever people's creative consciousness! It should not be a surprise to us that in the age of the "autonomous self"⁴⁷ Lukács with his "typical individuals" is much less appealing to the public than the prolific Žižek whose brand of Marxism attempts to redeem the "other" not only from the reductionist tendencies of Marx but even from the deferring negligence of Jacques Derrida.⁴⁸ But this is already another story, beyond the scope of our discussion.

Marxist criticism does not seem to be able to overcome the major dilemma of Marxist philosophy: how does one get from the "is" to the "ought"? This is a problem that plagues the Marxist system at more than one level. If what is determined by social-economic forces, how can an individual be exempt from

⁴⁵ Nine years after Mayakovsky committed suicide Meyerhold publicly denounced socialist realism as something less than art. He and his wife were killed soon after. (Ibid, 40)

⁴⁶ Mark T. Mitchell: *Michael Polanyi* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2006)

⁴⁷ My assumption here is that the West is still in the Emersonian attempt to transcend the constraints of the individual.

⁴⁸ Slavoj Žižek is a Slovenian philosopher who identifies himself as a Lacanian-Marxist. He teaches at European and American universities, many of his lectures can be freely downloaded from youtube.

these forces and act against his determined course? Or how can he *not* be forced to action if he is already a product of history? Is Marx's consciousness determined by life? Why should it be a reliable guide if this is so? Moreover, how can one know that there is an optimistic script for history if one denies transcendence, and immanent causes do not have minds, emotions and wills? Unless Marxists admit that Marxism is itself a religion,⁴⁹ there does not seem to be a good reason for the optimistic hope it nourishes. The ex-Marxist Heller Ágnes is right: once the great narratives are gone, the optimism of "ought" and "shall be" is gone, too, and what remains is Kierkegaardian despair. I agree. But if we opt for Kierkegaard, Kierkegaard's God, the God of Moriah and Mamre might also be there beyond the despair!

APPENDIX: JUDGES 6-8 THROUGH MARXIST LENSES

Despite the clear contours of Marxist ideology, neither Marxism nor Marxist criticism has been one, undivided school of thought. As Lenin and Trotsky or Marcuse and Gramsci did not have the exact same political vision, Lukács and Brecht, Adorno and Althusser, Gorky and Mayakovsky had slightly diverging approaches to texts. In this brief evaluation it would be unrealistic however to try to present all these related methodologies and apply them to one or more biblical passages. Roland Boer in his *Marxist Criticism of the Bible* uses nine sample texts and nine Marxist critics to demonstrate Marxist criticism in practice, and he needs 265 pages to do that! At the surface level one can see a rich variety among these critical shades, but Boer himself declares that in the end these examples "form some of the pieces of what may be termed the ideological structures of the dominant modes of production under which the Hebrew Bible was written".⁵⁰ There is a unity behind the approaches of Horkheimer and Gramsci, Benjamin and Jameson, Lukács and Bloch. Boer sees this unity in the primary interest in the base of the given biblical society (as opposed to an interest in the superstructure) and a secondary interest in the ideologies that support the ruling class.⁵¹ We can therefore make some generalizations at this point and leave the particular refinements of individual Marxist critical views to another time.

When a Marxist comes to a text like Judges 6-8, the questions he or she would ask are quite predictable. Judges 6-8 describes the story of the Jewish

⁴⁹ As Gary North calls it: "a religion of revolution". (Gary North: *Marx's Religion of Revolution*. Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989)

⁵⁰ Boer, 12.

⁵¹ "In Marxist terms the question of history operates primarily at the level of what has been called mode of production, a term I use at various points of the book itself. The various studies of texts therefore offer a collection of the tensions and conflicts within the ideologies that operated as part of those modes of production." (Ibid.)

Gideon and his liberation movement from under Midianite rule. At the beginning of the biblical account Gideon is threshing wheat in a winepress in order to save it from the Midianites who at that time were the oppressors of Israel. In the story God through his angel commands Gideon to become the leader of the tribes of Israel and liberate them from the Midianite rule. Gideon first has to destroy his father's altar that had been erected for the god Baal, and then through a process of selection he has to choose three-hundred men who would go against the Midianites and drive them out of the land. Although there is a conflict with the tribe of Ephraim, Gideon succeeds and under his leadership Israel experiences again peace and prosperity in the land. The story-teller gives a spiritual explanation for both the oppression and the deliverance: the Midianite oppression was a result of Israel's sins and their forsaking Yahweh, and their deliverance was God's gracious intervention on their behalf.

What would a Marxist critic do with the text? He would first of all try to discover the economic relations in Israelite society at the time of the story and also at the time of the story-teller. What is the historical context that explains the particular actions? What was the mode of production in the Israelite society and who owned the means of production? What are the class struggles that are obvious in the text and what are the more subtle ones? Gideon's strange work in the winepress looks an obvious sign that the Israelites were oppressed and alienated from their normal life-context. Marxist critics would also try to identify the ideologies that support the economic base and the oppression of the ruling class. The religious motives would be seen either as distorted reflections of the world or as ideologies giving support for the ruling class. Miracle-reports in the story are not accepted at face value, they are explained in a framework of immanent causes, in which each immanent cause is somehow related to the base. Was Baal-worship the ideology that the Midianites used to justify their superiority? Did the fact that Gideon had to destroy Baal's altar have to do with uncovering maybe and rejecting the ideology of the ruling class? Doing away with the ideological support of the ancient regime is crucial in the Marxist vision of liberation. What about Yahweh? Is there maybe another ideology too in the text, that of the story-teller? Can Yahweh-worship and the emphasis on Israel's abandoning Yahweh as the cause of oppression be another ideology supporting the new regime in which Gideon and his sons are the ruling class? For Marxists the writer's historical context is just as important as the historical context of the story itself. What was the author's political agenda? Is he simply reflecting on his own socio-economic context or is he also forming a criticism against it? Is the story an ideology or a social criticism?

A Marxist would try to understand Gideon as a type of the socio-economic reality that the writer encoded into his character. What does Gideon stand for? Since Marxist criticism is political action itself, the critic would be very cautious in his judgment whether Gideon is a type that is useful for contemporary liberation

or whether he is a type that is harmful for the cause of the socialist revolution. Marxist critics would ask: is Gideon typical of a progressive or a reactionary attitude? And they would also discuss how the Christian church used the story of Gideon as an ideology for her "reactionary" stance, and how Marxists can maybe use the same story to quicken the rise of the proletarians of the world to throw off their chains. If possible, Gideon should be made an ancient type of the proletarian-come-to-right-consciousness. If it is stretching the story too far, his character can be placed in other progressive categories, too. Or, as a last resort, the entire story can be forever silenced.

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