

Marxism, Philosophy, and the East/West Question

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The 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and its aftermath, the so-called "War on Terror," and the Iraq war, have given rise to instances of celebrated "western" figures using bigoted images of the "east." In the context of a reaction to the terrorist atrocities perpetrated by supposed followers of an "eastern" religion this might be understandable, if not condoned, but this racism is then often carried over to label Marxism. To mention one instance, the novelist Martin Amis did precisely this in an article in "The Observer" newspaper (UK, Sunday, 10 September 2006), written for the anniversary of 9/11. Here, in the absence of any reason given for the religious fundamentalism of the "east" being any different from the same sort in the "west," and then any explanation of the origins of either, the "east" functions as the implied source of all "crazy fundamentalism," and Marxism is tarred with the same brush. In a more subtle way the official 9/11 report on the New York attacks did a similar thing, all the problems it soberly deals with are implied to be the result, in the end, of a sort of sulky mood of underachievement and jealousy by eastern working class types. Lately in popular culture this has even become a feature film where 300 "Spartan" neo-fascists in leather underpants outwit and destroy a vast horde of oriental weirdness (including the disabled and freaks) invading Greece trying to interrupt the birthing in the "cradle of western civilization."

At the same time there are, peculiarly, arguments that hold Marx and Marxism to task for being too "western." Let's begin with an example of this, as

we can learn from both sides.

Edward Said's criticism in his famous work "Orientalism" (Said 1995, p. 153-158) was that Marx represents Asia as a collective entity rather than a plurality of individuals with different and subtle identities. Generally though, Said does not acknowledge that Marx applies the same thesis to England (as he does to India), a thesis that has at its basis the category of social classes. So, such a criticism could also be directed at Marx's treatment of the working class, peasantry, and bourgeoisie of England, they are also "lumped together" in terms of class. So, while Said might justly charge Marx with a grand view of collective class struggle in history, it is one that Marx would hardly deny. Instead of being a problem in Marx, is an indication of a difficulty in Said's position: i.e. the relative lack of a defined class basis, or indeed any basis other than skeptical empirical objectivity. I suggest this mars Said's analysis and allows it to fall into Nietzsche's (1954, pp. 46-7) epistemological grasp, as in the passage he quotes from Nietzsche about language (1995, see p. 203):

"...a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphism - in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are."

It is the principle of non-contradiction that asserts itself in Nietzsche; he seeks to embrace every difference in the one single unity of doubt and illusion. Hence "the boot is on

the other foot": it is this principle that I will argue is a "western" thing, in the pejorative sense of the term, and the exact opposite of what I will demonstrate lies behind Marx's material dialectics. And, strangely, the reason why Marx and Marxism are sometimes also labelled pejoratively "eastern" and "totalizing" by this 'west': the totalizing of Marxism is a different kind of totalizing.

Where better than to start with Lenin? In Lenin's "Philosophical Notebooks" (Lenin 1981), some of the principles of materialist dialectics plainly derive from early oriental philosophy, specifically its concept of being. This usually hinges on the work of the Pre-Socratic philosopher Zeno of Elea (e.g. see Lenin 1981, pp. 252-259), and Zeno's formulation of paradox and/or contradiction. The Marxist authorization of such metaphysics is mainly derived from Engels' conception of matter in motion, set out in his book "Anti-Duhring" (Engels 1976, p.152).

A quick note on terminology: we may, I submit, use the term "paradox" as another word for "contradiction," because they are referencing the exact same phenomenon in terms of nature and especially so in Marxist theory. And I use the term "metaphysics," shocking to some Marxists I suspect, deliberately. The term can be understood as a form of "higher physics" and not only in the familiar way Marxists have used it to denote mysticism. There is good reason for having a "metaphysics" of this type linked with Marxist materialism and, as we proceed, I shall try to show why. In my view it is an important and undervalued component of Marxist theory.

In "Anti-Duhring," Engels concluded that motion was the result of a contradiction between being and non-being. Although in this place there is no direct attribution to Zeno as there is in Lenin, the only other place where the paradox of motion is expressed in such clear terms is in Zeno. Later, his other book

on a similar subject, "Dialectics of Nature" (Engels 1941) takes these ideas further, which make it (along with some texts by Dietzgen of 1906 and 1917), one of the very few serious explorations into the wider questions of cosmic existence from a socialist position.

Marx, as everyone knows, was also a dialectician; his work was embedded in the European tradition that included, above all, Hegel "the great dialectician." Marx's oft-recounted "inversion of the Hegelian Idealist dialectic" is also well known. Hegel had referred to the Eleatics and the "oriental systems of thought" in his "Science of Logic" on the fundamental questions of being, non-being and the process of becoming, and in this connection he mentions Parmenides, Heraclitus, Buddhism and eastern proverbs. The importance of the latter legacy for Marx and Marxism is indicated by the fact that Lenin declared the necessity to read Hegel's "Logic" (his text on dialectics) first in order to be fully capable of grasping Marx's "Capital."

But, after Lenin, the way in which the dialectic fits with the theory of knowledge of materialism in Marxist theory has been a controversial subject, and there are many antagonistic camps even within Marxism, let alone to it from outside the fold. But still, little has been said concerning this apparently "eastern" aspect and its background.

Who, then, is Zeno, and why does Lenin refer to him? What is his importance to Marxism? Zeno is important because he goes straight to the heart of the east/west ideological axis.

First, we shall examine Zeno's ideas, and then briefly investigate why he might have produced them.

Zeno is supposed to have written over forty paradoxes (or contradictions), most of which are expressed in a haiku-like, elegant form. Many of the surviving paradoxes are not only such in the "internal sense," i.e. complete as paradoxes in themselves, but also act as doubly

paradoxical when taken in relation to each other. Despite the evident antagonism to them (Aristotle for instance), the famous paradoxes have become a perennial fixture of philosophy. Yet, at the same time, almost every philosopher has found it necessary to tackle the supposed "problem" they represent, and try to "solve" or dispense with them. Behaving towards the paradoxes as if they were wrong from the outset is clearly different to regarding them as worthy of investigation, or as something to theoretically build upon. This antagonism is an indication of the sheer radicalism of Zeno's arguments.

The paradoxes are generally divided into two sets: arguments refuting plurality, and those against motion. I will, below, set out all the paradoxes that I am aware of.

Against plurality the surviving are the following: 1) a) If there are many things, they must be both great and small, so small as to have no size, so large as to be infinite. b) Anything with size can be divided into two things each that have size, so the process has no end. c) If there is plurality, the total of things must be both finite and infinite in number. Finite because plurality implies a definite and therefore a finite number, infinite because two or more things require limits or generally distinguishing marks, and here a progress to infinity begins. d) If there are many things, they must be both like and unlike. The supporting argument is apparently not recorded for the latter, but it might have said something like: all things that are like have attributes that are the same, while all things that are unlike are different to each other; like things are therefore unlike unlike things so all is unlike and so, the same. 2) The millet seed paradox: if one millet seed makes no sound in falling but 1000 millet seeds do make a sound, this means that 1000 nothings become something.

The four famous arguments of Zeno

on motion are: Achilles and the tortoise, the stadium, the flying arrow and the moving rows. They form an equally effective set of pairs against both the conflicting assumptions that space and time are, and are not, infinitely divisible.

a) If Achilles gives a tortoise a head start, he will never be able to reach the tortoise, so the fast one can never overtake. For, when Achilles reaches where the tortoise started, the tortoise will have moved on, and when Achilles reaches this spot, the tortoise will have got a little further, and so on indefinitely.

b) In the stadium paradox, also known as the dichotomy paradox, it is impossible to complete the course. Before you reach the far end, you must reach the halfway point. Before you reach that, you must reach the halfway point to it, and so on indefinitely. If space is infinitely divisible any finite distance must consist in an infinite number of points, and it is impossible to reach the end of an infinite series of operations in a finite time.

c) The arrow in flight is at rest. In any indivisible instant of its flight, an arrow is at rest because, as with objects at rest, it occupies a space equal to its own dimensions. If at that instant the flying arrow is moving, how can it move in an instant? If it can never move, a flying arrow is at rest.

d) Solid bodies of the same dimensions moving at the same speed pass each other in opposite directions and a similar body that is at rest. These bodies are of the minimum size and those that move pass that which is at rest in the minimum unit of time. Then, those in motion must pass each other in less than that minimum period.

There are also other probable paradoxes of Zeno: about place, for instance: if everything that exists is in a place, and place is, then a place is in a place, and so on ad infinitum, Zeno's famous epicheirema: "everything is in place; this means that it is in something; but if

place is something, then place itself is in something, etc.," an argument against a kind of dimensional entity, a vessel distinct from the body that has been shifted away. There also seems to be a fifth paradox of motion that is rarely mentioned, which concerns a sphere moving in a circle which is said to be simultaneously moving and at rest (see Aquinas 1963, p. 410).

Zeno's paradoxes may also be seen as implicitly calling up, in his use of the ideas of infinity and nothingness, the idea of zero. Like Zeno's theorems, the, originally Hindu, sign (goose egg) has historically suffered from various forms of religious-state censorship, essentially because its paradox-embracing nature was, and often still is, seen to be usurping the place of God as the first incommensurable. Jammer also points out the 'strange coincidence' (for him, perhaps) that the very founders of the great materialistic schools in antiquity, Epicurus and Lucretius, were also "the first to say distinctly that a thing might be real without being a body," which they asserted against the Pythagoreans and Democritus.

The difference between the Democritean and Epicurean philosophy was of course the subject of Marx's doctoral thesis, in which he finds the concept of contradiction crucial to the advances in science that Epicurus made:

"...Epicurus objectifies the contradiction in the concept of the atom between essence and existence. He thus gave us the science of atomistics. In Democritus, on the other hand, there is no realisation of the principle itself. He only maintains the material side and offers hypotheses for the benefit of empirical observation." (Marx "The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature," Marx-Engels Collected Works Volume 1, 1902)

The doctrine of atomism is thought to have come from Leucippus to both Democritus and Epicurus via Zeno, be-

cause Leucippus was a student of Zeno. I see no reason to reject this, but we must accept all such evidence is fragile, but in any case there is a definite connection in the concepts, and this is what is most important, and I think Epicurus is continuing Zeno's position.

It must be added that some say Zeno put forward the paradoxes in defence of Parmenides' poetically expressed theory of Oneness – "all things are One" – but this seems unlikely, not all of Zeno's arguments simply defend monism against pluralism, but act against both sides. If it can be relied upon, a well known reported account by Plato of a meeting between Zeno and Socrates, with Parmenides present for some of the time, shows him being both subtle and diplomatic in respect of the difference between his position and his master's. A few commentators have been baffled by this apparent ambivalence and considered Zeno merely nihilistic, but this is valid only if you regard the end result of Zeno's paradoxes to be theoretically empty. To look upon them this way is to severely miss the point. Note that for Zeno it is no argument that motion does indeed take place: we walk to the door, we reach the door, pass through the doorway, that's obvious. He shows us the logical impossibility of motion: the point of philosophy and science is to understand this theoretically, and not pragmatically.

Zeno was of course a product of the social circumstances of his time and location. There are some clues (too briefly adumbrated here) to why he wrote as he did.

Zeno was born in Elea, Lucania; a Greek colony, around 490 BC, and we know he became a disciple, defender, and critic of Parmenides of Elea (c. 510 BC), the famous Ionian philosopher: Parmenides wrote the philosophical poem that is the largest preserved and most important of any pre-Socratic text and is widely held to have had an unri-

valled influence on the course of "western" philosophy. The Eleatics, as these philosophers are called, were known for their attacks on the religious anthropomorphic system of ancient Greece that is enshrined in Homer and Hesiod.

The pre-Socratic thinkers were centered in Ionia (now modern Turkey). Native and migrant Ionians laid the foundations of Greek philosophy, and down to about 500 BC Ionic rational thought dominated the intellectual life of Greece; the Ionic dialect of Greek in fact became the language of literature and learning.

But, despite the Ionian reputation for knowledge, by the time of Herodotus (c. 450 BC), Greek thinkers had formed an ethnology in which Ionians were identified with the aboriginal element in Greece and the Dorians with the immigrant "proper" northern Hellenes. There was therefore friction between Dorians and Ionians, and an element of racism in Greek city state politics. The Ionians had been subjected by Persia and come to be thought of as tainted and "soft" compared to the militaristic cadres of the Peloponnesian Dorians. So "Ionians" as a term became the "oriental" name for all Greeks.

It is during this Ionic period that the first systems of authorized coinage spread westwards, and, peculiarly, Ionia is where the earliest 'western tyrannies' developed out of the most primitive forms of democratizing money systems. The ostensible opposite of democracy, dictatorship, is denoted by the Greek word "turannos." Borrowed from monarchical Lydia, it did not at first denote barbarous behaviour (as it does today). Tyrannies could in fact be benign and supported by an oppressed populace for whom the creditors and competition from slave labor had become intolerable.

Remember, ancient Greek society was based on slave power, and uprisings had already begun to be officially blamed on the "oriental influence," defined as the affect of a different race with a dif-

ferent, essential, cultural attitude. But, it is revealing that in the historical material the "eastern" influence (to be found in the racism) is rarely said to extend to culture, to art and especially to "rational" philosophy, all of which were provinces of the upper social strata. Early Greek culture is described in the literature as strong enough, even in remote colonies, to survive intact, pure, and unaffected. On the other hand, and at the same time, the image of some knowledge (or even knowledge as such) having an Ionian 'root' and thus being suspicious because somehow "eastern," seems to have been useful when it became politically expedient to call upon brute force, i.e. "Spartan values," for protection and conquest.

That the Ionians possibly came from Athens (the same four tribal groups found among the Athenians surface in the inhabitants of Miletus and other Ionian cities) might seem a contrary factor, but it does not change things because the people of Athens were not placed there by their own gods, and the seductive image such a notion creates of a kind of "self-birthing," the most famous of which is the idea of the "Dorian invasion" itself, which the Greeks connected with the mythic 'return of the descendants of Heracles', is obviously wrong: the people we are talking about are basically an amalgamation, and not "pure." While Herodotus believed that the Etruscans were descended from a people who invaded Etruria from Anatolia before 800 BC and established themselves over the incumbent Iron Age inhabitants, Dionysius of Halicarnassus believed them to be of local origin.

The first idea has been contested, as are all the links that tend to reveal an apparently "even further eastern" origin to the Greek heritage, which usually begins, marking out its line in the process, with Homer rather than the much older "Epic of Gilgamesh." It was the Romans in 133BC who named Asia and consid-

ered Ionia to be in this province, and this is where today's geo-political demarcation, at least in a factual sense, dates from. Today's ideological line drawn "between" "west" and "east," though, appears to begin with the recorded histories that follow the earlier racism and separate Ionia, which lay on the "Asiatic" shore (Turkey), but which is considered to be the birthplace of "western" philosophy, from Lydia and, later, Persia (modern Iran). So the ideological line seems to oscillate about this troubling simultaneous birth/scission.

The evidence is admittedly fragile, but it would make sense if Zeno was responding, in his work, to these socio-political manoeuvres by going to the philosophical roots of the problem. In this, he attacks the two sides of essentialism in the ideology that confronted him: ab-

solute relativism and absolute absolutism.

The uniqueness of the Marxist approach to Zeno's paradoxes, and also what makes it seem 'eastern' to some eyes in contrast to most other "western" philosophy since, consists in not seeing them as representing a problem but as a solution (there are exceptions such as Abelard, Spinoza, and Hegel). Thus, Marxism takes up Zeno's position again. We are not just talking about solving riddles here, this solution is no less than an answer to the question of the way we should live our lives, how to practice or act given what science tells us. It is a 'holistic' way of acting, a revolutionary practice if you will, that does not succumb to false dialectics and is "all-sided."