

Marx, Renouvier and the History of Materialism

By Olivier-Rene Bloch

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The Holy Family contains several pages which concern the history of materialism in the 17th and 18th centuries which are well known to Marxist philosophers. After the appearance of this work, these pages impressed Engels who wrote to Marx (and thereby showed Marx to have been the sole author) on March 17, 1945:

"The Critical Criticism ... is absolutely wonderful. Everything that you say on the Jewish question, the history of materialism, and the *Mysteries* [i.e., *Mysteries of Paris*, a novel by Eugene Sue] is superb and has an excellent effect."

At the end of his life in 1892, Engels reproduced a part of this material which concerned British materialism in the introduction to the English edition of his *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*. Three years later, Lenin was also struck by this text when reading *The Holy Family* for the first time, noting in his *Notebooks*:

"This passage ... is one of the most valuable in the book. It does not contain a literal critique, but an entirely positive exposition. This is a *brief summary of the history of French materialism*. I ought to cite the entire passage, but must be content with a brief summary of it."

It is hardly necessary to recall that the *Holy Family* passage subsequently served as a constant reference in any philosophical history that claims to be Marxist. Reading the entire *Holy Family*, one easily understands the interest that Engels or Lenin found in these pages: it is certainly one of the most coherent and brilliant passages, and undoubtedly the most "philosophical" in a book made up of a patchwork of pieces, where the polemic is often lost in the details, sometimes even to the extent of futility. Can the first impression that this is a completed chapter in a Marxist history of philosophy be taken at face value? Looking at it more closely, there is something intriguing here, which may pose more questions than it answers.

The structure of the passage itself is less than completely clear, since the project of laying out the "profane, mass-like history" of French materialism is transformed in a rather intricate way. This transformation is a consequence of Marx's desire to show the "two tendencies of French materialism", one deriving from Descartes, the other from Locke. This aim leads to Marx's giving too much space to the history of British materialism, which makes his principle intention no longer obvious. As in the entire work, this part is clearly polemical, but what is the positive position that he aims at? Marx's target is indicated by the citation of an article by Bruno Bauer ("What is the object of critique now?", *General Literary Times*, Charlottenburg, July 8, 1844), but

neither the citation nor the rest of the article makes immediately clear what Marx finds wrong with Bauer's "critical history of French materialism," or what exact reasons lead him to make an extended contrast between his own "profane history" and Bauer's "critical history".

Beyond Marx's polemical purpose, one ought to ask what precise core of positive doctrine, if any, can be extracted from this polemic and "history." Even Marx's own view of this "profane history" is hardly evident. The complete absence of Spinoza in a proposed presentation of the materialism of the 17th and 18th centuries is surprising, and certain strange, erroneous, or enigmatic formulas in the detailed exposition are astonishing. Reading that "In his physics, Descartes has attributed a creative, spontaneous force to matter, and conceived mechanical movement as its vital act," is bound to raise an eyebrow, as does reading that Duns Scotus "was ... a nominalist." Never to my knowledge, has the philosophy of Duns Scotus been characterized as nominalist, except in this text, or those who cite it. Similarly, it is hard to understand the error, noted by the editors of the French translation, that Marx has Arnaud die in the same year as Malebranche, while in fact Malebranche died in 1715, Condillac and Helvetius were born in that year, and Arnaud died in 1694. What could it mean when Marx wrote that the mechanical materialism of the Cartesian tradition "loses itself in French natural science, properly so called." And why then does Marx insist (and express by odd typography) the fact that the principle figures in this tradition were physicians, from "de Le Roy (= Regius)" to Cabanis, passing over La Mettrie? Certain questions of this type, particularly concerning the exact sense of many characterizations, can hardly be correctly posed until *after* one has found the answer to them.

Before solving these problems of content, sense, and structure or scope, one must ask a prior question which has not, to my knowledge, been asked until now, the question of what information was available to Marx himself. He would certainly have been the last to object to this question, since he asks at the end of his account of his adversary, Bauer: "Where then has Mr. Bauer or Criticism obtained the documents necessary to write a critical history of French materialism?", after which he concludes that the "documents" in question come entirely from Hegel's works. A quick, objective examination of Marx's own text shows that it is appropriate to ask Marx this same question.

One can only be surprised--and this is apparently the main thing that struck Lenin--at the mass of information on the history of philosophy that the text contains, and that in areas and concerning figures which Marx's philosophical education could not have made him particularly familiar. Despite the fact that he was able to do real work as a historian of ancient philosophy in 1841 in his dissertation, *The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophies of Nature*, at a time when a university career still seemed possible for him, neither his prior studies nor his subsequent journalistic and political activities would have led him to document precisely the French and British philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries.

[Bloch notes here that *The Holy Family* was completed by Marx during a few months in the fall of 1844, which would certainly not leave time to study Descartes, Le Roy, Cabanis, La Mettrie, Gassendi, Bayle, Duns Scotus, Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, etc. He emphasizes again the importance of knowing Marx's sources, considering the

importance of The Holy Family in the formation of his thought. He predicts that when the sources are actually known, the principle interpretative problems can be resolved immediately.

After considering several possible sources, including Feuerbach, Bloch shows that some of Marx's memorable statements, in particular, the assertion that Pierre Bayle was the last of the metaphysicians and the first of the "philosophes" (18th Century French philosophers), come from Charles Renouvier's Manual of Modern Philosophy. He presents the similarities in the form of a table, parts of which are translated here:]

The Holy Family

1. Descartes in his physics endowed matter with self-creative power and conceived mechanical motion as the manifestation of its life.... Within his physics, matter is the sole substance, the sole basis of being and knowledge.

2. To quote a French writer, Pierre Bayle was "the last metaphysician in the sense of the 17th century and the first philosopher in the sense of the 18th."

3. In its further evolution, materialism becomes one-sided. Hobbes is the man who systematizes Baconian Materialism. Knowledge based upon the senses loses its poetic blossom, it passes into the abstract experience of the geometrician.

Renouvier's Manual

1. If the physics of Descartes is studied apart from method, if one is fascinated by the creative power that Descartes gave to matter, and if this matter is regarded as a unique substance and universal cause, then a doctrine that properly represents half of the Cartesian doctrine will have been found.

2. Thus was he [Bayle] the last of the metaphysicians and the first of the philosophes, taking that word in the sense that it has been given in the 60 years prior to 1840.

3. We will see later which period and which development of thought was able to embrace and regulate Cartesianism. In order for Baconism to have the same destination, it would have to be systemized by a powerful and rigorous genius, giving it order and precision. A contemporary of Descartes fulfilled this mission, and that was Hobbes.

[After reviewing Renouvier's work, and making a detailed comparison of his Manual and The Holy Family, Bloch arrives at the following conclusion:]

It is thus by the borrowings made from the *Manual of Modern Philosophy* that one must explain a considerable part of the text developed by Marx [in the section under consideration]: to consider it in its quantitative aspect, the borrowed part

constitutes by far the larger part of all the evidence in the section. Ought it to be concluded that there is nothing or almost nothing to attribute to Marx? Undoubtedly not, but establishing the limited character, in this first analysis, of his original contribution to the composition of this chapter permits more exact evaluation of what originality is present.

[After considering some minor differences between the two texts, Bloch finds certain quite different attitudes toward and conclusions from Renouvier's evidence when it is used by Marx:]

It [Marx's opposite conclusion from Renouvier] is characteristic most of all of an important passage in Marx's text, one which concerns the sources of socialism and communism in the materialistic theories of man developed in the 18th century, such as that of Helvetius. This discussion is entirely Marx's, and conforms to his fundamental aim. Marx's comments do owe something, however, to the passage of the *Manual* where Renouvier interprets the "rapid course of development of sensualism and its application to morals and politics." To carefully consider the two texts, one should recall that Marx's exposition of his materialist "theses" in this area uses some of Renouvier's terminology, but it in a way diametrically opposed to Renouvier's usage. Marx wrote

"There is no need for any great penetration to see from the teaching of materialism on the original goodness and equal intellectual endowment of men, the omnipotence of experience, habit, and education, and the influence of environment on man, the great significance of industry, the justification of enjoyment, etc., how necessarily materialism is connected with communism and socialism."

Here Marx made a modified use of Renouvier's phrases. To show that Helvetius had extracted from "sensualism" its natural consequences in the area of morals before d'Holbach, Renouvier, wrote:

"If you seek the cause of the superiority of man over the animals in the physical organization with which he is endowed, if you confound the progress of reason with those of industry, if you attribute to the material passions and to self-love in particular all of the education of the human spirit, and finally, if you maintain the natural equality of intelligences and put all moral notions into egoism, then will not the law which requires the senses to be exclusive origin of the knowledge and faculties of man be in some sense obeyed?"

Thus Marx put positively what Renouvier put in the negative, including as part of humanism what Renouvier attributed to egoism and described with offensive epithets.

[Bloch offers the following interpretation of some of Marx's comments on Feuerbach and Bayle:]

... what Feuerbach is to Hegel, Bayle was to the metaphysics of the 17th century, that of Descartes, Malebranche, Leibniz, and Spinoza. The point on which the profane history

of Marx (assisted by Renouvier) opposes Bauer's schema concerns Spinoza, to whose system Bauer tied the whole of 18th century philosophy, both theism and French materialism. But if Marx opposes Bauer's schema, it is because Marx shows that Bauer has drawn this conclusion entirely from Hegel....

It is clear that [the schema that Bayle is to Spinoza as Feuerbach is to Hegel] explains the absence of Spinoza in Marx's "history" of materialism in *The Holy Family*, although it hardly constitutes a justification of this omission. If Marx ignores Spinoza there, it is not solely because Renouvier had left him out, although this silence would be one of the reasons Renouvier's work suited Marx. Spinoza is omitted mainly because in the context of Marx's polemic against Bauer, Spinoza is equivalent to Hegel, the representative of the speculative philosophy which must be broken with in order to come to materialism, as Feuerbach and Bayle did.

[At the end of his paper, Bloch concludes:]

It seems to me that the identification of the source utilized by Marx to draw up the greater part of the section in the *Holy Family* devoted to the history of French materialism profoundly transforms the image of this passage, opens some new and suggestive perspectives on Marx's intellectual development, on the history of his own materialism, and on the evolution which led from the *1844 Manuscripts* to *The German Ideology*, as well as on the intellectual milieu of Paris.

[Finally Bloch notes the irony that Renouvier would later criticize Marx's ideas, and that Lenin would in turn denounce Renouvier's "neo-critical" philosophy, both in ignorance of Renouvier's contribution to the Holy Family passages that Lenin admired.]