3

Karl Marx: 'Howling Gigantic Curses'

KARL MARX has had more impact on actual events, as well minds of men and women, than any other intellectual in modern times. The reason for this is not primarily the attraction of his concepts and methodology, though both have a strong appeal to unrigorous minds, but the fact that his philosophy has been institutionalized in two of the world's largest countries, Russia and China, and their many satellites. In this sense he resembles St Augustine, whose writings were most widely read among church leaders from the fifth to the thirteenth century and therefore played a predominant role in the shaping of medieval Christendom. But the influence of Marx has been even more direct, since the kind of personal dictatorship he envisaged for himself (as we shall see) was actually carried into effect, with incalculable consequences for mankind, by his three most important followers, Lenin, Stalin and Mao Tse-tung, all of whom, in this respect, were faithful Marxists.

Marx was a child of his time, the mid-nineteenth century, and Marxism was a characteristic nineteenth-century philosophy in that it claimed to be scientific. 'Scientific' was Marx's strongest expression of approval, which he habitually used to distinguish himself from his many enemies. He and his work were 'scientific'; they were not. He felt he had found a scientific explanation of human behaviour in history akin to Darwin's theory of evolution. The notion that Marxism is a science, in a way that no other philosophy ever has been or could be, is implanted in the public doctrine of the states his followers founded, so that it colours the teaching of all subjects in their schools and universities. This has

spilled over into the non-Marxist world, for intellectuals, especially academics, are fascinated by power, and the identification of Marxism with massive physical authority has tempted many teachers to admit Marxist 'science' to their own disciplines, especially such inexact or quasi-exact subjects as economics, sociology, history and geography. No doubt if Hitler, rather than Stalin, had won the struggle for Central and Eastern Europe in 1941-45, and so imposed his will on a great part of the world, Nazi doctrines which also claimed to be scientific, such as its race-theory, would have been given an academic gloss and penetrated universities throughout the world. But military victory ensured that Marxist, rather than Nazi, science would prevail.

The first thing we must ask about Marx, therefore, is: in what sense, if any, was he a scientist? That is, to what extent was he engaged in the pursuit of objective knowledge by the careful search for and evaluation of evidence? On the face of it, Marx's biography reveals him as primarily a scholar. He was descended on both sides from lines of scholars. His father Heinrich Marx, a lawyer, whose name originally was Hirschel ha-Levi Marx, was the son of a rabbi and Talmudic scholar, descended from the famous Rabbi Elieser ha-Levi of Mainz, whose son Jehuda Minz was head of the Talmudic School of Padua. Marx's mother Henrietta Pressborck was the daughter of a rabbi likewise descended from famous scholars and sages. Marx was born in Trier (then Prussian territory) on 5 May 1818, one of nine children but the only son to survive into middle age; his sisters married respectively an engineer, a bookseller, a lawyer. The family was quintessentially middle-class and rising in the world. The father was a liberal and described as 'a real eighteenth-century Frenchman, who knew his Voltaire and Rousseau inside out'.[1] Following a Prussian decree of 1816 which banned Jews from the higher ranks of law and medicine, he became a Protestant and on 26 August 1824 he had his six children baptised. Marx was confirmed at fifteen and for a time seems to have been a passionate Christian. He attended a former Jesuit high school, then secularized, and Bonn University. From there he went on to Berlin University, then the finest in the world. He never received any Jewish education or attempted to acquire any, or showed any interest in Jewish causes.[2] But it must be said that he developed traits characteristic of a certain type of scholar, especially Talmudic ones: a tendency to accumulate immense masses of half-assimilated materials and to plan encyclopedic works which were never completed; a withering contempt for all non-scholars; and extreme assertiveness and irascibility in dealing with other scholars. Virtually all his work, indeed, has the hallmark of Talmudic study: it is essentially a commentary on, a critique of the work of others in his field.

described. He used the same deception in handling one of his main sources, Dr J.P. Kay's *Physical and Moral Conditions of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester* (1832), which had helped to produce fundamental reforms in local government sanitation; Engels does not mention them. He misinterpreted the criminal statistics, or ignored them when they did not support his thesis. Indeed he constantly and knowingly suppresses facts that contradict his argument or explain away a particular 'iniquity' he is seeking to expose. Careful checking of Engels's extracts from his secondary sources show these are often truncated, condensed, garbled or twisted, but invariably put in quotation marks as though given verbatim. Throughout the Henderson and Challoner edition of the book, footnotes catalogue Engels's distortions and dishonesties. In one section alone, Chapter Seven, 'The Proletariat', falsehoods, including errors of fact and transcription.[24]

Marx cannot have been unaware of the weaknesses, indeed dishonesties, of Engels's book since many of them were exposed in detail as early as 1848 by the German economist Bruno Hildebrand, in a publication with which Marx was familiar.[25] Moreover Marx himself compounds Engels's misrepresentations knowingly by omitting to tell the reader of the enormous improvements brought about by enforcement of the Factory Acts and other remedial legislation since the book was published and which affected precisely the type of conditions he had highlighted. In any case, Marx brought to the use of primary and secondary written sources the same spirit of gross carelessness, tendentious distortion and downright dishonesty which marked Engels's work.[26] Indeed they were often collaborators in deception, though Marx was the more audacious forger. In one particularly flagrant case he outreached himself. This was the so-called 'Inaugural Address' to the International Working Men's Association, founded in September 1864. With the object of stirring the English working class from its apathy, and anxious therefore to prove that living standards were falling, he deliberately falsified a sentence from W. E. Gladstone's Budget speech of 1863. What Gladstone said, commenting on the increase in national wealth, was: 'I should look almost with apprehension and with pain upon this intoxicating augmentation of wealth and power if it were my belief that it was confined to the class who are in easy circumstances.' But, he added, 'the average condition of the British labourer, we have the happiness to know, has improved during the last twenty years in a degree which we know to be extraordinary, and which we may almost pronounce to be unexampled in the history of any country and of any age.'[27] Marx, in his address,

6

The Deep Waters of Ernest Hemingway

ALTHOUGH the United States grew in numbers and strength throughout the nineteenth century, and by the end of it had already become the world's largest and richest industrial power, it was a long time before its society began to produce intellectuals of the kind I have been describing. For this there were several reasons. Independent America had never possessed an *ancien régime*, a privileged establishment based on prescriptive possession rather than natural justice, There was no irrational and inequitable existing order which the new breed of secular intellectual could scheme to replace by millenarian models based on reason and morality. On the contrary: the United States was itself the product of a revolution against the injustice of the old order. Its constitution was based on rational and ethical principles, and had been planned, written, enacted and, in the light of early experience, amended by men of the highest intelligence, of philosophical bent and moral stature. There was thus no cleavage between the ruling and the educated classes: they were one and the same. Then too, as de Tocqueville noted, there was in the United States no institutionalized clerical class, and therefore no anti-clericalism, the source of so much intellectual ferment in Europe. Religion in America was universal but under the control of the laity. It concerned itself with behaviour, not dogma. It was voluntary and multi-denominational, and thus expressed freedom rather than restricted it. Finally, America was a land of plenty and opportunity, where land was cheap and in ample supply, and no man need be poor. There was none of the ocular evidence of flagrant injustice which, in Europe, incited clever, well-educated men to embrace radical

ideas. No sins cried out to heaven for vengeance-yet. Most men were too busy getting and spending, exploiting and consolidating, to question the fundamental assumptions of their society.

Early American intellectuals, like Washington Irving, took their tone and manners, their style and content, from Europe, where they spent much of their time; they were a living legacy of cultural colonialism. The emergence of a native and independent American intellectual spirit was itself a reaction to the cringing of Irving and his kind. The first and most representative exponent of this spirit-the archetypal American intellectual of the nineteenth century-was Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82), who proclaimed that his object was to extract 'the tape-worm of Europe' from America's body and brain, to 'cast out the passion for Europe by the passion for America'.[1] He too went to Europe but in a critical and rejecting mood. But his insistence on the Americanism of his mind led to a broad identification with the assumptions of his own society which became closer as he grew older, and which was the exact antithesis of the outlook of Europe's intelligentsia. Emerson was born in Boston in 1803, the son of a Unitarian minister. He became one himself but left the ministry because he could not conscientiously administer the Lord's Supper. He travelled in Europe, discovered Kant, returned and settled in Concord, Massachusetts, where he developed the first indigenous American philosophical movement, known as Transcendentalism, encapsulated in his first book, *Nature*, published in 1836. It is neo-Platonic, somewhat anti-rational, a little mystical, a touch Romantic, above all vague. Emerson noted in one of his many notebooks and journals:

> For this was I born and came into the world to deliver the self of myself to the Universe from the Universe; to do a certain benefit which nature could not forgo, nor I be discharged from rendering, and then emerge again into the holy silence and eternity, out of which as a man I arose. God is rich and many more men than I he harbours in his bosom, biding their time and the needs and beauty of all. Or, when I wish, it is permitted to me to say, these hands, this body, this history of Waldo Emerson are profane and wearisome, but I, I descend not to mix myself with that or any man. Above his life, above all creatures I flow down forever a sea of benefit into races of individuals. Nor can the stream ever roll backwards or the sin or death of man taint the immutable energy which distributes itself into men as the sun into rays or the sea into drops.[2]

This does not make much sense, or, in so far as it does, constitutes a truism. But in an age which admired Hegelianism and the early Carlyle,

many Americans were proud that their young country had produced an undoubted intellectual of their own. It was later observed that his appeal rested 'not on the ground that people understand him, but that they think such men ought to be encouraged'.[3] A year after he published *Nature*, he delivered a Harvard address, entitled 'The American Scholar', which Oliver Wendell Holmes was to call 'our intellectual declaration of independence'.[4] His themes were taken up by America's burgeoning press. The paper which published Marx's dispatches from Europe, Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, by far the most influential in the country, promoted Emerson's Transcendentalism in a sensational manner, as a kind of national public property, like Niagara Falls.

Emerson is worth examining because his career illustrates the difficulty experienced by American intellectuals in breaking away from their native consensus. In many ways he remained the product of his New England background, especially in his naive, puritanical and etiolated approach to sex. When he descended on the Carlyles at Craigenputtock in August 1833, he seemed to Jane Carlyle a bit etherial, coming 'out of the clouds, as it were'; Carlyle himself noted he left 'like an angel, with his beautiful, transparent soul'.[5] On a subsequent visit, in 1848, Emerson described in his diary how he was obliged to defend American standards of morals at a dinner party at John Foster's house, attended by Dickens, Carlyle and others:

> I said that, when I came to Liverpool, I enquired whether the prostitution was always as gross in that city, as it then appeared, for to me it seemed to betoken a fatal rottenness in the state, and I saw not how any boy could grow up safe. But I had been told, it was not worse or better for years. Carlyle and Dickens replied that chastity in the male sex was as good as gone in our times, and in England was so rare that they could name all the exceptions. Carlyle evidently believed that the same things were true in America…I assured him it was not so with us; that, for the most part, young men of good standing and good education with us, go virgins to their nuptial bed, as truly as their brides.[6]

As Henry James later wrote of Emerson, 'his ripe unconsciousness of evil…is one of the most beautiful signs by which we know him'; though he adds, cruelly, 'We get the impression of a conscience gasping in the void, panting for sensations, with something of the movements of the gills of a landed fish.''[7] Evidently the sexual drive in Emerson was not powerful. His young first wife called him 'Grandpa'. His second, who had to put up with Emerson's much-adored mother living in the household until she died, occasionally gave vent to bitter remarks, which