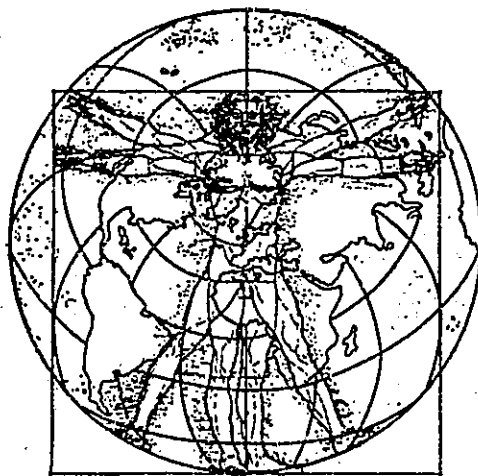


The Humanist Alternative:



Some definitions of Humanism
Edited by Paul Kurtz

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Humanism and Marxism

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MARXISM IS HUMANISM. Despite a hundred-year burial of Marx's Humanist essays, Marx's Humanism has made history, revolutionary history. No other philosophic writing can compare with it. In our era, it was the Hungarian revolution of 1956 that brought Marx's Humanism onto the historic stage. By unfurling the Humanist banner and laying down their lives in the struggle for freedom *from* communism, the Hungarian freedom fighters gave new life to Marx's original definition of his unique world view as a new Humanism or thoroughgoing naturalism, as against 'communism [which] is not itself the goal of human development—the form of human society'.¹ Similarly, the battle of the Czechs for 'socialism with a human face' was Marxist Humanism at its best.

So sweeping was Marx's vision of the new *human* dimension which would unfold in a classless society that he refused, at first, to associate with the then (1844) existing communist sects that he designated 'vulgar' because they thought that all they had to do to achieve a new social order was to abolish private property. Marx's contention was that private property, capitalist private property, had, of course, to be abolished since it was the manifestation of the exploitation of man by man through the instrumentality of the machine. Never again, he continued, must the individual be counterposed to society, for 'the individual is the *social* entity'. Where there is no freedom for the individual, there is no freedom in the society. Unless, however, Marx concluded in those famous 1844 *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts*, the division between mental and manual labour—that hallmark of all class societies which had become so monstrous under capitalism—were abolished, we would be confronting capitalism under another name!

¹ Bottomore, T. B. (ed) (1963), *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, New York: McGraw Hill, p 167.

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What Marx proposed instead was that, in place either of the profit motive of capitalism or the substitution of state for private ownership, the principle of the new society be the freedom of man, the reconstitution of his wholeness, the development of all his innate talents, the unity of mental and manual labour which exploitative society has fragmented, alienating from man not only the products of his labour, but the very activity of labour.

Following is a passage from the chapter 'A New Humanism' which I wrote shortly after the Russian Communist counter-revolution crushed the Hungarian freedom fighters.

Marx, the Hegelian, had a conception of labour and freedom as activity, completely different from the utilitarian conception of the economists, who, at best, could see freedom only as satisfied hunger and 'culture'. These—and they include the scientists of our age who see the break-up of the atom, but not the totality of the person—see free time only as 'enjoyment'. Marx saw the free time liberated from capitalist exploitation as time for the free development of the individual's power, of his natural and acquired talents.

He did not consider that Utopia. It was not the hereafter. It was the road to be taken, on the morrow of capitalism's fall, if the nationalized means of production were to serve any better end than the privately owned means of production. This too our age can understand more than any previous age, and it is this conception which hangs over the Russian theoreticians like the Sword of Damocles.

Marx must have had them in mind when he criticized classical political economy for wanting to keep the industrial workers' eyes riveted not on the vision of total freedom, but on their 'freedom from feudal blemishes'. Marx wrote, 'for them there was history, but history is no more.' For the Russian totalitarians, the Russian Revolution stopped in 1917, and history stopped with the triumph of the One-Party State.

Marx's theory of liberation was unique in still another way which illustrates why this discoverer of what has been called the materialist conception of history insisted on calling his philosophy a new Humanism which, as he put it, is 'distinguished both from idealism and materialism and at the same time constitutes their unifying truth'.³

Take the question of religion. No doubt all of you know Marx's famous statement that religion is the opiate of the people. But how many know the context in which the expression appeared? It is one

³ Dunayevskaya, Raya (1958), *Marxism and Freedom: From 1776 Until Today*, New York: Bookman Associates, p64.

⁴ Dunayevskaya (1958) op. cit., p206.

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of the most beautiful passages in Marx's writings which discloses how human was his materialism, how majestic the historic sweep of his demand 'to unmask human self-alienation in its *secular form* now that it has been unmasked in its *sacred form*'. Here is the whole passage.⁴

Man makes religion: religion does not make man. Religion is indeed man's self-consciousness and self-awareness so long as he has not found himself or has lost himself again. But man is not an abstract being, squatting outside the world. Man is the human world, state, society. . . . Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of men, is a demand for their real happiness. . . . Religion is only the illusory sun about which man revolves so long as he does not revolve about himself. . . .

This Humanist view is what compelled him not only to separate himself from the religious view but also from the 'vulgar' atheists. Instead, it was 'the human world, state, society' that preoccupied him. Naturally, the human world is primarily concerned with, engaged in, material production. This is what Marx meant by 'material'—the basic and primary conditions of human existence. Rooted in material production, in the relations of men at the point of production, are 'the legal property relations' as well as their philosophic concepts.

'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence,' wrote Marx in the most often quoted and most misunderstood statement of his position, 'but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness'.⁵ There is nothing mechanical about this materialist conception of history; the truth that social existence determines consciousness is not a confining wall, but a doorway to the future, as well as an appreciation of the past, of how men moulded history. The Hegelian dialectic, though Marx openly declared it to be the 'source of all dialectic',⁶ seemed to limit itself to thought alone as if thoughts were something 'outside' the human being. Marx humanized the Hegelian dialectic. He wrote that same year, regarding the Silesian weavers' strike: 'The wisdom of the German poor stands in inverse ratio to the wisdom of poor Germany.'

⁴ Ibid., pp43, 44.

⁵ Marx, Karl (1970), *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, New York, Lawrence and Wishart.

⁶ Marx, Karl *Capital*, vol. I, p654n.

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Pivotal to the Hegelian concept of dialectical development through contradiction and to the Marxian concept of the materialist conception of history is this: the more degraded the worker, the more oppressed, the more alienated, the greater is his 'quest for universality'.⁷ In this 'quest for universality', in this striving for freedom and the reconstitution of the wholeness of man, the proletariat transforms reality itself.

Marx's insistence that this was a scientific philosophy was backed up not with factual data alone, but, above all, with historic movement. Thus, in contrast to utopian socialism and to mechanical materialism, Marx's view was that there is neither anything 'automatic' about the inevitability of socialism, nor 'glorious' about science; it all depended on the human subject, on the revolutionary compulsions of the proletariat to transform reality by undermining the existing order and creating the new one.

Marx's vision of the pluri-dimensional in man as well as the creativity of his energies and passions—the 'energizing principle', he called it—came from the historic concept that *masses in motion*, not individual genius, are both passion for freedom transformed into energy and manifestation of universal 'Reason'. Reason and Revolution are the inseparables in the transformation of reality. Never, for a single instant, did he take his eyes off the actual class struggles that would decide the fate of men. Just as it was men who made religion, not religion men, so it was they who developed science, not science them. The human being, not science, was the stuff of revolution.

Long before Einstein formulated the principle of transformation of mass into energy, stating that all elementary particles are made of the same stuff—energy (as against the nineteenth century concept of matter, the twentieth century holds that 'matter exists because energy assumes the form of elemental particles')⁸—Marx warned against the *direction* science had been taking. A century before the atom was split and released, not so much the greatest energy force on earth as the most destructive, Marx wrote in 1844: 'To have one basis for life and another for science is *a priori* a falsehood.'⁹

⁷ Marx, Karl (1963), *Poverty of Philosophy*, New York: International Publishers.

⁸ Heisenberg, W. (1959), 'From Plato to Max Planck' in *Atlantic Monthly*, November.

⁹ Bottomore (1963), *op. cit.*, p164.

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We have been living this lie ever since, with the result that man faces his own destruction, not just figuratively, but literally. The destructive forces come not only from science, but from the class structure of society. Indeed, it is the class structure which determines the direction of science, even as it is this class structure which spews out racism in its death throes.

Nowhere is the *today-ness* of Marxist Humanism more sharply delineated and relevant to the problems of our day in America than on this question which will reveal to us as well the American roots of Marxism.

Truth is always concrete, wrote the most idealist of bourgeois philosophers, Hegel. In practising that principle, the most revolutionary philosopher, Marx, appeared 'nonmaterialistic' to the self-styled American Marxists who tried evading the actual Civil War by covering themselves with the abstraction that they were opposed to 'all slavery, wage and chattel'.

Marx's reply to these would-be adherents was that, if this was Marxism, he was not a Marxist. Truth is always concrete. The greater affinity of ideas turned out to be between Marx and the American Abolitionists, regarding both their total opposition to slavery and their recognition that what defaced America could be regenerated only through association with black revolutionaries. Or, as the great New England Oppositionist Wendell Phillips put it, *Oppositionists* were ten feet tall because they stood on the shoulders of the Negro slaves following the North Star to freedom.

Long before civil war was in the offing, Marx argued that intellectuals were held in tow by the ruling class in their unawareness of the origins of language itself and use of certain words. Thus, they used the word 'Negro' and the word 'slave' as if they were synonyms. 'A Negro is a Negro,' Marx argued. 'He only becomes a slave under certain conditions,'¹⁰ conditions created, not by them, but by their exploiters, who, furthermore, exuded the racist language as rationale for the continuation of slavery.

The year was 1847. By the time John Brown led the attack on Harper's Ferry, Marx wrote to Engels on 11 January 1860 that the biggest event in the world was 'the movement of the slaves in America started by the death of John Brown'. When, the following year, civil war finally broke out, Marx threw himself into the battle by spreading the words of the American Abolitionists in England

¹⁰ Marx, Karl (ed), *Selected Works*, vol. I, p263.

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and in Germany. The British proletariat had mobilized itself to stop their bourgeoisie from flirting with the Southern oligarchy. Under the impact of civil war in the United States and the strikes in Britain and France, as well as the Polish rebellion, the first International Working Men's Association was established, with Karl Marx in its leadership.

Nor was the International's support of the North limited to writing letters to President Lincoln, or even extolling Abolitionism. No, it transformed, that is to say, made more concrete Marx's concepts of labour's self-development, by extending them to the question of race: 'Labour in the white skin cannot be free so long as labour in the black skin is branded.'¹¹ This was not mere rhetoric. Marx proved its truth by showing that it was only after the abolition of slavery that the first national trade union was established in the United States. And this National Labour Union, headed by Sylvius, soon joined the International Working Men's Association. Deep indeed are the American roots of Marxism. Their long burial can no more exorcise them from American history than the exorcism of the true history of black revolt could withstand today's tidal wave of revolts.

Marx at first had called his philosophy a new Humanism; then, with the 1848 revolutions, on the eve of which he had written: 'A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism', he had changed the name to Communism. That there was no change in Humanist concepts is clear from this same history-shaping *Afensists* which also declared: 'The free development of each is the condition of the free development of all.' And when 'all' meant not only all men in any one country or even continent, but the world, he changed the name again, this time to the International Working Men's Association. That remained the name after its headquarters moved from London to New York and until his death, for his Humanism meant that the many worlds were one and this one world was moving towards full liberation.

When the new, third world came onto the historic stage in our postwar world, it, too, singled out the Humanism of Marxism as the philosophy that governed it. As Leopold Sedar Senghor expressed it in the international symposium on *Socialist Humanism* that, for the first time, brought together not only the Humanists from East and West, but from the South and North: 'Beyond the economic

¹¹ Marx, Karl, *Capital*, vol. I, p329.

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"appearances", it [Marx's thought] plunges into the *factual* view of things, Marx substitutes a profound insight into human needs. His is a new Humanism, new because it is *incarnate*.¹²

This exchange of ideas is not new to our age nor even to great men like Marx. It is the innermost hunger of the greatest masses of men. When slave traders were busy establishing the triangular trade of African slaves, West Indian sugar and New England cod, a triangular exchange of *ideas* was established between Africa, the West Indies and the United States (especially with American Negroes). The basic ideas we think of as very recent, such as 'Black is beautiful', were in fact born then. Every idea from black nationalism, 'Negritude', 'African personality' to the 'Humanism of Marxism' was, in fact, born in the nineteenth century.¹³ It took us so long to find them only because we do not *listen* to the impulses from below any more than we gather about us the true historic roots of man's struggle for freedom.

You are all aware, I am sure, that Marxist Humanism is not exactly the most popular philosophy in the United States. Whether that or something else is the reason for it not being brought openly into the black freedom movement, there is no way of knowing. But Humanism, in the form of Martin Buber's philosophy, was directly quoted by Martin Luther King in his famous letter from a Birmingham jail, *Why We Cannot Wait*.¹⁴ He referred to Martin Buber's most famous expression of his philosophy, the 'I-thou' relationship, and said that until Americans recognize that the question of segregation is not an 'I-it' relationship, that is to say, not a relationship of a person to a thing, but an 'I-thou', a human relationship, segregation will not be abolished. Where King did not directly mention Marx, the young black revolutionary (such as Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice*)¹⁵ is openly invoking the name of Karl Marx. The frozen lines of communication between black and white can be reopened only through such a total philosophy of freedom as Marx's Humanism. Without the red colouration, the name for 'the man' is 'whitey' who has so repulsed the black freedom fighter that he has no desire

¹² Senghor, Leopold Sedar, 'Socialism is Humanism' in Fromm, Erich (ed) (1967), *Socialist Humanism*, New York: Doubleday, p61.

¹³ Dunayevskaya, Raya (ed) (1963), *American Civilization on Trial*, Detroit, Michigan: News and Letters Committees, 1st ed. May; 2nd ed. August, 1970.

¹⁴ King, Martin Luther (1965), *Why We Cannot Wait*, New York: Harper and Row.

¹⁵ Cleaver, Eldridge (1969), *Soul on Ice*, London: Cape.

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for any dialogue with him. In that case, just as surely as the H-bomb has called the very survival of mankind into question, so has the colour division.

On the other hand, because of the all-pervasiveness of the alienations in all strata of the population, stretching across the generational gap as well, the very totality of the crisis impels a search for new beginnings. Hence, there is that shock of recognition as we come face to face with the Humanism of Marx, who, from the start of his break with bourgeois society, held that the overthrow of the old is insufficient for the creation of the new unless we thereby release the vast untapped energies of millions upon millions of the oppressed and degraded and thereby add a new dimension to man himself.

Marx lived in just such a time of crisis as we are witnessing today. That is what makes him so contemporary. He has something to say to us. Let us listen. Marx was asked why he had broken with the bourgeois society into which he had been born; what need he had to become a radical. His answer was that no man is whole when the social order is so alien; and to end alienations one must become a radical, for 'To be a radical means to grasp something at its root. The root of mankind is man.'

It still is.