

Marxism and the Enlightenment

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Particularly with questions in mind that relate to the arts, sciences and the intellectual realm in general, I recently read a book called *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture* (which is a collection of essays and lectures by David A. Hollinger). Although it approaches things from a different viewpoint than ours, this book does speak to many of the important questions concerning intellectuals and their role in relation to the larger society and societal objectives with which I have been wrestling for some time, including in various writings and talks (for example, in some of the essays in *Reflections, Sketches, & Provocations*,* then in "End/Beginning,"** and in more recent talks and writings). Hollinger does provide some important historical background and some insights into the key questions at issue, which of course we have to sift through and synthesize as part of applying **our** outlook and methodology.

Discussing various intellectual currents and influences from the 1920s to the present—with particular attention to the post WW2 period and focusing especially on academia and more specifically on the struggle of Jews to break down barriers there and, in turn, their overall positive influence on academia and more generally on intellectual thought in America—Hollinger touches on the question of "intellectual inquiry" *per se*—or "in its own right"—vs. social and political influences and "agendas." He traces how, during WW2, a major strain in American academic and intellectual circles was to wage an intellectual and more broadly a cultural struggle (a *Kulturkampf*) against the Nazis and their ideology, and how later, during the early years of the "Cold War" in particular, a similar "Kulturkampf" (or cultural war) was directed against the Soviet Union (and "Stalinism").

In a chapter entitled "Free Enterprise and Free Inquiry: The Emergence of Laissez-Faire Communitarianism in the Ideology of Science in the United States," Hollinger shows how a significant tendency within intellectual circles, in the U.S. in particular, has been (as the chapter title suggests) the notion of *laissez-faire* individualism as the ethos of science and the best means for its progress—the linking of "free inquiry" with the "free market." For example, he discusses theories prominent in the 1920s and '30s which "shared the assumption that knowledge was something autonomous, an entity that could be trusted to shape society since its own shape was produced by truths external to, and somehow above, society. In this view, science was to be left alone just as the market was to be left alone in classical political economy." (p. 103) Yet, especially with the growth of "support" for science by the bourgeois state and bourgeois "private foundations," through and after WW2, there was an increased recognition that there were limits to this "laissez-faire individualism": "But the massive federal funding and the creation of an attendant

bureaucracy eventually forced the recognition that somebody was going to have to decide exactly who would get the money and why." (p. 108) Somebody is going to have to decide—that's a very important point. (In fact this is a point that I emphasized—and whose implications I explored—particularly in relation to socialist society, in the "open letters" to Stephen Jay Gould, Carl Sagan, and Isaac Asimov that are in a collection of essays I wrote some years ago, *Reflections, Sketches & Provocations*.)

Hollinger's discussion touches on how various intellectuals have perceived the mission of Western civilization—or the "modernizing" and "civilizing" mission of Western intellectual thought and culture, especially as embodied in science. He writes:

"We also see these intellectuals offering science to the rest of the world in much the same perspective from which their loquacious ally [British scientist and novelist C.P.] Snow was calling for the spread of the scientific spirit to Africa and Asia. *The Dynamics of Modernization*, by the Princeton historian Cyril Black, identified 'the scientific attitude' as the most important single motor of the entire modernization process from early modern Europe to the present. Industry, technology, and democracy followed eventually in the wake of this distinctive mentality.

"The modernizing process was generally understood to entail the making of the entire world over according to the model of what the United States had become by the early and mid-1960s." (p.167)

This relates to questions bound up with the Enlightenment and how we have to, from our perspective, divide the Enlightenment in two. In previous talks, I spoke to what Marxism holds in common with the general thinking associated with the Enlightenment, and what we disagree with and have to make a radical rupture with. This is very important these days, and also very complex, because there are various strains of imperialist and reactionary thought relating to the Enlightenment. There is a certain kind of all-out assault on the Enlightenment, from religious fundamentalists and obscurantists, including the "Religious Right" in the U.S., who identify the Enlightenment—and in particular the concept of reliance on science and rationality, rather than obscurantist religious notions, as the foundation for ideology and politics—as the dawning of the age of the devil, so to speak. On the other hand, as indicated by some of the intellectual trends Hollinger examines, there is a definite strain in bourgeois liberal thinking to conceive of the Enlightenment (and what are considered its results) as a "positive" instrument of colonialism and of an imperialist domination that seeks to remake the whole world in the image of bourgeois democracy.

The point I want to focus on here, with regard to the Enlightenment and the continuing contention around its influence, is that Marxism agrees with that aspect of the Enlightenment that says that the world is knowable, that people should seek to understand the world (or reality generally) in all its complexity, and that they should do so by scientific methods. Now, there is a difference, a profound difference, between bourgeois scientific methods and the scientific method of dialectical and historical

materialism, but it is a tenet and a basic premise of the Enlightenment that people should seek to understand the world by scientific methods, and this is a principal reason why the Enlightenment has been brought under attack—and today is once again being brought under attack—by religious obscurantists and other reactionary trends. That's the aspect of the Enlightenment with which, in a general sense, Marxism agrees.

What it disagrees with is, first of all, the notion that (to invoke a certain irony by quoting the Christian Bible) "you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." This is not true, in the final analysis. First of all, what's in the Bible is not the truth. But even if it were, just **knowing** what the truth is and thinking that in itself will "set you free" is a form of rationalism (of idealism); it goes along with this idea that science will re-make the world by mere force of its "truths." It is the same basic outlook that I criticize in the open letter to Gould (and others) speaking to his statement that eventually the Catholic Church relented on its difference with Galileo because, after all, Galileo's views of the solar system were much more correct than the Church's, and the Church had to accede to that reality. I pointed out that there is some validity to Gould's argument, but that there are also many, many profound truths that the Catholic Church and other religious institutions and authorities still do not acknowledge—not the least of which is that God does not exist! So, it's not just a matter of what is true; there is also the fact that social struggle—and, in class society, class struggle—has to take place in order for ideas, even ones that represent profound truths, to become "operative" in society, to be taken up and applied by society as a whole. And this gets back to Marx's insistence that the point is not merely to understand the world, but to change it.

So that's an important way, philosophically, in which Marxism differs from the core thought of the Enlightenment, or the rationalism that's integral to the Enlightenment. And, at the same time, of course, politically, the revolutionary proletariat opposes and represents a radical rupture with the system of bourgeois political rule which essentially corresponds to the Enlightenment. And, more particularly, we oppose the use of the Enlightenment, and the scientific and technological advances associated with it, as a way of effecting and justifying colonialism and imperialist domination, in the name of "the white man's burden" or the alleged "civilizing mission" of the "more enlightened and advanced" imperialist system, and so on. This is another way in which we differ, profoundly, from at least important aspects of how the Enlightenment (and associated things) have been applied.

Returning to what Hollinger has to say on important aspects of this—significantly (and this relates to some points I have emphasized in discussing the role of religion in American society in this period), Hollinger writes that:

"The 'conflict between science and religion' is a set phrase that historians of the United States associate the most directly with the second half of the nineteenth century, and for good reasons. It was in the wake of the Darwinian revolution in natural history that American Protestants displayed their most acute anxiety about the relation of scientific innovation to inherited Christian doctrine. This anxiety, which was often expressed through the argument that the very idea of a 'conflict' between science and religion was based on a misunderstanding of the issues [and here I would interject that we hear this very same argument today; but in any case, this anxiety, says Hollinger], had long since diminished by the middle decades of the twentieth century. But in the milder cultural wars of the era of World War II and immediately following, one can hear several echoes of these earlier spiritual disputes." (p. 155)

(As an aside here—and this would seem to relate to why the current Pope decided not to join the Protestant fundamentalist reactionaries in attacking evolution, but instead chose to declare evolution compatible with religious belief—it is worth noting that Hollinger writes a little later:

"In the meantime, the relationship of Catholic commitment to American intellectual and political life had been transformed by the replacement of Spanish and Italian fascism with the 'Godless' Communist menace of the Cold War, by the political success of President John Kennedy, by the liberalization of Vatican II, and by the influence of John Courtney Murray. The tension between the secular intelligentsia and Catholicism was dramatically diminished; Catholics were no longer assumed to be enemies of liberal intellectuals." (p.167)

Hollinger also shows how certain "conservative" intellectuals have made use of intellectual tendencies and debates—including, interestingly, those generally involving "post-modernism"—to try to undermine science and promote fundamentalist religious obscurantism and in particular the fundamentalist Christian view of the world and theory of knowledge (to make "an orthodox version of the biblical episteme" the legitimate means of acquiring an understanding of things):

"I invoke post-modernism to remind us of the familiar story of Kuhn's appropriation and use by intellectuals of the 1970s and 1980s who depicted science as an authoritarian, 'totalizing' project that impedes rather than promotes truly democratic and egalitarian values.... The representation of science in post-modernist discourse is so close to us today that I need do no more in this lecture than allude to it. Yet there is one element in the contemporary scene to which I want to call attention in closing. This is the recent, increasingly assertive claim of conservative Christians that Kuhn and Foucault and their followers have disproven the objectivity of science and thus have rendered an orthodox version of the biblical episteme cognitively legitimate once again." (p. 171)

All this emphasizes yet again that what is required is the synthesis that only the consistent application of our ideology, MLM, can provide. And all this underscores, as well, the importance of our basic understanding that, on the one hand, truth does not have a class character while, on the other hand, the means for arriving at the truth in the fullest sense—and for acting, in the most systematic and comprehensive way, to change the world in accordance with reality and its motion and development—is represented by the outlook and methodology of one class in this era, the proletariat.

At the same time, precisely this proletarian world outlook and methodology should lead us to handle the contradictions with intellectuals, as well as artists (and generally the sphere of ideology, including culture) in a dialectical and not a crude, mechanical and narrow way. It should lead us both to appreciate the importance of science and other intellectual (and artistic) work that **does** more directly serve the ongoing struggle of the proletariat, and the importance of a fundamentally collective framework and approach to intellectual (and artistic) work, on the one hand; and on the other hand, to appreciate scientific inquiry and intellectual engagement (and artistic experimentation as well) which is not tied in such a direct way—and certainly not in a pragmatic, "instrumentalist" way—to the policy and more immediate aims of the proletarian party (and the proletarian state where that exists) at any given time, and which allows for and encourages the initiative of individuals, within the overall collective framework and spirit.

The many different aspects of this should be approached in such a way that it all contributes, in an overall and ultimate sense, to the larger revolutionary cause of the proletariat. As should be obvious, and as I have emphasized a number of times, these are not easy contradictions to handle correctly—but this is a challenge we must meet if we are going to make the world-historic advance to communism and achieve those two radical ruptures, with traditional property relations and traditional ideas.

* *Reflections, Sketches & Provocations* (RCP Publications, 1990). [[back](#)]

** "[The End of a Stage-The Beginning of a New Stage](#)," a talk by Bob Avakian, was published in *Revolution* magazine, Fall 1990. [[back](#)]