A new phenomenological Marxism

JAMES BOHMAN
Department of Philosophy, Saint Louis University, St. Louis, MO 63103


Every generation of modern philosophy sets for itself the task of reinventing the master thinkers of its tradition. In this century, this phenomenon has been borne out by repeated substantial reinterpretations of Marx, particularly so in France where since 1945 emergent philosophical movements have infused new philosophical concepts into Marxism. As hermeneutics informs us, such infusion is a condition for the possibility of the continued vitality of any tradition, whether political, philosophical or otherwise. This interplay with other philosophical movements and their new vocabularies has been a particular strength of Western European, non-orthodox Marxism.

"Existential" Marxism in France is perhaps the greatest expression of the lack of orthodoxy in Western Marxism. Its most influential works came after World War II, written by Merleau-Ponty and Sartre in the face of the situation of post-War Europe. The various versions of Existential Marxism influenced the interpretation of Marx in the entire post-war generation and introduced a rich phenomenological vocabulary into historical materialism, replacing its abstract, large-scale sociological descriptions with ones more adequate to phenomena of subjectivity, intersubjectivity and everyday life. However, with the rise of Althusser and now post-structuralism, the influence of existentialism has waned considerably. Against the trend toward anti-humanism in reaction to phenomenology and existentialism, Henry’s work represents a revitalization of this important Western Marxist philosophical tradition, informing it with the criticism of Western metaphysics that has been developed by Levinas and Heidegger. While in some ways it is a return to this older movement, Henry’s book is more importantly a new phenomenological Marxism appropriate to the contemporary philosophical situation in France.

Existential Marxism fell out of favor primarily because of its humanism.
For all their internal differences, both structuralism and post-structuralism see humanism as the enemy of thought, responsible for much that is wrong with modern philosophy. As can be seen from the very title of Henry’s work, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, it is evident that Henry means to provide an answer to such criticism. His answer is not just another defense of old Enlightenment humanism, but a new interpretation of it through Marx. He argues that Marx uncovered a far more radical concept of human subjectivity than has been put forward by either liberalism or previous Marxism, including the existential Marxism of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre and the Hegelian Marxism of Lukacs and the Frankfurt School. On Henry’s reading, Marx is neither a philosopher of history nor an economic theorist; he is a social critic for whom criticism is the constant attempt to rescue the irreducible subjectivity of living individuals from the invasions of social mediations and false objectifications. As construed by Henry, Marx’s primary endeavor to find such a concept of subjectivity requires more than the standard critique of institutions. The main obstacle is none other than Western metaphysics itself. Reduced from the original French edition into one dense long volume in English, Henry’s work attempts to retrieve Marx’s hitherto forgotten discovery of the living, non-representational subject of praxis, a new subject entirely distinct from the Idealistic metaphysical subject of cognition or history. Marx, not Nietzsche or Heidegger, begins the most successful attempt at a radical departure from all previous Western metaphysics in which even Husserl and Heidegger are implicated. For Henry, Marx’s persistent question in any genre of writing is a metaphysical one: the recovery of the reality of a living monadic subject. This is the key to Marx’s new philosophy of praxis and his thorough-going criticism of capitalist society.

The theme of recapturing original subjectivity places Henry squarely in the Western Marxist tradition that began with Lukacs. The category of subjectivity informed Lukacs’s Hegelian description of the proletariat as the subject of history, as well as his attempt to describe the diverse forms by which the individual subject experiences objects in the world in various historical epochs. Moreover, the humanist Marxist theme of alienation and the creation of the society in individual social activity further focused Western Marxism not merely on collective social structures but on their effects on individual subjectivity and action. But previous Western Marxism, inspired by Lukacs, adopted a basically Hegelian, and hence problematic, model of human activity. Action is seen as the objectification of some inner creative essence. Henry proposes that the philosophical key to understanding Marx is to see just how far he got beyond Hegelian metaphysics and theory of action, both of which embody all the assumptions of Western philosophy. This insight was spurred by Marx’s realization