Karl Marx, or A New Twist on Old Ideas

This article briefly compares and contrasts Kantian and Marxist thinking, trying to show how the second derived from the first.

Immanuel Kant, in 1784, described man as being in a state of immaturity, which is “the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. (1).

Karl Marx followed, sixty years later, by telling the common people that “the emancipation of society (...) from servitude is expressed in the political form of the emancipation of the workers” (2). It was the beginning of a new era that would give a new twist to old ideas.

According to Kant, the reasons for this immaturity are “laziness and cowardice.” (1) In order for some progress to occur, man must start using his reason, he must “have courage to use [his] own understanding.” (1) For Kant, the historical progress must ultimately lead to some form of freedom: “For enlightenment of this kind, all that is needed is freedom. And the freedom in question is the most innocuous form of all—freedom to make public use of one's reason in all matters.” (1) This freedom, however, must not be understood as political, or social. “A high degree of civil freedom seems advantageous to a people's intellectual freedom, yet it also sets up insuperable barriers to it. Conversely, a lesser degree of civil freedom gives intellectual freedom enough room to expand to its fullest extent.” (1) The ordinary people are free to think, but that must be the limit of their freedom: “Argue as much as you like and about whatever you like, but obey!” (1) If man starts doing more than that, the society would collapse in chaos.

One hundred and four years later, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels would declare, in their Manifesto of the Communist Party (the English edition of 1888), that “the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles.” For them, “society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes, directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.” (3) In contrast to Kant’s theory, Marx thinks that the current condition of the “proletariat” is not caused by its lack of courage to reason, but by the fact that there have always been “oppressed classes” living, more or less, at the mercy of other classes. The historical progress has only simplified this struggle, leaving only two to clash. The Marxist solution is similar to Kant's: the man (worker) must be “emancipated” in order to be free. This emancipation implies the laborers using their reason to unite in a single party that would protect their interests against the bourgeoisie – the Communist Party.

If Kant envisaged a middle course for philosophy, Marx, quite the opposite, tried to shake the world by trying to destroy its status quo. For him, the thesis and the antithesis of the two classes – “property owners and propertyless workers” must create a synthesis, which could only be a revolution. Revolution in society, in thinking, and in politics.

Echoing Kant's definition, Marx explains that “the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation – and it contains this because the whole of human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production, and all relations of servitude are but modifications and consequences of this relation” (2). Marxist philosophy sees the worker as a symbol for mankind, in general. If man would “have [the] courage to use [his] own understanding” (1), then he would ultimately be a man. Because, as he put it, right now, in his current situation, “man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, (...), etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be
anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal” (2). In other words, man should put aside his “laziness and cowardice” (1), and realize that the only way to become truly human is to become empowered by knowledge. Knowledge of his condition, and knowledge of how it can be made better. This might not have been Marx’s main argument, but it is implied. Otherwise, how can man throw away his shackles of oppression, if he is not aware of his condition? And how can he be aware of his condition, if he does not start thinking for himself, just as Kant wanted it?

Both thinkers envisaged the historical progress playing a role in freeing the human being, under one form or another. Both Kant and Marx thought that this freedom can be achieved by man through the use of reason (or emancipation). The difference between them is how each saw the reason why man is not currently free. For Kant, it is man’s own fault. Marx has the opposite idea, that the exterior, objective societal conditions are to blame. Their methods also differ. While Kant suggested a middle course for philosophy, Marx is far more political. Kant wants man to discover thinking by himself, arriving at some sort of “enlightenment” of reason, whereas Marx wants the workers to organize in groups and take action against their oppressors. For both, however, the progress of man and society is a constant preoccupation. They both feel, as they (and as we) should, that man needs constantly to improve himself, and the society around him. And they share a sense of optimism, believing that this is undoubtedly possible.

Karl Marx kept the essential core of the Enlightenment, as presented by Kant, but took it somehow to the extreme. For Marx, the phrase “Argue as much as you like and about whatever you like, but obey!” (1) is an insult. Man is in this animalistic condition because he obeys. Thinking is no longer enough. Action is needed. More than action, a complete revolution must take place. Kant’s way of thinking is obsolete. This old order must be replaced by a new one. The old man must make room for a new one: the communist.

The communist man would embody the basic ideas of Enlightenment, such as thinking for himself, free from the influence of others, but he is more than that: “the Communists (...) are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, (...) they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.” (3)

Whether this ideal, perfect man can actually exist in reality, and perform political deeds that would make the world a better place, that is a whole different story.

Works cited

(1) Kant, Immanuel – An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?", 1784, http://ebooks.gutenberg.us/WorldBookLibrary.com/whatenli.htm