

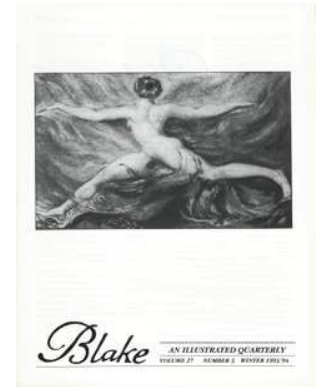
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D I S C U S S I O N

William Blake: A Man without Marx . . . ?

Chris Rubinstein

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## DISCUSSION

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with intellectual spears & long winged arrows  
of thought

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### William Blake: A Man without Marx . . . ?

by Chris Rubinstein

"William Blake: A Man Without Marx" . . . surely an untoward headline for the absorbing and informative review by John Vice (*Blake* 26 [1993]: 162) of Bronowski's famous book. A close reading of *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, along with a bit more of his work, makes it clear enough that Blake's and Marx's living faiths significantly overlapped, though Blake died when Marx was a child, and Marx apparently never knew of Blake.

There is a problem of elaboration because of the sheer intensity of the two thought systems, but nonetheless some basic principles are shared—against the mores of their times as each was aware. It would be totally uncharacteristic of admiration of Blake's verbal and visual art form to let any political bias impede a just comparison. Ideally, two memo books, each of excerpts from their writings, would assist. In the case of Marx's works, the famous 11 theses on Feuerbach dating from 1845 make a good start.<sup>1</sup>

The sweep of Marxism in a monist context is consistent with Blake's emphasis on monism and on translucence having no limit—the closing plates of *Jerusalem* and plates 20 to 28 of *Milton* provide a good example. Mastery of dialectics is mutual property, and Blake's linguistic ability may have the edge—e.g., compare Blake's "minute particulars" with the Marxist "concrete," or the daring concept of "the covering cherub" with the ponderous "a revolutionary situation." Each of them postulated an eventual near millennial transformation of human society, and dealt in his own way with a notional transitional period, partly in the future—accepting as the duty of a

philosopher not only to interpret the world but also to change it.

While the contrast between Marx's materialism and Blake's idealism cannot be absent from any evaluation, Blake's own comment (*Europe* iii: 13-18) carries conviction:

Then tell me, what is the material world,  
and is it dead?  
He laughingly answer'd: I will write a  
book on leaves of flowers  
If you will feed me on love-thoughts, &  
give me now and then  
A cup of sparkling poetic fancies; so  
when I am tipsie,  
I'll sing to you this soft lute; and shew  
you all alive  
The world, when every particle of dust  
breathes forth its joy.

So what is the significance of the ideological gap or gulf between the materialism and idealism? There may be no simple decisive answer to this question. It is clear that both Blake and Marx were aware of the consideration and refused to be deterred by it. Blake's utilization of phenomena, social inter alia, was in keeping with his realization, that whatever the ultimate assessment should be, the World is a material one. We can refer to Bronowski's major theme: Blake as an insightful commentator on the pre-steam locomotive era of the industrial revolution based in England.

An outstanding example is to be found in *Jerusalem* 59: 26-55, with a powerful description of the stream of consciousness of women at work in the new industrial system—their energy. The fact that the image of their agonies may be interpreted as deriving from a neo-Platonist view of human souls about to be born does not obviate the reference to infestation by vermin of a textile workshop and parts of creatures, living or dead, identifiable as commodities for production for the market. The women work to the point of exhaustion.

Nor should Blake's castigation of the Sons of Albion be overlooked (*Jerusalem* 10: 7-16). The liberal-minded and Whig-orientated section of the intelligentsia, led by Leigh Hunt and his brother with *The Examiner* (the Hand of Jerusalem) fell, as Blake saw it, for an erroneous ideology—one not

dialectical. Los drives the point home (*Jerusalem* 17: 33-35 and 38: 67-68) and Albion, with a sign of Blake's sense of humor, peevishly complains of "Two bleeding Contraries equally true" (*Jerusalem* 24: 3)! It would be tedious here to cite excerpts at length but *Milton* certainly undergoes a remarkably intense learning process with a commitment typical of the real Milton and later Marxists (*Milton* 32: 8-38).

Why should we be surprised that similar cultural movements influenced Blake and Hegel (1770-1832)?

If Blake had survived to a ripe old age unimpaired, what would have been his opinion of *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848? Would he have seen it as a sequel to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* or as a significant contribution to the Bible of Hell or as a new vision of Albion's or perhaps Los's?

My own conclusion is that whereas Marxism encapsulates for the human mind phenomena as essentially social phenomena, objectively and scientifically ascertainable, Blake at the other polarity emphasizes the vehicle of human consciousness as primary. That each added significantly to our understanding of the human condition, and that their systems complement rather than contradict each other, seems to me to be beyond doubt.

Bronowski, when he wrote his book in or about 1942, almost certainly firmly believed that the post-war world would see a form of socialism or communism, likeable or otherwise, in the ascendant, and that the culture of Blake could act as a humanizing influence on the apparently scientific claims of Marxism.

<sup>1</sup> The full text of the 11 theses on Feuerbach may be found in the English translation (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1950) of volume 1 of the *Selected Works of Marx and Engels* (365-67). The Manifesto of the Communist Party (sic) is in the same volume.

In addition to the references to *Milton* and *Jerusalem* above, the following may provide examples of Blake's ideology compared with Marxism: *Milton* 38: 28-32, 40: 9-11; *Jerusalem* 9: 17-27, 29: 33-40, 31: 13-18, 33: 17-34, 42: 25-28, 49: 65-76, 55: 55-66, 63: 26-31, 89 (the covering cherub), and 91: 21-29.