

LUKACS, KIERKEGAARD, MARX AND THE POLITICAL

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Despite the fact that they were writing at the same time, Kierkegaard and Marx are usually thought to have little in common. Marx wrote the *Communist Manifesto* in 1847 and Kierkegaard produced *Two Ages* in 1846. Both completed their doctoral dissertations in 1841. But there the similarity is supposed to end. Kierkegaard and Marx are two thinkers who are normally thought to have radically different concerns and opposing theoretical outlooks. Both were intellectually shaped by the work of Hegel or by some follower of Hegel. However Kierkegaard, it is commonly held, rejected Hegel and the Danish Hegelians, while Marx drew heavily on Hegel, and critically developed his theory. Kierkegaard is seen as focussing on individuals working out their own salvations while Marx invites all proletarians of the world to unite.¹ Kierkegaard is said to be concerned, as one commentator has put it, with ‘individual inwardness of self choice while Marx focuses on external self-activity in the social practice of material production’ (Toews 2004: 420). Marx’s works shaped the thinking of Lenin and Lukacs, amongst others, whereas Kierkegaard influenced Heidegger and the existentialists. This is the story about the two thinkers that is commonly told. In this chapter, I will challenge the view that Marx and Kierkegaard have little in common. I will do so partly through consideration of a work by Lukacs on Kierkegaard. Lukacs claims that Kierkegaard has no conception of ‘system’. I will challenge this. I will then briefly outline a reading of Marx, drawn mainly from the *German Ideology*, that shows that, contrary to some readings, and like Kierkegaard, Marx is concerned with human beings and their activity as well as to provide a systematic theory of history.

1. LUKACS AND KIERKEGAARD

One Marxist thinker who did write about Kierkegaard and who saw some similarity between his own Marxism and the work of Kierkegaard is Gyrgy Lukacs. The latter was a 20th century Hungarian Marxist philosopher whose interpretation of Marx, drawing on the notion of ‘class consciousness’, challenged the orthodox Stalinist view. I would like, in this chapter, to consider Lukacs’ (2010) engagement with Kierkegaard, in his early essay, *The Foundering of Form against Life: Søren Kierkegaard and Regine Olsen*, an article published in the collection of essays *Soul and Form*. I will then move to outline a response to Lukacs and to suggest that there are more parallels between the thought of Kierkegaard and that of Marx than even Lukacs suggested.

In his essay, Lukacs celebrates what he views as Kierkegaard’s understanding of the ‘alienation’ of humans in his contemporary world. He notes that Kierkegaard deeply understands love and suffering. In this respect he sees Kierkegaard as sharing one of his own abiding concerns. Yet he is critical of Kierkegaard for two central reasons. One of these relates to Kierkegaard’s handling of his affair with Regine Olsen. Lukacs analyses Kierkegaard’s actions in relation to her as founded upon a ‘gesture’ that could not possibly work in the way he imagined it would. Lukacs claims that, by presenting himself as unworthy of her, Kierkegaard believed he could make Regine understand that he and Regine were incompatible and that she would then be able to move on and find happiness elsewhere. For Lukacs, this represents a ‘gesture’ because the modern social world is so fragmented that there could be no guarantee that she would see his actions in the light he had intended. There could be no certainty that she would not blame herself for the break in their relationship.

For Lukacs, and this is his second major criticism of Kierkegaard, this reflects something about Kierkegaard's corpus in general. While Kierkegaard claims, according to Lukacs, that there is no 'system' in the world, he nonetheless acts as though there were such a system. Given, to take one example, Kierkegaard's focus on the paradoxical nature of reality, as exemplified through figures such as Abraham, one might have expected him to apply this to his own life as well. Lukacs, then, claims that while Kierkegaard properly analyses the central problem – that of alienation – in the contemporary world, he fails to offer any solution to this problem. He fails, in other words, either to offer a systematic theory of history or to propose any social or historical solution to this problem.

Lukacs draws an analogy between Kierkegaard's treatment of Regine and his philosophical outlook. According to Lukacs, Kierkegaard refused to consider that historical change might act as a solution to the problem of alienation.² Rather than suggesting some major historical event or process that could bring about preferable conditions for all, Kierkegaard, for Lukacs, preferred the solution of individual 'faith.' Lukacs goes on to make the point that Kierkegaard might have made similar mistakes to the Hegelian (or, one might say the Adlerian) 'speculators' he apparently decries³. Lukacs writes: 'And so (for Kierkegaard) there is no system anywhere for it is not possible to live a system; the system is always a vast palace while its creator can only withdraw into a modest corner.' He continues, (2010: 48): 'is not the denial of a system itself a system?'

Kierkegaard, according to one commentator on Lukacs on Kierkegaard, Zachary (1999), has analysed the social world in a similar fashion to Lukacs. Yet rather than proposing a 'world historical' solution to the problem of alienation or of the superficiality of conventional Christianity, Kierkegaard argues that only an individual solution is possible. The future, as

Zachary puts it, is uncertain, and therefore, according to Kierkegaard, the only way forward is for people to turn inward to find their ‘truth.’ For Lukacs, however, this view amounts to Kierkegaard ‘systematising’ hostility towards any system.

Most commentators on Kierkegaard, like Lukacs here, have denied that he makes reference to any ‘system.’ Lukacs goes one step further, however, in his claim that Kierkegaard makes a system out of his denial of system.

2. **KIERKEGAARD: AN ANTI-SYSTEMATISER?**

I’d like, in this section, to consider the claim that Kierkegaard critiques the notion of ‘system.’ I will note Lukacs’ extension of this view, namely that Kierkegaard ‘systematises’ his hostility towards any notion of system.

2.1 Evidence for the claim that Kierkegaard is ‘anti-system’

The evidence for Kierkegaard challenging all notions of system can be found in a number of places in his work. One possible place is *Fear and Trembling* (F&T). In that text, de Silentio claims that ‘the philosophers’ were attempting to ‘sell off’ the most significant ideas—those, one might suppose, that concerned matters of faith—in a ‘dirt cheap’ manner (F&T, 41). ‘Actuality,’ de Silentio writes, cannot be comprehended in the fashion of the Hegelians—or the Adlerians. ‘Actuality’ is about real life—about activity and faith—while the discourse of the systematisers is about logical matters or conceptual relations. ‘Even if one were able to render the whole content of faith into conceptual form, it would not follow that one had grasped faith, grasped how one came to it or how it came to one’ (F&T, 43). Or, as Vigilius Haufniensis puts it in *The Concept of Anxiety*, philosophy makes a crucial error when actuality is considered as a part of logic (CA, 9–

10/SKS 4, 282–3). Indeed, one might argue, in an extension of this point, that the very form of much of Kierkegaard's writing involves a challenge to the notion of 'system.' Even if one did not accept that all systems involve reference to 'logical' or 'conceptual' relations, Kierkegaard would be critical of all notions of system. For not only does his use of pseudonyms involve an ironic playing with the very idea that it is he that is the author of the works, but he also constantly makes reference to stories—Abraham and Isaac, Adam and Eve, Sarah and Tobias and many more—instead of writing about more abstract theoretical matters. For these and other reasons, he has been labelled the 'father' of existentialism and as focussing on an individual's relationship to a transcendent God. These latter foci are thought to preclude a concern with abstract and 'systematising' theory.

Another text that appears to support the view that Kierkegaard is anti-system, is *Continuing Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Climacus, the pseudonymous author of this text, appears to critique anything that seems to be analogous to a science. He appears, as he does elsewhere, to satirise the 'systematisers.' Climacus seems to suggest that the most significant, the most profound truths can never be presented in such a fashion. Climacus notes that the very possibility of inward truths poses a problem for systematisers, since for them, the system is supposed to encompass everything. The very existence of such truths suggests a 'gap' in the system. Climacus writes: 'the systematic idea is the subject-object, is the unity of thinking and being; existence, on the other hand, is precisely the separation [...] existence has spaced and does space subject from object, thought from being' (CUP 1, 123/SKS 7, 120).

However, it is at least possible to suggest that the commonplace view that Kierkegaard is 'anti-system' is open to contestation. I would like, in the next section, to challenge the claim that Kierkegaard is wholly 'anti-system.' The claim that Kierkegaard is hostile to 'system' is a very

familiar way of reading him, but it is worth noting that it is a reading that is being challenged by a number of recent authors including Žižek, Michael Burns, Maria Binetti, Steven Shakespeare and myself.⁴

2.2 Challenge to the view that Kierkegaard is ‘anti-system’

The first point to note is that the aforementioned critiques of the idea of system perhaps presuppose that all ‘systematising thinking’ must be internally coherent. It suggests that ‘systems’ will be free from paradox, free from gaps and perhaps will also fail to provide room for doubt. In *Philosophical Fragments*, by contrast to this, Climacus represents doubt as inherent in thought. There is no possibility of gaining the kind of knowledge Descartes, for example, sought. However, this point, rather than indicating that Kierkegaard is anti-system, might instead suggest that he believes that any system must be open to the view that its claims could be wrong, that it might contain gaps and that its authors need not claim to be certain that its claims represent truths that could not possibly be shown to be wrong. Although it is undoubtedly the case, therefore, that Kierkegaard doubts that it is possible to gain the kind of knowledge about reality and specifically about the social world that some have thought possible, it does not follow that Kierkegaard is entirely critical of any reference to ‘system.’

One recent philosopher, as noted, who takes a different view of Kierkegaard’s conception of system is Slavoj Žižek. According to Žižek (2009), referring to Kierkegaard, ‘God is the name for the Absolute Other against which we can measure the thorough contingency of reality—as such it cannot be conceived as any kind of Substance, as the supreme thing’ (Žižek 2009: 79). Michael Burns (2012, 107) reads Žižek as implying not that there is no system in Kierkegaard’s

work but rather that the system as a whole must contain contingency. Maria Binetti, as well, writes that ‘the history of philosophy has kept Kierkegaard and Hegel apart. I believe that this has been sadly detrimental to both of them, as their longstanding opposition has swept through the speculative greatness of Kierkegaard’s thought and the existential power of Hegel’s’ (Binetti 2007: 183). For Žižek, Binetti and Burns, as well as for some other recent readers of Kierkegaard, then, the latter offers a metaphysic, drawing on the German Idealist tradition, of contingency. Instead of breaking with the German Idealist tradition, he rather builds upon it and draws from it.

For Žižek, then, the recognition that practical ethical choice precedes every theory itself represents Kierkegaard’s theoretical position and it indicates his continuity with the German Idealist tradition. One might be forgiven for thinking that this is mere word play. The very same characteristics that led former commentators on Kierkegaard to indicate Kierkegaard’s break with the German Idealist tradition are re-cast by Žižek as an engagement with it. However, Žižek has a particular reason for his argument. His reason stems from the work of Kant. Kant had suggested, in his ‘First Antinomy’ in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that the conception ‘the world as a whole’ is both phenomenal and noumenal. It is noumenal in so far it is a concept that lies beyond the possibility of categorical representation. It cannot be known in the way in which phenomena in the spatial and temporal world can be known. Yet it is phenomenal in the sense that it represents, for beings like us, the limits of our world. The mind, for Kant, is necessarily led to speculate up to its own limits and in this sense the ‘world as a whole’ depicts the limits of our world, our phenomenal world. The transcendental self, then, that experiences these paradoxes, represents, for Žižek, the ‘ultimate parallax’ (Žižek 2009: 22). By parallax he means an ‘insurmountable gap between two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible’ (Žižek 2009: 4).

Žižek suggests that Kant is the originator of this notion but that it is Kierkegaard, following Fichte and Schelling, who fully develops it. For Žižek, both Kierkegaard's self and reality-as-a-whole are in some sense contingent and paradoxical in an analogous fashion to the transcendental self of Kant outlined above. For Žižek, this indicates a fact about the relation between a contingent subject—any such subject—and reality. God in Žižek's interpretation of Kierkegaard, becomes a power, a 'becoming' as opposed to a thing, There is no clear possibility of mediation between the 'ethical' and the 'religious'. As Burns reads Žižek, infinite resignation is the recognition of the lack of any consistent move from the ethical to the religious and the anxiety produced by this recognition (Burns, 2012, 108). Burns further suggests that this 'inwardness', rather than indicating a break from the socio-political, is in fact a precondition of doing anything at all (Burns, 2012:108). If this reading of Kierkegaard has even a modicum of plausibility it already brings him closer to Marx, as the latter is commonly read.

Žižek suggests that Kierkegaard's 'system' is comprised of processes rather than substances or things. This, then, for me, comprises Kierkegaard's 'system.' There are, indeed, other commentators on Kierkegaard—e.g. Pattison and Carlisle—who have seen him as a thinker who emphasises processes. Pattison refers to actuality, for Kierkegaard, as 'containing potentiality or possibility within itself' (Pattison 2003: 40). The world is permeated by temporality or becoming. However, for them, like many commentators on Kierkegaard, he is not a philosopher or a 'systematiser' at all. The reason they draw this conclusion, however, may be because they see philosophy in a particular light—perhaps philosophy, for them, excludes reference to a world that contains movement and process but that also contains wonder, the sublime and paradox. Perhaps they are also influenced in their view by Kierkegaard's own critical and satirical references to 'the philosopher' or 'the system'. It is likely though, as Stewart

has claimed, that Kierkegaard's satirical comments concern the Danish Hegelians who exerted such a strong influence over Kierkegaard's contemporaries, rather than Hegel in particular or than 'all philosophers' in general (Stewart 2011: 237–53).

Evidence for Kierkegaard's process system emerges in many places. One piece of evidence is his positive reference to Heraclitus⁵, who offers an ontology of process, of movement. De Silentio, in the epilogue to *Fear and Trembling*, also mentions Heraclitus' follower, Cratylus, who 'goes further' than Heraclitus. Cratylus wrote, in relation to Heraclitus' claim that one cannot step into the same river twice, that one cannot even do it once (F&T, 152). Cratylus went too far and rendered both movement and stasis impossible and translated both into an Eleatic doctrine that denies movement altogether. In a journal note, Kierkegaard writes: 'A disciple wanting to improve it said: One cannot even step into the river once. Thereby the nerve is cut; as far as making any sense, the statement becomes the opposite, an Eleatic sentence and denies motion' (JP, 3290/PAP IV, A 20) Also in CUP, Kierkegaard praises Heraclitus and criticises the Hegelian notion of movement (CUP, 307/SKS 7 263)). Further positive references to Heraclitus occur in *Philosophical Fragments* (PF, 167/SKS 4, 146). So there is evidence, then, that Kierkegaard, like Marx, saw the world as in process, as constantly changing.

As Jason Wirth has noted, in his *Introduction* to his translation of Schelling's *Ages of the World*, Kierkegaard's view of time is informed by that of Schelling (Wirth 2000: xxix). In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard wrote: 'Thus understood, the moment is not properly an atom of time but an atom of eternity. It is the first reflection of eternity in time, its first attempt, as it were, of stopping time' (CA, 88/SKS 4, 358). We cannot capture the moment, for as soon as we attempt to do this, it has gone. In other words, it is impossible for we limited beings, really to capture stasis. We experience the world as in process, as temporal. When we try to catch the moment, it

disappears. So the above quote from Kierkegaard, then, suggests that ‘the moment’ is not a category of time because time is always passing. In effect, then, it is an atom of eternity—an atom of a timeless universe.

We might generalise this, as Schelling set out to do, by suggesting that we imagine that reason itself is self-contained, complete. Reason appears to allow us to gain access to the truth. But we cannot even do this with a moment of time. In the *Ages of the World*, Schelling is setting out to capture in language the ‘excess’ of reason or the ground of reason. The entire world, he writes, seems to be caught in reason, but he poses the question: how did it come to be this way? Schelling suggests, in metaphorical form, that the origin of the intelligible is God becoming time. In turn, this notion relates back to Plato’s *Timaeus*, the ‘wild unruly matter’ or the potency within Being (Schelling 2000: 3-8).

It is perhaps worth speculating that the view that Kierkegaard challenges system may stem partially, then, from an unfamiliarity, within much western philosophical thinking, with the notion of process and also with speculation about the origins of this. In some Islamic thinking, by contrast, both of these ideas may be more familiar. In the thought of Mulla Sadra, for example, God is Pure Act and reality is comprised of energy, or power (Jambert 2007). In this thought, which itself draws, as do both Kierkegaard and Marx, on the ancient Greeks, philosophy is a way of life; it involves more than mere contemplation.

Kierkegaard, then, emphasises the importance of activity—activity in this metaphysical and deep sense, but also the activity of individual human beings and of groups of people. Many of the characters whose stories he re-writes are people who, in various and different ways, enact their beliefs. Two obvious exemplifications of this are, of course, Christ and Abraham. But there

are also characters like Agamemnon, who, while not receiving quite the stamp of approval afforded the former, nonetheless act from principle and for a cause.

Indeed, throughout Kierkegaard's works, there are references to the importance of action—he often uses metaphors of swimming to suggest reasons why it is important not to focus merely on thinking at the expense of action. For example, in a rendering of the good Samaritan parable, Kierkegaard considers someone who sees a person in danger and thinks about how it would be a good idea to help them (WL, 22/SKS 9, 100). But this person doesn't do so in time and then later regrets his decision and returns, but too late. This reaction, Kierkegaard suggests, is inferior to acting immediately. Moreover, it is important to note that it is the act of diving or swimming that Kierkegaard admires, rather than the actor doing the swimming or the diving.

3. KIERKEGAARD ON LIVING NATURE

There is one more very specific additional reason, however, that has been given for denying that Kierkegaard makes any reference to system, and specifically for claiming that he broke with the German Idealist tradition. Apart from his many ironic and negative references to Hegelian philosophy, there is also a claim that relates specifically to Schelling. In 1842, Kierkegaard attended the latter's lectures, along with Engels, Burkhart and Bakunin. He was at first transfixed and then disappointed. Many commentators have argued that this is the end of the matter as far as Kierkegaard's relation to Schelling is concerned. However, there is another way of looking at this. Michelle Kosch (2006) has noted that Kierkegaard continued to acquire works by Schelling after he had attended the lectures. Moreover, there are strong resemblances between Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift* and Kierkegaard's *Concept of Anxiety*. Thirdly, there are positive references to Schelling in other texts of Kierkegaard (for a summary of this, see Assiter 2015: 56-58).

In my book *Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Birth* (Assiter 2015), I point to a common theme in the work of Schelling and Kierkegaard, notably, the suggestion that both offer some sort of process system and specifically that they each see nature, the ground of nature and human nature in terms of a system of powers. I further argue that both can be read as conceptualising this nature in terms of metaphors of birth. I refer specifically to Schelling's freedom essay where he focuses on evil and on freedom.

I will summarise something of the argument here but if the reader wishes to read more, she will find it in the book. Schelling writes: 'the whole of modern European philosophy since its inception (through Descartes) has this common deficiency that nature does not exist for it and that it lacks a living basis' (Schelling 2006: 355). The *Freiheitsschrift* presents an active process ontology that significantly 'precedes our thinking of it' (Schelling 2006: 421). Ultimately the process is grounded in something that precedes all ground, something that represents an excess in the system of grounding, that Schelling calls a 'non-ground' or an 'ungrund' or in Wirth's words 'an irreducible remainder' (Wirth 2000: xv). God, in this system and specifically in the *Weltalter*, is beyond both Being and Not-Being. Wirth helpfully quotes Lyotard on Wittgenstein, who responded to the latter's claim that we cannot 'say the unsayable.' Lyotard suggests that we must try to do this. Imagining that one cannot speak about the limits of language, as Wittgenstein does, for Lyotard, is to suppose a beginning without any presuppositions at all. Instead, the beginning, as noted, for Schelling, is conceived in terms of a potency or a power (Wirth 2000: xii).

Schelling's essay, moreover, claims that freedom must exist in some form 'in' the whole of nature. Haufniensis, in *The Concept of Anxiety*, I have argued elsewhere, (Assiter, 2015), presupposes this Schellingian system. Using it, one can make sense of the Adam and Eve story, deployed there, as accounting for the origin of evil. Adam and Eve, given the Schellingian

assumptions, existed in a living and active natural world but one in which there was not yet any awareness of right and wrong, good and evil. I have argued, along with others, that Haufniensis, like Schelling in the *Freedom* essay, is partly responding to Kant, the Kant of *Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason*. Summarising my argument, the claim is that Kant was unable to see how the story of Eve and Adam can explain the origin of freedom and evil because he assumed that Adam and Eve must be either wholly outside history or wholly inside it. Reading the story in terms of a Schellingian process ontology, however, allows for them to be partly inside and partly outside history, and so freedom can ‘come into’ them. As Kierkegaard puts it ‘by the first sin, sinfulness came into Adam’ (CA,33/ SKS IV, 305). I suggested that, in Kierkegaard’s reading, Adam and Eve existed without knowledge, innocently, in the Garden of Eden, prior to the eating of the forbidden fruit. They were, at that point, neither human nor animal. Since there was nothing, both were anxious. When Eve ate the fruit, freedom and knowledge ‘entered into’ them via a ‘qualitative leap’. The natural world, then, on this view, is made up of living powers, grounded in a force or a power that sets the whole process in motion.

Read in these ways, then, Kierkegaard does have a clear conception of system: his is a system founded on processes or powers, that culminate, as they did in Schelling, in a potency that might perhaps best be characterised as both ground and excess of ground. So it is possible to argue, then, that Kierkegaard did offer a conception of system.

There is something else that is important that I would like to mention here. In *Ages of the World*, as well as in the *Freiheitschrift*, Schelling characterises intellectuals who describe themselves as devoid of the ‘madness of freedom’ as in some way physically and morally sick. Schelling writes: ‘One could say that there is a kind of person in which there is no madness whatsoever. These would be the uncreative people incapable of procreation, the ones that call

themselves sober spirits. These are the so-called intellectuals whose works and deeds are nothing but cold intellectual works and intellectual deeds.[...] But where there is no madness, there is certainly no proper active, living intellect' (Schelling 2000: xiiiio). In other words, Schelling is critiquing a conception of system that might be the one held by many commentators on Kierkegaard. This is a conception of system that assumes that reason and madness, indeed reason and action, are diametrically opposed to one another. This may perhaps be a 'scientific' view of system.

Kierkegaard picks up on Schelling's language. In *Two Ages*, he critiques the 'herd' who mindlessly follow a given outlook on the world. Merold Westphal, in his book *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (Westphal 1991), noting this, has suggested that Kierkegaard offers a critique of the conception of reason expressed in his own epoch.

In this section, I have suggested that Kierkegaard may, contrary to the suggestion of many commentators, have a conception of system. Indeed, I have suggested further that the notion of system he adopts is one that would not be familiar to many philosophers in the western tradition. Furthermore, I have argued that Kierkegaard may have been poking fun not at all systematisers, but rather specifically at those 'systematisers' who adopt a static and ultimately, for we humans, impossible notion of a system. I will now move to sketch a brief picture of Marx's work that demonstrates that he too is concerned with living, active human beings as well as with providing a systematic theory of history. Therefore his outlook shares some characteristics with that of Kierkegaard.⁶

4. MARX ON LIVING NATURE

Marx, like Kierkegaard, is concerned with natural, living and active beings. Like Kierkegaard, Marx offers a theory of history based on processes of change, processes involving these living and active beings. The focus of his materialist theory of history is human activity. Famously, in the first thesis on Feuerbach of 1845, Marx writes: ‘The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing [*Gegenstand*], reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object [*Objekt*] or of intuition [*Anschauung*], but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively’ (Marx 1968: 28). Then in the eleventh thesis, he famously notes: ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however is to change it’ (Marx 1968: 30). Like Kierkegaard, then, Marx is critical of certain interpretations of Hegelianism, in his case, that of the Young Hegelians, and he writes about them in the *German Ideology* as ‘sheep.’ He sets out to ‘uncloak.... these sheep, who take themselves and are taken for wolves’ (Marx 1965: 29). Their ideas were abstract and irrelevant. In this sense of ‘system’ then, Marx is critical of the Hegelians in similar manner to de Silentio, who pokes fun at the ‘systematisers’ (F & T, 41-3). Like Kierkegaard, moreover, Marx is concerned to offer a theory that differs from the pure abstractions of ‘the philosophers’ and also of any theory that fails to take human activity as central.

Both Kierkegaard and Marx, then, emphasise the importance of action and particularly action carried out freely. The subject matter of Marx’s materialist conception of history is material life. What is this? The answer is that it is ‘people, their activity and the material conditions under which they live’ (Marx 1965: 39). Marx continues: ‘We must begin by stating the first premise of all existence and therefore of all history, the premise, namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to “make history.” But life involves eating, drinking, a habitation, clothing, and many other things. The first historical act is therefore the production of the means

to satisfy these needs' (Marx 1965: 39). Marx is concerned, in other words, with human beings and their conditions of life.

Marx also writes: 'man is a natural being. He is an active natural being' (Marx 1975: 167-8). Not only is production an active process but for Marx, additionally, knowledge is active. As Sidney Hook puts it: 'Marx sought to save the idealist's insight that knowledge is active. Otherwise his own historical materialism would result in fatalism. The starting point of perception is not an object on the one hand and a subject opposed to it on the other, but an interacting process within which sensations are just as much the resultant of the active mind (the total organism) as the things acted upon. What is beheld in perception, then, depends just as much upon the perceived as upon the antecedent cause of the perception' (Hook 1985: 88-9).

As human beings live with one another, according to Marx, they develop relations with one another and these relations change with the growth of the productive forces. However, major changes in social relations require a level of consciousness on the part of working class human beings. Like de Silentio, once more, who salutes Descartes for 'doing what he has said' (F&T,41) as opposed to the Hegelians, who simply speculate for its own sake, Marx emphasises the importance of human activity that has a point or a purpose.

Both Kierkegaard and Marx, then, are naturalists. They are not reductive mechanistic naturalists, but they rather see a continuity between humans and other natural beings. Each of them accepts an ontology of processes or powers. Both Kierkegaard and Marx claim that nature conditions consciousness. For Marx, famously, 'the production of ideas, of conceptions, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life' (Marx 1965: 40). In the Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*, he writes: 'legal relations as well as forms of state are to be grasped neither from themselves nor from the so-

called general development of the human mind, but rather have their roots in the material conditions of life' (Marx, 1968: 181). Neither Kierkegaard nor Marx accepts a reductive form either of materialism or of idealism: rather, for both thinkers, thoughts and actions form part of an active living reality.

I have argued elsewhere that the relation between being and consciousness for Marx can be read as both an identity and a causal relation. The claim that consciousness is identical with being is not a necessary truth, because it holds between items under different descriptions (like the Morning Star and the Evening Star) but specifically the two terms designate different 'time slices' of the same individual (Assiter 1979: 18-20). So an individual as a natural being causally shapes that individual as a conscious being but the two are also the same person. Similarly, for Kierkegaard, the individual and natural being, Eve, who has no consciousness and simply exists in the natural world, is identical with the person who comes to have consciousness after the emergence in her of freedom. But the former, through her actions of eating of the forbidden fruit, caused the latter to come into being.

For both Marx and Kierkegaard, moreover, the self is a natural being partly shaped by a power that lies outside it—for Marx some kind of an ideal and for Kierkegaard a norm stemming from God.

So it seems, then, that it is possible to argue that there are commonalities, to a greater degree than is suggested by Lukacs, between the thought of the two writers. It might be argued, though, that this might be accepted but it does not answer Lukacs' point that Kierkegaard is basically a thinker about the individual in relation to a transcendent God and that he does not accept that there can be any historical solution to the problems of alienation and anxiety. It seems

to me, however, that there is some evidence in Kierkegaard's writings that this claim might not be wholly true.

5. *TWO AGES*

In his text, *Two Ages*, written after *Postscript*, Kierkegaard writes about the 'revolutionary' and the 'present' ages. He writes positively about the 'revolutionary age' and contrasts it with the static mindlessness of what he calls the 'present age.' The age of revolution 'takes action with passion' in contrast to the present age which is a 'reflective age devoid of passion' (TA, 70/SKS 8, 67). The age of revolution is an age of revelation 'by a manifestation of energy that unquestionably is a definite something and does not deceptively change under the influence of contextual criticism' (TA, 66/SKS 8, 63).

In some respects Kierkegaard's description of the 'true revolutionary' fits that of the individual suffering before God. Just like the Knight of Faith, 'humanly speaking' the revolutionary may lose everyday taken-for-granted realities; he or she may lose home, family and jobs, but they may also gain a passion for action and for a cause with which they strongly identify. The age of revolution, Kierkegaard writes, can 'prefigure the eternal' while the present age, by contrast, is a 'fossilised formalism' which has lost the 'originality of the ethical' (TA, 78/SKS 8, 74).

Revolution, it must be noted, is not conceived by Kierkegaard quite as Lukacs does. Kierkegaard did not view revolution as leading towards a Utopia that would effectively alter the reified and alienated structure of existing society. Indeed, he would probably have doubted that such a view of the future was possible. That in itself might lend support to Zachary's view that

Kierkegaard was a pessimist and that his views were strongly at variance with those of Marx and Lukacs on the subject of historical change. Yet Kierkegaard might counter this with the claim that the view that a Utopia is possible for we finite limited beings is itself founded upon a conception of ‘actuality’ that is Hegelian or Adlerian in the bad sense. It assumes a kind of necessary logical development of the historical process that is inappropriate for the world of real interactions between beings like us. Doubting that Utopia is possible in the full ‘communist’ sense does not mean that dramatic change is not possible. A revolution, for Kierkegaard, as I have just outlined, shares many features of the relation between an individual and a transcendent God. Yet it is a collective process. If it were really informed by moral ideals akin to those of a truly religious person, then it could, on Kierkegaard’s premises, quite properly be regarded as capable of bringing about change for the better.

6. CONCLUSION

If this interpretation of the works of both Kierkegaard and Marx is deemed to have any modicum of plausibility, then it casts doubt both upon the view that Kierkegaard was ‘anti-system’ and on the view that he denied the possibility of change. But it also casts doubt upon the view that Marx was a radically different kind of systematiser from Kierkegaard. How about the other accusation, made by Zachary, that Kierkegaard both denies the notion of system, and implicitly, accepts it as well? It seems somewhat unfair to describe Kierkegaard’s actions in relation to Regine as demonstrating that he believed in a system, at the same time as he theoretically decried the notion of system. It is difficult to judge the actions of any philosopher outside their philosophical thinking, as indicating that their philosophising is somehow challenged. All of us are finite and limited, and, at times, we act in ways that we might in

principle decay. Kierkegaard's brief and somewhat unhappy life has been subjected to more intense scrutiny than have the lives of many philosophers. His texts are often supposed to be either about his relationship to Regine or they are said to contradict his relationship. He is claimed to have acted well in relation to her and to have acted badly. So if this is the evidence that is offered for claiming that Kierkegaard contradicts his own philosophical pronouncements, then I suggest it should be taken with a pinch of salt.

In this paper, I have suggested that the view that Kierkegaard is not a 'systematising' philosopher is open to challenge. But I have also questioned the view that, although Marx and Kierkegaard lived at the same time, this is about all they have in common. Instead I have suggested that both are some kind of naturalist and that both emphasise activity over passivity. Finally, I have questioned the view, held by Lukacs, that while Kierkegaard theorised the notion of alienation, he was unsympathetic to any notion of social change or revolution. It may be, then, that Kierkegaard and Marx have more in common than at first meets the eye.

RELATED TOPICS

Anthony Rudd (1997) *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, Oxford: OUP.

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FURTHER READING

Assiter, Alison (2015) *Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Birth*, London: Rowman and Littlefield.

The book offers a speculative naturalist reading of Kierkegaard, viewing nature in terms of metaphors of birth.

Ryan, Bartholomew (2014) *Kierkegaard's Indirect Politics, interludes with Schmitt, Benjamin and Adorno*. Boston: Rodopi, Brill.

Ryan gives an interdisciplinary reading of Kierkegaard and argues that a radical political gesture can be found in his work.

Toews, John Edward (2004) *Antiphilosophical Epilogue: Historicising Identity in Kierkegaard and Marx, 1841-1846*, from *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory in Early 19th century Berlin*, Cambridge: CUP.

The book is an intellectual history of the period and the final section considers Marx and Kierkegaard. Toews considers common elements in the two thinkers' conceptions of self-hood.

NOTES

¹ For one study of the subject, see Ryan (2014).

² Marcuse makes a similar point. He writes of Kierkegaard's work that it is the 'last great attempt to restore religion as the ultimate organon for liberating humanity from the destructive impact of an oppressive social order' (Marcuse 1941: 265).

³ Jon Stewart (2007) in his monumental work, has altered understanding of Kierkegaard's relationship to Hegel. He has suggested that Kierkegaard was probably criticizing the Danish Hegelians, and, in particular Adler, rather than Hegel himself. It is important to add, however, that Kierkegaard was also clearly aware of the texts of Hegel himself.

⁴ See Binetti (2007), Burns (2012), and Assiter (2015).

⁵ Heraclitus was a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher who believed that change was the fundamental principle of the universe.

⁶ One of the most significant theorists who emphasizes Marx as a 'systematiser' is Louis Althusser who sees Marx as primarily concerned with offering a 'scientific' theory of history. See Alison Assiter, 1990, for a critique of this reading of Marx.