

Is There A Marxist Humanism ?

by Peter Barry

For the past three or four years a lively debate has been taking place in Chinese intellectual circles about the relationship of Marxism and humanism (rendao juyi).¹ In fact, one essayist has stated that in the last three years over four hundred articles having to do with the topic humanism in Marxism have appeared.² Besides essays and articles by various commentators, academic seminars have been held to discuss the topic. At least one book entitled, Marxism and Man, has appeared.³ The debate has influenced campaigns, such as the discussion on the "Meaning of Life," inaugurated by China Youth magazine in the Spring of 1980,⁴ the building up of "spiritual civilization," and the practice of the "five stresses" and "four points of decency."⁵

In this article we will give a brief summary of the writings and discussions on the subject of humanism, which have taken place in the recent past, in order that our readers might have an idea of the parameters and directions of the debate. We start with some important essays written by scholars on both sides of the issue, that is, those who affirm that there is such a thing as a Marxist humanism and those who deny that there is any humanism in Marxism at all. We will then give the conclusions of some academic seminars on the subject of humanism in Marx.

The first essay is one entitled "Is Humanism Revisionism?" by one Ru Xin, which appeared in the People's Daily exactly three years ago, August 15, 1980.⁶ Ru Xin began his essay by saying that the criticism of humanism as revisionism, which has taken place over the last 20 years is one-sided and simplistic, and under the banner of "revolution," has led to all kinds of lawless behaviour. The criticism not only contributed nothing to Marxist theory, he wrote, but on the contrary, it distorted its real spirit.

Run Xin then went on to define humanism. He distinguished between a narrow and a broad meaning. Humanism in the narrow sense refers to the intellectual and cultural movement of Renaissance Europe

which opposed feudalism and theology. Humanism in the broad sense refers to a system of thought which advocates the protection of human dignity, rights and freedom, attaches great importance to the value of the human person, and seeks full human development and the like. It is in this latter sense that Ru Xin uses humanism in his essay. To put it in a simple sentence, he writes, humanism advocates treating man as a man.

Ru Xin then described how Marx pointed out the source of the inhuman character of the capitalist system. In the capitalist system, according to Marx, man is alienated from the product of his labor; man becomes a mere tool in the production of goods and wealth. The crime of capitalism, Ru Xin wrote, is not the mere oppression and exploitation of one class by another, but the enslavement of the whole human race. Thus the aim of the communist revolution, he says, is not simply the overthrow of the capitalist system, but the liberation of the entire human race. "Communism is ... the return of man to himself and to social (i.e., humanized) man," Marx wrote.

In the second section of his essay, Ru Xin criticized those who separate the writings of the young Marx from those of the mature Marx, and say that the mature Marx rejected the humanism of his early years. On the contrary, our author writes, the development of the theories of historical materialism and of surplus value, products of Marx's mature years, put his humanist thought on a truly scientific basis because these theories explained the objective laws of development within human social history, and disclosed the secret of human exploitation in the capitalist system of production. In Ru Xin's view, Marx's attention to the human problem represented a continuous intellectual development throughout his whole life. Marxism must contain humanism within itself, Ru Xin holds, otherwise it could follow the opposite road and become a cold and lifeless dogmatism, which considers human beings beneath its notice. It might even change into a new form of alienation exercising control over humanity. From its past history, hasn't international communism learned this lesson, Ru Xin asks?

In the third and final section of his essay, Ru Xin distinguished Marxist humanism from its capitalist counterparts, stating that the humanism of the proletariat is much more enlightened. The points of difference he lists are as follows:

1. Other humanist theories start from an abstract, general humanity, and lack a concrete historical analysis of the human situation. Marxism, on the other hand, insists upon a class perspective throughout,

as it investigates, analyzes and resolves the human problem.

2. Humanists have generally been ignorant of the social source of inhuman phenomena. Thus, the most they do is to sympathize with the sufferers of inhuman phenomena and offer specific forms of aid. However, they are unable to find a way to eliminate these phenomena at the root. Their humanism cannot possibly be thorough. Marxism, on the other hand, through its deep analysis of the capitalist social system, points out that the exploitation of humans by humans is the most important source of all inhuman phenomena. Marxism takes the abolition of exploitation and the elimination of private property as the programme for its concrete struggle. It destroys the possibility for the occurrence of any further inhuman phenomena. Thus, Marxism can be said to be a most thoroughgoing humanism.

3. Non-Marxist humanists all believe in historical idealism. They hope to build a future society based on such humanist ideals as the improvement of "human nature" and the victory of "eternal righteousness." Or else, they look for the appearance of individual heroic persons or "great saviours of humanity." Marxism, on the other hand, clearly spells out the conditions for the liberation of the class most oppressed by capitalist society, the proletariat. It thoroughly rejects vain talk about "human nature" and "righteousness," and shatters all dreams about a "world saviour." It affirms that true liberation is entirely a matter for the masses themselves.

4. Marxists in principle do not reject all use of force as some humanists do. They realize that it is basically impossible for "ravings about love" to bring about complete change in this world. When reactionary classes, in order to prop up a very inhuman system, use counter-revolutionary force to deal with people, then the use of revolutionary force is the most humane behaviour. However, the Marxist does not worship, nor have superstitious faith in, force. Rather, he opposes all abuse of power.

In conclusion, Ru Xin calls for a special investigation into what the concrete content of Marxist humanism ought to be.

Another representative essay is the one by Ruo Shui, cited above, which appeared in the Wenhui Bao for January 17, 1983.⁷ Ruo Shui begins by describing the humanism he is talking about. Here he covers much of the same ground as Ru Xin. He writes that he does not mean the humanism of the Renaissance, nor a type of humanism (really a humanitarianism)

which was prevalent during revolutionary times and which advocated "healing the wounded and rescuing the dying." The humanism Ruo Shui speaks about is the philosophical outlook which has man, human worth, respect, the benefit and happiness of mankind, and human freedom and development as its substance.

Ruo Shui nexts traces the development of humanism from Feuerbach to Marx and within Marxism itself. He rejects the distinctions some essayists make between the thought of the early and late Marx. He concludes that Marx, from beginning to end, has taken the proletarian revolution and communism and bound them up together with human value, respect for man, human liberation and human freedom. Marxism is the most complete humanism, Ruo Shui asserts. The author does concede, however, that if at certain times Marx himself did not use the word "humanism," this is due to the conditions of those times. It is not necessary, however, for us to be such sticklers now. One cannot sum up all of Marxism in humanism, the author writes, but Marxism does contain humanism. The humanism we advocate, he asserts, is none other than Marxist humanism (or socialist humanism, revolutionary humanism and the like).

Finally, Ruo Shui declares, we need socialist humanism. Why? Because it means that we are determined to abandon the "complete dictatorship" and the ruthless struggle of the ten years of catastrophe; it means that we oppose the feudalistic ideas of rank and special privilege, oppose the capitalist outlook of worshipping money, oppose regarding man as a saleable item or simply a tool; it means that we acknowledge man as the object of all our work; it means we want to bring about and develop socialist spiritual civilization, where there is mutual respect, mutual love and protection, mutual help, and a new type of social relationship based on friendly cooperation; it means highly regarding the human factor in our socialist construction, and developing among the workers an attitude of creativity and of man being his own master.

If someone should ask you, "Who are you?" the author writes in conclusion, you should answer proudly, "I am a human being."

The intellectuals who hold that there is a Marxist humanism get support from none other than Party theoretician, Zhou Yang. In an article in the People's Daily for March 16, 1983 entitled, "A Discussion of a Few Theoretical Problems Regarding Marxism," Zhou Yang admits that past criticism of humanism as revisionism had much prejudice in it.⁸ Zhou even admits that in the past he himself has written these kind of essays,

and that some of the ideas expressed were incorrect or not completely correct.

Marxist humanism is different from capitalist humanism, Zhou Yang writes. Capitalist humanism uses abstract human nature and ideas to explain history. If it becomes a complete system of thought, it is still not able to be scientific. Marxism is concerned about the human person and advocates the liberation of all mankind. However, the man Marxism speaks of is the concrete, actual human being in society, and the liberation spoken of is identical with the liberation of the proletariat. Feuerbach's abstract humanism was changed by Marx into concrete humanism based on historical materialism. In the history of this change, the idea of "alienation" played a key role, Zhou Yang holds. After using the rest of his essay to explain the development of Marx's theory of "alienation," Zhou Yang concludes that a socialist society is the best society for human beings to develop their capabilities.

However, not all essayists are as optimistic about the place of humanism in Marxism as our first three writers. In an article in the April 6, 1983 People's Daily,⁹ Huang Dansen writes that, after undergoing adjustment and change, some basic ideas of humanism can be incorporated into communist theory. However, humanism cannot sum up communism, he warns. In fact, humanism should come in for criticism, Huang says, for the following reasons: it speaks about abstract man; historical development in humanism is the development of the individual person; the historical outlook of humanism violates historical fact; and using humanism to explain phenomena in today's society or to direct our practical activities is weak and powerless.

Wang Ruisheng in an essay in the Wen Hui Bao of April 11, 1983 denies outright that there is such a thing as a Marxist humanism. "From the point of view of history," he writes, "the difference between historical materialism and humanism is not whether they attach importance to man, but lies in the manner you treat human activity in its relationship to the laws of history. In other words, what philosophical outlook does one use to explain human activity: is it to use man's material relationships to explain spiritual relationships, or the opposite?"

"The duty of historical materialism," the author continues, "is to expound the most general laws regarding the development of human society. However, the basic principles of humanism consistently and unconditionally put human worth, respect for the human person, human happiness, and the like, in the first place, and make them the criteria for examining

historical phenomena. Thus, it is hard to see how the two theories, from beginning to end, can be united."¹⁰

Likewise, the essayist Yang Bing in the June 4, 1983 issue of Guangming Daily denies the existence of a Marxist humanism. After an examination of the writings of Marx and Engels, Yang writes that Marx advocated an analytical method which had the economic realities of the time as its starting point, and not man. Therefore, the author concludes, "A basis for the idea of a 'Marxist humanism' cannot be found in Marxist writings."¹¹

The relationship between Marxism and humanism was also the subject of several academic seminars during the past three or four years. One such seminar was held by Marxist-Leninist theoreticians in Tianjin in the latter half of October, 1980.¹² In their discussion of human nature and the relationship between Marxism and humanism, the participants agreed, according to the report, that the struggle of the proletariat and the establishment of socialism was for the purpose of fulfilling man's material and spiritual needs, and to create conditions for the complete development of man's qualities and powers.

At the annual meeting of researchers in Marxist philosophical history, held in Hangzhou, June 11-19, 1981, the participants debated the question of the starting point of Marxist philosophy.¹³ Some participants were of the opinion that the starting point was man, concrete man in society. They declared that the development of the Marx-Engels world view started from a study of problems relating to man himself and to man's liberation. They cite a text from Marx's German Ideology, which reads: "Our starting point is real, concrete, living man..."

Others at the Hangzhou conference held that the starting point of Marxist philosophy was not man, but economic relationships. They consider that activities of production are the most basic activities of man. The determining factors in man's nature, they said, are the relationships man in society has to production and economics. They distinguish between "man" and so-called "real man." Marx, these thinkers say, spoke not of abstract man, but of "real man," who is involved in material production and certain economic relationships.

Other participants thought that the starting point was practice; others still, work; and lastly, some held that it was to acknowledge that matter held the primary place and that consciousness was secondary,

that social existence was primary and social consciousness secondary.

The following year's meeting of researchers in Marxist philosophical history was held in Luoyang, April 17-23, 1982. Over two hundred delegates were in attendance from all over the country. Regarding the formation of Marxist philosophy, the participants discussed the place of alienation and humanism in Marx's Manuscript (Shou Gao). Was this work a product of mature Marxist thought, they wanted to know? Some thought that it was not, that theories about alienation and humanism expressed in it still showed the influence of Hegel and Feuerbach. Others felt that even though Manuscript did not represent the mature Marx, the alienation and humanism mentioned in it were an important part of Marx's later, more mature thought.

Finally, some participants expressed the opinion that humanism is included in Marxist philosophy, but can not be said to sum up Marxist philosophy. Others were of the opinion that it was impossible for Marxist philosophy to have man as its starting point.¹⁴

We have presented a brief summary of the discussion on the relationship between Marxism and humanism now taking place among Chinese intellectuals. The question which comes to mind is about the possibility for points of contact for dialogue with Western, or Christian, humanists. In this regard it is interesting to note that Pope John Paul II uses some Marxist terms, such as "alienation," "exploitation," etc. in his encyclical On Human Work, published in September, 1981. More importantly, the Pope's whole encyclical treats of the place of man, and man's labor, in the economic production process. It may be useful to quote some sample paragraphs from On Human Work, which was written to commemorate the 90th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's famous social encyclical letter, Rerum Novarum. Pope John Paul writes:

From this spring certain specific rights of workers, corresponding to the obligation of work. They will be discussed later but here it must be emphasized in general terms that the person who works desires not only due remuneration for his work; he also wishes that within the production process provision be made for him to be able to know that in his work, even on something that is owned in common, he is working "for himself."¹⁵

On the basis of these illuminations emanating from the source himself, the Church has always proclaimed what we find expressed in modern terms in the teaching of the

Second Vatican Council: "Just as human activity proceeds from man, so it is ordered toward man. For when a man works he not only alters things and society, he develops himself as well. He learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside himself and beyond himself."¹⁶

On the question of humanism and Marxism, to end on a personal and less serious note, I believe that there must be humanism in Chinese Marxism. Almost every Western visitor to China, from Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci to the modern day tourist, has remarked on the natural courtesy of the Chinese people. Indeed, anyone who has experienced the warm welcome and cup of hot tea in a Chinese home at the end of a long journey will know what I am talking about. The Chinese are the most human people in the world! Therefore, their brand of Marxism must certainly be humanistic too. Party Chairman, Hu Yaobang, gives us the clue. In a speech commemorating the centenary of Karl Marx's death, delivered on March 13, 1983, he said:

It follows that a basic lesson to draw from the history of the development of Marxism is that the Marxist Party of each country cannot succeed in revolution and construction unless it formulates its own line and policies in accordance with its own concrete conditions and with the international and domestic circumstances in which it finds itself.¹⁷

Thus, according to the Party Chairman, Marxism will be Chinese in China. By the same token, perhaps it can be said about the humanism of Chinese Marxism: while it is not necessarily there because it is Marxist, it is there because it is Chinese!

FOOTNOTES:

1. Some translate "rendao juyi" as "humanism," and others as "humanitarianism." In this article we will use "humanism" for "rendao juyi" because it seems to be a more philosophical term, compared to "humanitarianism, which has the more restrictive meaning of seeking the welfare of suffering humanity.

2. Ruo Shui, "In Defense of Humanism," Wen Hui Bao, January 17, 1983, reprinted in Xinhua Wenzhai, 1983, #3, pp. 38-42. The English Ta Kung Pao weekly (No. 874, April 21-27, 1983) dates the beginning of the discussion on humanism from the publication of the novel, Man, Oh Man,

written by Dai Houying, which appeared in the late 1970's.

3. Marxism and Man, ed. Beijing University Philosophy. Department, March, 1983. Fourteen essays appear in this volume, with such titles as, "Some Theoretical Questions Regarding Man," "How to Recognize Questions of Human Nature," "The Use of the Idea of Alienation in the Formation and Development of Historical Materialism," "Changes in Marx's World Outlook and the Development of His Thought Regarding Man," "A Brief Criticism of Theories of Human Value in the History of Chinese Philosophy," and "A Discussion of 'man' and 'human liberation.'"

4. "A Presentation to Those Who Thought About the Meaning of Life," by editorial staff, China Youth, 1981, #6, pp. 2-11. One year after the discussion on the meaning of life prompted by the young worker Pan Xiao's letter (China Youth, 1980, #5), the editors of the magazine offer their concluding remarks. They had received over 60,000 letters in response to their invitation to other young people to answer Pan Xiao. Some of these responses appeared in subsequent issues of China Youth. In their summary, the editors write:

To bring up questions of "human worth" is the result of a new knowledge of Marxism. For a long time many of our people were in the habit of categorizing "humanism," "human nature," "human worth," and other words touching on "man" as revisionism or belonging to the capitalist class. This is really a mistake. From the beginning Marx attached great importance to "man" and to "human worth." In the Marxist view, man is the object, not the method. The highest goal of the communist movement is the liberation of all mankind....to allow each man to attain complete, free, and harmonious development. (p. 5)

5. Cf. Beijing Review, Vol 26, #18, May 2, 1983, pp. 16-19.

6. Ru Xin, "Is Humanism Revisionism?" Renmin Ribao, August 15, 1980. Reprinted in Xinhua Yuebao, 1980, #8, pp. 138-144. Ru Xin's essay has been translated by Paul V. Martinson, and appears with commentary in Ching Feng, Vol. 24, No. 1, March, 1981, pp. 18-36. We have freely borrowed from this translation and are grateful to Paul.

7. Ruo Shui, op. cit. (footnote 2)

8. Zhou Yang, "A Discussion of a Few Theoretical Problems Regarding

Marxism," Renmin Ribao, March 16, 1983.

9. Huang Dansen, "Some Questions Regarding Theories of Man," Renmin Ribao, April 6, 1983.

10. Wang Ruisheng, "A Few Opinions Regarding 'Marxist Humanism,'" Wen Hui Bao, April 11, 1983.

11. Yang Bing, "Marx, Engels, and Humanism," Guangming Ribao, June 4, 1983.

12. "An Academic Seminar on Human Nature and Humanism Convened in Tianjin," Guangming Ribao, October 29, 1980. Reprinted in Xinhua Yuebao, 1980, #11, p. 152.

13. "A Summary of the Annual Meeting of Researchers in Marxist Philosophical History," Guangming Ribao, August 8, 1981. Reprinted in Xinhua Yuebao, 1981, #8, pp. 169-71.

14. "A Summary of an Academic Seminar on Marxist Philosophical History," Guangming Ribao, May 22, 1982. Reprinted in Xinhua Yuebao, 1982, #6, pp. 157-9.

15. Pope John Paul II, On Human Work (in Latin, Laborem Exercens), dated September 14, 1981, in The Pope Speaks, Vol. 26, No. 4, 1981, paragraph 15, p. 315.

16. Ibid., para. 26, p. 333.

17. Hu Yaobang, "The Radiance of the Great Truth of Marxism," Beijing Review, Vol. 26, No. 12, March 21, 1983, p. IV.