CHALLENGES TO MARXISM

Henry De Man wrote an important book: 'The Psychology of Socialism' which elaborated some important criticisms of Marxism. (1) He outlines some very relevant arguments as to why orthodox Marxism is problematical and should be replaced by a more dynamic approach. In this aim he can be supported. The problem is that some valid criticisms of the limitations of Marxism are combined with the effective rejection of principled revolutionary politics. His approach would have been more constructive if his intention would have been to improve and elaborate the approach of Marxism in order to promote its ability to relate to the activity and aspirations of the working class. But his starting point, which is to question the possibility of developing connections between the class struggle and socialism, means that his conclusions must be opportunist. This does not mean that he has not outlined important questions about the connection of the class struggle to socialism. He comments that: “Doubts arise as to the inevitability of the transition to a new social order as the direct consequence of the proletarian struggle on behalf of the workers interests; and these doubts grew more and more urgent.”(2) This is a perceptive point to make because the very character of the mass movement of the working class does not inherently generate objectives that are compatible with socialism. Instead the very limited and modest aims of the labour movement can mean that socialism does not become an aim that is promoted by the so-called logic of the activity of the working class. Indeed we can maintain that the conception of such a logic is mythical and is an illusion. However, this does not mean that the apparent alternative of reformism expresses the character of the activity of workers. We know that the impulse of class interest can result in militant activity, or the reluctant acceptance of the domination of capital, but these developments do not mean there is a historical relationship between the actions of the working class and the aim of socialism. But what is crucial in this context is whether this awareness of contingency leads us to reject the goal of socialism, or to become defenders of this perspective despite the knowledge that it does not represent the expression of the inevitability of history. De Man utilises this understanding in order to cast doubts about the relationship of the working class to socialism.

Instead of developing a conception of the reason why socialism is in the interests of the workers, he prefers to imply that socialism is merely the product of the imagination of various intellectuals. This approach means that he is reluctant to recognise economic and political reasons why the connections of the working class to socialism may express class interest. Thus he defines the role of socialism as an aim that is somehow imposed on workers by the influence of intellectuals. This point may have some historical validity but it is surely also true that the very ability of the aim of socialism to become popular and influential within history is because of its connection to class interest. This development does not mean that socialism becomes inevitable, or expresses the logic of history. Nor does it mean that the working class becomes inherent supporters of socialism, they may become adherents of other ideologies. What is being explained by Marxism is that when the working class become supporters of socialism they are recognising that this aim is credible because of the limitations of capitalism. But De Man is making the valid point that there is no necessary connection between socialism and the working class in terms of the inevitable expression of its historical intentions. Therefore it is necessary to comprehend the complexity of the emotions involved in the class struggle which cannot be reduced to the sole aim of socialism. But De Man is wrong to also imply that the character of the class struggle can be understood primarily as an expression of emotional impulses. Such a reductive view ignores the ability of humans to reflect on their experience and to make rational conclusions. Indeed if this was not possible the ability to establish the connection between socialism and class struggle would be effectively impossible. However we have to admit that this connection is difficult not because of the inability of the workers to become rational, but instead because the influence of bourgeois ideology encourages the view that class struggle cannot be successful. This development is related to the balance of class forces which can favour the interests of the employers. In these circumstances the situation may not be conducive to the attempt to realise socialism. Instead it is more probable that only defensive struggles will occur. Thus De Man is right to suggest that the dogmatic Marxist view that the working class is always receptive for class struggle is a caricature: “In this formula, the worker lives only for the class struggle; and all his thoughts and actions are directed towards the one end.”(3) But it would be equally dogmatic and rigid to suggest that the class struggle cannot achieve the potential for the overthrow of capitalism. The major strategic problem of the time of De Man was that the leadership of the labour movement was reluctant to promote the possible connection between the class struggle and socialism. In contrast, it was principled and realistic for the revolutionary forces to try and promote this relationship. The tragic problem was that the impulse for class struggle was not sufficient in order to realise the overthrow of capitalism, instead strategy was required, which was generally lacking in these situations. De Man argues that the problem is the elitism of the Marxist parties who in practice reject the role of the initiative of the workers. This point has some validity, but what is the alternative? His conclusion is to vaguely call for the end of the influence of the intellectuals. Such an approach would not resolve the problem of the role of elitist parties. What is required is that the Marxist party has to become the principled and genuine expression of the interests of the working class. This relationship is not established by the rejection of revolutionary objectives. Rather the party should be the steadfast and intransigent adherent of this approach. This standpoint would not mean rejecting the importance of the immediate situation and its requirements. Rather the connections between the present and the possible future would be developed in terms of the attempt to realise aims that connect these two aspects of reality.

A party that was genuinely the expression of workers’ interests would not be dominated by elite forces. Instead it would promote the connection of the role of intellectuals to the aspirations of the working class. The assumption of De Man is that this possibility will not occur until the very character of the aim of socialism is modified in terms of the rejection of the most dogmatic aspects of Marxism. This point may have some validity, but it depends on what is being rejected. The problem with his approach is that he seems to equate the revolutionary aspirations of Marxism as being inherently defective. But he also has criticism of reformism. Hence it is important that he tries to establish an alternative that can overcome the limitations of both approaches. This is a very difficult task. It could be argued that we have to support revolutionary politics as the only principled approach, despite its limitations. The point is that De Man knows what he is against, but he is more reticent in explaining what he supports. He is a critic of Marxism, but lacks an alternative approach.

De Man makes the valid point that the working class is a historical force which has been shaped by the period before capitalism. It has developed a strong sense of social justice and equality, but is also influenced by the attitudes of inferiority and egoism. He makes the important point that possibly the most important psychological influence is that of self-respect. The role of dignity is connected to the promotion of any conception of class interests. This analysis indicates that the role of morality is important for understanding the attitudes and motivations of the workers. The very ability of the workers to act in collective terms is connected to their sense of morality being undermined. Therefore he is making the important point that Marxism has an incomplete understanding of the class struggle because it lacks awareness of the significance of morality. For example, the process of exploitation which occurs under capitalist relations of production results in the sense of the workers being unjustly rewarded in terms of modest wages: “Out of the disproportion between what a man has and what he might have, grows a feeling of injustice, a sentiment based in the workers mind upon a comparison of his own position with that of a member of the possessing classes.”(4) Thus the issue of class antagonism, and possible generation of class struggle, cannot be understood except in these moral terms. The theoretical role of Marx's Capital is to explain this situation in intellectual terms, but it does not outline the motivations of class conflict. The implication of this critique is that if the class struggle is connected ultimately to the role of morality, this would imply that ethics has to enter into the strategy of the attempt to overcome the problem of exploitation. But this point is not understood by Marxism which instead defines exploitation in exclusively economic terms. The motivations of the workers are not fully understood. Hence the necessary role of ethical socialism is not being integrated into the programme of revolutionary change.

De Man suggests that Marxism does not understand that an important aspiration of the workers is for work to be satisfying and to make them happy: “Yet even though we are thenceforward condemned to labour for practical ends, there still remains the old capacity to delight in labour in so far as what we are doing gives expression to our personality. All the social problems of history are no more than variants of the eternal, the social problems of history variants of the eternal, the supreme, the unique social problem – of how can man find happiness, not only through work, but in work.”(5) This approach indicates not only the importance of a moral based form of socialism, but also the necessity of workers control in production in order to overcome the alienation of labour. Unaware of Marx's writings on the issue of alienation, he criticises Marxism for ignoring this issue. But De Man outlines in a powerful manner how workers are often denied the possibility to realise creative forms of work, because of a lack of control over the means of production, and so become dictated to by the imperatives of machines. He also outlines the indifference to this issue in the Soviet Union of the 1920's because of the role of techniques of mass production. He outlines how the role of labour in the Soviet Union is subordinated to that of the interests of managers, and he suggests that the alternative to this distortion of the principles of socialism is provide by self-government of the workers within industry.

In other words De Man is actually outlining an important strategy of how capitalism can be transformed into socialism in terms of the advance of workers control within capitalism. The success of this development will mean that the domination of capital over labour is being effectively overcome within the relations of production in terms of advancing the ability of the workers to develop control of the process of work. The only problem is that De Man defines this possibility in terms of the promotion of the realisation of the proprietary instinct of the workers: “If the worker were devoid of the proprietary instinct he would lack the sense that as a producer he had a just claim to the ownership of the means of production and the product of his labour – a sense which makes the class struggle something nobler than a mere fight for personal interests.”(6) This concept of proprietorship is problematical because what is being referred to is crucially about ending the domination of capital over labour. Only in this context does the working class develop the ability to own and control the process of production. What is actually important will be the sense of self-autonomy that results from the end of the role of capital. Hence what could be vital is not proprietary aspirations, which imply forms of individual ownership, but instead the collective ability to overcome the domination of capital within the relations of production.

However, De Man is right to suggest that Marxism did not have a valid strategy that can promote the possibility for the working class to establish its ability to control the activity of the process of production. This was not because of the supposed dogmatic view of the Marxists about the role of the working class but was instead because of the theoretical neglect in failing to elaborate a convincing conception of socialism. De Man is right to imply that the answer to the apparent inability of Marxism to define what is meant by socialism is to suggest that the working class has effectively begun the struggle for socialism within capitalism in terms of its class activity to obtain better conditions of work, and increasingly establish its control over the process of production. Thus the realisation of completed socialism would be the continuation and consolidation of this process of the promotion of socialism within capitalism. But De Man implies in a dogmatic manner that Marxism does nothing to encourage the success of this perspective because of its defeatist view that nothing can be changed within the process of production of capitalism. This view ignores the actual fact that Marxism could feasibly support the development of workers control of production. (Indeed this standpoint did become a typical feature of more recent Marxism) However, what is being accurately criticised is the general inability of Marxism to relate the struggles of the workers within capitalism to the development of a conception of socialism. De Man outlines in convincing detail how Marxism seems unable to connect what is actually happening within the factory to the prospects for change within society. Instead it seems to have an understanding of the role of the working class which ignores important developments within the production process. The result is that Marxism is unable to develop effective strategies for socialist change. This point would seem to be still convincing given the neglect by some contemporary Marxists of the importance of workers control in the possibility of transition to socialism.

However, instead of blaming the Marxist approach to strategy, De Man prefers to suggest that it is the problem of Marx's understanding of technical progress and his apparently uncritical view of its development under capitalism. But Marx's understanding that the development of the productive forces enhances the material basis for socialism does not mean that he is indifferent to the various forms of economic activity that occur under capitalism. He outlines in Capital the de-humanising effects of the role of mass production, and this implies that socialism will be based on types of industrial work that will be based on the interests and requirements of the producers. Hence there is nothing within the works of Marx that are incompatible with De Man's criticism of the alienating effects of mass production within capitalism. It is the distortion of the ideas of Marx which have justified the continuation of monotonous factory production within the USSR. In this sense the approach of Marx is different to the distortion of his standpoint by his supposed adherents as in the USSR.

De Man argues the following: “As far as the masses are concerned, the motive which drives them towards socialism is less the desire for an ideal system of society than the instinctive and direct wish of the lower classes to diminish social inequality.”(7) This point is possibly historically accurate, and means it is puzzling why Marxists have not devoted more emphasis on this question of inequality when they are presenting the argument for socialism. It may be that concentration on supporting the development of the class struggle has meant that the justification of equality has been neglected. Furthermore, the emphasis on equality is part of the moral reasons for socialism, and as a result Marxists have tended to ignore its importance, but this means that one of the most crucial reasons for socialism is being glossed over, which is that capitalism cannot realise social justice and equality. In this context the exploitation of capitalism is the objective basis which explains why inequality occurs within this type of society, and only socialism can overcome this unequal situation because this is a type of society in the interests of working people. The point is that only the working class has a class interest in realising equality.

However De Man makes a reactionary conclusion from this understanding: “In the last analysis, the social inferiority of the working classes is not dependent upon a political injustice or upon economic prejudice, but simply upon a psychological state. The essential characteristic of this inferiority is the workers belief in their own inferiority. The working class is in an inferior position because it feels itself to be so.”(8) This subjective view ignores the unequal power relations of the capitalist relations of production, and instead primarily emphasises the issue of the supposed inferiority complex of the workers. What would be more accurate would be to connect the issue of the unequal economic relations, and the subordinated character of the workers, for generating any sense of inferiority. In this manner inferiority is an issue that results from the role of the relations between capital and labour. It is essentially an issue of power, which can be resolved by the militant and collective action of the workers. Indeed, any successful strike, and the development of solidarity within the workforce, promotes the possibility to overcome the sense of inferiority. In contrast, the approach of De Man accommodates to the pessimistic view that the workers will tend to consider themselves as being part of a lower type of social class. He does not establish how they will collectively overcome this sense of inferiority, and instead he contends that workers are envious of the privileged situation of the capitalists and will aspire to emulate them in individual terms. This point may be true in periods of a downturn in the class struggle, but Marxism is principled in suggesting that this accommodation to bourgeois ideology within the working class can be overcome by success in the collective struggle. But instead of this perspective, De Man can only describe the dominant role of the ruling class in terms of its prestige, and the deferential acceptance of this situation by the working class and its political representatives. This implies that the impulse for workers to become part of the ruling class is as influential as the alternative importance of the aspiration for equality. De Man is close to suggesting that the durability of class forms of society is because of the egotistical limitations of human nature. In this context, he is effectively opposing Marxism for being too confident about the success of the struggle for socialism! However, he also contradicts his own views by suggesting that the workers are motivated by the aspiration for equality, and by remarking about the success of the trade unions in this regard. This contradiction is because he lacks the development of a strategy for socialism. Instead he lets his own tendency towards pessimism to overcome his contrasting support for equality and socialism. On the one hand he implies that workers can be motivated by the attempt to overcome inequality and on the other hand he suggests that they accept the privileged position of the ruling class. This contradiction can be overcome by developing a strategy that would connect the aspiration for equality to that of socialism.

De Man outlines the powerful argument that democracy is an integral aspect of socialism. He criticises the expedient approach of the Bolsheviks for suggesting that democracy is only of use in the struggle for power, and is not important for the construction of a socialist society. He makes the crucial point that party dictatorship cannot express the will of the people better than the role of democracy. In addition, the working class has already within capitalism indicated the economic character of democracy in terms of its increasing participation in the management of enterprises. But, possibly most crucially, the development of democracy will enable the aspiration for equality to be realised in relation to the participatory character of socialism. He defines his approach in the following manner: “The parliamentary regime presupposes the existence of parties. Under the regime of universal suffrage, a grouping of parties in accordance with class interests reveals itself as the best way of giving these parties the greatest amount of effective force and the greatest amount of responsibility towards the electors.”(9) The problem with this perspective is that it does ignore the issue of power. What is the policy that would enable the socialist forces on the basis of democracy to promote the realisation of its aims? In this context, the fact that the role of revolution is ignored does imply that the domination of capital has not been seriously challenged. Hence De Man would seem to be suggesting that in order to maintain the principles of democracy it is necessary to avoid the issue of establishing hegemonic political power. But society is either a form of bourgeois democracy or socialist democracy. Indeed he suggests that adherence to a class approach is a part of the political process that has to be superseded. The result of his standpoint is that an emphasis on the significance of democracy means that he lacks a policy for the realisation of the power of the working class. Indeed he would consider that this approach was an expression of outdated Marxism. But this view means that his strategy is incomplete and is not able to provide a coherent conception of the political transition to socialism.

De Man contends that Marxism has an emphasis on the role of common economic interests of the workers creating the conditions for collective class struggle which ultimately results in socialism. The narrow basis of this approach means that the significance of ethics is ignored, and moral values like the aspiration for equality are not articulated. This criticism is important, and indicates the one-sidedness of the Marxist perspective. However, this omission does not mean that Marxism cannot be connected to the role of ethics. Indeed, greater study of the class struggle could establish the importance of ethical values and their relationship to the motivations for opposition to capitalism. De Man argues that the narrow Marxist understanding of class interest has no place for ethics, but he denigrates the conception of working class solidarity when he defines it as a 'herd instinct'. (10) In contrast, to this insulting term we can suggest that the very ability to generate proletarian solidarity involves the promotion of ethical values of the highest level such as altruism, a high sense of the common good, and social justice. Indeed De Man accepts that solidarity is an aspiration that is constantly promoted within history, and he makes the important point that a narrow sense of class interest will not realise socialism. Instead this is a type of society based on a high level of ethical values. De Man's view is that a type of socialist society reduced to narrow class interests cannot be based on the necessary moral code that is essential for its functioning. But the point is that without a sense of class interest the very development of class struggle is inconceivable. But in this context the connection of class interest to solidarity is also intimate, and so the very practices of mass action are related to the elaboration of a moral code. In contrast, De Man contends that solidarity related to narrow class interest has no moral effectiveness, such as the privileged view that skilled workers have toward the unskilled. This point is true, but it indicates that the sense of solidarity is being distorted in order to uphold sectional interests. If a genuine collective will of the class can be developed this will mean that solidarity is connected to the highest moral and political values such as opposing inequality and supporting internationalism.

De Man denies this point because he can only conceive of the transformation of narrow class interest into a wider community interest: “If, none the less, we are entitled to regard working class solidarity as the germ of a new social ethic, this is because, in its socialist form, it is something very different from an awareness of interest, because it is a special manifestation of a community instinct natural to mankind, an instinct whose obliteration by the competitive economy of capitalism will be transient.”(11) This standpoint implies that class interest is egotistical, and so the only basis for the promotion of socialism is for this standpoint to be transcended by a conception of community interest. This means that the role of class interest no longer is considered to be related to the struggle for socialism, which is based on the importance of a different type of ethical value system. But this approach reduces the aspiration of socialism to the role of morality, and so its relationship to class interests is rejected. Such a standpoint is idealist and denies the relationship of motivation with the objective importance of the capital-labour relationship and the connected promotion of antagonistic class interests. The possible result of this situation is that the advance of class interests is not egotistical or self-motivated but instead is connected to ethical values like the role of solidarity and cooperation. This impetus to class struggle may have some relationship to the past historical importance of community interests, but it is primarily promoted by the contradictions of the capital-labour relationship. However, this development of united struggle can be undermined by sectional interests, and the role of differences between skilled and unskilled workers, or white collar versus blue collar. In order to overcome these problems it is necessary to promote united action on the basis of genuine class solidarity, or a revolutionary conception of class interest. De Man equates class interests with self-interest, and this would seem to be a major limitation in his approach. He is right to connect the struggle for socialism with ethics, but wrong to deny its relationship to class interest. Instead it is possible to reconcile class interests with ethical aims such as equality and justice. Without either of these aspects the struggle for socialism would be inexplicable.

De Man argues that community spirit created working class solidarity. This point may be true, but it is not the point of contention. What is problematical is the denigration of the role of class interests to being nothing more than an expression of egoism and sectionalism. De Man considers that socialism is only principled when it is connected to community and moral aspirations. (12) This means that he effectively denies the transforming role of the class struggle. The major problem with this view is that he is unable to provide a strategy of success for his ethical socialism. Indeed he implies that the very struggle for socialism becomes a desperate expression of hope in a better future, or an eschatological idea. Hence the aim of socialism becomes reduced to faith, and the role of strategy is reduced to this form of subjective aspiration. It is not possible to develop a measured and reflective perspective about how socialism can be realised. The aim of a better society becomes similar to the aspiration for the Kingdom of God. What De Man does not explain is how this influence of an eschatological perspective influences what has been his ethical understanding of the realisation of socialism. It would seem that the very character of history, such as the Russian revolution, is influenced by the mythology of the eschatological hope. The mass movement seems to be motivated by the following emotions: “The vigour of such movements depends upon the strength of the sentiments of which animate them; and the sentiments of the masses require, like other emotional states, a belief in the possibility of absolute satisfaction. It is this trend towards the absolute which impresses upon the socialist working class movement its religious and eschatological character.”(13) How can the apparent superiority of ethical socialism oppose this attractiveness of the connection of revolution to the mythology of a superior future, which has attained mythical terms? De Man does not explain. Instead he knows in an ambiguous manner that his conception of socialism could easily become dominated by eschatological themes. This is because he recognises that the impetus for ethical type struggle could easily become influenced by the eschatological. His very sober analysis of the situation is unable to establish how his distinctive approach could become dominant in relation to the opposing tendencies of revolutionary Marxism or reformism.

De Man is suggesting that the major impulse for supporting the aim of socialism is a teleological conception of a desirable end to history. This standpoint is connected by Marxists to the role of class interest, even though the doctrine of class struggle is elaborated by intellectuals of a non-proletarian origin. It is being suggested that by discovering the laws of social evolution it is possible to connect the dissatisfaction with capitalism to the perspective that socialism can be the inevitable result of the manifestation of economic processes within capitalism. There is a delicate relationship between the role of rationalism, and its emphasis on the importance of scientific theory, combined with the psychological and eschatological impetus to realise socialism. However, the problem is that Marxism denies the significance of the psychological aspects in the name of the importance of scientific theory. Hence it does not fully appreciate the eschatological impulse within the class struggle. This means that the role of the emotional is the most important aspect of the class struggle. Whilst we can admit that Marxism has possibly ignored this aspect, the problem is that an excessive development of the role of the emotional can result in irrational and erratic impulses that can only undermine the possibility of the successful overthrow of capitalism. Instead of accepting the primary role of the emotional it would be more constructive to develop a strategy that is able to unite the role of the spiritual and emotional together with the rational elaboration of theory. However, this process would mean accepting that an inevitable end to history in terms of the realisation of communism is an illusion. Instead it is necessary to develop a mature mass movement that is able to accept that failure may result in relation to the attempt to overthrow capitalism. Only the highest level of rationality can ensure that a strategy is developed which will be effective and successful, but it also has to be admitted that the prospect of success is not guaranteed by the supposed logic of history. De Man would argue that this standpoint denies the importance and psychological role of eschatological hope which indirectly accompanies the influence of Marxism. In answer to this point it would be more effective to relate hope to the actual development of solidarity within the class struggle. In this manner hope becomes an aspect of rationality and its advance is based on the effectiveness of the mass movement and its ability to develop popular forms of solidarity. Thus in 1917 hope was not futile because it was connected to the creation of Soviets, which expressed the power of the working class. In contrast, a conception of eschatological hope that is not connected to the advance of the class struggle can become an expression of voluntarism and desperation. In this context this type of hope can substitute itself for genuine success within the class struggle. This criticism of eschatology does not mean that we should deny the importance of hope, but this aim should always be made practical and connected to the effective advance of the mass movement.

De Man contends that the Marxist aim of self-government by the people will be difficult to realise because the administration of the state is based on the importance of specialists. Furthermore, class forces are represented by parties which become influential in the state apparatus. Marxist theory has denied this important role of the intellectual, and so has not recognised how elitism undermines the understanding of the ability to realise socialism in a popular manner. The cultural and social difficulties of the working class being able to overcome its subordinated position within society means that the intellectuals will be likely to assume an important role in the administration of society that is aiming to realise socialism. De Man argues that this situation is not necessarily detrimental to the interests of developing socialism, and so he comments: “However, the socialism of intellectuals is a useful and necessary intermediate stage on the road which leads to socialist society – just as necessary as the socialism of manual workers arising out of class interest.”(14) The merit of this position is that De Man in a realistic manner has accepted the important and vital relationship of intellectuals to the struggle for socialism. But what he has not established in a satisfactory manner is the issue of how to maintain the objectives of socialism and avoid new forms of social inequality in this situation. Indeed he has accepted that the intellectuals can dominate the socialist organisations in an arrogant manner, and yet does not resolve the issues related to this tendency towards elitism. Instead he only comments in a vague manner that the intellectuals should not dominate the process of realising socialism.

De Man re-emphasises the importance of the role of morality in the class struggle, but he seems to contradict this view when he also outlines in rigid sociological terms that the workers aspire to emulate the achievements of bourgeois cultural and its practices: “The function of the labour movement, is not to found a new civilisation but to create for the masses certain material conditions which are essential preliminaries to all civilisation – the coming socialist civilisation not excepted. Since this does not yet exist, any improvements in the material conditions of the workers subjugates them more effectively than before to the cultural standards of the social classes adjoining their own.”(15) This is the view that the affluent worker will inevitably adapt to the influence of bourgeois culture. What is not mentioned by De Man is that this standpoint establishes serious questions about the ability of the working class to oppose capitalism. There seems to be an important inconsistency in his viewpoint because on the one hand he outlines how many workers are motivated by eschatological hope in order to oppose capitalism and on the other he suggests that workers are passive because of their acceptance of the supremacy of bourgeois culture. This tension is not resolved in terms of establishing what is the most important aspect of social reality - revolt or acceptance of the system? In contrast, Marxism can outline how the influence of bourgeois ideology does not overcome the importance of the exploitative character of capitalism. Consequently the possible reactionary influence of the prevailing forms of culture does not mean that opposition to the system is ended. Furthermore, it could also be argued that the influence of bourgeois culture is not necessarily an expression of acceptance of capitalism. Instead that culture can promote the ability to question the existing order in relation to the critical character of literature, art and music. Culture by its very nature often raises questions about the domination of the ruling class, and so the role of culture is to be critical. In contrast, De Man suggests that culture can only have a conformist role. This is a caricatured view, and he also denies the possibility to develop an oppositional socialist culture.

De Man outlines how the working class movement is increasingly influenced by reformism and the attempt to make partial gains via the role of political compromise. He suggests that this situation is not necessarily detrimental given that the alternative is the formation of party dictatorship as in the USSR. The conservatism of the working class organisations led to support for the war aims of the national state in 1914, but this stance was justified by Social Democracy in terms of the possibility of achieving political power because of the role of moderation and accommodation to the influence of the bourgeois state. But this perspective has meant that when a socialist government has been elected it has acted in a moderate manner, and has not tried to oppose the interests of capitalism. In this context, De Man seems to suggest that the most realistic policy is for a socialist government to contribute measures that promote the stabilisation of capitalism. This situation will enhance the worldwide development of capitalism whilst also facilitating the possibility of global socialism. This represents a dialectical policy in which the maintenance of capitalism also contributes to its demise: “This apparent contradiction is really resolved in the unity of motives in accordance with which socialism still contributes, and must contribute, towards the realisation of some of the aims of capitalism as a method of production, while continuing to fight capitalism as a form of social domination.”(16)

The major problem with this standpoint is its vagueness. How can presiding over the situation of capitalist stabilisation promote the demise of the social system? What is actually being justified is the cooperation of Social Democracy with the forces of capitalism, or an acceptance of reformism. De Man does not outline in what manner such a situation could promote the class struggle against capitalism, and instead he actually relies on a crude interpretation of an economic determinist view that the development of the productive forces under capitalism will result in socialism. This standpoint is actually an evolutionary perspective that denies the vital role of active human agency in the process of change. Hence despite his supposed elaboration of a process of historical change he has actually practically justified a policy of class compromise. Indeed he has actually become an apologist for the existing opportunist practice of Social Democracy.

But De Man is more convincing when he outlines the importance of the role of nationalism which has undermined the internationalist ambitions of Marxism. He suggests that not only capitalism takes a national form, and the tendency towards reformism meant adaptation to the national state, but also the history and culture of nations is crucial for the development of distinct types of identity of people with a given state: “The international socialist movement is a plurality rather than a unity. National sentiment is an integral part of the emotional content of the socialism of each country. It grows in strength in proportion as the lot of the working masses of each country is more closely connected with the lot of that country itself; in proportion too as the masses themselves have won for themselves a larger place in the community of national civilisation. At bottom this partial absorption of socialist sentiment by national sentiment need not surprise us.....Socialism itself is the product of the interaction between a given moral sentiment and a given social environment. It is not only the environment which has a national character. The other factor, likewise, the moral sentiment, has primarily, in different peoples, a peculiar tinge, derived from a peculiar national past.”(17)

De Man has outlined in convincing detail the importance of the influence of nationalism. He has also indicated its reactionary aspects in terms of class collaboration and support for imperialism. But how is nationalism to be overcome? Is this an impossible task? Marxism would suggest that class struggle indicates that the role of the solidarity of the mass movement can become more important than nationalism. The task of revolution poses the necessity to expand the influence of the new proletarian state in international terms. But De Man cannot provide such an optimistic perspective. Instead he implies that the enduring influence of nationalism, because it is rooted within historical communities, means that it will remain a constant factor that undermines the ability to strive for socialism. This is an important point to make, but it also justifies pessimism in that it seems impossible to replace the role of nationalism with internationalism. However, De Man is right to suggest that Marxism has often ignored the significance of nationalism in terms of a rigid doctrine of formal internationalism. This approach has often glossed over what is actually a situation of accommodation to nationalism.

De Man outlines a complicated critique of what he considers to be the limitations of Marx's adherence to a rationalist methodology. He contends that Marx developed an understanding of conceptual abstractions which he imposed onto reality such as the definition of proletariat and capitalist. The problem is that this approach was theoretically flawed because it ignored the important moral and motivational aspects of the process of social change. Instead the conceptual schema was imposed onto reality: “Even a struggle as vast and decisive as a revolution always proceeds in the form appropriate to the voluntary actions of individuals and masses, never in accordance with the mathematical rhythm which characterises the rigid actions and reactions of conceptual antitheses. When we apply to the concrete fact of a social revolution, laws which are valid for the conceptual antagonisms of the categories...we do violence to reality. “Revolutionary” antagonisms are only real in so far as they concern moral ends; that is why the essential historical meaning of very revolution is the replacement of the extant moral order by a new one.”(18) This criticism is illogical it would imply that the very attempt to relate conceptual schemes to the understanding of reality was futile because they could not describe empirical reality. De Man's own standpoint is based on his conception of the connection between concepts and actual practice, in this context he emphasises – quite rightly – the moral aspect of revolution. Therefore instead of absolutely and dogmatically rejecting the approach of Marx, it would be more constructive to try and modify it in order to include the moral motivations connected to revolutionary developments. In contrast, De Man is trying to reject Marxism because of its inherent conceptual abstraction, but the result is a problematical understanding of the relationship between theory and practice. This means his standpoint is a voluntarist rejection of the necessary relationship between theory and practice. But ironically he actually justifies an alternative form of theoretical reasoning, which if applied reflectively could enhance Marx's theory of revolution!

The point is that we cannot understand the empirical events within reality without elaborating concepts by which they are interpreted. Obviously these events will provide an important guide as to whether the theory is false or basically true, but if events falsify the theory the task is not to reject the role of theory but instead to create a new theory in order to evaluate developments within history. Thus if we could argue that Marxism was proved to be false, our task would be to create a new theory in order to argue for socialism. However, we can suggest that Marxism retains validity because it is the most explanatory theory of the class antagonisms within capitalism, and suggests a perspective for their resolution. In contrast, the criticisms of De Man about the apparent limitations of Marxism do not amount to a rival explanatory theory of society. Instead, all that we can principally suggest is that some of his criticisms could contribute to developing the theoretical importance of the concepts of Marxism.

Ultimately De Man criticises the limitations of Marxist theory for making what have become false predictions such as the increasing misery and impoverishment of the proletariat. He then connects this to a collection of supposedly dogmatic views, such as defining class solidarity as a result of the cooperative character of capitalist production. The result of these criticisms is to argue that the theory of surplus value is unable to explain the sense of unjust exploitation within the working class: “Marx's determination to exclude from his analysis all ethical valuations insusceptible of proof by economic categories, made it impossible for him to prove, in addition to the obvious fact of capitalist gain, that such gain is unjust.”(19) But the point is that only careful analysis of the causal mechanisms of the process of exploitation of labour by capital is able to indicate that the ethical sense of the unjust character of capitalism is not just a sense of resentment about treatment by employers, but is instead established by study of the relations of production. Hence De Man is wrong to contend that: “Inasmuch as class interest is based upon a subjective state of mind determined by ethical valuations, we must infer that it is impossible to deduce the notion of class from purely economic categories.”(20) The problem with this view is that the sense of being exploited is a moral response which requires theoretical analysis in order to interpret this reaction precisely and connected to the role of the process of production under capitalism. Furthermore, elaborating the understanding that capitalism is a morally unjust system requires both ethical and philosophical reflection. In contrast, De Man is implying that spontaneous reactions are sufficient in order to understand the economic system. The result of De Man's irrational reasoning is to consider that understanding class consciousness is an issue of comprehending its emotional aspects. Hence theory is reduced to a question of developing psychology. This may be important, but its role should not become a justification of the apparent rejection of the role of economics and history as an expression of the dogma of rationalism.

In other words the problem is that De Man rejection of the supposed rationalist limitations of Marx does result in his own defence of irrationalism. The role of emotion and will becomes the basis to deny any importance for Marx's theory of surplus value and historical understanding of the class struggle. The rejection of Marxism as an expression of extreme determinism about history and the future means that De Man justifies a voluntarist sense of freedom which has no relationship to necessity and is instead based on the ability to choose the outcome to our future: “The concepts of freedom and necessity are void of meaning unless they are related to the subjective fact of feeling we have in a given situation concerning what we can or cannot do.”(21) Frankly this is the freedom of fools. In actuality our level of freedom is based on the character of society and its connection to the possibilities for self-autonomy. Hence the role of necessity is not something imagined, but is instead an expression of the social context in which decisions can be made. This means that the causes of our actions cannot be imaginary, but instead are a specific expression of the relationship of individuals to structures that define the possibilities, or otherwise, of freedom of action. In contrast, De Man does suggest that causation is imaginary and so action is effectively voluntary: “Every subjective decision is accompanied by the feeling of freedom, in so far as we cannot refer the motives of this decision to causes. Of course that does not prevent us from supposing, if we choose, that causes exist. Our feeling of freedom is unaffected by such a supposition, for the consciousness of a general and hypothetical causality will not modify any element in our voluntary decision.”(22) Thus what defines the character of a decision is the role of freedom. To suggest that actions and views are based on causes is an expression of false consciousness. Consequently: “Thus the power of thought which enables us to apprehend causal relationships, is subject to numerous limitations, which do not derive so much from the phenomena themselves as from our own ways of thinking.”(23)

This justification of the view that causes do not have an objective basis in the relationship of individuals to society can only uphold the voluntarist standpoint that people are able to act in a manner that is not defined by any connection to structural relationships. The point is that we can only act in terms of our interaction with structures, which in turn generates the causes of how we are able to carry out certain practices. In contrast, De Man is justifying a conception of absolute freedom which implies that the causes of actions are only the expression of the illusions of consciousness. The ultimate result of this view is to define theory itself as an expression of rationalism and determinism, which means to justify an alternative form of irrational and voluntarist understanding of the character of individuals and their relationship to society. In order to refute Marx, De Man has to outline his alternative views concerning history and society. But his view is subjective in that it is based on the importance of human will and emotion, and the role of causality is considered an example of human ignorance trying to deny this situation in terms of the elaboration of grandiose theories about history having a necessary and utopian end. This means that the very issue of the aim of a better future becomes a vague expectation which we do not have convincing knowledge of its possibility: “When we believe that we are able to formulate causal relationships in the form of laws, the goal towards which we strive is not knowledge in itself.”(24) Such a view would be relevant and impressive if it could be argued that the tendencies for the possible future were not present within the existing system of capitalism. But the very basis of Marx's major historical prediction about socialism is that it is already developing within the relations of production of capitalism. In this context, socialism is the possible logical continuation of the most progressive features of the present system. Hence, whist we cannot establish that socialism is the necessary end of history, we can still contend that is possible outcome of the present economic and political tendencies.

But, in contrast to this emphasis on a better future, De Man categorically claims: “We are only interested in history because we are interested in the present, that is to say our own purposes here and now.”(25) This standpoint contradicts his own emphasis on the popular motivations of eschatological hope and the striving to overcome capitalism. But the above comment does represent his genuine political programme, which is reformist and ultimately accepts what is possible within capitalism. The concept that history has an evolutionary direction that could realise a better future is dismissed as being completely illusory or the outcome of the illusions of the will: “It only postulates a necessity which we want, and this pretended necessity is nothing more than an illusion of the will as to the bearing of its own capacity for realising its desires.”(26) In this sense, the very aspiration for emancipation is considered to be an illusion, and instead we can only establish what is the immediate present. This view implies adaptation to capitalism which is the actual present. In this manner, Marxism must be dismissed because it has advocated a different future. The approach of Marxism must be because of its rigid determinism and belief that the laws of history are realised by the conscious action of the working class. There are flaws with a rigid form of Marxism as De Man describes, but what of a more flexible Marxism that is able to outline a more open ended view of history and the prospects of class struggle? De Man cannot contemplate this possibility because he can only envisage the character of Marxism to be problematical and which cannot be revised. His most important criticism of Marxism is that it considers its aims to be an inevitable outcome of history, but what if we accepted the strength of De Man criticism of this viewpoint and instead attempted to develop a different view of historical development? Or as De Man suggests we develop a standpoint in which we consider the possibilities of history to be desirable and not inevitable, and which are the expression of our actions in the present?

But we cannot support a voluntarist conception of history, which De Man defends in the following manner: “Man wills, and it is his will which transforms society; however the only willed modifications which can succeed and maintain themselves are those which are compatible with the material conditions that form the environment.”(27) The problem with this view is that the relationship between the objective and subjective is still obscure in terms of the inability to define what is meant by the character of the will. It would be more precise and less voluntarist to suggest that class struggle is what is able to transform reality. However, this occurs within given material conditions which are important for defining what is possible and likely to occur. De Man does not establish whether he is talking about the will in individual or collective terms, and nor does he elaborate what should be the aims of a will which is truly progressive. It is entirely possible that a will with reactionary aims could triumph, as with the victory of Fascism. Only a will with revolutionary aims can truly change history in accordance with the progressive possibilities of reality. But the point is that the role of the will can only be established in terms of the social context of which it is a part. Hence the will cannot transform reality if the balance of class forces favours the established order. Furthermore, the will if it is to be genuinely progressive must be defined in terms that express authentic revolutionary aims which means striving for socialism. It is possible to have reactionary form of the will which is based on adherence to aims such as support for imperialism. Thus if the will is to be considered revolutionary it must be rational and based on the application of reason. In this context the role of emotion should be subordinated to the importance of rationality. In contrast, this is the very issue that is blurred over by De Man because he defines history in terms of the role of the will but does not outline what this means in precise terms. As a result of this confusion it is entirely possible to consider that his approach is based on an accommodation to irrationalism in order to reject what he defines as the rationalist dogmatism of Marx. De Man rejects reasoning as an expression of rigid categorical laws, and suggests that the application of such laws does not result in an accurate understanding of capitalism. But what he refers to, such as improvements for the working class, Marx could not predict accurately because this advance occurred after his demise. The point is not that Marx is able to make astute future predictions about capitalism, but whether he has established a coherent methodology by which we can analyse the system in a perceptive manner. Marx has outlined an ontology of the relationship between capital and labour which enables us to study the social system in reflective terms. This does not mean that proletarian revolution is the necessary outcome of inevitable laws, such a view is a dogmatic version of Marx. Instead all that we can establish is that contemporary society is based on antagonistic relations which can generate class struggle. The outcome of this development depends on the level of class consciousness of the working class, which may not be adequate in relation to the aim of revolutionary change. Indeed, it could be argued that this aspect is characteristic of the history of capitalism. But such a development is not the outcome of the fallacy of rational and evolutionary laws, but is instead because of the ability of the forces of capital to perpetuate the domination of capitalism.

De Man contends that the evolutionary laws of Marx are an expression of the mythological power of God: “Marxist determinism creates a magical illusion that actions performed in conformity with a determinate direction of will and parallel to the direction of the law acquire a superior historical efficacy. There ensues a sort of mystical supervaluation of such actions, which raises above all common moral law, and gives them a higher value than that which they derive from their immediate effects.”(28) Instead of an emphasis on the moral ought as the basis of socialism the role of the will is based on the logic of historical laws that imply 'must' be realised. However, this critique is based an understanding of the evolutionism of Kautsky which is projected back onto Marx. The latter only attempted to establish that the contradiction between the development of the productive forces and the existing relations of production provides the possibilities for social change. The question as to whether this change occurs depends on human intervention. It is a caricature of Marxism to imply that its methodology is dependent on the influence of the role of the divine. Instead Marx has outlined an understanding of history that is strictly about the importance of human activity, and its possibilities. The basis of De Man's criticism of Marx's apparent determinism is because he upholds a voluntarist conception of history based on the realisation of ethical values: “A being endowed with a moral sense does not act because of a knowledge of necessity; he acts in virtue of a sense of freedom.”(29) The importance of morality as an aspect of the motivations of humans within history should not be disregarded – indeed such a dismissal is a limitation of Marxism – but the role of morality should be located within a given historical context. Thus our sense of what is ethical changes in different periods of history, and this is because of the connection between morality and social systems. Therefore what we mean by morality as a reason to oppose capitalism will be shaped by the character of the present system. Revolutionary morality will be connected to the aim of socialism because it is opposed to the domination of capitalism. In this manner morality is not the pure expression of a vague sense of human freedom, but is instead defined by its social and material environment.

However De Man is right to reject the evolutionist and determinist view of an inevitable end in history. Indeed it is questionable whether Marx upheld this perspective. Furthermore, he is right to connect the passivity of German Social Democracy in 1914 with its support for an evolutionary view of history. But the alternative is not to emphasise as primary the significance of ethical socialism. This standpoint cannot establish a strategy, and it is problematical when De Man utilises the role of the ethical in order to justify an irrational and voluntarist conception of history and politics. He is right that we should reject the claims of omnipotent truths by Marxism, and instead connect our understanding of reality to the importance of what happens in the present, but this does not mean that the method of Marxism is invalid. Bu the major problem of De Man's approach is that whilst he has many examples of the dogmatism of Marx and the Marxists his alternative is vague and effectively defined as ethical socialism. This can be an important aspect of the development of class struggle but it is not sufficient. Instead it is necessary to outline an alternative in historical and political terms. Primarily we need a programme of struggle for socialism. Instead of this, De Man is content to suggest that working people interpret the practical importance of Marxism in the same manner that he does. For example, the conception of exploitation is interpreted in a moral sense: “On the other hand, the masses regard as fundamental that which Marx intentionally left in the shade, or tacitly assumed to be already proved, namely the moral stigma attached to the employing class for an unjust appropriation of surplus value.”(30) Thus De Man is a critic of Marx and Marxism, but he cannot outline a superior perspective for the class struggle. Indeed, he often accepts the wisdom of reformism. He argues that Marxism should be superseded, but in actuality he provides an emotional alternative to the revolutionary religion of the Communists. Thus he has some sympathy for the moral fervour of the Communist International, but he disagrees with its aims. Unfortunately, what his aims are apart from being different to that of orthodox Marxism and the Communists remains a mystery.

De Man is unable to explain the support of many workers for revolutionary Marxism apart from the vague view that they consider it an alternative form of religion. In a subjective manner he explains support for Marxism in Germany as an expression of the importance of the national character. But his major emphasis is on indicating that Marxism cannot establish the motivations of class struggle: “Marxism is a science of capitalism and not a science of socialism, in this sense that it can disclose the conditions arising out of the capitalist environment which are essential to all socialist realisation, but it cannot establish the socialist will itself, for the scope of the socialist will transcends the framework of capitalism and the class struggle which capitalism engenders. Political economy and history show what can be; to show what should be is matter for ethics.”(31) This comment actually indicates the relationship of Marxism to the role of ethics. Marxism s able to provide an analysis of the relationship of capitalism to the class struggle, but the complex understanding of motivation requires the significance of ethics. In this manner, De Man is not actually denying the importance of Marxism as a science, but rather that it should be improved and enhanced by the recognition of the ethical aspects of the class struggle. But De Man does not make this conclusion because he is also concerned to deny the apparent scientific credentials of Marxism. In order to uphold his standpoint he makes the incredible and irrational claim that socialism is not the possible outcome of capitalism, and instead it is the expression of ethical imperatives.

His only precise and practical expression of the perspective of realising socialism is expressed by the call for industrial democracy within the economy: ”It has become increasingly plain that there is only one way in which the trade union movement can be lifted to a higher plane, can be given loftier objectives than those of a fight for better material working conditions. This way is that of industrial democracy, the establishment of workers control in industry, beginning with a right of supervision, and advancing in due time to the establishment of self-governing productive units managed by associated producers.”(32) But this policy is not connected to the elaboration of a programme for socialism, but is instead an aim utilised in order to criticise the dogmatism of Marxism. Indeed he argues that his approach is based on recognising the common interests of employers and employed, rather than support for intransigent class struggle. Hence his apparently radical call for workers control is part of a reformist approach. In other words if De Man has a programme it is based on the ability of the trade unions to modify capitalism in the interests of the working class. The activity of the workers within the present system could at some point transform capitalism according to their aspirations. This programme is not necessarily unprincipled, but in order to realise its objectives would mean that the emphasis on class collaboration should be rejected. De Man is right to suggest that only the genuine activity of the working class can realise a just society, but this very possibility means that class struggle should not be rejected as a dogma of Marxist rationalism.

It is also a caricature of reality for De Man to blame Marxism for the passivity and nationalism of the leadership of German Social Democracy. Instead it is the very rejection of Marxism which explains their opportunism and opposition to genuine internationalism. Ironically, De Man calls for a new form of principled and ethical struggle which will create new and more principled political organisations: “All we can hope for from the adaptive and imitative instincts of the masses is that these will lead to actions which break a trail for the realisations of new vanguard minorities whose motives are the fruit of personal moral convictions.”(33) The problem with this vague aim of new parties is that no basis is provided for possible policies. Parties are not formed on the basis of moral aims, but instead because of definite perspectives. He does not provided any policy for a principled socialist party. Instead he outlines the historical and principled example of Jean Jaures. But examples, however significant are not sufficient to create a party. Nor is it adequate to outline the limitations of Social Democracy and Communism. It is necessary to provide policy.

Instead of this elaboration, De Man provides a brief characterisation of his approach in the following terms: “I am a socialist, not because I believe in the realisation of a socialist vision of the future more than I believe in any other ideal you like to mention, but because I am convinced that the socialist motive makes human beings happier and better in the here and now.”(34) It would have been more principled to criticise those that utilised the aim of socialism in order to deny the importance of improvements in the present. But this is not what he is saying. Instead he rejects the aim of socialism in the future in favour of advances in the present. It is one thing to suggest that we should start to realise the future in the present – all Marxists should agree with this aim – but it is another thing to utilise this approach in order to repudiate the aim of socialism as abstract an unrealistic. His approach is based on the present, which means merely modifying capitalism. This standpoint is justified in the following terms: “Aims live only in our present actions; there future existence is illusion, whereas their present existence is reality.”(35) Thus socialism becomes reduced to the sense of well-being provided by improvements of the conditions of the workers in the present. The relationship of means to end is rejected in these pragmatic and sceptical terms about the lack of realism of an alternative future. It is true that we should all strive to have meaningful and improving situations in the present, but this does not mean that socialism is an abstraction that should not be strived for. Instead socialism is an aim generated by the limitations of capitalism which cannot be overcome by measures of individual or collective advance. Indeed De Man's definition of socialism as democratic self-government cannot be realised under capitalism, but instead requires the successful realisation of class struggle. De Man defines socialism as 'present happiness', but it is perfectly possible to be happy and yet consider that capitalism is unjust and should be overthrown. (36) Furthermore, his connected aim of socialism as 'a social order in conformity with our moral sense', cannot be realised in terms of reforms within capitalism.(37) Ultimately his reliance on passions and emotions can only result in an inconsistent and unprincipled approach that is based on accommodation to capitalism.

Consequently his standpoint is based on the naïve view that the logic of morality will transform society in a progressive manner: “In social life too, the moral forces of belief always prove the strongest. A policy which is based upon them is the only realist policy, the only opportunism which can win lasting successes. Why is the socialist labour movement gaining strength? Not because the class interests it represents are, per se, becoming more powerful! The reason is that people come to see more and more plainly that the aspirations of the working class movement are in conformity with a moral demand, whose essential justice even the ruling class do not venture to deny.”(38) But sadly, this view was an illusion. Instead the issue of advance means the necessity of realising the power of the proletariat. The failure to realise this possibility in Germany led to tragic results. The problem in this situation was not the influence of Marxism, but instead the distortion of this approach and the rejection of principled politics. De Man's standpoint was ultimately also illusory. Ethical socialism is important but not at the expense of revolutionary politics.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Henry De Man: The Psychology of Socialism, Gorge Allen and Unwin, London 1928

(2) ibid p25

(3) ibid p33

(4) ibid p63

(5) ibid p65

(6) ibid p72-73

(7) ibid p97

(8) ibid p100

(9) ibid p123

(10)Ibid p126

(11) ibid p131

(12) ibid p133

(13) ibid p138

(14) ibid p237

(15) ibid p269

(16) ibid p301

(17) ibid p325-326

(18) ibid p351

(19) ibid p379

(20) ibid p381

(21) ibid p386

(22) ibid p387-388

(23) ibid p388

(24) ibid p389

(25) ibid p390

(26) ibid p391

(27) ibid p395

(28) ibid p398

(29) ibid p400

(30) ibid p415

(31) ibid p442

(32) ibid p446

(33) ibid p465

(34) ibid p472-473

(35) ibid p473

(36) ibid p490

(37) ibid p491

(38) ibid p506