

IDEAS

MILLAR OR MARX?

Communism may be dead in all but a few precincts of the world, but many of its founder's ideas live on. One of the more noxious, George Watson thinks, is the theory that classes are the fundamental units of a society. Here, he makes the case for another idea advanced by an unjustly neglected pre-Marxian thinker.

by George Watson

There was once a professor of law named John Millar. Born in Scotland in 1735, he went to Adam Smith's lectures on moral philosophy and then, finding his own religious convictions too weak for a clerical career even by the tolerant standards of the Enlightenment, took to the law. In 1761 he became a professor at the University of Glasgow, where he is said to have been among the first to lecture in English rather than Latin, acquiring a reputation as an orator in his university and beyond. His private life was as uneventful as academic lives often are, but in the 1770s, as a militant Whig, he openly supported the American Revolution, and a dozen years later the French, and he opposed the slave trade.

He also wrote a treatise on social differences, which appeared in 1771 as *Observations Concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society* and in later editions came to be known as *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*. A work by a professor still in his thirties, it plainly owed something to the French *philosophe* Montesquieu and to David Hume, who, though a Tory, was a close friend. The book is not now famous and has

not been reprinted since 1806. In 1923 the noted German economist, Werner Sombart, called it astonishing and one of the best and most complete of sociologies, and wondered why it had dropped from view. In fact, it was not widely celebrated even in its own century. Neither Boswell nor Johnson discussed it. Yet it was probably the first book in Europe to be devoted entirely to the theory of social difference, and almost the only one in the Western world before the present century.

Millar's invisibility since his death in 1801 is faintly surprising. He belonged, as a Scot, to a modest nation but not, as a lawyer, to a modest profession. His book went into several editions in his lifetime, with improvements, and was translated into German a year after it first appeared, and a year later into French. There was a Basel edition in the original English in 1793. But 19th-century Continental theorists such as Karl Marx seldom if ever mentioned it, though David Ricardo owned a copy and John Stuart Mill and his father James are known to have admired it. Yet it can teach us something today, since it seems to be widely assumed, even by anti-Marxists, that modern theorizing about social difference,

and even social history itself, began in the 1840s with Marx and Friedrich Engels.

"We are all Marxists now," a professor of classics remarked recently at an international conference, meaning no more than that ancient historians nowadays are interested above all in social history. The misapprehension is widespread. Soon after the fall of communism in 1989, for example, an article entitled "Premature Obsequies?" in *History Today* (April 1991) by Christopher Hill, the octogenarian British historian, argued that Marxism is immortal even if the Soviet system was not, being conceptually indis-

pensable to historians. The argument has become a convenient bolthole for ex-party members and can be unthinkingly accepted, at times, even by the nonpolitical. A myth is being born, and it has two aspects: that social difference is always and necessarily the same as social class, and that theories of class began with Marx. These are enormous assumptions. I want to argue here that one can be interested in the theory of social difference without being interested in class at all—by rejecting, indeed, theories of class—and that the theoretical issue was at least a century old in modern Europe when Marx began to write about it in the 1840s. Marx was a latecomer to the debate about social difference and knew he was, and the debate was not improved by his intervention.

In 1748, exactly a century before the *Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels, Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Law* appeared, a comparative study of human society that drew excited attention to the ways social institutions differ according to period, custom, and climate. Montesquieu was not a moral relativist, though this did not save his book from the papal index. In fact his first chapter insisted that the laws of life are God-given: "He acts according to the laws of the universe because He knows them; knows them because He made them,



An idea whose time is past? The Marxian vision of social reality, little more nuanced than this 19th-century cartoon, still reigns.

made them because they relate to wisdom and power." Every human and physical variation, Montesquieu argued, represents an ultimate uniformity, every change an ultimate consistency in human nature. Anthropology, here in its infancy, did not entail the view that morality is a human invention or that it exists only relative to time and place. Moral laws are given, like physical laws, in the Enlightenment view, and individual beings and communities can get them right or wrong. Millar believed that too. Though his book is a study of the diversity of human customs, occasionally invoking Arabs, American Indians, and even Congolese, its preface boldly restates the foundation doctrine of humanism: Human nature is "everywhere the same." He is a disciple of Montesquieu's doctrine that diversities of sex, wealth, government, and the arts only illustrate the deeper unity of the human condition. From the perspective of a post-Marxist age like our own, however, his argument has a wider significance.

Millar believed in *rank* rather than in class, in "subordination," as he and his master Adam Smith often called it, rather than in vast and potentially hostile conglomerations like bourgeoisie and proletariat. Such polysyllables do not figure in his book. Five years after Millar's *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* appeared, Adam Smith introduced a chapter on the subordination

of ranks into his *Wealth of Nations* (1776). The debate about the theory of social differences had already opened in Scotland with Adam Ferguson, a professor of philosophy at the University of Edinburgh and another Whig, who published his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* in 1767. Like Millar's after it, Ferguson's book was promptly translated into German and, rather more tardily, into French. In the 18th century Scotland led Europe in the study of society: anthropology and sociology together. These three books are about the ancient, medieval, and modern all in one, at once comparative and analytical, factual and theoretical, and they do not recognize any separation between anthropology and its unborn rival.

Nor do they engage in the modern debate about social class, for the simple and easily forgivable reason that their authors had not heard of it. The sociology of the Scottish Enlightenment was about social inequality or the subordination of ranks—the factors that cause such subordination and, in turn, cause it to change. That establishes the point that it was (and is) possible to take an intelligent and even theoretical interest in social difference without being interested in class at all, as Marx was one day to understand the term.

The theory of rank represents as large a gap as any there is between the world of assumption familiar to our own times and the world of the Enlightenment. Rank differs from class in more ways than one. It is various—perhaps infinitely various—representing society as something like a pyramid with many steps, each subordinate to another; class implies, or came to imply, no more than two or three vast groups condemned, in its extreme Marxian version, to class struggle or civil war. There are other divergences. Rank was and is a popular and originally nontheoretical view of social difference, in the sense that the uneducated can readily believe in it or take it for granted, as the scenes before Agincourt in William Shakespeare's *Henry V* vividly illustrate. By contrast, class was first and last a doctrine for intellectuals. Rank,

again, is more subtle than class in the sense that it admits of more than one defining factor—birth and property, and above all status—whereas class tends to divide into rich and poor, with the poor as agents of change. The contrast is highly paradoxical. One expects intellectuals to hold complex views, on the whole, the uneducated to hold simple ones; and no doubt class theories can be made to look complicated, especially if they are dignified with the jargon of the Hegelian dialectic and fitted out with polysyllabic talk about consciousness and reification. But the real effect of class when it began to replace rank during and after the Napoleonic wars, in the writings of Saint-Simon (1760–1825) and Marx, was not to subtilize but to simplify. An ignorant idler silently identifying a stranger's probable rank by his dress, gestures, and accent, for example, is performing an act of identification far subtler than the historian who concludes that the Spanish Civil War was ultimately a struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The real charm of class to the intellectual mind of the 19th and early 20th centuries, one sometimes feels, was that it was easy and portable. Intellectuals may sometimes like things to look complicated, but they also like them to be simple. The most seductive combination, one suspects, would be to look complicated and be simple at the same time.

The interest of Millar's argument of 1771 has been largely obscured in our times, not because it is obscure in itself but because Millar could not know, or be expected to know, that a counter-theory was about to be launched. That leaves the writings of the Enlightenment looking a trifle bland; nor would the views of Millar and his peers on prehistory, untouched as they are by recent archaeological discoveries, excite the respect of any living scholar. Millar was not an original thinker and did not claim to be one. Oddly enough, something similar, in a mildly qualified form, could be said of Marx and his theory of class. It is strange that this should have been overlooked, because he was a pedantic German and conscientious in giving his sources. His theory of class was never ex-

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pounded in its final form, and belongs to those portions of *Das Kapital* left incomplete at his death in 1883. But enough has survived to make his position clear, and it is confirmed by a letter of March 1852, in which he denied having discovered either the theory of class or the class war—his contribution having been rather to show how classes are linked to phases of productive development, and how the coming class war must inevitably lead to a dictatorship of the proletariat.*

Since there have been no such class wars in industrial states, the second proposition has not exactly worn well, and the first is persuasive only in part and by means of elaborate interpretation. Like others that come to mind, Marx was mostly unoriginal when he was right and original when he was wrong. He was right in acknowledging his intellectual debts, however, and what matters is that he should have been wholly aware that the theory of class was not his invention.

The Enlightenment view of social difference had this in common, at least, with such 19th-century views as Saint-Simon's and Marx's, that it was fundamentally a theory of history. Millar's book, for example, treats prehistory and the first creation of settled societies. But history for the two camps points in opposite directions. For Montesquieu and his followers it illustrated the

constancy-in-flux of human nature; for Saint-Simon and Marx, its profound inconstancy. Consciousness itself, Marx believed, had been profoundly changed both by feudalism and by the Industrial Revolution, and socialism would change it again. Man is not now what he was, and is about to become another thing again. That argument between the humanism of the Enlightenment and the relativism of its successors will not easily be settled, but the collapse of communism might be said to have left the game

drawn, for the moment, in the humanist's favor, insofar as the return of the free market in Eastern Europe may imply that consciousness was not, after all, profoundly and permanently altered by socialism, and that a human instinct for individual self-advancement can survive even three-quarters of a century of deep freeze. The question is plainly too vast to be settled by a single instance, or even a set of instances. The revival of humanism in recent years is nonetheless notable after a century and more of dogmatic relativism in the fashion of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. In *Beast and Man* (1978), for example, Mary

Midgley, a British philosopher, persuasively argued that anthropologists and sociologists in our time have tended to see only differences because differences were all they were looking for. The humanistic doctrine of the unchanging human heart may, in the end, be less absurd than we have been lately encouraged to suppose.

There are other contrasts here. Though Millar had read travel books and even fleetingly mentions the Congo, neither he nor



John Millar

*"No credit is due to me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them. Long before me the bourgeois historians had described the historical development of the class struggle, and bourgeois economists the economic anatomy of the classes," Marx wrote to Georg Weydemeyer.

Montesquieu, in an age before archaeology and anthropological field work were born, shows much acquaintance with any evidence beyond the textual or with worlds beyond the classical ages of Greece and Rome and the intervening epoch of European feudalism. As seen from the present, their evidence is thin. Marx, too, was a classicist by education, but his range was wider, especially in his later years when, as his notebooks show, he took a passionate interest in a variety of Third World topics (as they would now be called) such as American Indians, and a keener interest in theories of race than his modern admirers have cared to acknowledge. These speculations, and those of Engels concerning primitive communism, are not now much respected by anthropologists, being based on fanciful and largely discredited sources, but for good or ill they make the Marxist mix richer, historically and geographically, than the Enlightenment view.

The most provocative contrast between the two traditions, however, lies in the simple fact that the luminaries of the Enlightenment saw wealth rather than poverty as an agent of change, and change for the better. They wrote like Whig magnates. Since the world, with the death of socialism, is now returning by leaps and bounds to that opinion, the Enlightenment view now possesses an interest beyond the merely curious. Four years before Millar, Adam Ferguson in his *Essay* had considered the subordination of ranks required of any settled and peaceful society as necessarily based on an earlier and existing accumulation of private wealth. Such wealth, he believed, was utterly essential to the civilizing task of turning brutal warlords into the rulers of settled and prosperous states, and must precede it: "Before this important change is admitted, we must be accustomed to the distinction of ranks; and before they are sensible that subordination is requisite, they must have arrived at unequal conditions by chance."

In other words, the highly desirable goal of a settled society can be based only on an existing ownership of property, where some have more and others have less or none. Thus political power in peaceful states, as under England's Whig constitution of 1689, is likely to be an effect rather than a cause

of unequal ownership. The doctrine of the economic base is already apparent. (Montesquieu had already hinted at it, though not as a universal law.) Ferguson was quite clear, like Millar after him, that social and economic institutions commonly underlie political change. His chief emphasis lay on the institutions of justice—statutes, the judiciary, courts of law, and the like—which, as in Adam Smith, presuppose private property and largely exist to guarantee property. Property comes first, and only societies in which there are rich as well as poor, in that view, can sustain forms of justice, civil liberties, and the civilized arts. Inequality of condition is in no sense a matter for regret. In fact it is out of property, and the laws that protect it, that liberty is finally born. "Liberty . . . appears to be the portion of polished nations alone," Ferguson wrote—a nonreversible proposition, one may be sure, since Ferguson was aware that France in 1767 was polished but not free.

This is an interesting argument to our generation, now emerging from the assumption that private wealth is socially conservative in its effects. Ferguson and Millar believed the reverse; so did Adam Smith. Liberty, in their view, and the very search for liberty, need rich men, and not a few of them. And since not everybody can be rich, one may say that liberty needs inequality of condition in order to seek and achieve equality before the law. The less there is of one equality, they might have agreed, the more there is likely to be of the other. All political advances arise out of inequality, they believed, and George Orwell's contention in *Animal Farm* (1945) that equality of condition, or rather the search for it, naturally leads to despotism is one they would no doubt have been happy to endorse.

Like the ancient historians he read, Millar was aware that wealth can corrupt. Nonetheless it can lead naturally to demands for civil rights by the rich against their rulers, whether Stuart or Bourbon, and sometimes, as after 1689, to liberty itself. Echoing Ferguson's point about polished nations, Millar wrote:

The farther a nation advances in opulence and refinement, it has occasion to

employ a greater number of merchants, of tradesmen and artificers; and as the lower people, in general, become thereby more independent in their circumstances, they begin to exert those sentiments of liberty which are natural to the mind of man, and which necessity alone is able to subdue.

Necessity here means dire poverty. So the most natural effect of private wealth, though not an inevitable effect, is political radicalism: a limited monarchy, for example, as opposed to tyranny, perhaps even a republic, and extensions of suffrage. Just as poverty tends to acquiesce in despotism, as in slave states, so private wealth tends to be radical, obliterating memories of a "former state of servitude," enfeebling traditional authority by creating a sense of independence and weakening hereditary influences. Wealth is a necessary, though not a sufficient, cause of progress. "Money becomes more and more the only means of procuring honors and dignities," Millar remarked without regret, as if the prospect of California were nothing to worry about.

The worry about new wealth began later. Some 30 years after Millar, William Wordsworth, by then an ex-revolutionary, complained in his sonnet "O Friend!" (1802) that "The wealthiest man among us is the best," as if this were a shocking infringement on the status of old families; and Jane Austen's novels can be deprecating about the vulgarity of new riches that conveniently ignore their origins. It is easy to forget that conservative interests were once critical of competitive wealth-creation and the commercial spirit, and for good reason. Charles Dickens, a radical, profoundly admired the active commercial spirit—Daniel Doyce, the lively engineer-inventor in *Little Dorrit* (1857), illustrates the point—and indeed no one has ever shown what, in its social effects, is likely to be conservative about competition. By the early years of the 19th century, as a Tory, Wordsworth found the commercial spirit vulgar, which perhaps at times it is. Ferguson, Millar, and Adam Smith saw it as the engine of civilization as well as of social change, and it is an argument worth reviving. As Yeltsin's Russia may yet show, no economic system is more likely to allow the poor and the unconnected to rise and

threaten a hereditary caste or privileged *nomenklatura* than a competitive system.

It is now time to return to Christopher Hill, that Marxist survivor in an age of disillusion. He left the British Communist Party in 1957 in protest against the Soviet invasion of Hungary the previous year, and his independent credentials have been unassailed for more than 30 years. But independent Marxism, too, may now be under threat, or deserve to be. What 1989 demonstrated, Hill argues in *History Today*, was not the death of Marxism but of the Communist parties. I believe and hope that it signaled both, though the death of an abstraction is admittedly harder to certify than that of a person or party. It will evidently take more than an Enlightenment thinker like Millar, or even Montesquieu, to overturn Hill's case. But that is less because the case is strong than because, in certain important respects, it is nebulous. Consider this passage from Hill:

During the past century many Marxist ideas have been incorporated into the thinking of historians, including those who regard themselves as anti-Marxists. That society must be seen as a whole; that politics, the constitution, religion, and literature are . . . related to the economic structure and development of that society; that there are ruling classes: all these are now commonplace.

They were also commonplace before Marx was born. They were known to anyone who had read Montesquieu, Ferguson, Millar, and Adam Smith, and not all of them were wholly unfamiliar to Aristotle, Hobbes, and Locke before them. Professor Hill simply has not read enough if he imagines that Marx was the first to see society as a whole—Thomas Macaulay did that in the famous third chapter of his *History of England*, which appeared in 1849, the very year Marx settled in England—or that Marx invented the concept of a ruling class, or that he was the first to link political and artistic advances to the economy. Marx neither invented the doctrine of the economic base nor claimed to have done so.

A lack of reading may seem an impertinent charge to make against scholars. But that is to misunderstand the direction in

which lives are lived. Even eminent scholars, after all, often form their dogmatic opinions, sometimes for life, before they have read a word of the matter, and later reading can be partial and ommissive. The late Moses Finley, a historian of antiquity, once explained that his lifelong dedication to Marxism began when, as a freshman at a New York college, he heard Marx expounded in what proved to be for him an irreversible revelation. At the time he had not so much as heard of Marx. It is possible for highly intelligent beings to be converted, and permanently converted, by authors of whom they have read nothing. In one of his last books, *Politics and the Ancient World* (1983) Finley deplored the vulgar habit of calling all class analysis Marxist, since (as he said) it was as old as Aristotle. Not everyone is so scrupulous. A German professor of similar sympathies once told me it would be wrong to imply he was unacquainted with the writings of Marx and Engels, since he had read *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) more than once. The *Manifesto* is a pamphlet, not a book, and Marx and Engels were prolific authors, but he plainly thought that a sufficient answer. Marxists are not just ignorant of the world. They are often ignorant of Marx.

It may seem strange that so many modern historians are content to talk as if social theory were an innovation of the 1840s. But there may be an explanation. Aristotle, when he spoke of the struggle between rich and poor, was making the richly antidemocratic point that the poor only want democracy in order to expropriate the wealth of the rich; the Scottish Enlightenment, for its own high-minded reasons, was also actively in favor of inequality and private wealth. These are arguments that have not usually recommended themselves to historians in a democratic and even egalitarian age. Victorian socialism did not deny its intellectual origins, and Marx's debt to Aristotle was one he often acknowl-

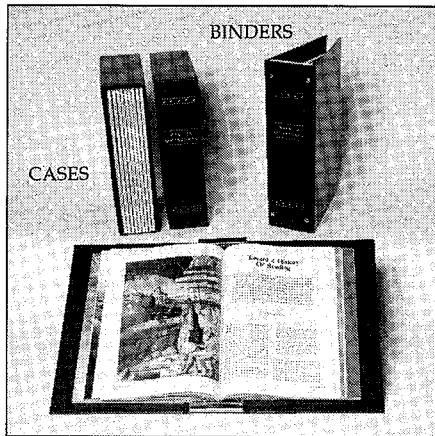
edged. In fact he was proud of it. The 20th century has usually preferred to ignore his sources, ancient and modern. Although Marx was idolized for decades behind a wall of barbed wire and venerated for even longer by earnest spirits outside the wall, his footnotes were neglected and his sources unread. Those sources were often explicitly antipopular, openly favorable to the rich, and unavoidably ignorant of the new conditions created by the Industrial Revolution. No wonder, then, if the Enlightenment, which candidly believed in private wealth as an agent of progress, was written out of the script after Marx's death.

There is a danger of perpetuating a large myth of intellectual history. The academia of the English-speaking world may soon come to look like a sort of Masada of impenitent Marxism. Christopher Hill, for example, writes that "Jack Hexter is the doyen of anti-Marxists, but when he tells us that Shakespeare's *Richard II* is about property . . . his approach is manifestly Marxist." But is it? There is a river in Macedon, as a Welshman says in another of Shakespeare's plays, and a river in Monmouth. In his *Politics* Aristotle called it a merely accidental feature of oligarchies to be ruled by a few, of democracies to be ruled by the many. His base too was economic: "The real point of difference is poverty and wealth." So perhaps J. H. Hexter is an Aristotelean, though I suspect he is better left to speak for himself.

Or perhaps both Hill and Hexter are Millarists, and should be invited to read his book and tell us. More than two centuries ago Millar believed that property defined power and directed where it would go, and rank has worn far better as a theory than class. If we could make the invisible Scot visible again, along with his sources among the *philosophes* and his Scottish contemporaries, we might liberate ourselves from something more than the tyranny of communism that Hill, like others, discovered 40 years too late. We might liberate ourselves from an obsession with class.



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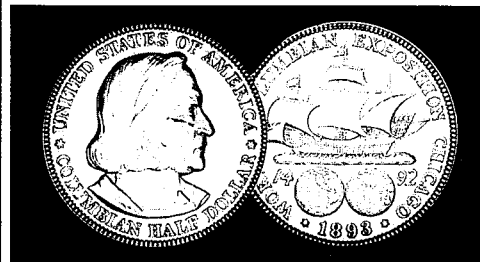
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