

Maximilien Rubel: Anti-Bolshevik Marxist

Maximilien Rubel who died at the end of February was not just a Marx-specialist, he was also someone who wanted Socialism in the real sense of a society of common ownership and democratic control from which what he along with Marx regarded as the two great expressions of human alienation, money and the state, would have disappeared. As such he recognised, and denounced in his writings, the rulers of state-capitalist Russia and their state ideologists as the great distorters of Marx's ideas. His ambition, on the academic field, was to produce a definitive edition of the writings Marx himself published but free from the distortions and tendentious commentaries in the editions emanating from Moscow and East Berlin.

Unlike many others, Rubel was never taken in by the state-capitalist regime in Russia. In other words, he was never at any time a member or supporter of the Communist Party. He came in fact from the old minority Marxist tradition within European Social Democracy.

He was born in 1905 in Czernowitz, at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (and later, successively, part of Rumania, the Russian Empire and now the Ukraine), and it was in Austria that he first encountered the ideas of Marx. There he came under the influence of the social philosopher Max Adler who, before the First World War, had been amongst those Social Democrats who sought to supplement Marx's critique of capitalism with an ethical element based on Kant's "categorical imperative": socialism was something the workers *ought to* establish for moral reasons rather than something they were inevitably *going to* establish for economic reasons. It was a controversial position but Rubel embraced it and expressed it in his own writings. In 1931 he moved to Paris where he lived for the rest of his life.

Rubel was the author of many books and articles on Marx mainly in French but some in English. They all make interesting, if sometimes difficult reading. Particularly to be recommended are the selections from the writings of Marx and Engels he edited with Tom Bottomore (*Karl Marx: Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy*; published by Penguins, this is still available and is one of the best of its kind) and the life of Marx he wrote with Margaret Manale *Marx Without Myth*. He also contributed a chapter to *Non-Market Socialism in the 19th & 20th Centuries* which he co-edited with John Crump.

In French there is the collection of his articles published in 1974 under the title *Marx critique du marxisme* ("Marx Critic of Marxism"). In it Rubel argued that Marx was not a Marxist. In two senses. Firstly, that Marx's own views conflicted with what was generally called "Marxism" (Bolshevism, Leninism, Stalinism, Trotskyism, etc). Rubel argued vehemently against "the myth of the October Socialist Revolution" which he saw, not as the winning of political power through the self-activity of the working class as a prelude to socialism, but as the capture of political power by the Bolshevik Party as a prelude to the development of capitalism in Russia under the auspices of the state.

Rubel's second reason for saying that Marx was not a Marxist was that Marx had not set

out to establish a new school of thought to be named after him and that in fact the establishment of such a body of thought named after an individual was contrary to Marx's whole approach and analysis. Ironically, though Rubel always refused to regard himself as a Marxist his writings expressed Marx's views more accurately than most of those who have called themselves Marxists.

Rubel emphasised that since his earliest socialist writings in the mid-1840s Marx had regarded money and the state as two expressions of human alienation, and had envisaged their disappearance as a defining feature of the free society that was the alternative to capitalism. Marx, said Rubel, saw this moneyless, stateless, classless society as being achieved by the independent self-activity of the workers themselves, which would include turning the vote into an instrument of emancipation; in other words, Marx's position was that the state, as an organ of class rule standing above society, should be abolished by democratic political action. Marx was not opposed to socialists contesting elections.

This of course is an interpretation of Marx very close to our own. Rubel was aware of the SPGB, having attended some of our meetings and corresponded with some of our members as well as subscribing to the *Socialist Standard*. He was apparently fascinated by our existence as a group which had stuck so closely to Marx's own conception of socialism and the socialist revolution. He didn't agree with our position of concentrating exclusively on what William Morris called "making socialists", and, tempted by the specious plausibility of the "lesser evil" argument, voted for in the 1981 presidential elections in France. Needless to say, within a year of election the Mitterrand government was freezing wages and cutting social benefits in accordance with the dictates of the economic laws of capitalism that profits and profit-making must come first. There is no lesser evil under capitalism, only one big evil, capitalism itself, as Rubel should have known.

Rubel was in the tradition of what Paul Mattick called "Anti-Bolshevik Marxism" and, through his writings, will continue to contribute to the socialist understanding required before a genuinely socialist society can be established.

(*Socialist Standard*, June 1996)