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ERNEST BELFORD BAX  
MARXIST, IDEALIST AND POSITIVIST

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## ABSTRACT

Bax was the leading philosopher of the socialist revival in Britain during the 1880s. He saw Marxism as an economic and historical science that lacked a philosophical and ethical basis. Consequently, he tried to justify the Marxian dialectic by using a philosophy indebted to German idealism to show that the dialectic was a fact about reality itself, and he also tried to provide an ethical defence of Marxism in terms of a positivist ethic enshrining the goals of the French Revolution. Such an understanding of Bax's philosophy makes his political activities appear more rational than historians have previously thought.

I

Ernest Belfort Bax (1854-1926) was the leading philosopher of the British Marxist movement during its formative years. In 1881 he wrote an article which was the first to proclaim Marx to the British public and which - together with an article by H. M. Hyndman - signalled the start of the socialist revival in Britain.<sup>1</sup> Marx told Sorge that Bax's article was "the first publication of that kind which is pervaded by a real enthusiasm for the new ideas themselves and boldly stands up against British philistinism"; though he also complained that "the biographical notices the author gives of me are mostly wrong" and "in the exposition of my economic principles and in his translations (i.e., quotations of the Capital) much is wrong and confused."<sup>2</sup>

Scholars have paid little attention to Bax despite the originality and historical interest of his philosophy. Certainly Bax does not correspond to the caricature of Anglo-Marxists as people who reject theory and submerge the Marxist dialectic in British empiricism. On the contrary, he tried to bolster Marxism by recourse to both the philosophy of German idealism and the ethics of French positivism. When, for example, a correspondent criticised an article that Bax had written on socialism, Bax advised him to read not only Marx but also Kant.<sup>3</sup> In brief, Bax believed that although Marx's economic theory was "comparable in its revolutionary character and wide-reaching implications to the Copernican system in astronomy," nonetheless Marxism lacked a philosophy - it should be remembered how few of Marx's works were available in the 1880s when Bax was writing.<sup>4</sup> Bax maintained that Marx had used the dialectic in Capital without giving any metaphysical grounds for its use, and that "the dialectic method without metaphysic is a tree cut away from

its roots," "it has no basis and therefore no justification as an instrument of research."<sup>5</sup> He claimed that only German idealism could provide Marxism with a suitable metaphysical basis. Further, Bax thought that Marx had ignored the ethical side of socialism where Bax defined socialism as a new world view that appeared "in economy as co-operative communism; in religion as anti-theistic humanism; and in politics as cosmopolitan republicanism."<sup>6</sup> He argued that only French positivism could provide Marxism with a suitable humanist and republican ethic.

The few scholars who have studied Bax's ideas have all found them fundamentally irrational. Stanley Pierson, for instance, concludes that "Bax exhibited attitudes, or a style of thought, which were simply irrational," and that "his peculiar fixations on the Victorian family, suggest anxieties, resentments or desires which, in the absence of much information of Bax's personal life, are beyond the reach of the historian."<sup>7</sup> Likewise Dr. J. Cowley portrays Bax's attitude to the Woman Question as a phobia caused by a repressive childhood.<sup>8</sup> Finally E. P. Thompson suggests that "there was something odd about Bax" because he "kept plunging off after the spectacle of hypocrisy, rather than the fact of exploitation."<sup>9</sup> All of these critics are saying much the same thing - Engels had voiced somewhat similar qualms when he described Bax as a "chaser after philosophical paradoxes."<sup>10</sup> All of these critics object that Bax's social analysis exhibits a strange obsession with social hypocrisy and so misses the political point, and all of these critics seek an explanation of this obsession in terms of popular psychology.

Now, whilst psychology undoubtedly has a place in social explanation, surely we should only adopt psychological explanations of beliefs if we can find no rational reason why an agent should have believed what he believed.<sup>11</sup>

Further, many philosophers now follow Wittgenstein's suggestion that concepts of rationality depend on wider language games; that is, that to give a

rational explanation of a belief is not to show that that belief is true or that we ourselves should rationally hold that belief, but rather that it was rational for a particular agent to hold that belief in the light of the other beliefs of that agent.<sup>12</sup> Different philosophers however develop the idea of rational belief in different ways and my concern is solely with the fact that none of Bax's critics have tried to explain his obsessions by putting them in the context of his other beliefs.<sup>13</sup> I am not arguing that there are no psychological reasons why Bax believed what he believed. Rather I am arguing that many of his obsessional beliefs were rational within the context of his core philosophical beliefs and so that we do not have to resort solely to psychology to explain his obsessions.

My purpose therefore is twofold: I want to give a clear account of Bax's Marxist philosophy, and I want to show that Bax's critics have paid insufficient attention to his philosophy and so not seen the extent to which his social and political views, notably his over-riding concern with hypocrisy, fitted in with his metaphysics.

## II

Bax was born in 1854 to a lower-middle class family.<sup>14</sup> His father and uncle had become moderately wealthy through running a wholesale and retail business in the macintosh trade, and the growing prosperity of the family enabled them to move from Lemington - where Bax was born - to fashionable Brighton and then to leafy Hampstead. During the 1870s Bax became friendly with a number of European exiles living in London including several old Communards such as Pascal Grousset, Charles Longuet and Albert Reynard. These exiles were not Marxists but they introduced him to socialism and when he read Capital in 1879 he started to consider himself to be a Marxist. Yet, as we have seen, he thought that Marxism lacked a philosophy and so he set out to

upholster Marxism with German idealism and French positivism.

As a youth, Bax wanted to become a composer and to this end he went to study music at the conservatorium in Stuttgart where he also developed an interest in German philosophy. Later, in 1880, he became assistant correspondent in Berlin for the Standard and, whilst there, he met von Hartmann with whom he had long discussions about idealist metaphysics. By the time he returned to Britain he had come to believe that the solutions to "all the more comprehensive problems in philosophy" must begin with Kant's concept of the unity of apperception as expressed in the self-conscious act "I think".<sup>15</sup> Bax set out to resolve certain philosophical problems that he found within the intellectual tradition of German idealism. His philosophical work represented his attempt to grapple with issues raised by this tradition. Consequently we should consider briefly Bax's view of German idealism so as to explain the philosophical tasks that he set himself.

Bax thought that the Kantian metaphysic contained two possible paths of development and that the later history of German idealism consisted of the working out of these two paths.<sup>16</sup> Hegel took the first path. He stressed the "think" of the unity of apperception and so fell prey to the intellectualist fallacy of reducing reality to reason. Hegel's dialectic, however, caught the true dynamic nature of the world: the dialectic was a revolutionary concept that showed that all fixed distinctions were merely temporal. Further, whereas Kant's Categorical Imperative invoked a transcendental and so quasi-religious source of morality, Hegel's dialectic showed that morality depended on the needs of society, though unfortunately Hegel had reigned in the radical implications of the dialectic by portraying the state not society as the embodiment of human needs. Schopenhauer took the second path and so overturned Hegel's panlogism. His concept of the "Will" reasserted the "I" of Kant's unity of apperception and so derived thought from a deeper non-

conscious reality. Yet Schopenhauer also argued that all willing implied wanting, that all wanting implied suffering, and so that the best hope was for the will-to-live to recognise its own futility. His final solution was a pessimistic asceticism, the negation of the "will". Besides, Bax continued, Schopenhauer's "will" could not be the root principle of reality since, according to Schopenhauer's own ethical theory, the "will" negated itself and such negation implied the destruction of the original substance: thus, "the Will as thing-in-itself would seem to be not merely a basal element, but itself a concrete."<sup>17</sup> Here von Hartmann had overcome the problems attendant on Schopenhauer's concept of the "will" by replacing it with the concept of the "Unconscious", though unfortunately von Hartmann rejected the Hegelian dialectic in favour of Schopenhauer's pessimism.<sup>18</sup>

The problematic of Bax's philosophy is clear. In the first place, he wanted to develop the idea of a unity of apperception in a way that steered clear of Hegel's panlogism by emphasising that subject and object coexisted within a world understood in terms of a concept resembling von Hartmann's notion of the unconscious. In the second place, he wanted to develop a metaphysic that would secure the dialectic with what he considered to be its radical implications. Let us consider, then, how Bax as a philosopher used ideas derived from German idealism to try and resolve these philosophical problems.

Bax's philosophy begins with the assertion that reality is the Kantian unity of apperception:

The warp of which reality consists cannot be space or extension, for this is a mere blank form of external objects; it cannot be matter (in the physical sense), for this is merely a name for a synthesis of qualities in space which are perceived or thought, and which have no meaning apart from their perceivedness, as old Berkeley showed; it



cannot be mind, for this is made up of 'impressions and ideas' derived from external experience . . . What then is more fundamental than all these? The answer is the act of apprehension.<sup>19</sup>

The act of apprehension contains two terms, the subject or "I" and the object or "think". Bax argued that since an unknown reality is a contradiction in terms, the object must be consciousness, and since reality must be a single whole, the object must be "consciousness-in-general" where consciousness in general is the universal, all-embracing consciousness presupposed by the particular consciousness of each individual. Further, Bax argued that just as a particular consciousness must have an individual or particular-I as its subject so consciousness in general must have a "universal-I" as its subject.

Indeed, these two terms exist as one; they are interdependent not divisible: "we may, if we like, define the 'Ego' as the potentiality of Consciousness, or Consciousness as the actuality of the 'Ego', since the two are correlative."<sup>20</sup>

Bax therefore was an idealist for whom reality consisted of a primary unity between a universal object, consciousness in general, and a universal subject, the universal-I. He combined the objective idealism of Hegel with a quasi-Kantian subject in a fundamental unity of apperception.

All phenomenon and all experience involve the negation of the basic unity between consciousness in general and the universal-I. All experience presupposes the division of reality into subject and object, into "Ego" and "feltness," a division that denies that the object is indissolubly related to the subject. Instead the subject now regards the object, consciousness in general, as external to itself. Further, because the individual subject sees itself as separate from the object, the individual subject also distinguishes itself from the universal subject, that is to say that the particular-I or individual asserts itself as independent of the universal-I. Bax's primary negation therefore entails the division of reality into subject or "ego" and

object or "feltness", an object that includes other subjects. As he explained, "a feltness, although ultimately referred to the 'Ego', is referred to it by Antithesis; the 'Ego' is Subject, the Feltness is Object."<sup>21</sup>

The primary negation is itself negated by thought which acts as the third term of the original synthesis. Thought shows that subject and object are interdependent thereby reaffirming the unity of all against the primary negation implied in experience. Thought brings out the fact that the subject and the object are united in a single whole and so thought also brings out the fact that the particular-I is merely a part of the universal-I. Here our immediate intuition suggests that the individual is an absolute but thought, or philosophy, shows that this is not so. Thought reduces the particular-I to a "particular representative of a universal class"; thought shows that the particular-I is a pseudo unity or one of many whereas the universal-I is a genuine-unity or one in many; thought reconciles the opposing terms of the primary negation.<sup>22</sup> As Bax explained:

The essence of every real-qua-real consists in these three elements or momenta, a thatness or matter (= 'I'), a whatness or form (= negation of 'I' or feltness), and the limitation of each by each, whence results the relation or logical category, which, so to say, suffuses with its light the allogical process behind it, which it completes. Every real contains a non-rational as well as a rational element.<sup>23</sup>

Bax's argument therefore presents the primary unity and the primary negation as prior to thought. In this sense, the primary unity and primary negation are allogical so that to describe them is necessarily to bring logical categories to bear and so in a sense to distort them. The allogical, like von Hartmann's concept of the unconscious, is a reality that exists beyond thought, a reality that thought can never perfectly capture, a reality that can not be reduced to logical categories.

Once we understand the primary synthesis, claimed Bax, then we can see why the dialectic is the right method for scientific thinking. On one level, because the alogical lies beyond thought, our logical categories can not fully capture reality and so we must develop our categories through the process of the dialectic. Here non-dialectical thinking provides the consistency we find in formal logic since it describes the logical side of reality as though it were static. Yet to grasp reality we must embrace the alogical as well as the logical and in doing so we find that we constantly redefine and extend our categories in a dialectical process. On another level, however, the dialectic constitutes the method of scientific thinking precisely because reality is dialectical. Thought begins with the unity of apperception before building up dialectically through the primary negation to the primary synthesis. Thus, reality understood as thought or consciousness in general, without reference to feeling, conforms to the dialectic. Reality is dialectical, in other words, because thought obeys the laws of the dialectic; because "we find, throughout the whole range of Reality, that activity of the Subject, which we call Thought, universalising, defining and reducing to its special forms or categories the a-logical element of feeling."<sup>24</sup> What is the result of Bax's philosophy? "The result is dialectic - contradiction and its resolution - which is nothing more than the continuous positing of the alogical and its continuous reduction to reason; in other words, to the forms of the logical concept."<sup>25</sup>

In these ways, then, Bax both developed von Hartmann's idea of a fundamental reality beyond thought and provided the Marxian dialectic with a metaphysical basis in philosophical idealism. He argued that reality consisted of a unity of apperception that lay beyond thought in the realm of the alogical. Our immediate experience negates this unity by suggesting that we are distinct beings separate from the world around us which appears to us

as composed of external objects. When we apply logical categories to our experience in an attempt to understand it, then we enter the realm of thought where philosophy reasserts the fundamental unity of apperception. Further, because reality is dialectical, being composed of a thesis or the unity of apperception, a negation or experience and a synthesis or thought, therefore we must adopt a dialectical method, as did Marx, if we are to make sense of reality. Yet because Bax grounded Marxism in his particular idealist metaphysic, he used the dialectic in a distinctive fashion as exemplified by his philosophy of history. It is to this that we will now turn.

In some respects, the fact that Bax looked upon the dialectic as a necessary truth about reality meant that the structure of his philosophy of history closely resembled that of Hegel, though like the Young Hegelians he insisted that contemporary conditions were far from rational. Like Hegel, Bax argued that the dialectic was a logical truth about reality itself and so that history logically must conform to the laws of the dialectic: history is the logical movement of the dialectic manifested in reality; history is the dialectical progress of consciousness in general, the constant resolution of contradictions within consciousness in general. Unlike Hegel, however, Bax claimed that the end term of the dialectical movement of history would be socialism not liberalism: socialism, not current arrangements, was the rational form of society and so the end of the dialectical process of history.

Thus, Bax concluded that socialism was inevitable in the strong sense of being a logical necessity deducible apriori from the nature of reality itself.

Bax reached this conclusion because, like Hegel, he suggested that philosophy shows that reality is consciousness in general (albeit that the universal object is linked indissolubly to a universal subject), and, therefore, that reality conforms to the laws of the mind. In short, the dialectic must result in socialism because socialism is rational; whilst reality must end in

socialism because reality must conform to the dialectic.

In other respects, however, Bax taught a philosophy of history that had little in common with that of Hegel. In the above analysis of history, Bax considered reality only logically from the perspective of thought, but behind thought there lies the alogical dimension of reality, and here Bax differed from Hegel who having no concept akin to the alogical identified what exists entirely with the mental. How does a belief in the alogical affect Bax's philosophy of history? Here Bax believed that logical explanations subsume an event under a category that provides a general law covering that event: logical explanations work by abstraction and so they are true only in a timeless sense. We can grasp Bax's meaning by imagining a mathematical truth that needs to be worked out through history: this mathematical truth would be a logical truth even in the present, but it would be true only outside of time since it would not yet have become an actualised truth worked out through history. Thus, for Bax, history and reality must conform to the dialectic and logic, but they must do so only in a logical and so timeless sense. The existence of the alogical therefore means that although socialism is inevitable, it is inevitable only outside of time. As Bax explained, "the Category must be realised; the logical course of human development must obtain; but the individual working in his own element, so to say, the form of all quantitative Particularity - Time, to wit - can indefinitely delay or accelerate its realisation."<sup>26</sup> It was a belief in the alogical, then, that led Bax to describe determinism as part of the intellectualist fallacy that elsewhere he described as Hegel's error.

Whilst the logical dimension of history appears as "law", the alogical dimension appears as "chance" or "the ceaseless change of events in time."<sup>27</sup> Past history creates alogical forces that determine the history of society within time. Here Bax argued that both material and ideological forces play a

causal role - "there is always an interaction between these two sides."<sup>28</sup>

Elsewhere Bax described the nature of this interaction:

Of course "ideological" conception to bear fruit must be planted in suitable economic soil, but this economic soil, as such, is merely a negative condition. The active, formative element lies in the seed, i.e., the "ideological" conception . . . Economic conditions, let them press never so hardly, require the fertilising influence of an idea and an enthusiasm before they can give birth to a great movement, let alone a new society.<sup>29</sup>

Once we grasp Bax's distinction between the logical pattern of history and the alogical forces of history, then we can understand the apparently contradictory positions he took towards the revisionist controversy. On the one hand Bax called on the German Social Democratic Party to expel Bernstein for denying almost every principle of socialism.<sup>30</sup> But on the other hand Bax attacked the economic determinism of Kautsky and asserted that ideology played an independent role in history.<sup>31</sup> Now, although Pierson notes Bax's views on Kautsky and Bernstein, he is unable to explain them precisely because he does not distinguish between Bax's logical and alogical views of history.<sup>32</sup> Certainly there would seem to be a contradiction between asserting the inevitability of socialism and denying economic determinism. In fact, however, Bax managed to reconcile the two because when he considered reality from a logical perspective he was a idealist-determinist and when he considered reality from an alogical perspective he believed that ideology played a causal role.

### III

Although Bax was just a youth in 1871, the Paris Commune made "a deep and ineradicable impression" upon him which "nothing else could make again."<sup>33</sup>

In particular, the Commune led him to the positivism of Auguste Comte:

I can well recall the tears I shed during those days, in secret and in my own room, over this martyrdom of all that was noblest (as I conceived it) in the life of the time. Henceforward I became convinced that the highest and indeed only true religion for human beings was that which had for its object the devotion to the future social life of humanity.<sup>34</sup>

Bax even began to attend positivist meetings once he saw that the British positivists were "the only organised body of persons" with "the courage systematically to defend the movement of which the Commune was the outcome."<sup>35</sup>

Later, as we have seen, Bax became friendly with a number of Communards living in London and it was they who introduced him to Marxism.

In the Cours de Philosophie Positive, Comte outlined a linear theory of history according to which society progressed from theology through metaphysics to science whilst morals progressed from egoism to altruism.<sup>36</sup> The contemporary age stood on the lip of the transition from metaphysics to science: it marked the death not only of religion but of all speculations about the infinite. In the scientific age a technical elite of industrial entrepreneurs would govern society for the welfare of all. In the Systeme de Politique Positive, Comte argued from his belief in the decline of all metaphysics including Christianity to the need for a religion of humanity to act as a spiritual force within the society of the future.<sup>37</sup> Later still Comte also introduced liturgical elements into his Church of Humanity.<sup>38</sup>

We should distinguish three types of positivism that arose in Britain. The most established were the republican positivists such as E. S. Beesly, Henry Compton and Frederic Harrison who rejected Comte's religion whilst adhering to a less authoritarian version of his social theory.<sup>39</sup> They strove for a democratic and social republic based on the revolutionary trinity of liberty, equality and fraternity, a republic in which social sympathies would

replace class sympathies with labour and capital uniting behind enlightened captains of industry; and, to this end, they joined enthusiastically in the battle for legal rights for trade unions. The most widespread was a loose ethical positivism found amongst George Eliot, T. H. Green, Beatrice Webb and all those other late-Victorians who when confronted with Biblical criticism and the Darwinian theory of evolution responded by transferring the evangelical sense of sin and duty from God to man.<sup>40</sup> Finally, there was a religious positivism that inspired people such as Richard Congreve, though few Britons could accept Comte's liturgies - T. H. Huxley dismissed them as Catholicism minus Christianity.<sup>41</sup>

Now Pierson fails to distinguish between these varieties of positivism and in doing so he assimilates Bax to the intellectual movement represented by Eliot, Green and Webb. Pierson, for instance, describes both Bax's concept of consciousness in general and Bax's ethical theory as attempts to replace the Christian idea of God and yet "retain important features of the traditional faith."<sup>42</sup> Yet Bax disagreed profoundly with the ethical positivists. Whereas they tended to lament the loss of faith and worry about how morality would fare in a post-Christian world, he was a confessed secularist who attacked Christianity for sustaining the false morality of the bourgeoisie. He was an iconoclast who championed new departures in the arts such as the music of Wagner precisely because he believed that they challenged the moral complacency of bourgeois society - he belongs with other secularist converts to Marxism such as Edward Aveling who promoted Ibsen as a critic of contemporary morality.<sup>43</sup> In truth, Bax was a republican positivist who looked back to the French Revolution and the Paris Commune, praising Marat for his work "in the service of Humanity and Progress."<sup>44</sup> He was a republican and a secularist who detested not only Christianity but also Christian morality. He did not see positivism as a way of keeping the good features of Christianity



alive in an age when the dogmas of Christianity were no longer tenable. On the contrary, he denied that Christianity had any good features, and he saw positivism as violently opposed to Christianity. In particular, Bax never suggested that his intention was to rework aspects of Christianity or Christian morality. Instead, he spoke of his desire to give Marxism a metaphysical and ethical basis. I can see no reason to reject his expressed view of what he was doing. Let us, therefore, consider Bax's efforts to bolster Marxism with Comte's ethic.

Bax grounded his moral theory in his metaphysic. He argued that because feeling, or the alogical, is metaphysically prior to reason, or the logical, therefore "the basis of the Rationality in human action is always Feeling."<sup>45</sup>

The telos of human action is given by feeling. Further, although "we are not able to formulate this telos in its totality, we are nevertheless immediately conscious beyond all dispute of the fact that happiness, or pleasure, using the words in their widest sense, is at least its essential attribute."<sup>46</sup> Indeed happiness is merely satisfied impulse or completed feeling. Human action therefore aims at happiness. Yet, Bax continued, moral individualism contains a contradiction that proves that altruism exists: individualism teaches that we should seek our own good, and so individualists can define what we ought to do, as opposed to what we do do, only by assuming that we do not always act out of self-interest and so that altruism exists. What though is the status of altruistic actions if, as Bax has already argued, human actions necessarily aim at happiness? Here Bax claimed that because happiness guides our actions and yet individuals constantly act against their own interest, therefore we must conclude that the happiness that constitutes the telos of life is social and not individual. If all actions aim at happiness, then we can explain actions of deliberate sacrifice only on the hypothesis that the happiness aimed at is the happiness of something "intrinsically more

comprehensive" than the particular-I. Thus, Bax concludes:

May not the true significance of Ethics . . . the conviction that the telos of the individual lies outside of himself as such, consist in the fact that he is already tending towards absorption in a Consciousness which is his own indeed, but yet not his own, that this limited Self Consciousness of the animal body with the narrow range of its memory synthesis is simply subservient and contributory to a completer and more determinate Self Consciousness of the Social Body as yet inchoate in Time? If this be so, the craving of the mystic for union with the Divine Consciousness in some transcendental sphere would be but the distorted expression of a truth . . . that . . . the human animal is yet not the last word of Self Consciousness, but is in its nature subordinate to a higher Self Consciousness, his relation to which the individual human being dimly feels but cannot formulate in Thought.<sup>47</sup>

Bax's ideal is an idealist version of Comte's social morality, an "ethic of human solidarity."<sup>48</sup>

We can reach the same conclusion from a different starting point. According to Bax, the primary negation is that between subject and object during which the particular-I asserts itself as separate from the universal-I. Now, Bax defined socialism as the resolution of this primary negation so that socialism is the state in which the particular-I or individual recognises itself to be not a discrete identity but rather an intrinsic part of the universal-I or society. The ethic of socialism is, therefore, a social ethic which, like that of Comte, goes beyond class: Bax talked of a "higher instinct which, though on face it has the impress of a class, is in its essence above and beyond class; which sees in the immediate triumph of class merely a means to the ultimate realisation of a purely human society, in which class has disappeared."<sup>49</sup> Bax's ideal is a social morality, a positive ethic.

Bax drew on the republican positivism of the Commune to give content to his social ethic. He argued that the revolutionary trinity of liberty, equality and fraternity describe the true relationship between the particular-I and the universal-I. Liberty is "the freedom of the individual in and through the solidarity of the community," but, Bax explained, this does not mean majority rule since, as Rousseau had said, the will of the majority is a mere collection of individual prejudices.<sup>50</sup> Instead true liberty is based on a concept of a general will that fits perfectly with Bax's idealism: liberty consists of the realisation of one's true relationship to society, liberty requires that one recognises that one's true interests are the same as the interests of the community. Indeed, Bax's analysis of the universal-I implied that "the perfect individual is realised only in and through the perfect society."<sup>51</sup> The ideal of liberty therefore embodies the ideals of equality and fraternity.

If we are to have a social ethic, Bax continued, then we must recognise a principle of justice that gives society a right to "all wealth not intended for direct individual use."<sup>52</sup> Here Bax argued that property is an essential pre-requisite for liberty, but whereas capitalism provides liberty for the few through private property, socialism will provide liberty for all through collective property. Once again the movement is dialectical: "individual autonomy, or the liberty of private property - once the only conceivable form of liberty at all - implied the negation of the bonds arising directly or indirectly out of the crude homogenous solidarity of tribal society; the liberty of the future implies the negation of this negation."<sup>53</sup> Thus, Bax finally arrives at the Marxist goal of the common ownership of the means of production. He provided the ethical justification that he thought that Marxism needed by showing that his idealist metaphysics supported a positivist ethic and by showing that the Marxist goal of abolishing private property was

a necessary corollary of this positivist ethic. The need to subordinate the particular-I to the universal-I pointed towards the social morality of Comte and the social morality of Comte required that we establish a socialist commonwealth.

#### IV

Bax thought that Marxism lacked a philosophy and he tried to fill this gap by marrying Marxism to both a metaphysic indebted to German idealism and an ethic indebted to French positivism. Consequently his core philosophical beliefs were those of idealism and positivism not those of Marxism.<sup>54</sup> Now, once we understand Bax's core beliefs we can see why his social theory took the form it did. As I suggested earlier, his concern with social hypocrisy rather than exploitation was an extension of his philosophy not just the result of personal obsessions.

In Bax's view the primary opposition is that between the particular-I and the universal-I. Thus, "the most salient relation in history" is the antagonism between individual and society.<sup>55</sup> Further, because the primary opposition also involves the individual subject asserting itself against a supposedly external object, therefore the antagonism between individual and society is mirrored in the antagonism between mind and nature. It was for these reasons that Bax maintained that "the oppositions wherein history . . . consists, may, I think, be reduced to two chief pairs, i.e., the opposition or antagonism between Nature and Mind, and the opposition or antagonism between the Individual and the Society."<sup>56</sup> What of class? The class struggle is just "a special manifestation of the antagonism between individual and community."<sup>57</sup>

No wonder, then, that Bax found the explanation of history in the changing nature of humanity's ethical consciousness. He described the logical

course of history primarily in terms of the changing dialectical relationships between the individual and society and between mind and nature not between opposed classes or changes in the means of production.<sup>58</sup> Initially these antagonisms were latent and an unconscious social solidarity reigned supreme.

Land was held in common and individuals identified their interests with the interests of the tribe. Similarly people worshipped nature but only in so far as nature affected their own tribe. The antagonisms only asserted themselves during the current era of liberal individualism or civilisation. Individuals now see their links to the community as fetters from which they try to break free and they therefore have become obsessed with asserting their own rights.

Similarly people now distinguish themselves from nature which they think of as inert matter ruled over by a transcendent God who they also regard as distinct from themselves. In the modern era, then, Christianity has resulted in the "severance of the individual from nature and society."<sup>59</sup> Finally, however, a conscious social solidarity and a conscious religion of humanity will arise to reunite the individual with society and to reunite mind with nature. The particular-I will recognise its integral relationship to the universal-I and people will no longer distinguish religion from politics, the sacred from the profane.<sup>60</sup>

The most important relationships in history are those between the individual and society and between mind and nature. What, then, could be more reasonable than that Bax's social analysis should concentrate on the current state of these relationships rather than on the class struggle? Here Bax argued that the most important point about contemporary civilisation was that it represented the most acute point in the history of the antagonisms between the individual and society and between mind and nature. Further, Bax believed that the crux of these antagonisms appeared in the dominant ethos of individualistic Christianity - a belief, incidentally, that explains why he

was so virulent in his polemics against Christianity and why he refused to accept the Social Democratic Federation's official policy of neutrality on matters of religion. According to Bax, we should consider behaviour from an ethical perspective if it is "definitely social" and from an aesthetic perspective if it "merely concerns individual taste."<sup>61</sup> Christianity, however, does exactly the opposite: it concentrates on subjective virtues concerned with personal piety not on objective virtues concerned with a social consciousness. Finally, given Bax's analysis of the most salient antagonisms in society, his social theory naturally focused on the ramifications of this false ethic. Here Bax argued that the main ramification is the hypocrisy that arises because people are more concerned to appear to be good people than to do good deeds. Thus, the central point about capitalist society is that the bourgeoisie are "vulgarity in a solution of hypocrisy."<sup>62</sup>

We have therefore an eminently rational explanation of Bax's concern with hypocrisy in terms of Bax's own philosophical beliefs. His metaphysics led him to believe that the most important relationships in history were those between the individual and society and between mind and nature not those between social classes. When he turned to contemporary society, he found the individual estranged from society and mind estranged from nature. Thus, focusing on what he saw as the most important relationships in history, he claimed that the rotten core of contemporary society consisted of a false ethic not of economic exploitation. Naturally, therefore, he directed his critique of contemporary society at the teachings of Victorian Christianity which alienated individuals from society by leading them to worship a transcendent God not the humanity of the positivists, and that also alienated mind from nature by leading people to look on the material world as full of sin as compared to a pure spiritual world. Bax, in other words, concentrated his attacks on the way in which people who followed the Christian ethic

transgressed the social and natural morality which, he believed, we all know to be true. He exposed moral humbug and social hypocrisy.

Victorian morality, symbolised by the capitalist "hearth" and the middle class family, is hypocritical and superficial, the "perfect specimen of the complete sham."<sup>63</sup> Consider, for instance, the institution of monogamous marriage which, Bax argued, is totally incompatible with natural affection. Personal relations are an aesthetic matter and so people should be free to abandon the shackles of such a marriage if they wish to do so. Yet Christianity teaches instead that personal relations are a moral matter and that people should conform to the Christian ideal of a monogamous marriage. The result is hypocrisy: people piously pretend to be living in accord with the ideal of a monogamous marriage when in fact they are doing nothing of the kind. Likewise, interior decoration is clearly an aesthetic matter that should be left to individual taste, but the bourgeoisie assert that a certain style of decoration is a sign not only of good taste and good breeding but also of upright morals. Bax again slams the result as hypocritical, a sham of "jerry-built architecture," "cheap art," "shoddy furniture," "false sentiment" and "pretentious pseudo-culture."<sup>64</sup> Finally, we should note that Bax's attitude to the Woman Question follows the same pattern. Whereas relations between the sexes should be an aesthetic matter, Christianity actually has a strict moral code that dictates how men should treat women. Once again the result is a sham with appearance dramatically diverging from reality: men seem to dominate but behind this facade the Christian moral code enables women to exercise almost complete control.<sup>65</sup>

Bax's critics might say that although Bax's social analysis makes sense in terms of his own philosophy, it still misses the political point and so is irrational. This, however, would be to beg the question of whose political point, for the notion of what constitutes effective political action varies

according to one's philosophical perspective almost as much as do analyses of society. Bax, for instance, thought that the realm for effective action was in the alogical dimension of history. Further, within the alogical dimension, he thought that, whilst economics provided the necessary backdrop, it was ideology that would actually lead to a socialist revolution. Consequently, he believed that effective political action consisted of effective ideological propaganda to spread the socialist ideal. But what is the socialist ideal? Bax depicted the socialist ideal as the synthesis of the individual and society and of mind and nature: he placed greater stress on the propagation of the positivist ethic than on the elimination of capitalist exploitation. Thus, for Bax, effective political action consisted in polemical pieces of social criticism that showed how contemporary civilisation divorced the individual from society and mind from nature, that is the very pieces of social criticism that his critics regard as representative of nothing more than his irrational phobias. We can conclude, therefore, that Bax's beliefs form a coherent whole - though, of course, we need not agree with them.

## V

Bax's synthesis of Marxism, idealism and positivism resulted in an original and sometimes complex philosophy. His views often seem to run in a totally contrary direction to the dominant Marxism of his time. After all, he propounded his apriori and idealist metaphysics only a couple of years after Engels had popularised a rigidly empirical and materialist version of the dialectic.<sup>66</sup> Further, the world's leading Marxist party, the German Social Democrats, had followed the guidance of Kautsky and adopted a version of Marxism heavily indebted to Engels as their official policy in the Erfurt Programme.<sup>67</sup> Likewise, in Britain, for all his Toryism, Hyndman expressed an equally materialist and empiricist philosophy, and his views dominated the



Social Democratic Federation to which Bax belonged for most of his political life.<sup>68</sup> Small wonder, then, that Bax complained that Marxism had become identified with a "crude and dogmatic materialism."<sup>69</sup>

In some respects Bax appears to have more in common with those later Marxists who reassessed the relationship between Marxism and German idealism than with his own contemporaries. It certainly seems that his interest in the relationship between Kant and Marx and his concern with the ethical foundations of Marxism influenced the Austro-Marxists since Victor Adler translated a number of his essays into German whilst imprisoned for involvement in the train strike of 1889. Further, Bax seems to have even more in common with those humanist Marxists who reinterpreted the relationship of Marx to Hegel in the light of the writings of Lukacs and the discovery of Marx's Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts.<sup>70</sup> Yet the humanist-Marxists were still materialists. They argued that Marx had understood the dialectical movement of history to be a result of the interaction of objective economic forces and the subjective actions of human agents. Thus, although they disputed Engels' view that the dialectic was a given empirical fact about the whole of reality, they also disagreed with Bax's view that the dialectic was an apriori truth about the whole of reality. They thought that the dialectic applied only to that part of reality where human agents acted on an external reality.

Indeed Bax's belief that the dialectic applied to the whole of reality places him firmly amongst contemporaneous Marxists. His belief in the universality of the dialectic meant that he no less than Engels, Kautsky and Hyndman believed that in some sense the future was determined. Ultimately he denounced economic determinism for an idealist determinism not for a belief in human agency. In addition, Bax's belief that Marxism needed a philosophical basis was characteristic of his contemporaries who often saw Marx's work as

incomplete. In this they differed from the later humanist Marxists who typically sought a Marxist philosophy in the early writings of Marx himself. Contrary to initial appearances, therefore, Bax was in many ways very much a Marxist of his time.

NOTES



























































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































