

# Joseph McCarney, 1941–2007

Joe McCarney, who has died in a tragic road accident at the age of sixty-six, was a unique voice in the resurgence of Marxist theory and philosophy that took place in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. He joined the *Radical Philosophy* group in 1976, and he was prominent thereafter as a contributor and (until 2001) a member of the editorial collective of the journal. In three meticulously argued books and a number of papers he developed a distinctive perspective on the thought of Marx and Hegel, which was deeply immersed in the original texts and yet thoroughly alive to the realities of present-day capitalism. His writings were a model of clarity both in their exposition of complex issues and in their exact English style.

The central theme of McCarney's work revolved around the question of the relationship of theory and practice in Marx. While it is clear that Marx envisaged his theoretical work as a force on the side of the proletariat in the class struggle, McCarney fiercely opposed the characterization of Marx's theory as 'critical social science'. He felt that its practical significance belongs to its peculiar nature as *science*, not as critique. In rigorously developing this conception, McCarney suggested that the key to it lay in Marx's debt to Hegel. McCarney argued that 'a certain conception of the theory–practice relationship constitutes the core of Marx's Hegelianism and embodies the sense in which he remains all his life a faithful Hegelian'.

Joe McCarney attended University College Dublin, where he achieved a first-class degree in Politics and History, writing his thesis on the Irish labour movement. Afterwards, he gained an M.A. in Philosophy at Warwick University. Finally, he secured a post as a lecturer in Philosophy at London South Bank University (then Borough Polytechnic) in 1969. At the time South Bank was a magnet for working-class students, many of them mature, and also academics, such as McCarney, committed to social equality. The only full-time philosopher at South Bank, McCarney was a gifted teacher. He developed courses there on Political Ideology, Social Philosophy, Human Rights, and Medical Ethics. His beautifully crafted lectures gained the respect of his students; moreover they found him a helpful and accessible tutor, careful, considerate and patient in reviewing their work.

McCarney's first book, *The Real World of Ideology* (1980), set itself squarely against the view (almost universal then and still extremely prevalent today) that by 'ideology' Marx meant 'false consciousness', or a cognitively defective view of the world that was spontaneously produced by social structures. Marx never used the term 'false consciousness'; it was a coinage of Engels' (and even then did not mean what it was taken to mean). Using a wealth of textual evidence, McCarney argued that for Marx ideology simply meant ideas that serve to advance class interests. The function of ideology is to be the medium of class struggle in the realm of ideas; the ideology of a particular class will consist of the ideological weapons at its disposal in that struggle. As he put it, 'the real world of ideology is class society and class conflict, and it disappears from the historical stage with the close of the epoch that is characterised by those conditions.'

McCarney then pressed his case further, arguing that the current view of ideology was symptomatic of a 'Western Marxism' that, in the wake of the defeats of the 1930s, resiled altogether from the idea of class struggle. The result was that figures such as

Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Louis Althusser, and later the Althusserians and 'Analytical Marxists' of his own time, had completely lost touch with the classical tradition of Marx, Engels and Lenin. (Lukács was exempted from this criticism. His most influential works were written while the optimism engendered by the October Revolution still obtained, of course.)

A thesis on Science and Ideology, for which McCarney was awarded a D.Phil. by Sussex University in 1987, was the first draft of *Social Theory and the Crisis of Marxism* (1990). As did his first book, this one set itself against the stream; as he said, the assumption that an emancipatory socialist theory must be essentially a critique of capitalist society is now so pervasive as to constitute a whole climate of opinion. The central feature of contemporary Marxism, he argued, was that it understood itself as a 'critical theory' of society: a theory that showed that capitalism failed by some ethical or rational standard. Whether the standard was an external one, as in critiques based on freedom, equality or justice, or whether it was simply one of self-consistency, as in so-called 'immanent critique', McCarney asserted that such a conception of his theoretical work was utterly alien to Marx himself. Instead Marx began with the idea that socialism was the 'hidden truth and emergent reality of capitalism' and that the working class was driven by its circumstances to become the agent that would bring this reality about. Marx conceived his own theory as articulating the understanding of the world that was anyway developing within the working class, so that it would facilitate the overthrow of capitalism without ever involving itself in a moral critique of it. So his theory was

an expression of class struggle. (More controversially, McCartney went on to argue that it was no longer possible to identify the working class of the advanced capitalist countries as the agent that would bring about socialism. He added that today we must look to the oppressed masses of the 'Third World' as the agent of revolution.)

Marx's conception of the logical status of his own work committed him to denying that revolutionary theory needs a moral, or indeed any normative, dimension. As McCarney acutely observed, Marx, like Hegel before him, had a kind of aristocratic, proto-Nietzschean, disdain for habits of complaining and fault-finding, and taking refuge in



idealistic dreams. But if so, McCarney asked, how does Marx's theory have practical significance? The answer lay in a form of knowledge which is expressive of the necessity inherent to its object. Dialectical theory surrenders to the life of its object and seeks to bring that life into the light of consciousness. It cannot add anything of its own without betraying its own character, and in particular must not seek to provide a normative commentary to mediate the stages in the life of the object. From this perspective a central role is assigned to the category of 'contradiction'; it is above all contradictions that need bringing to light. Such an activity itself transforms the situation, not merely the conceptual field, where self-contradiction is concerned. The proletariat is compelled

to rebel by the contradiction of its existence when it becomes aware of its own nature and the nature of its situation. The role of revolutionary theory is to be the self-consciousness of the emancipatory historical subject.

The shift from doctrinaire to revolutionary science is precisely that from a normative to a dialectical conception. Once it has taken place, theory is no longer a vision of what ought to be but the voice of an emergent movement of reality which in becoming articulate is enabled to develop its world-transforming potential.

It is instructive here to compare McCarney's view with that of another RP stalwart, the late Roy Edgley – a good friend of Joe's, as is clear from his deeply felt 1999 obituary of Edgley in *RP* 97. Both put the logic of contradiction centre stage. But whereas Edgley thought that diagnosis of 'contradictions' in reality provided the sole and sufficient ground for a critical social science, McCarney emphasized the *ontological* import of the necessarily contradictory movement of reality. In sum, a truly dialectical social theory expresses the movement of the real, and abjures any normative dimension. It was this conception of social theory, shared by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Lukács, that Marxists needed to recover and develop.

However, the conception of Marxist theory for which McCarney was arguing depended implicitly not only on identifying a revolutionary agent but also on an underlying confidence that history was tending towards socialism, or in Hegelian terms that the rational was becoming real. It was perhaps this that led him to a study of Hegel's philosophy of history in the 1990s, culminating in his *Hegel on History* (2000), a lucid exposition of Hegel's conception of history as the emergence of universal human freedom. Hegel was convinced that a people once possessed of the spirit of freedom does not willingly surrender it. Rejecting transcendentalist readings of Spirit, McCarney concluded: 'It is "We" who are responsible for sustaining history in its course and bringing it to an end in freedom.' He reacted to the failure of the Soviet experiment in a true Hegelian spirit, regarding the reunification of East and West as a natural resumption of the march of world history. He often remarked jovially: 'The Absolute is not in a hurry.' One might say he became more of a Marxist Hegelian than a Hegelian Marxist.

Frustrated by the increasing bureaucratization of South Bank, McCarney took early retirement in 2000, but he continued to work and publish. He was a founder-member of the Marx and Philosophy Society in 2003. 'Repoliticized', as he put it, by the invasion of Iraq, he was working on a study of the relationship between Hegel and Marx when he died. He remained to the end of his life a quiet but principled opponent of capitalism, which he once described as 'systematic violence and terror'. His conception of socialism was typically low key: 'a truly human society, one that does not, by its nature, systematically obstruct the attempts of the mass of its members to cope with the burdens of being human'.

Joe McCarney's first contribution to *Radical Philosophy* (*RP* 13, 1976) criticized a piece by John Mepham (*RP* 2, 1972) for abstracting 'ideology' from class interests, foreshadowing his book on ideology. His last word appeared this year (*RP* 141, 2007). In a review, he characteristically called for study of 'the dialectic of the object' in an effort to provide the work on 'the world market and crises', Marx projected, in which 'all the contradictions come into play'.

Although in some ways a very private man, Joe McCarney was warm and witty, possessed of a droll humour, and always courteous in debate. His sudden death robs us of a stimulating philosopher and an irreplaceable human being.

**Chris Arthur**