

OUR CRITICAL MARXISM: AN INTRODUCTION

PART TWO

SOCIOLOGY

We learn from the philosophical foundations of Marx's work that our understanding of the struggle for socialism must involve the overcoming of alienation and it must be dialectical and it must be materialist. Marxists are historical materialists, so when we are faced with different ideas about what socialism is and how to get there, we have to deal with some contradictions. We also have to deal with 'sociological' ideas about what socialism is.

The most important contradiction in this case is the opposition between, on the one hand, fixed ideal schemes or blueprints for implementing socialism and, on the other hand, the movement or ongoing political struggle for it. Blueprints are, of course, limited to what exists at the moment, to present-day conditions, and Marx is suspicious of any such 'utopian socialist' schemes; he is, rather, concerned with how we can move beyond current conditions, how we can emancipate ourselves by anticipating and building an alternative to capitalism.

Marx notices and confronts the split between current conditions and our struggle for a way forward in different ways. For example, in 1852, when discussing the coup in which Louis Bonaparte seized power the previous year, Marx comments that 'the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.' This comment follows his historical materialist argument that people make their own history, and Marx emphasises that 'they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.'

There were material conditions for the historical emergence in Europe of hopes for liberty, for human freedom, and for the grand social schemes through which a more perfect society could be put in place. The 'bourgeoisie', that is, the capitalist class, was coming to be more and more influential, then dominant. This bourgeoisie owned the raw materials and machines and factories, the means of production and consumption, and that rise in their power redefined labour itself, no longer as directly under the control of the feudal lords, but as wage labour. Peasants were now becoming wage slaves, compelled to sell their labour power, but selling it as if by free choice, as if there was a free contract between themselves and those they sold their labour power to.

Bourgeois democratic movements championed that kind of false contract and individual choice, and here you see very clearly how that fiction of individual choice operates ideologically, how 'the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class.' The bourgeoisie made choices about employment, investment and growth and, impelled by the need to maximise profit, experienced those choices as freely made; their experience of the world flowed from their class position, and, as ideology, was relayed down to the working class they had created, a class that needed to sell its labour power.

These are the material conditions for the flowering of Western Enlightenment thought setting itself against the absolutist monarchies that stood at the head of feudal societies, now promoting individual liberty and the promise of consciously-planned human freedom. And in those conditions you have German philosophers like Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) giving us one of the mottos of the Enlightenment 'have the courage to use your own understanding', which was his answer to the question 'What is Enlightenment?'

Alongside this, you have early French sociologists like Auguste Comte (1798-1857) aiming to construct a scientific 'religion of humanity' and to construct a 'positive' or 'positivist' account of society. 'Positivist' was Comte's scientific new word. That, Comte thought, would counter the disorder he saw in the 1792 French Revolution, and would set out clear stages of social development. Comte's project was summed up by his followers in the watchwords still inscribed on the Brazilian flag 'order and progress.'

Marx is here in the time and place of the Western Enlightenment, writing and intervening, and working at the contradiction between individual liberty and social schemes. What Marxism gives us is a way of dialectically practically resolving and transcending that contradiction. In order to do that we need to deal with the question of structure, or the kind of order that was necessary for capitalist society to implant itself, and the question of historical progress and dizzying perpetual change that capitalism opened up.

What we see in that process is that capitalism is simply concerned with how labour power can be put to work to finally realise profit; capitalism is only concerned with 'abstract labour' and it is indifferent to useful or 'concrete labour.' We have to take care though not to then assume that Marx is against abstraction, against what is 'abstract', and only prizes and wants us to prize what is 'concrete', wanting us to return to that. What is 'concrete' for Marx is itself something to already be conceptualised, grasped, he says, in its 'many determinations'; what is 'concrete' for Marx is not like a lump of concrete to be directly observed and measured, but is given reality for us by its relation to

other things. At the same time, it is absolutely necessary for any analyst of capitalism or anything else, any scientist, to work with 'abstract' categories like 'labour' or the 'working class.'

We will see this more clearly when we look at what 'class' is for Marx, and we will arrive at that by looking at how 'abstract' categories like 'order' and 'progress' have to be grasped by us and examined 'concretely' in their many determinations, as they exist in relation to other things. Let us look in a little more detail at order and progress and then at the key Marxist category of social class.

ORDER

Marxism always homes in on contradiction, and social order under capitalism is riddled with a contradiction between the realm of the individual – a realm of free choice that is promised and promoted but always impossible to fully realise – and the collective as a realm of human freedom, the conditions for which are created by capitalism but which is continually systematically blocked. We will focus here on four material and ideological instances of order under capitalism; utopias, organisation, the state and the family.

Utopias

The phrase 'utopian socialism' is actually Marx's own phrase as an accusation levelled at the social reformers who propose visions of egalitarian forms of order, ideal societies. These ideal societies would not only dissolve exploitation in favour of cooperative harmonious participation, but would, the reformers claim, also solve the contradictions between exploiters and exploited. In place of the kind of disorder that arose at times of social unrest, there would be social order. This was exactly the nub of the problem for Marx, for these utopian socialists wished away not only social unrest but also the deep structural conflicts that characterise capitalism.

The utopian socialist reformers imagined they could step above and beyond class conflict. In practice, many of them dreamt up their schemes from the standpoint of the bourgeoisie. Some of the schemes were mere blueprints, with no plan for putting them into practice. Some were enacted as communities that were either crushed because they posed a threat to capitalist property rights, or neutralised and absorbed when they had to compete in the market-place, which is the fate of most 'cooperatives.' And some were enclosed factory sites that were set up by social reformers, benefactors who ran them on a top-down basis in accordance with capitalist principles.

Organisation

Marx was not against order, organisation, and neither were the anarchists who Marx squabbled with. Most of the anarchists in fact complained about the caricature of their own political projects as romanticising chaos, and they actually looked to a deeper social order based on the cooperative nature of human beings. What was at stake was how a new social order could be built out of the ruins of the chaotic cut-throat free-market system.

For Marx, that required building on the collective experience of the working class which was forced together by mass industrial production, welded together as a social force. Workers' collective self-organisation would be democratic and accountable, against the 'dictatorship of the bourgeoisie'. In place of that kind of dictatorship would be a social order run by and for the working class. That alternative social order was characterised by Marx in a much misunderstood phrase borrowed from one of his comrades, the 'dictatorship of the proletariat.'

For that self-organised labour to develop, organisations needed to be built now, under capitalism. Those organisations included, crucially, labour unions and political parties independent of the ruling class and forging an understanding of the world independent of bourgeois ideology. For Marx, such political organisations also needed to transcend national borders, needed to be international. That meant continual struggle against capitalist forms of social order that entered the working class by way of bourgeois ideology, and against the effects of material benefits obtained by representatives of labour organisations; bureaucracy was an endemic problem that was always present in the separation of a privileged layer of representatives with their own particular organisational interests.

State

The danger was that workers' organisations could replicate rather than oppose the forms of social order that are essential for protecting large private property and ensuring control of the means of production under capitalism. Those forms of social order are crystallised in the state apparatus which lifts a section of the population out from the working class, from direct production, and gives them all manner of privileges and power. The lower levels of the state are staffed by the working class, by those still in close familial and community contact with their class, but they are usually obedient to the bureaucracy and to their masters at higher levels of the apparatus who are more closely tied to the bourgeoisie.

The state apparatus is also, when it comes down to it at times of crisis, a body of armed men, restoring social order, and so the state, for Marxists, is always a ruling class state. That is why Marx draws the conclusion that in order to

achieve a revolution against capitalism the state must be 'smashed', broken up by the working class. That state apparatus operates as a mechanism that appears to stand above society, simply ensuring social order, but it actually functions to ensure the smoothest possible running of capitalism. As Marx and Engels put it in their 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, 'The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.'

Family

We owe to Frederick Engels a first historical materialist analysis of the place of the family in the constellation of power relations that enable capitalism to function. The bourgeois nuclear family is a form of order essential to capitalism that links the political-economic system of production to patriarchal power. The family is a kind of refuge from capitalism and seems to be a private space, but it is also a little prison under the command of someone enjoying some of the power they are denied in their alienated lives outside of it.

Engels analyses the rise of private property way before the development of capitalism. That first private property is a prerequisite for capitalism to develop much later, and is intimately linked to the formation of the first state apparatus. The state apparatus guarantees the right to private property, the first instance of which is woman as one of the chattels, property of men. This linking of the origins of private property, the family and the state is proto-feminist as well as Marxist analysis. It opens the way to later analyses of production in the family; 'social reproduction' which, as capitalism becomes globalised, also operates through 'global care chains' that bind women into capitalism.

We have briefly focused on utopias, organisation, the state and the family as material and ideological instances of order under capitalism, and this Marxist account of order has a number of political consequences, including the contradiction between individual and collective action. Let us note three points about this contradiction.

First, we need to notice the individualising effects of capitalism; that individualisation, which is in line with what capitalists might experience of their economic choices, also intensifies alienation for those of us who must sell their labour power to survive. And, among the many ideological effects, it points away from systemic structural analysis to conspiratorial explanations for the misery we experience, as if individuals are also behind the scenes, pulling the strings. Such conspiracy theories are toxic for working class politics and Marxism shows why they have such a grip on people.

Second, just as the family can appear to be a little refuge, an escape into private space away from alienating labour under capitalism, but is functional to capitalism, so individual dissent can be tolerated, even encouraged to the extent that it channels discontent into useless complaint. That kind of 'dissident' complaint against the system is functional as a pressure relief valve as long as the complaint rails against the system as an abstract impersonal bureaucratic enemy over which one has no control, which we are led to believe we will never be able to completely understand or control.

Third, at a deeper level, Marxist analysis always attends to the role of structure and to the historical material possibilities for certain kinds of action. Marxism is not determinist, for there is always agency, and, crucially, collective agency in and against structure. However, we are always suspicious of claims that rebellion is 'spontaneous', coming out of nowhere. We may not be able to predict every breaking into the open of contradictions in capitalism, but we can analyse them, trace them to their historical formation the better to intervene in them, to take them in a progressive direction.

PROGRESS

This brings us to look more closely at what Marxists mean by progress. Here there is another contradiction that Marx had to work through, and he did so again in a dialectical manner, taking account of capitalism's drive for 'development' while also attending to the need for 'conservation'; that is, Marx had to take seriously the relentless innovative potential of capitalist development, but also inspire a political movement that would take forward what was progressive about what capitalism opened up.

A historical materialist account of what capitalism views as 'progress' is not at all an endorsement of the perpetual onward march of industrial development. Many pre-capitalist societies existed for many centuries without any conception of things going forward, of 'development'; their sense of time being cyclical, following the rhythm of the seasons, was grounded in their material practical engagement with nature. If anything, early Marxists could be accused, not so much as holding to a linear forward-focus conception of perpetual progress, but to a very long cyclical view of history; this was seen as beginning with 'primitive communism' and proceeding through a logical sequence that would finally end with the abolition of private property and a return to communist collective life, but now with the material and technical resources accumulated along the way to sustain it.

The as yet unresolved opposition between development and conservation opens up a number of political questions that we now need to put to Marx while learning from his analysis of the brutalising destructive drive for profit.

The role of progress in Marx's work leads to questions about enlightenment, globalisation and growth. So let us explore each of these questions.

Enlightenment

We have already seen that Marx was immersed in a historically and culturally-specific series of intensely ideological discussions about what political-economic development amounted to. Most of the key figures in the Western Enlightenment tradition of thought assumed that Europe was the most historically-advanced part of the world, though some authors, such as Voltaire (1694-1778), also added to this assumption the cynical thought that this was not the best of all possible worlds.

Some Western Enlightenment thinkers, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), promoted a romantic nostalgic return to nature as a solution. This grappling with the paradox of progress, and the suspicion that we might actually be heading somewhere worse, was resolved dialectically by Hegel with the claim that the end-point of the journey would be the 'End of History'.

Marx resisted the arrogant Eurocentric reasoning that surrounded him and he also resisted the romanticising of nature as a way out, as if there was a way back. Instead, as a historical materialist armed with a dialectical method that focused on internal contradictions in society, he analysed what was reactionary inside what was presented as progressive. However, and here is the question that Marxists are still tackling, in what sense is capitalism 'progressive' and in what sense is it 'reactionary'?

If you view the historical sequence of development from primitive communism to slavery to feudalism and then to capitalism as a fixed route, there is a real danger that you see European capitalism and even colonialism as 'progressive' and other pre-capitalist cultures as 'backward.' Marx opens up this question in his discussion of 'globalisation'.

Globalisation

Capitalism took root as the dominant economic system of production in Europe in the nineteenth century, and it rapidly became a global force. This was happening even as Marx was writing, analysing it and building communist organisations that would think of themselves as international, internationalist as a progressive response to globalisation. That also called for a conscious critical response to the incorporation of layers of the working class in the 'advanced' capitalist economic centres into a privileged upper social layer in the global division of labour; there workers could function as what later Marxists, including Lenin, described as a 'labour aristocracy.'

Marx actually included a first analysis of colonialism in 1867 in the last chapter, chapter thirty-three, of the first volume of *Capital*. Here it is clear that, as far as Marx was concerned, colonialism was not merely an outgrowth or extension of capitalism, but was an essential part of it. Marx points out that in the colonies we see 'the truth as to the conditions of capitalist production in the mother country'; that is, as he puts it 'the expropriation of the mass of the people from the soil forms the basis of the capitalist mode of production.'

It has to be said that Marx is mainly focusing on the position of the colonists resistant to wage labour as being a source of profit in the 'mother country' rather than 'indigenous' or original nations peoples. It is nevertheless a big advance on earlier formulations by both Marx and Engels about the necessary price colonial peoples should pay for progress. Marx and Engels broke from that illusion after learning from the misery inflicted on Ireland by Britain. Capitalism, in Marx's better later analysis, thus encounters the resistance of producers who own their own conditions of labour, and this resistance must be broken by capitalism if it is to obtain economic growth. But does this mean that Marx is committed to growth?

Growth

There are at least two indications that this is not the case, and that Marx is instead asking what kind of growth is privileged by capitalism. First, there is the sarcastic description in the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* of the supposedly progressive role of the bourgeoisie; the bourgeoisie, Marx and Engels write, have stripped away the religious illusions that bound society together under feudalism and reduced every sentimental bond, including that of the family, to naked direct monetary self-interest.

It is here that you find the famous phrase 'all that is solid melts into air.' This phrase is followed by the argument that when 'all that is holy is profaned', 'man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.' Does this not only point to an acceleration of the dynamic of capital, but also to the need to slam on the brakes?

The second indication that Marx is giving a more nuanced approach to the question of 'growth' can be seen in his descriptions of the extraction of natural resources by capitalism as a necessary correlate of industrialisation. Our labour is itself part of nature. There are useful ecosocialist challenges to the so-called 'Promethean' image of development and economic growth. Prometheus stole fire from the gods for human technological development and was punished for it, and ecosocialists show that Marx was not at all committed to a Promethean model but was, rather, concerned with the different ways in which political-

economic systems 'metabolise' nature. Marx's analysis is a critique of the 'Promethean' developmental logic of capitalism, not a celebration of it.

There are political consequences of Marx's critical dialectical response to enlightenment, globalisation and growth. One concerns 'abstraction', the sense that capitalism dissolves society into monetary relationships that then stand against real concrete human life. Marx is not pitting himself against 'abstraction' as such, and not at all proposing a return to natural 'concrete' social relationships of the kind found in romanticised idealised communities existing in apparent harmony with their land, the soil. There are wilful misinterpretations of Marx that make that seem so and that portray him as promoting the kind of hatred of all that is 'abstract' that then leads to reactionary opposition to capitalism.

There are indeed reactionary responses to the dissolving of traditional forms of life by capitalism and such proponents object to capitalist 'abstraction' from the standpoint of the past. Marx instead analyses capitalism dialectically from the standpoint of the future, of another world beyond capitalism. This also means that Marxism is not at all aiming to wipe away the past and start from a kind of year zero. To abolish capitalism is not to abolish the past, far from it.

Our aim is to take all that is valuable, all that is worthwhile produced by the development of civilization so far, including the technical advances made under capitalism and, to put it in dialectical terms, to 'sublate' the opposition. This is sublation in times of revolution; to transcend the contradiction; that is, to abolish what is reactionary and preserve what is progressive about it, to simultaneously negate and retain key elements. Sublation here is revolutionary transformation.

CLASS

Now we come to class, but to get to it we need to notice something important about the way Marxism understands and analyses capitalism. Marx makes what is, at first glance, a curious comment in Chapter thirty-three of his 1867 masterpiece *Capital*. He says 'capital is not a thing.' So what is it if it is not a thing? Capitalists seem to accumulate capital and invest it, so it looks to us like a thing. Here is an example of where we need to look at the world dialectically. The money handed over for wages is something 'concrete' in the sense we give to it when we count it, but this money means many different things to us; that is why, in dialectical terms, it is concrete. And capital is a social phenomenon that operates as the organising principle of capitalism as something 'abstract', an abstraction that we make use of in our analysis of capitalism.

Marx clarifies his comment that capital is not a thing by saying that it is 'a social relation between persons, established by the instrumentality of things.' That is also our starting point when we look at social class. You see a stark contrast here between an academic sociological way of looking at the world that can only take aspects of the world seriously if they can register them as things, and a dialectical way of looking at it. We will look at class from three angles, as relation, as something that changes and as something we aim to abolish.

Relation

There are moments in Marx's writing when he wants to drive home to his readers how small a group it is in society that controls the means of production, and he throws in a reference to an 'upper ten thousand' in England at a time when the population was about seventeen million. But this is radical journalism to make a point. In his analytic writing he is careful to insist that just as capital is a social relation between people, so is class.

Although Marx and Engels did not define class in a systematic way, we can extract from their writing an understanding of it that is useful for practical political action, which is what they themselves were concerned with. Under capitalism, Marx says, people enter into 'definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production.' The working class or 'proletariat' is brought into being as the class that must sell its labour power, formed in the process of becoming this class of people that is dependent on the bourgeoisie. It is then a class 'in itself', and Marx and Engels go so far as to say in 1846 that 'class is itself a product of the bourgeoisie.'

Change

Marx and Engels' comment about class as a product of the bourgeoisie was in a book called *The German Ideology* which did not see the light of day until it was published in Moscow in 1932, and the comment raises a number of issues for us. The comment draws attention to the historical materialist and dialectical point that classes come into being and they will disappear. What we experience and act upon as a class consists of 'many determinations', many aspects that include residues of previous pre-capitalist societies and, we would now say, 'intersectional' relationships with different oppressed groups.

It is 'class' in this particular Marxist sense that is brought into being under capitalism, and then has the potential and is charged with the task of seizing the means of production. That means that the clarion call in the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, that the history of 'all hitherto existing society is the

history of class struggles', has to be modified. Engels actually clarified it later, in 1888, to say that it referred to 'written history.'

Abolition

People understand the world and act in it according to their class interests, under capitalism at least, and the working class which is brought into being as a class 'in itself' becomes conscious of its task as a class 'for itself.'

Consciousness of class is thus crucial politically, and this consciousness is blurred, complicated by the rise of a 'middle class' which is caught in an extremely contradictory situation.

The middle class is, from one point of view, increasingly deskilled by the production process, something that is alienating for mental labour as well as for physical labour, and so driven into alliance with the working class, even we could say, drawn into the working class. From another point of view, and this connects with long-standing concerns about the role of a 'labour aristocracy' locally and globally, the middle class is also in a sense subject to a process of 'embourgeoisement' that disconnects it from the working class and, at times of crisis, becomes very hostile to working class organisation.

This middle class, and its perception of the working class rests on ideas about its supposed 'identity' rather than as a relation to the means of production, and it is indeed threatened by working class politics, revolution that would abolish its privileges, abolish class as such. That abolition of class is another instance, a practical dialectical instance of 'sublation.' Just as the working class did not exist before capitalism, so it will not always exist, and so the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is the rule by all of the people. What it is to be a worker is retained, empowered and transformed. In this sense it is 'abolished.'

CONCLUSIONS

Just as the philosophical contributions to Marxism are subject to 'recuperation', so are ideas from the French sociological tradition. They are useful, but we have to beware of the way they can be turned into static fixed categories in present-day sociological versions of Marxism, versions which include some of the 'structuralist' approaches that set themselves against the Hegelian dialectical contribution as if it was a whimsey of the young or immature Marx.

We are now in a globalised capitalist world in which class conflict runs through every society. That is a conflict that is soothed and sometimes obscured, wished away by social reformers who would like social improvement to proceed smoothly and peacefully. It is also a conflict that is often displaced

from the interior of society onto an exterior enemy, and which scapegoats enemies within who are seen as acting on behalf of external powers and accused of creating the conflict.

Marxists analyse and intervene in class conflict and associated struggles of the exploited and oppressed. We operate as part of the increasing consciousness of the working class as it overcomes the ideological split between order and progress. The working class becomes a force that can bring about a new order that is a real alternative to the actual already-existing barbarism of capitalism and the catastrophic barbarism it is heading towards.