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Article

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A CRITIQUE OF KARL MARX'S CONCEPT OF CLASS STRUGGLE AS A PARADIGM FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This work titled, "A Critique of Karl Marx's Concept of Class Struggle as a Paradigm for Social Development", seeks to bring to the fore Marx's theory of class struggle where he distinguished the demarcation existing between the rulers and the rule, arguing that the capitalists have deliberately made it difficult for others to come up to their class. They are perpetuating themselves within the corridors of wealth. Marx's theory has on the other hand inspired so many changes and developments both in the political and economic sectors. Evidently, Marx theory has continued to be a source of hypothesis to many theorists in the world and has created a puzzle in the realm of social reality. The quest to solve the puzzle has engendered divergent paradigms of Marxism. The capitalists are uncomfortable with Marx theorizing as it hinges on the oppressiveness and emancipation of the masses (proletariats), of the emerging modern capitalist system been brought about by the industrial revolution. He believes that the class struggle was the driving force of social change. According to Marx, men begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence. In producing their means of subsistence men indirectly produced their actual material life. This stage occurs within the framework of a progressive historical evolution. The work adopted analytic and critical methods.

Keywords: Class Struggle, Social Change and Development.

Introduction

Like Plato and Aristotle of Greek antiquity, the Philosophy of Karl Marx has had far reaching influence on the world. The influence of Marx cuts across various fields' politics, economics, education, and even family life. Hardly can anyone engage in any meaningful discussions in

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these fields without acknowledging Marx's contributions. It is due to this profound influence of Karl Marx theories in these various fields that made William Lawhead in his book, *The Voyage of Discovering: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy* remarks:

Marx radical political philosophy eventually became both the rallying trumpet and the theoretical foundation of angry, impoverished, oppressed workers throughout Europe and the rest of the world. As a result of his theories, governments have been overthrown, maps have been changed and his name became a household word. (596).

Marx argues economics is at the root of all human existence. He begins with the undeniable claim that people cannot eat ideas but must survive on the material products of their labour. In other words, economics, for Marx, rules everything and those who can secure the means of production are those who are also in charge of other spheres of government. As Marx put in, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (Lawhead 596). Although, Marx employed the dialectics of Hegel and the materialism of Feuerbach, he argues that the dialectics of history in which different forces oppose themselves and give rise to another epoch, is not one of Ideas as Hegel opines, but one of matter-that underscores the historical and productive relations among men in different epoch.

In Marx's words "the development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers" (Marx, 24).

Engels also gives us the fundamental idea underlying the Manifesto: political and intellectual ideas and therefore all of history are based on the economic system of the time, and thus on class struggles. Today, Engels says, the many exploited and oppressed proletariat (workers) can only free themselves by both overthrowing the few rich bourgeoisie (capitalists) and ending economic class altogether. Marx says that all of history is based on class struggle, and then he details the rise of the bourgeoisie. The capitalists have become the most powerful class, he says, putting the aristocracy in the shadows. The bourgeoisie control the means of production (the factories, heavy machinery, and agricultural land) and exploit and oppress the working proletariat, keeping the profit for themselves. To stay on top, the members of the bourgeoisie have to expand across the planet, finding natural resources, new customers, and new workers. They've made life impersonal and miserable for the workers, since now everything boils down to money. Some people occupy other spots in the mix of classes but this show is ultimately about the capitalists versus the workers.

Marxian Theory of Class and Class Struggle

The Marxian theory of class and class struggle is a vital part of the explanation of capitalist production. A class is made up of people who are in the same position in relation to the ownership and control of the means of wealth production. For Marx and Engels, the class struggle between the bourgeoisie (capitalist class) and the proletariat (working class) is the great lever of modern social change. Originally Marx identified three classes on the basis of source of income: "wage for labour, profit for the capitalist and rent for the landowner" But capitalism has now succeeded in absorbing the landlord class, leaving society polarised between two classes: capitalists and workers. The Marxian theory of class is opposed by those academics who explain class not in terms of ownership or non-ownership of the means of wealth production, but in terms of prestige and style of life. Society is said to

consist of a hierarchy of non-conflicting classes, with names such as upper, middle, working and under. Such a theory tends to gloss over the fact that only about 2 percent of the population own enough capital to live comfortably on the income it provides; the other 98 percent have to find an employer or live off state benefit. Brief mention should be made of a few other Marxian ideas relating to the analysis of capitalism. Marx is sometimes associated with the belief that as capitalism continues it will lead to the increasing misery of the working class. His use of the term 'misery' should be taken as relative to that of the capitalist class, not absolute:

Although the engagements of the worker have risen, the social satisfaction that they give has fallen in comparison with the increased enjoyments of the capitalist... Our desires and pleasures spring from society, we measure them, therefore, by society and not by the objects which serve for their satisfaction. Because they are of a social nature, they are of a relative nature' (Marx and Engels, 94).

Alienation is a concept much discussed by Marx but relatively neglected in commentaries on Marxism, including those by the World Socialist Movement. Alienation means the subjugation of man by his own works, which have assumed the guise of independent things. A concept allied to that of alienation is that of what Marx called the fetishism of commodities. People are dominated by the products of their own activities but do not realize this and attribute an independent existence and power to those products. Marx (83) is of the view that the existence of things as commodities, and the value-relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising there from. There is a definite social relation between men that assumes in their eyes the fantastic form of a relation between things. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. In another instance, much has been made of Marx's use of the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. A close study of his references to this idea shows that he meant something very different from our modern understanding of dictatorship as totalitarianism exemplified by Hitler and Stalin. To understand Marx's use of the term "we must return to the original Roman institution of dictatura... the classic dictator held extensive but not unlimited powers, powers to cope with an emergency but not to be left entirely unchecked" (Hunt, 1982: p.286). With this interpretation in mind we may note Marx's remarks in a speech on the 7th anniversary of the International in Marx, 1871:

The class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat... In destroying the existing conditions of oppression by transferring all the means of labour to the productive labourer, and thereby compelling every able-bodied individual to work for a living, the only basis for class rule and oppression would be removed. But before such a change could be effected a proletarian dictatorship [Fr. Dictatorship] would be necessary, and the first condition of that was a proletarian army' (Marx and Engels, 197).

The hard line expressed in those words can scarcely be denied. Engels, too, foresaw a violent revolution, though he wrote of English workers being driven to the use of violence rather than choosing it. As long as other classes, and the capitalist class in particular, still exist; and as long as the proletariat fights against them... it must employ coercive measures, that is, governmental measures; so long it is still a class itself, and the economic conditions which

give rise to the class struggle and the existence of classes have not yet disappeared and must be forcibly removed... With its complete victory, therefore, its rule also comes to an end. Strong measures, then, but temporary and no doubt contemplated with the best of intentions. We must remember that Marx and Engels were men of their time, and that time was one when the use of force by workers against authority for political purposes was much more thinkable than today. Having said that, we believe that no kind of 'dictatorship of the proletariat', no matter how watered down and temporary, should form any part of the socialist program at the end of the 20th century or beyond. The socialist goal will be achieved by force of argument, by democratic methods, not by force of arms or authoritarian methods.

Leadership Versus Self-Education

One major Marxian political theme is that of leadership versus self-education of the working class. Here we have a much clearer consensus that power invested in leaders is the wrong way to go, and that workers educating themselves for the revolutionary task is the right way. Engels, (335) Maintains that Communism rises above the enmity of classes, for it is a movement that embraces all humanity and not merely the working classes. Of course, no communist proposes to avenge himself against any particular individuals who are members of the bourgeoisie... Should the proletariat become more Socialist in character its opposition to the middle classes will be less unbridled and less savage... It may be expected that by the time the rising comes the English working classes will understand basic social problems sufficiently clearly for the more brutal elements of the revolution to be eventually overcome—with the help of the appearance of the Communist Party'. This is a very interesting and revealing passage. It shows a progression of Marxist thought from a capitalist present that is in many ways divisive and brutal, to a communist/socialist movement that is in a transitional stage from divisiveness/brutality, to a future society that will embrace all of humanity. Clearly Engels quite reasonably expected workers to become less brutal as they adopted socialist ideas. Reference to the help of the Communist Party should not be taken as meaning the vanguardist CP or other movements of the 20th century, rather the general movement of those in favour of communism (another name for socialism). Hunt's interpretation of Marxian views on workers' self-education is also closer to the Socialist Party's approach to this question rather than that of the Communist or any other Party. According to Hayak, (290):

“Their [Marx and Engels'] own vision of communist revolution did not rest on the fundamental postulate of mass immaturity, but rather pre-supposed the masses' prior self-education... Perhaps the key distinguishing feature of Marx and Engels' thinking... was precisely their conviction, their ultimate democratic faith, that the masses could and would educate themselves, organize themselves, liberate themselves, and rule themselves. “

Cohen agrees with Hayak's interpretation of the Marxian concept of socialist revolution, especially its democratic character and opposition to leadership. According to (Cohen, 163), the nature of a revolutionary movement was seen by Marx and Engels as crucial for the kind of post-revolutionary society that could be expected to emerge. A mass movement of workers meant that a democratic regime was feasible after the overthrow of bourgeois rule. A small conspiracy of professional revolutionaries implied a dictatorial post-revolutionary regime.

Capitalism

To some extent the debate between materialism and idealism, in which Marx and Engels engaged so prominently, is an artificial one. Yes, we should never lose sight of the basic material nature of life. But the Hegelian dialectic, which Marx sensibly reversed, serves to remind us that ideas and ideals are also an essential part of human life. The debate between structure and action, which some philosophers and sociologists carry on today, is also not a matter of either-or but of both-and. We need society to have developed structures of (potential) production to meet all reasonable human needs, but we also need informed and educated action on the part of a majority of the world's population to change those structures. A second Marxist concern was with the analysis of capitalism. In the more than hundred years since Marx and Engels were writing, capitalism has changed drastically, though not fundamentally. It is still a system of exploitation, still one in which commodity production alienates us from what we produce and even, in a sense, from ourselves. In this line of issues Hayek argued that Marx and Engels were less concerned about poverty than about alienation. Without downplaying the suffering and deprivation caused by poverty, "we should also recognize the abjectly poor quality of life that capitalism offers its supporters. Think of rush-hour sardine-tin like mass transport, the eminently throw-away Sun newspaper, the excruciatingly dumbed-down Noel Edmunds TV show - and much more." Hayek (57).

Most critics of Marxist economics believe in capitalism. Some of them like Cassidy, are happy to applaud Marx's analysis of where power lies in capitalist society but are opposed to overthrowing that society. However, it is possible to criticise some of Marx's views on capitalism while supporting his call to abolish it. It is true that working-class pursuit of its own self interest has so far led only to trade unionism, not socialism. As we have seen, Marx and Engels did offer to 'support any revolutionary movement against the existing society and political order of things.' They did not qualify this support by insisting that it be based on socialist/communist understanding rather than on mere physical reaction against a class of exploiters. They paid the price for this in disillusion when uprisings such as the Paris Commune failed to spark the introduction of classless society. Which brings us to the third theoretical issue of politics. Marx and Engels were spectacularly wrong in their prediction of when the communist revolution would take place. In 1845 Engels prophesied the end of capitalism by 1852-3, and he greeted the depression of 1847 in a way that leaves little doubt he believed it to be the death knell of capitalism (Hunt, 141). It is not a great crime to be guilty of over-optimism about when socialism will come (though it is unwise, to say the least, to set a target date for its achievement). What is much more worrying is the misplaced confidence Marx and Engels had in the workers' self education leading fairly rapidly to their adopting socialist ideas. Of course it may be that Marx and Engels actually equated self education with the process of becoming a socialist. But I think a more plausible explanation is that they were tinged with the idea, common among Trotskyists, some anarchists and others today, that the immediate steps to be taken by those who want revolutionary change are to encourage the workers to be 'active' in some way. Never mind that the 'activity' ('stop the closures', 'oppose the cuts', 'reclaim the streets', or whatever) is only defensive activity within the profit system—it is at least doing something and not just talking. One can imagine Marx and Engels poring over drafts of Capital and saying something like 'The workers will never understand all this stuff. What they need is something rousing but simple. Let's give them a Manifesto that has a few good slogans and includes a list of immediate demands.'

Perhaps the biggest difference between capitalism then and now is the enormous growth in the scope and pervasiveness of the mass media of communication and persuasion. And in the growth of hegemony, a concept not used by Marx and Engels, but one which is a logical extension of alienation, which they did recognize. Hegemony has different meanings, but the one most relevant to this discussion is class domination through the active participation of the subordinate class. In our daily activities, we as producers and consumers participate in creating the conditions and social relations that shape our lives. A practice is hegemonic to the degree that its structure is defined by elites, by centralized social structures, rather than being controlled by its users. The capitalism of the Marxist era was more openly class-divided and coercive than the capitalism of today. Then it was more obviously their system - now it is too often our system, if it is seen as a system at all. Marx and Engels were right to insist that 'the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself. They were no doubt sincere in urging members of the working class to educate themselves for the revolutionary task. But they failed to foresee the extent to which workers would educate themselves to run capitalism rather than overthrow it. This weakness leads us finally to what is probably the weakest element in the Marxist exposition: the nature of the socialist/communist society that is to replace capitalism. By refusing to write recipes for future cook shops, by failing to talk about the future society except in very general terms for fear of being dubbed 'idealist', they in fact signaled that the building of socialism - as distinct from the opposition to capitalism - was not high on their agenda. Yet for socialists the building of the new society, by spelling out what common ownership, democratic control, production solely for use, and free access mean as a practical alternative that people can support now, must be at the top of our agenda.

Paradigm to Social Development

There is no doubt that Marx and Engels gained a great deal of popularity in their own time - and since - by being openly on the side of the workers in their struggle for better wages and conditions. In the Communist Manifesto, their most persuasive and appealing call to revolutionary action, Marx and Engels leave no doubt about the breadth of their support for working class action "the communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing society and political order of things" (Marx and Engels, 34). The lack of socialist ideas among revolutionary movements such as the Paris Commune must have been a bitter pill for Marx and Engels to swallow, but it is right that they - and we - should do so. Marx and Engels had relatively little to say about the future, partly because they held the drawing up of blueprints for an ideal society to be the very essence of utopianism. Nevertheless, what they did say was usually positive and in line with their generally optimistic view of human nature and the capacity of workers to build a better, more equal and more truly human society than that of capitalism. In particular, Marx wrote in the Collected Works of the variety of useful and pleasurable work that would be available to people, in this well-known passage:

In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, to fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic (47).

On another page he summed up the same thought as follows: "In a communist society there are no painters but only people who engage in painting among other activities" (394). Commentators sympathetic to Marxism discuss his other ideas about the socialist future, sometimes pointing out that Marx was an idealist in his own way. For instance, (Kolakowski, 224), observes that the picture of a harmonious community, a society without conflict in which all human needs are satisfied, and so forth - all this can be found in Marx in similar formulations to those of the utopians. But socialism means more to Marx than a welfare society, the abolition of competition and want, the removal of conditions that make man an enemy to man: it is also, and above all, the abolition of the estrangement between man and the world, the assimilation of the world by the human subject' 'Communism, as envisioned by Marx, was to be "a society in which the full and free development of every individual forms the ruling principle", a society "in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all"... This was even more important than the material standard of living' (Cohen, 25). But some statements by Marx and Engels about the socialist/communist future seem to show that they were not entirely immune from a conception of that future still rooted in the capitalist past. Engels, arguably out of character with the bulk of his writings, let the following slip in one of his letters:

We still lack the technicians, agronomists, engineers, chemists, architects, etc. But if worse comes to worst we can buy these just as well as the capitalists do; and if a stern example is made of a few traitors which are sure to crop up among this lot, then they will find it in their own interest to stop robbing us. But outside of such specialists, we can get along very well without the rest of the "educated people"... (Darl, 543).

Engels does seem to have suffered from a kind of inverted intellectual snobbery, a characteristic that is of doubtful value to a project designed to unite the whole of humanity: '... the "academically educated people" have far more to learn from the workers, all in all, than the latter have to learn from them' (Darl, 515). Some Marxist writing on the future socialist/communist society is concerned with what will happen, and what will be possible, in its early and later stages. A particular worry about scarcity of goods in the early stages led Marx to consider labour time vouchers or certificates: What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has developed on its own foundations but, on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society; and which is thus in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birth-marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges. Accordingly, "the individual producer receives back from society - after the deductions have been made, exactly what he contributes to it. What he has contributed to it is his individual quantum of labour" (Darl, 15).

Two points may be deduced from the foregoing. One is that modern production is social, not individual. It is doubtful whether the value of the 'individual quantum of labour' could have been measured in Marx's time except in the crudest terms of time. It is even more doubtful whether such a measure could be made today. The second point is adequately dealt with in the Socialist Party (1978) publication of the article 'Labour time vouchers'. Marx made it quite clear that, if labour time vouchers were used in socialism, this would be a temporary measure resulting from the comparatively low level of technology. Today potential abundance resulting from improved technology has made the idea of labour time vouchers quite outdated. It will no doubt become even more outdated in future. Some evaluation, as well as straight reporting, of Marxist writing has been presented above. Here

we are to consider how far socialists today can usefully draw on the work of Marx and Engels, and in what ways we should frankly admit that their ideas are either now outdated or were misguided in the first place. There is no doubt that socialists should continue today, as in the past, to regard the immense sweep and authority of Marxist thought as extremely valuable to the task of replacing capitalism with socialism. Neither Marx nor Engels were specialists in the sense of concentrating on any one aspect of the socialist movement. They wrote, sometimes in a very detailed way, on economics but they were not primarily economists. They were interested in the history of humankind through all its stages of development from primitive communism to capitalism, but their history was not merely academic - it was for a revolutionary purpose.

Sometimes a writer sympathetic to the ideas of Marx and Engels can interpret them in a novel way, one that brings out the best in what they had to say and perhaps sees in their words a meaning that the original authors may not have intended but would very probably have agreed with. Communism puts an end to the division of life into public and private spheres, and to the difference between civil society and the state; it does away with the need for political institutions, political authority, and governments, private property and its source in the division of labour. It destroys the class system and exploitation; it heals the split in man's nature and the crippled, one-sided development of the individual... social harmony is to be sought not by a legislative reform that will reconcile the egoism of each individual with the collective interest, but by removing the causes of antagonism. The individual will absorb society into himself thanks to de-alienation, he will recognize humanity as his own internalized nature. Voluntary solidarity, not compulsion or the legal regulation of interests, will ensure the smooth harmony of human relations... the powers of the individual can only flourish when he regards them as social forces, valuable and effective within a human community and not in isolation. Communism alone makes possible the proper use of human abilities. This is communism/socialism in its most profound and all-embracing conception. Though it can be shown to relate to everyday life, now and in a future society that we can help to shape, it is a highly intellectual approach. We should not be afraid to combine it with a more emotive, more artistic approach, such as that of William Morris. But this is not the place to pursue that thought.

Conclusion

This hypothetical but hopefully not valueless question is necessary; Do we need a Marx and Engels today? The answer is mainly yes but partly no. We need people of the intellectual stature of Marx and Engels to help put across ideas. It would be splendid if we could publish a paperback edition of something like *Capital*, with an updated and critical account of the contemporary profit system. Less desirable would be a *Communist Manifesto* for the New Millennium, though one without immediate demands for the reform of capitalism could find a place in our list of publications. The ideas of Marx have never been more relevant than they are today. This is reflected in the thirst for Marxist theory at the present time. Alan Woods deals with the main ideas of Karl Marx and their relevance to the crisis we're passing through today. It is 130 years since the death of Karl Marx. But why should we commemorate a man who died in 1883? In the early 1960s the then Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson declared that we must not look for solutions in Highgate cemetery. And who can disagree with that? In the aforementioned cemetery, one can only find old bones and dust and a rather ugly stone monument.

Even some bourgeois economists are being forced to accept what is becoming increasingly evident: that capitalism contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction; that it is an anarchic and chaotic system characterised by periodic crises that throw people out of work and cause social and political instability. The thing about the present crisis was that it was not supposed to happen. Until recently most of the bourgeois economists believed that the market, if left to itself, was capable of solving all the problems, magically balancing out supply and demand (the “efficient market hypothesis”) so that there could never be a repetition of the crash of 1929 and the Great Depression. Marx’s prediction of a crisis of overproduction had been consigned to the dustbin of history. Those who still adhered to Marx’s view that the capitalist system was riven with insoluble contradictions and contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction were looked upon as mere cranks. Had the fall of the Soviet Union not finally demonstrated the failure of communism? Had history not finally ended with the triumph of capitalism as the only possible socio-economic system? But in the space of 20 years (not a long period in the annals of human society) the wheel of history has turned 180 degrees. Now the erstwhile critics of Marx and Marxism are singing a very different tune. All of a sudden, the economic theories of Karl Marx are being taken very seriously indeed. A growing number of economists are poring over the pages of Marx’s writings, hoping to find an explanation for what has gone wrong.

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