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EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

WHY MARXISM? APPROACHING AN OLD QUESTION FROM A NEW STANDPOINT

I have been asked to prepare a presentation outlining an argument in favor of Marxist foundations in social theory and political practice, for an audience of left-leaning young people. These folks, after all we have been through, still need to be convinced. They are attracted by the siren songs of radical empiricism, anarchism, methodological individualism, neoclassical economics, communitarian theory, the postmodern sublime, and so on. That's ok. It could not be otherwise. Inter-generational continuity should never be taken for granted, and we, on our part, should welcome every opportunity to revisit the fundamentals. Moreover, every time we return to the basics, *they change*. The only truly solid argument for Marxism-as-starting-point is to demonstrate (*if we can!*) its unique capacity to synthesize all of the new developments in economics, political economy, ethical theory, and democratic theory; to incorporate current efforts to foreground consciousness, subjectivity and emotion; and — of course — to address the novel aspects of present-day reality. If the old bottles can't handle all the new wine, they should indeed be replaced! But the old bottle-makers may, after all, still have something to pass along to the new ones.

This essay will be a condensed brief for Marxist foundations. (Note the word “condensed”: the presentation itself would have to be much more illustrative and much less telegraphic.) It is not about the naming or labeling issue; on that, see “What's in a Name?” Editorial Perspectives, Fall 1999. Call it *whatever*; this is about the essential contributions of what, for present purposes, I will simply call “Marxism.” I summarize under six headings (the list is undoubtedly incomplete).

1. *The middle level of abstraction*. When we look around casually, especially through the lens of the dominant individualist ideology, we see “individuals,” pre-formed and unique, each facing specific and contingent circumstances. These individuals then interact with one another to form “society,” “institutions,” the “economy.” Ultimately, these abstractions resolve themselves into

what is seen as the primal human problem: the solitary individual facing the great external constraint, nature. Maggie Thatcher's "there is no such thing as society" captures this well.

Now you can start from this premise and add cooperative relations, cultural norms, lengthy means–ends chains, unintended consequences, prisoners' dilemmas, and more. We then have "institutions," including all of the perceived political and economic forms: democracy, markets, etc. But spontaneous perception will not reveal the underlying systems of social relations (class, production relations, property, power). These systems are social, not natural; they are, nevertheless, external to the individual (just as is the natural world), even though they are the product of history and social evolution. Between "individual" and "society" lies *capitalist* society, for example. The middle level of abstraction is central to sorting out the dynamic properties of the whole. It is, to be sure, largely missing outside of Marxist thought, and, from the standpoint of capital, for excellent reasons.¹

This, however, is only a small part of . . .

2. *The cunning of capital*. Capitalism emerges when prior (and potential) productive forces development make necessary (and possible) a sophisticated and historically novel system for controlling the subaltern laboring population and extracting surplus from its labor. A unique feature of capitalist exploitation, as opposed to its various historical precursors, is its built-in self-concealment. Capitalist exploitation adopts structural disguises, which are part of its unique character.

The disguises are located along several dimensions. First (and perhaps foremost): *the market*. This is the "valorization" of social relations, classically analyzed by Marx in *Capital*, I, ch. 1, section 4, "The Fetishism of Commodities." Insofar as the social relation to be valorized, *par excellence*, is the labor process, we can see the connection between labor and value, or the *law of value*. The ideology associated with the "free" market — which acquires the status of a "natural" law, especially in our neoliberal times — is in fact grounded in people's actual daily experience on the surface of the (capitalist) market economy: we do sell our "labor" and buy our "livelihood," in markets that are "real," however superficial our experience of them may be. Unlike ideology that is inherited from long-standing cultural traditions outside of the capitalist system, such as religion, the "free market" is thus inherent, and therefore a structural basis for ruling-class ideological hegemony in the capitalist era.

¹ Paradoxically, social science might have been easier to achieve in earlier, precapitalist environments, in which social relations were more visible and not subject to systematic mystification. Capitalism's productive forces, and its need for public policy, both resulted in the emergence of the academic social-science disciplines, but these disciplines are under enormous functional and ideological pressure to obfuscate and conceal what should in fact be their core subject matter.

Other system-reproducing ideologies are found in the apparently given and “ineluctable” nature of bureaucracy, and expertise; these depend on a high level of productive-forces development to become effective. Capital is able to hide behind the apparent power of office-holders and those who monopolize knowledge and derive authority from that monopoly. Further, the autonomy of the capitalist market brings into relief the distinctive reality of the state, and thus of the *politician* — another ideological presence behind which the capitalist takes shelter. Machiavelli’s Prince, in modern capitalist guise, has many lieutenants and sub-officers ready to serve and deflect anger. Finally, in ways we can’t elaborate fully here, capitalist development gives rise to nations, and so to national consciousness. Nationalist ideology works to shift perceptions away from the social reality of the capitalist system, and therefore joins with the other forces — market, religion, bureaucracy, expertise and the “autonomy of state managers” — working on behalf of capital to enable and reproduce capitalist exploitation.

Cunning, indeed.

3. *Social evolution and stadiality*. Marxism, as we know, posits limits that constrain human will in any period. The word “objective” is a favorite buzzword: we speak of “objective limits” to the power of this or that social class or stratum. The capacities of a class to act in its own interest, or in a general social interest, are “objectively” determined by that class’ conditions of existence. Recall here, for example, Marx’s discussion of the French peasantry in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*.²

“Stadiality” refers to the notion that society advances through stages, and that given stages are preconditions for ones that follow. This does *not* mean that a historically specific society must follow a pre-given trajectory (just as any given human individual does not exhibit the consciousness that corresponds to her actual social conditions, even though social existence as such is the source of the entire range of subjective representations). Note that this limitation is empowering as well as disempowering. It says that a social class cannot achieve (for example) revolutionary agency in a given period; *but also* that the steady evolution of that class’ conditions of existence may move it (“inexorably,” another favorite word!) in that direction.

Non-Marxist social science decouples the objective and subjective dimensions, rather than grasping their intense interaction. The result is usually a strong technological, biological or statistical determinism, combined

2 *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, by Karl Marx (New York: International Publishers, 1928 (1852), part III. This is Marx’s classic treatment of France in the period leading up to the *coup d’etat* of 1851. “Eighteenth Brumaire” is the 18th day of the “month of fogs” in the calendar of the French Revolution — in 1799 the date of the original *coup d’etat* of Napoleon Bonaparte. See “The Legacy of the Eighteenth Brumaire,” *Editorial Perspectives*, Winter 2002–2003.

with an open-ended call for transcendence: “if only we could summon the will,” etc. Paradoxically — and social reality is nothing if not paradoxical — this sort of indeterminist call for subjective rebellion under any and all circumstances turns out to be *less* enabling of action than an analysis that posits social evolution, stadiality, development (or not) of prerequisites, possibility and impossibility. In short, revolutionary prospects, I would like to argue, are *enhanced* by joining appeals to subjective possibilities with study of objective conditions: what can be done in any given set of circumstances, how conditions can be altered, and so forth.

4. *Social classes are real.* This gets us to the heart of the matter.

Classes are part of a complex system of interaction within a social system, or mode of production. The social classes of a capitalist society are a defining relation between those performing labor, and those who control the labor process and its outcome. Most importantly, class is *not* a characteristic or attribute of individuals; rather, individuals act *within* a system of class relations, and embody those relations in various (often imperfect and sometimes contradictory) ways. Capitalism’s classes have historically specific connections to the market; to property; to the political process; to the structure of power. They are defined in a mutual relation of exploitation. By contrast, all conceptions of class within non-Marxist sociology that treat classes as groupings of individuals by some common attribute, and that reduce class to one of many such attributes, as in

“raceclassgendersexualorientation”

miss the point mightily (to put it mildly).

The connection of social class to roles in production makes this concept quite distinct from any other attribute, since production and control of the surplus product establishes the relation of exploitation. By definition, capitalists cannot be exploited by workers. By contrast, it is quite possible to imagine a world in which domination on the basis of gender, or race, is reversed. The form of gender or racial oppression/inequality that actually obtains therefore cannot be explained in terms of gender or racial attributes alone. To the extent that male or white domination can be explained by biological or geographical factors, grasping the persistence and nature of those dominations still requires study of their embedding in social and economic evolution — in short, we must refer to the political economy of the historic eras within which they evolved.

5. *The functionality of social and economic issues.* Our times resound with issues that cry out for change: employment, workplace conditions, health care, education, housing, public support programs (the “social safety net”: but who said social existence should be likened to a high-wire act?). All of these areas of concern exhibit aspects of racist oppression and discrimination — a historical factor that is deeply intertwined with capitalist exploitation in the United

States (and, in different ways, elsewhere). At this writing (July 2009), the official U. S. unemployment rate is approaching 10 per cent. Everyone has analyses: What can be done to create jobs? How can health care be made universal? Shouldn't working-class home ownership continue to be part of the "American Dream"? Oceans of ink are spilled analyzing details: costs, inefficiencies, systems of delivery, imperfections. The Marxist intervention is unequivocal: *all* of these aspects, however important, must *first* be placed firmly on the terrain of capitalist social relations.

Unemployment (the "industrial reserve army"), poor and uncertain access to health care, absence of (or challenges to) secure residential property — all of this is *functional* for capital. Conversely, universal health care, widespread working-class home ownership and full employment would, together, amount to a *general crisis* for capital! From the standpoint of capital, these social gains *are* the crisis.

Education must be conceived in these terms as well. Used as a safety valve for working-class aspirations in the post-World War II period (some readers will remember the GI Bill), the goal of ruling-class policy makers now is evidently to lower expectations and close off the educational pipeline. Reproducing dependency on the labor market at all levels, including those of unskilled and semiskilled labor, takes on special significance in view of the likely coming reduction in the immigration stream which made upward mobility for the native-born working class possible for many decades.

There has been a general shift in policy toward lowering of expectations regarding skilled and secure employment, health care, education, home ownership, and social security. This shift, I would argue, reflects the shifting balance of class forces worldwide. Capitalist ruling classes — perhaps increasingly the emergent *transnational* capitalist class — have steadily reversed the forward momentum of labor gained as a result of the Russian Revolution, the mobilization following the Great Depression, and World War II. That reversal is the down-phase of the current balance of class forces cycle in recent decades.

For present purposes, it is the political-economy framework, not the detailed assessments, that matters. That framework certainly appears to be essential to consideration of the social issues at the practical and operational levels. When we say that solving social problems creates deep fissures in the capitalist social fabric, we are not saying these victories are impossible, or that these victories should not be sought; only that we need to be aware of the serious and ultimately revolutionary measures that will be needed to secure and extend them.

6. *Alternative social visions.* This last point can be stated very briefly (but see our special issue, "Building Socialism Theoretically," Spring 2002). Put simply, the credibility of the broad left in advancing programs and movements

in the interests of working people depends on its ability to counter the infamous TINA (“there is no alternative”). Credible projections of a socialist future — indeed, a communist future, to refer to the longest range of vision available to us at present — have importance far exceeding their lack of immediate political relevance. In this sphere, non-Marxist progressive thought generally turns to Marxism for help. The only “*alternative* alternative” comes from the anarchist standpoint, and there one finds nothing but opposition to the state. A stateless society, however, can be of radically different characters, as the division of the anarchist movement into libertarian (“free market”) and cooperativist wings makes clear.

By contrast, Marxist socialism, as the name for a comprehensive historical, theoretical *and* practical tradition pointing toward democratic planning, with progressive attenuation of market relations and progressive democratization and devolution of state power, provides the necessary counterweight to the capitalist ideological colossus, which hides (as always) behind the skirts of the “free market.” Again, recall Marx’ and Engels’ famous response to the “abolition of private property” charge against the communists, in the *Manifesto*: “you (the bourgeoisie) have already abolished it for nine-tenths of the population.” (Today, perhaps 99/100 would be a more appropriate ratio.)

Well, perhaps the old Marxist bottles are holding their own, at least for the present. To stretch the analogy just a bit, I would urge the new bottle-makers to be sure they have bottles ready of equivalent capacity, and endurance, before spilling the contents of the old ones onto the sand.



IIPPE

We would like to take notice of the formation of the International Initiative for Promoting Political Economy (IIPPE), in 2006. Based at the School of Oriental and Asian Studies in London, IIPPE is reaching out to interested participants in many countries. It lists as its aims:

- Promote Marxist political economy
- Command and criticize mainstream economics
- Critically and constructively engage with heterodox alternatives
- Assess and advance political economy across other social sciences
- Engage with activism through formulation of progressive policy and support for progressive movements

IIPPE has formed a series of working groups on various topics and issues. It holds international research workshops, prepares special issues of journals, panels at left conferences, working papers — a range of activities too vast to cover in detail here. Interested readers should get full information by visiting the IIPPE website, <http://www.soas.ac.uk/iippe>, or sending an email to iippe@soas.ac.uk.



IN THIS ISSUE

The articles in this issue truly cover our spectrum, from literature and its relation to consciousness among movements of the oppressed and exploited, to contemporary left theory and its sources, socialist debate both classically and in Venezuela today, and Marx's political economy of labor.

Bill Lyne's study of James Baldwin and his critics ("God's Black Revolutionary Mouth: James Baldwin's Black Radicalism") makes palpable the deepening consciousness of this remarkable writer as he progressed from liberal integrationism to the uncompromising radicalism of the later work, especially *No Name in the Street*, which signaled, for mainstream literary criticism, Baldwin's decline and slide into "pamphleteering" and shallow negativism. To the contrary, Lyne argues, this passage is not a decline but a growth, and its understandings still an intellectual and emotional challenge to both left and Black readers, even those who are sympathetic to Baldwin. Drawing upon Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism*, Lyne suggests that "Black isn't just an auxiliary to a left moved to the center; Black *is* left, and was long before Marx." Read on!

Over recent issues we have offered several critical essays and reviews on the widely read works by John Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* and *Multitude* (Shandro, Fall 2003; Rossi, April 2005; Roberto, April 2007; Choi, April 2009). Now John Grant, in "Marcuse Remade? Theory and Explanation in Hardt and Negri," swings the pendulum back a bit. Citing a critique by Ernesto Laclau to the effect that the Hardt–Negri concept of immanence destroys the political and the possibility of resistance, Grant urges that we take Hardt and Negri seriously as theorists of the present stage of world capitalist development. We can, moreover, do this at least partly by bringing the critical theory of Herbert Marcuse (back) into the picture — a dialectical blunting, so to speak, of the sharp edge of Laclau's critique.

Steve Ellner ("The Perennial Debate over Socialist Goals Played Out in Venezuela") frames the issues by means of a distinction between "cultural

optimists” and “realists,” a contrast that appears throughout the history of socialist advocacy and policy debate. Cultural optimists stress the need to build upon the struggles and movements that propel transformations in consciousness and behavior that alone can ground genuine social change. Realists, to the contrary, insist that socialism can only succeed by working (or work by succeeding!), and that means organizing production and social life in the present, with the experience and consciousness inherited from the past. Ellner traces this debate within the leadership and rank-and-file of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela; he urges the two sides in the debate to confront each other’s issues more intensely, and also to learn from experience and empirical study.

Finally, the paper by Alexis Ioannides and Stavros Mavroudeas (“Work More or Work Harder? The Duration and Intensity of Work in Marx’s *Capital*”) identifies a line of thought in Marx according to which a tradeoff exists between duration and intensity, one that can only be studied in a long time frame (as opposed to, *e.g.*, a single day). This inverse relation can be affected by other aspects of the balance of forces within the class relation between workers and capitalists, but it has an objective status that sets limits to what is possible within that class relation. Marx’s thinking on this has political importance for the working-class movement; it also anticipates, in significant ways, much current work on both the physio-technical (ergonomic) aspects of the labor process and the relations of productivity to incentives and preferences presently under study within mainstream economics.

We present two Communications. Following upon his earlier work (S&S, October 2006), Jorgen Sandemose (“Golden Howlers: Grossmann’s Attack on Luxemburg”) now addresses Henryk Grossmann’s 1932 critique of Rosa Luxemburg, which draws upon Marx’s analysis of gold production and its incorporation into the sectoral model of capitalist reproduction of *Capital* II. Sandemose, as usual, shows the intense interconnection between an apparently arcane technical debate in political economy, on the one hand, and a larger controversy with continuing political relevance, on the other. Perhaps especially valuable in his parsing of this “debate” (quotation marks because Luxemburg, of course, was not alive to contest Grossmann’s claims) is Sandemose’s insistence (in broad support of Luxemburg) that theory must reflect the spontaneous and elemental character of the actual capitalist process whose inner reality it is seeking to expose, rather than “solving” the problem of reproduction from a larger standpoint that is implicitly that of a sort of (fictitious) state manager.

Lastly, we take note of the publication in English of Victor Considerant’s *Principes du Socialisme*, which first appeared in 1843. We present excerpts from that document, along with an Introduction by Joan Roelofs, who translated

and prepared Considerant's text for publication (Maisonneuve Press, 2006). The selections given here are fascinating for the way in which they bring forth the nature of early socialist thought in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. There is also, of course, the claim that Considerant was plagiarized by Marx and Engels four years later, in what became the *Communist Manifesto*. Roelofs wisely does not take sides on this claim, urging that we allow the texts to speak for themselves; we concur. What is interesting, to this reader, is the extent to which one's sense of the degree of similarity and difference as between the two documents (*Principes* and *Manifesto*) must ultimately be dominated by one's grasp (or lack thereof) of their *essential* natures, as opposed to the superficial aspects that inevitably govern the perceptions of both novice and hostile observers. (Not that depth of understanding would prevent a whole host of political and academic interpreters from mounting a plagiarism charge against Marx and Engels, if given the chance!)

D. L.

The Alternatives Foundation and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (Russia) invite you to participate in an international conference:

LENIN ON LINE

Towards the 140th Anniversary of Vladimir I. Ulianov

April 22–23, Moscow

- 140 years: victories and defeats of Lenin's policy
- Lenin's theoretical legacy: re-actualization and critique (the dialectic; imperialism; socialism)
- The 21st century: what can and must we learn from Lenin?

Working languages: Russian, English. There is no funding for travel or accommodation, but the conference can arrange visas, make reservations, organize tours, etc. There is no registration fee. Proceedings will be translated on line, via the internet. Off-site participation via SKYPE will also be organized.

Deadline for participation: February 28, 2010.

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