



KARL MARX AND SOCIALISM: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF CONTRIBUTION OF KARL MARX TO THE SOCIALIST SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The article is to present an appreciative and critical evaluation of the contribution of Karl Marx and to the ideology of socialism and socialist movement. It also focuses on the influence of Friedrich Engels, the friend and collaborator of Marx. Marx's concept of socialism is a protest, as is all existentialist philosophy, against the alienation of man; In the words of Aldous Huxley, "our present economic, social and international arrangements are based, in large measure, upon organized lifelessness," then Marx's socialism is a protest against this very lifelessness, and lifelessness against man's exploitation of man, and against his exploitation towards nature, the wasting of our usual resources at the expense of the majority of men today, and more so of the generations to come. The Man who does not suffer alienation is the goal of socialism as it is presented, is the man who does not "dictate" nature, but who becomes one with it, who is alive and receptive toward objects, so that objects come to life for him It will not deal with the 'Marxism' that has been developed by various writers, leaders, parties and movements that have used, extended, and in some cases distorted, the writings of Marx and Engels for their own purposes.

Key words: capitalist system, utopia, communism, human development, historical materialism, alienation

Introduction: No other thinker in the 19th century had direct and powerful Influence upon mankind as Karl Marx. He was neither a popular writer nor an orator, Karl Marx, a social scientist, a political philosopher and was involved with revolutionary movement. Marxist analysis suggests that we live in a Capitalist society and economy in which the capitalists – those who own the varied businesses, that is, the means of production – profit from exploiting the workers. Capitalists exploit workers' labour power – the labour power of men and women workers, workers from different, ethnic groups and religions, and those from different castes. Capitalism appropriates surplus value from the labour of the ('raced' and gendered and caste-divided) working class (see, for example, Marx, 1867/1996, explained in the



Appendix to chapter 8 of Cole 2009 for an explanation, and also the explanation in Faivre, 2009).

The capitalist system – with a tiny minority of people owning the means of production – oppresses and exploits the working class. This, indeed, constitutes the *spirit* of capitalism: the extraction of surplus value – and profit – from workers by capitalist employers. Marxist analysis also suggests that *class-conflict*, which is an essential feature of capitalist society, will result in an overthrow of capitalism given the right circumstances (whether by revolutionary force or by evolutionary measures and steps, i.e. social democracy) has, historically, been much debated in different countries, from the late nineteenth century debates in Germany over ‘Revisionism’ associated with Eduard Bernstein (e.g. in 1899, his *The Prerequisites for Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy* – see Tudor and Tudor, 1988) on the one hand, and on the other, his orthodox revolutionary Marxist critics such as Rosa Luxemburg (for example, in *Reform and Revolution*, in 1899/1900).

The recurrent crises of capitalism alone would testify to the continuing relevance of Marx’s analysis of capitalism and the viewpoint of historical materialism. But there is much else that Marx had anticipated, including many of the contemporary concerns about the environment. In a brilliant passage in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx makes the point that capitalism advances agriculture precisely by sapping the basic sources of wealth, namely the soil and the labourer. His analysis of many aspects of culture, of the alienation that characterises capitalist society, of the issues of gender equality, of colonial booty and its role in the development of capitalism in the western world –all these remain relevant today, as we face the onslaught of contemporary imperialist globalization that seeks to once again enslave the developing countries and is causing grave and irreparable damage to the environment and the earth we live in.

Marx: Karl Marx has been variously described as an economist, philosopher, historian, sociologist and revolutionary. He was born in 1818 in Prussia. His parents were Jewish, his father a successful lawyer.

At the age of eighteen, Marx went to the University of Berlin to study law and philosophy. He was introduced to Hegel's philosophy and became involved in the activities of the Young Hegelians, who were generally atheistic and talked vaguely of political action. But he did not accept Hegel's views uncritically. Hegel was an idealist who believed that matter or



existence was inferior to and dependent on mind or spirit. Marx was much influenced by Feuerbach, a critic of Hegel, who put forward a materialist view that spirit was a projection of 'the real man standing on the foundation of nature'. From then on Marx sought to combine Hegel's dialectic—the idea that all things are in a continual process of change—with Feuerbach's materialism, which placed material conditions above ideas.

Marx and Engels combined to write *The Holy Family*, a criticism of Hegelian idealism, published in 1845. But their next joint work, *The German Ideology*, expounding their materialist conception of history, did not find a publisher until 1932. An unusual sequence of events led them to write their pamphlet *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848. A society of mainly German handicraftsmen met in London and decided to formulate a political program. They asked Marx and Engels to join them, changed the name of the society to the Communist League, and entrusted Marx with the mission of writing the manifesto. It was a pithy summary of the materialist conception of history (see below), asserting that the forthcoming victory of the proletariat would put an end to class society. The idea of small experiments in community living, 'social utopias,' was rejected. It also set forth ten immediate measures as first steps towards communism, ranging from a progressive income tax to free education for all children (Higgins, 1998: 4).

In 1859 Marx published *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Then he started work on his magnum opus, *Capital*. It was the Paris Commune of 1871 that made Marx into an international figure. When an insurrection broke out in Paris and the Commune was proclaimed, Marx gave it his unwavering support. After the Commune was crushed in 1871, Marx's name became synonymous throughout Europe with the revolutionary spirit symbolized by the Paris Commune. Union leaders found they could make practical advances by co-operating with the Liberal Party, and they generally regarded Marx's theoretical justifications as an encumbrance in pursuit of their reformist aims.

During the rest of his life Marx was in poor health and his creative energies declined. In 1875 he wrote a caustic criticism of the program of the German Social Democratic Party (the Gotha programme), claiming that it made too many compromises with the status quo. Despite his withdrawal from active politics, he still retained influence on working class and socialist movements. Following the death of his wife in 1881 and of his eldest daughter early in 1883, Marx died in London, evidently of a lung abscess, in March 1883.



Concept: Marx expressed the aim of socialism with great clarity at the end of the third volume of *Capital*: "In fact, the realm of freedom does not commence until the point is passed where labor under the compulsion of necessity and of external utility is required. In the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of material production in the strict meaning of the term. Just as the savage must wrestle with nature, in order to satisfy his wants, in order to maintain his life and reproduce it, so civilized man has to do it, and he must do it in all forms of society and under all possible modes of production. With his development the realm of natural necessity expands, because his wants increase; but at the same time the forces of production increase, by which these wants are satisfied. The freedom in this field cannot consist of anything else but of the fact that socialized man, the associated producers, regulate their interchange with nature rationally, bring it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by some blind power; they accomplish their task with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most adequate to their human nature and most worthy of it. But it always remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human power, which is its own end, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can flourish only upon that realm of necessity as its basis. "The study of Marxist theory is that of socialism/communism, the future form of society that will replace capitalism. 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' (Hunt, 1974: 212). 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 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' (Collected Works, vol.5: 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' (p.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:

'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' (Kolakowski, 1978: 224). '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' (Sowell 1985:25):

'What [Marx and Engels] visualized for the future society, from its very beginning, was a kind of participatory democracy organized without any political leaders or administrators at all, which has nowhere been established in a national government, and which requires some effort of imagination and historical understanding for the present-day reader to grasp' (Hunt, 1974: xiii).

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"... '(Werke, quoted in Draper, vol. 2: 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' (p.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' (1970: 15).

Two points here. 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.

Evaluation: The system of doctrines worked out by Marx is characterized by a certain boldness of conception and a great logical consistency. Taken in detail, the constituent elements of the system are neither novel nor iconoclastic, nor does Marx at any point claim to have discovered previously hidden facts or to have invented recondite formulations of facts already known; but the system as a whole has an air of originality and initiative such as is rarely met with among the sciences that deal with any phase of human culture.

It is observed that Marx have not sufficiently appreciated the radical character of his departure in both of these respects, and have, therefore, commonly lost themselves in a tangled scrutiny of supposedly abstruse details; whereas those writers who have been in sympathy with his teachings have too commonly been disciples bent on exegesis and on confirming their



fellow-disciples in the faith. His work has, therefore, an air of bias, such as belongs to an activist's argument; but it is not, therefore, to be implicit, nor indeed to be credited, that his propagandist aims have in any considerable way deflected his inquiry or his assumptions from the faithful pursuit of scientific truth. His socialistic bias may color his polemics, but his logical grasp is too neat and firm to admit of a bias, other than that of his metaphysical preconceptions, affecting his theoretical work.

There is no doubt that socialists should continue today, as our comrades have done in the past, to regard the enormous sweep and authority of Marxist thought as extremely precious to the task of replacing capitalism with socialism. Neither Marx nor Engels was 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.

There is no system of economic supposition more logical than that of Marx. No member of the system, no single article of doctrine, is fairly to be understood, pass judgment on, or shielded except as an expressive member of the whole and in the light of the preconceptions and postulates which afford the point of departure and the controlling norm of the whole. As regards these preconceptions and postulates, Marx draws on two distinct lines of antecedents, -- the Materialistic Hegelianism and the English system of Natural Rights. By his earlier training he is an adept in the Hegelian method of speculation and inoculated with the metaphysics of development underlying the Hegelian system. These doctrines are, on their face, nothing but a expansion of the conceptions of natural rights which then encompassed English assumption and afforded the metaphysical ground of the liberal movement. The more formidable critics of the Marxian socialism have made much of these doctrinal elements that further the propaganda, and have, by laying the stress on these, abstracted attention from other elements that are of more vital outcome to the system as a body of theory. Their special interest in this side of "scientific socialism" has even led them to deny the Marxian system all substantial originality, and make it a (doubtfully legitimate) offshoot of English Liberalism and natural rights. But this is one-sided criticism. It may hold as against certain tenets of the so-called "scientific socialism," but it is not altogether to the point as regards the Marxian system of theory. The theory of value, then, is contained in the main postulates of the Marxian system rather than derived from them. Marx identifies this



doctrine, in its elements, with the labor-value theory of Ricardo, but the relationship between the two is that of a superficial coincidence in their main propositions rather than a substantial identity of theoretic contents.

The gravest conclusion of this systematic inconsistency between the value of labor power and the value of its product is the accumulation of capital out of unpaid labor and the effect of this accumulation on the laboring population. The law of accumulation, with its corollary, the doctrine of the industrial reserve army, is the final term and the objective point of Marx's theory of capitalist production, just as the theory of labor value is his point of departure. Such are the outlines of the Marxian system of socialism, in all that has been said so far no option is hard to the second and third volumes of *Kapital*. Nor is it essential to resort to these two volumes for the general theory of socialism. They add nothing essential, although many of the details of the processes concerned in the working out of the capitalist scheme are treated with greater fullness, and the analysis is carried out with great consistency and with admirable results.

Socialism according to Marx is too returned to the idea of the "good society" as the condition for the realization of man's spiritual needs. It was antiauthoritarian, both as far as the religion and the State are concerned, hence it aimed at the ultimate disappearance of the state and at the establishment of a society composed of voluntarily cooperating individuals. Its aim was a rebuilding of society in such a way as to make it the basis for man's true return to himself, without the presence of those authoritarian forces which controlled and impoverished man's mind. Socialism is the abolition of man's self-alienation, the return of man as a real self. "It is the definitive resolution of the antagonism between man and nature, and between man and man. It is the true way out of the conflict between existence and essence, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species. It is a solution of the puzzle of history and knows itself to be this solution". For Marx, socialism meant the social order which allows the return of man to himself, the identity between existence and essence, the overcoming of the separateness and antagonism between subject and object, the humanization of nature; it meant a world in which man is no longer a stranger among strangers, but is in his world, where he is at home.



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