

Marxism: Obscuring more than it reveals

Criticism & Critique of a Failed System

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“... [I]n my view, anarchism has no significant contribution to socialist theory to make.”

—Eric Hobsbawm, “Reflections on Anarchism,” 1969

Hobsbawm, the late British Marxist historian, in his snobbery, unintentionally poses the question as to the function of theory of any sort in revolutionary challenges to the present system. Marxists believe it is important to come to the confrontation armed with memorized critiques of capitalism and history, believing this provides them with the organizational and critical tools for overthrowing the system.

David Graeber, an American anarchist, in his 2003 article, “The Twilight of Vanguardism,” asks in a different context, “... [I]f the role of revolutionary intellectuals is not to form an elite that can arrive at the correct strategic analyses and then lead the masses to follow, what precisely is it?” But, it’s that; Marxists make no disagreement that it is its purpose and utility.

The beauty and power of the voluminous anarchist writings through the years resides in their vision of a new world lived in circumstances when capitalism and state have been discarded. When a moment of revolution arrived historically, it wasn’t because people in revolt had finally read enough analysis of their misery, but that they could no longer tolerate it.

The vision, for instance, posed by anarchism leading up to the late 1930s Spanish Revolution, came from a desire for freedom that had been nurtured for decades by writings and agitation. As the anarchists said at the time, they had “a new world in their hearts.” They called this the quest for The Ideal in human affairs.

Marxists denounced this as romanticism; utopian, and destroyed the revolution, not only in Spain, but in Russia before it. With all of their analysis, the main contribution of Marxism has been the gulag; for anarchists it has been revolution.

A tiny sliver of revolutionary theorists contend that Marxism can be divorced from the authoritarian utilization of its theories and become part of a larger theory of liberation. On closer examination, however, this turns out to be impossible since Marxism only has its “world historical moment” when linked with the political forces of Leninism.

The most significant Marxist theorists, ones who brought the ideology into reality on a mass scale, are Stalin and Mao, who not only ruled in the name of Marx, but expounded on it as well. In other words, the hopes of radical intellectuals aside, Marxism only comes to power through the apparatus of the authoritarian political party with everything that implies.

The so-called libertarian variant of Marxism mostly remains confined to the university and exists with no efficacy in the real world. No one is interested in it except other intellectuals and ultimately, it, along with all of critical theory, becomes only the most interesting sector of sociology.

No longer “a spectre haunting Europe” or anywhere else, for that matter, defanged Marxist theory has become a huge intellectual market and growth industry within academia. Written in texts often so arcane that they can only be decoded by initiates, such that Marxism is no longer reviled except by the rabid right. Those who profess this

ideology (literally, professors) are elevated to positions, for example, within the American Sociological Association as “Chair of the Section on Marxist Sociology,” or prestigious teaching positions at universities.

The editors of the New York-based *Monthly Review*, which wept at Stalin’s passing in 1953, are now trying to sell us the same old Marxist ideology they have peddled all these years as a supposedly ecologically purified version. However, it’s like they can’t help themselves; the cover of their 2014 catalog features a photo of Lenin. In an attempt to prove it has left its moribund past, the magazine features recent articles by its editor with titles such as, “Marx and the Rift in the Universal Metabolism of Nature.”

Undoubtedly, it will receive rave reviews from the Section on Marxist Sociology.

In their defense, these professors of Marxism often have a radicalizing effect on students, many of whom are and have been active on their campuses and beyond. However, to accept the basic tenets of this outmoded system of critique and analysis will lead them to the same ideological dead end as their mentors.

Another sector of the political spectrum advocating Marxism are the creepy, authoritarian Leninist cults with their alphabet soup acronyms featuring memberships so small they could probably have national conventions at a McDonald’s and whose membership turns over faster than the restaurant’s fast food workers.

The many flaws of Marxism are being treated throughout this section, so this essay examines how Marx and his epigones view humans, their function within capitalism, and how they reproduce the world which we inhabit.

Few would dispute the contention of Marx that the reigning ideas of a given society are those of the ruling class during any epoch. What has to be faced squarely, however, is not just that the Marxist concept of humans fails to transcend those of the ruling capitalist class, but that Marx’s views and those of even his present-day advocates mesh exactly with those of the capitalist model.

To Marx and his followers, human beings are essentially producers and have never been anything else. The late anti-authoritarian Marxist, Seymour Faber, wrote in *Our Generation*, “One of the assumptions underlying Karl Marx’s discussion of alienation was that production was not only a means of satisfying needs outside itself, but that which made man human.”

The only reason this view appears to make sense is that it is the world-view of the prevailing capitalist society and when it is repeated by Marx, it sounds just as reasonable. Instead, if this productivist model of society is viewed within its historical context, it comes through clearly as the definition needed by the ascendant bourgeoisie centuries ago to marshal the entire world out of the lethargy of feudal society and into the torrent of industrialization, commodity production, and the accumulation of capital.

This self-perception of humans as a special category of producers was unknown in human history until the capitalist epoch. Marxism makes no break with this. Marx not only relishes the productivist model, he is its strongest advocate. Whatever develops the means of production is good, for the higher the degree of development of capitalism, the greater its contradictions, the more developed the proletariat, and the greater the material base for communism (or, so the theory goes). He is a prophet of production extolling its virtues and denigrating its detractors.

When the Luddites in England, workers at the dawn of capitalism, began an assault on the production system by breaking machines, burning factories, and assassinating their owners, understanding that they were being drawn into a system that would wreck their lives and livelihoods, Marx declared that it was the bourgeoisie who were the revolutionaries in this era, not the workers. It is no wonder then that the most enthusiastic exponents of Marxism were found in the state capitalist bureaucracies of the communist countries; they functioned as the ascendant bourgeoisie.

As a vision of the future, Marxism offers only more of what capitalism has already presented us with—a continuation of the development of the means of production. No matter that the entire productive apparatus remains an externality to the humans involved, it is assumed that the quantitative development of the means of production will lead to a revolution of social relations.

This is nonsense. Every material aspect of our lives is a thing of capital, a thing that was created only for the needs of capital and never for those of humans. Our jobs, workplaces, commodities, cities, transportation, schools, dwellings; all of it developed with humans fitting in as an afterthought if considered at all. The only thing Marxism advocates is to remove the capitalist class from this process.

But exactly what is missed here is that the means of production are capital themselves and their further development will only mean our further enslavement and capital's continued domination. The very nature of the technology of capital demands centralized political control and management, and only after its dismantling, when human affairs are based on decentralized, human-scale technology, can we begin to talk about a liberated future.

Those who envision a technocratic, self-managed future where automation and cybernation satisfy all of our desires, continue to push the productivist model for coordinated economic and political control where humans remain reduced to workers, an inherent category of alienation. But it's very possible that the people affected might not want to buy the program of the leftist politicians and planners. They may not want to continue massive auto or steel production even with a workers council in charge as management.

Marxists, with their fetish of production, shudder at such a possibility of the refusal of their hobby horse, but let's be through with them. If we are going to advocate anything, let it be a revolution of desire, one that really overturns everything and sweeps away the entirety of the muck of capitalism.

Marxism stands squarely as an ideology of capital; a rigid fetter on the mind that can only make us shrink from the real potential of a human existence.

Peter Werbe is a long time *Fifth Estate* staff member. His related article, "Marx: Good-Bye To All That," appeared in our March 1977 issue.

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