

Farewell to the Working Class?

Has capitalism absorbed the proletariat to the point where it no longer represents a threat?

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Some might have thought that the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states, along with the abandonment of socialist economics across less industrialized countries would have sounded the death knell of Marxism. But Marx's loyal tribe are keen to regurgitate his mantras at any available opportunity.

Perhaps the problem isn't so much with Marxism as with Marxists. Some cling like limpets to the memory of the USSR and other self-proclaimed communist states as the model for a workers paradise. Despite the utterly discredited and deformed forms of socialism practiced there, they indulge in a gross idolatry of former comrades from Stalin to Mao to Kim Il Sung, utterly convinced of their divine benevolence.

All blame is laid on capitalist propaganda that engages in fabrications, distortions, and hyperbole in an effort to undermine the grand Marxist ideal. Everything from the gulag to the Great Leap Forward is either denied as an invention of the CIA or justified as a necessary step on the glorious path to communism.

The hard-line left faced an existential crisis with their faith and their ideology seemingly in tatters after working-class people in socialist states marched against their rulers, the self-proclaimed vanguard of the proletariat. Many of their ilk abandoned Marxism altogether, embracing social-democratic politics, or pragmatically toning down their orthodox rhetoric on revolution and replacing it with reform, market socialism, "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," compromising principle for realism and working for what at best amounts to state-managed capitalism.

When it comes to interpreting Marx's legacy, rejecting the positions on both sides of the ideological divide is the only option.

The 20th century's failed experiments in revolutionary socialism produced some of history's most brutal police states and centralized bureaucratic behemoths. Marx's Jacobinism, his unyielding belief in the transformative power of a dictatorship of the proletariat that would, inevitably, "wither away," instead gave impetus to an anti-democratic and authoritarian nightmare.

State-ownership and centralized management of the means of production, distribution and exchange did not foster a workers' utopia. Command economics did not lead to paradise. But this should not engender a capitalist triumphalism or neoliberal circle jerk. The myth that a free market and a free people go hand in hand is confounded daily in the sweatshops of despotic regimes all over the world.

The world and capitalism has changed a lot since Marx's heyday. What he and Engels witnessed first-hand was the dog-eat-dog depravity of inchoate, laissez-faire industrial capital.

The fetid slums of new industrial towns of Victorian England, fed by a mass influx of former agricultural or cottage industry labor from rural and semi-rural areas, were at the point of collapsing under their own weight of filth, poverty, disease and deprivation. With workers at the mercy of the market's volatile fluctuations, unemployment meant starvation and being at work was scarcely better, with every waking hour spent earning just enough to avoid the workhouses or poorhouses.

But Marx failed to foresee the adaptability of the free market system. He misjudged the trajectory of capitalism's evolution. His supposition was that the desire of employers to increase their rate of profit, by cutting labor costs and maintaining competitive prices, would lead to the immiseration of the proletariat and cyclical crises of overproduction, and thus to inevitable class conflict between bourgeois and proletarians, which was to be resolved by the victory of socialism.

The Marxist axiom of the proletariat as the sole revolutionary class, the agent for a new communist future, looked less appropriate after the widespread adoption (at least in the industrialized world) of a social-democratic, paternalistic capitalism which all but guaranteed a standard of living of which Marx's 19th century workers could only have dreamed. In fact, in enjoying the rewards of this consumertopia, many of the "workers of the world" seem to be united only in their mutual appreciation of shopping and reality TV.

Situationist Raoul Vaneigem eloquently described consumer-capitalism as, "A democratic monarchy: Equality before consumption...freedom through consumption. The dictatorship of consumer goods recognizes only differences of quantity between values and between people. The distance between those who possess a lot and those who possess a small but ever-increasing amount is not changed; but the intermediate stages have multiplied, and have, so to speak, brought the two extremes, rulers and ruled, closer to the same level of mediocrity. To be rich nowadays means to possess a large number of poor objects."

Rather than the separation of the world into two great hostile camps, one growing fat off the blood, sweat and tears of the more numerous other, in the wealthiest nation-states where industrialization occurred during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a sort of historic compromise has been reached; the embourgeoisement of many workers and their co-option into the fold of capitalism.

No longer is there a direct threat to capitalism from organized labor or political parties. Democracy and elections are a side-show in which supposedly competing elites vie for power to implement nominally different versions of essentially the same plutocratic racket. In the middle of the twentieth century, in response to a strong workers' movement, concessions in the form of welfare, legislation on wages and hours, universal education, and healthcare, etc., were granted to a restive, combative working class, sick from two world wars and a worldwide depression, unwilling to see a return to business as usual.

Everything needed to change so that everything could stay the same.

As anarchist theorist Murray Bookchin put it, "The system does not abolish the traditional forms of class struggle but manages to contain it, using its immense technological resources to assimilate the most strategic sections of the working class." It has certainly succeeded in preventing mass, widespread revolt so far.

However, since the 2008 banking collapse and the subsequent Great Recession, capitalist governments around the world have been sure not to let a good crisis go to waste, using their own transfer of private debt into public hands, the bank bailouts, as an excuse to run roughshod over the welfare settlement, imposing a program of austerity on those who did not cause the downturn while allowing those responsible to grow richer by the day.

The worldwide crisis, rather than shaking the foundations of the neoliberal model, has reinvigorated the economics of the free market right-wing as they attempt to slash the state to a size not seen since the 1930s. In the midst of economic chaos, a new sub-strata has emerged that could be seen as the extreme counterweight to the decadence of the international financial elite, suffering a combination of poverty wages, irregular hours and short-term, casualized, zero-hour contracts—the precariat.

Sections of the working class are being pauperized by yet another restructuring of the class system and by a new rebalancing of forces which the capitalist system in its seemingly boundless ability to evolve and react to new pressures, is exploiting to the full.

The image of the idealized worker which used to adorn propaganda throughout the socialist world was tantamount to a gross fetishization of labor. But, the virtually obsolescent workers of old, the archaic macho factory workers stepping boldly towards a new future, are an anachronism in a world of post-industrial, post-Fordist advanced capitalism deriving its profits from financial services, retail and cognitive work.

Marxists hailed "heroes of socialist labor," glorified Taylorist "scientific management," assembly line production, and awarded the eponymous Stakhanovite Soviet workers with special privileges and medals. They romanticized the dull routine of alienated work and with it, to use Marx's insight, the forced extraction of surplus value from the proletariat, which in essence is the same in either system of capitalist or socialist accumulation.

Contrary to the declarations of state socialists everywhere, the drudgery of alienated labor isn't assuaged by government ownership of the workplace, nor is exploitation alleviated with the replacement of private shareholders or CEOs by communist nomenklaturas or faceless bureaucracies.

With the unionized, blue-collar working class in terminal decline in the West, whole cities lost to the whims of rampant capital moving entire industries from place to place in search of cheaper, more exploitable labor, and the simultaneous rise of a casualized, non-union, white-collar proletariat, perhaps over-educated and under-paid, but largely assimilated and passive, where does Marxist dogma come into play?

Periodic explosions of nascent (sometimes violent) resistance could serve as precursors to more generalized revolt.

This is certainly a threat to the present (dis)order; not the battered old Trade Union movement or the phony left. The former is all too cozily rooted in its historic role of integrating workers into wage-labor peaceably, acting as arbiter between labor and capital and channeling all the frustrations and grievances of their membership into nice, moderate demands for quantitative increases in wages or conditions, with paid bureaucrats destroying any genuine militancy or desire with negotiations, compromises and pay settlements.

The Marxist left meanwhile, is still soaked with patronizing, vanguardist rhetoric and committed to the tired old modes of newspaper-pushing and hierarchical organizing.

The 20th century did not see the material immiseration of the proletariat that Marx predicted. Exploitation did not disappear, but hid behind the palliative effects of a welfare state package or moved elsewhere to new pools of fresh arrivals on the global labor market.

The massification of the workers that Marx foresaw, and the advent of organized labor has not led to world revolution.

Taylorism, scientific management, standardization, increased division of labor, de-industrialization and the rise of the service economy, Trade Unionism, cheap credit, embourgeoisement and our beloved social safety-nets (through which no-one can fall?) are all part of the same social pacification package.

As Jacques Camatte postulated, workers have simply become an inherent component of capital rather than its negation. Instead of offering a threat to capital's existence, we complement it as the ying to capital's yang, unable to transcend our position or maneuver a way out of our narrow confines. The system's global omnipotence leaves us little escape from its reaches as it has come to dominate and define every aspect of our existence. The future struggle will not be between classes so much as they are between capital and humanity.

As alienation, drudgery, uniformity and apathy have become the omnipresent hallmarks of our society, we have seen the corresponding perfection of assimilation techniques that have lulled many into a blunt inertia.

It is time to end the love affair with labor and the quixotic rhetoric of the heroic working class and adopt a strategy of all-out rejection of the tired old dictates, of party and union hierarchies, the state as the Godhead, and the omnipresent work ethic.

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