

## **For Marx During the Good and the Bad Times!**

As most of my readers will know, these are the bad times: In the affluent parts of the world, mankind is becoming more and more fragmented and atomised. This explains why we are indifferent to the fact that one billion of the world's population goes hungry; despite the fact that we have the most advanced electronic media and communications system in history. It is therefore unfortunate that, just as in Hegel's time, today's intelligentsia espouses the old atomic principle: They are at one with 'a certain bourgeois stratum,...the petty bourgeoisie'. In philosophical circles, this tendency is called post-structuralism, which one critic has likened to 'the logics of disintegration'. Moreover, post-structuralism has spawned its own cultural movement or postmodernism. It is reflected in the popular broadsheets across the developed world.

Therefore, unlike in Hegel's time, there seems to be no 'philosophical montagnards' anywhere, who seek the 'downfall of privileged capitalism', which they believed, was responsible for social injustice. Hence their criticism of bourgeois 'egoism' that was unable to rise to a 'universal point of view'. Not only is such a stratum lacking in today's intelligentsia; there are no Marx and Engels waiting in the wings. The revolutionary marxists have all but disappeared from view. This can only be explained in terms of the poisonous legacy which the Stalinist interregnum has bequeathed mankind, both the intelligentsia and the masses alike. Thus the period 'late capitalism', concretely the 'societe de consummation' and the 'society of the spectacle' (see below), continues to flourish.

And in the absence of any kind of counter-veiling force, the situation can only worsen.

That is precisely why, against the stream, we need an intelligentsia committed to a totalising theory of knowledge more than ever. The tradition of classical marxism provides such a theory. It is distinguished by the fact that it refuses to err on the side of idealism or that of reductive materialism. It is not only closest to Marx's own theory and method; but also gives one the opportunity to develop Marxism further in the light of the present. Hence this essay strives to uphold that tradition.

Marxism, of course, goes beyond philosophy. That is why Marx found it necessary to turn Hegel on his head; i.e. once he realised that the latter's understanding of the dialectic was based on an idealist method. For Hegel, the dialectic is part of a process which is necessary for progress. It operates in the world and is reflected in thought. As for the latter, this process involves overcoming the contradiction between thesis and anti-thesis, before arriving at the synthesis. It is repeated until the final perfection or the truth is attained. However Hegel never goes beyond the realm of thought. Therefore for him, all that is required of human reason is that it be able to mirror the historical force (world spirit) behind world history, which is proceeding in the same contradictory way towards the ultimate synthesis or the end of history. The goal of the Enlightenment - or the age of reason - is to understand this relationship, as well as the epoch in which history achieves its final end. For Hegel, this was epitomised by the rise of the Prussian state.

For Marx also, the dialectical process operates in the world. As far as humanity is concerned, historical epochs supersede one another as a result of their inherent contradictions, until a society emerges, in which all of these contradictions have been resolved; i.e. in a future communist society, wherein private property relations and the bourgeois division of labour have been removed: In a communist society the contradiction between 'work and pleasure... between the free play of bodily and mental powers' and the 'conscious will' have been abolished. Along with the abolition of classes and the ultimate disappearance of the contradiction between physical and spiritual [intellectual] labour, comes an all-sided development of the individual. Only communist society, in which 'the associated producers regulate their interchange with nature rationally, bring it under their common control, instead of being ruled by some blind power', can establish the basis for 'the development of human power which is its own end, the true realm of freedom'.  
5 [Marx, 'Capital III', Moscow 1966, p 820.] Finally, however, the dialectic can - and must - be mirrored in human thought. But man also must also be able to change the world practically, not just in theory.

It is here that Marx, the materialist, parts company with his mentor, Hegel, the idealist. For Marx realised that ideas are not sufficient unto themselves. To be effective, i.e. change things, they must be grasped by men collectively, in particular, that class of newfangled men and women, the proletariat; only then can ideas become a material force.

Both Hegel and Marx realised that the rise of modern capitalism in the 18th century, along with its new industries and the market, established private property relations in a new form. At the same time, the new mode of production which the capitalist class had created, also gave birth to a new social class, the proletariat. But the relationship between the two classes is antagonistic and contradictory: The proletariat is a propertyless class; it produces surplus value for the capitalist, but only receives enough in return in order to maintain its own existence, i.e. wages; it does not own or control the means of production; hence it is forced into struggle, as often as not, just to survive. On the other hand, it is an indispensable part of the productive forces. Even with advanced mechanisation, men are still needed to operate the machines. (But capitalist mechanisation also makes millions of workers redundant or they are forced into low-paid, semi-skilled, even unskilled jobs.)

Even before Marx, Hegel acknowledged that modern capitalism and its commodity system, along with the ‘paralysing effects of the [bourgeois] division of labour, the increasing mechanisation of all forms of human activity’, led to ‘the engulfing of quality by quantity’, which is inimical to poetry’, even though Hegel ‘acknowledged capitalism to be the essential foundation of progress’. 6 [Lifshitz, ‘The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx’, Pluto Press, London, 1973, p 14.] Later, of course, Hegel chose to reconcile himself with existing reality. On the other hand, Marx welcomed the new epoch, if only because it was pregnant with its opposite: The capitalist mode of production also established the conditions, which would make the achievement of true human freedom a real possibility. Whereas the romantic poets rejected capitalism outright, because, for them, it was only a

destructive, inhuman force. As William Blake wrote in his famous poem, 'Jerusalem', England's 'green and pleasant land' had been replaced by those 'dark satanic mills'. Whereas, for Marx, the destructive forces of capitalism were, at the same time, great productive forces. He recognised that the 'social forms of production develop through contradiction - through their very opposite - atomisation and [fragmentation]. 'Herodian slaughter of the innocents', extinction of entire peoples...this is the price that humanity has to pay for the colossal achievement of capitalism: socialisation of labour and concentration of production.' 7 [Lif. p 98-9]

On the other hand, this has to be set against the fact that, as the recent Pulitzer Prize winner, Chris Hedges, says: 'capitalism turns everything into a commodity, including human beings and then exploits them..' Today the situation is worsened, because capitalism also created the world's greatest imperial power, the United States of America. Just like the Roman Empire (but in a much shorter space of time), the American empire is now in decline. But, as the ancient Roman historian said, once an empire has destroyed the world, it then begins to destroy itself. 8 [See interview between Michael Moore and Chris Hedges in 'Extras', at the end of Michael Moore's latest film, 'Capitalism: A Love Story' (2009).]

Today, it is clear that, despite its decline, the USA continues to set the standard for the rest of the developed world: On the one hand, we have the free market economy and monopoly capitalism in the form of powerful corporate entities, as well as the 'societe de consummation', along with the 'society of the spectacle' (in

which the image is now 'king', not the word). Whilst the notion of the consumer society is not unfamiliar; the 'society of the spectacle' is somewhat less so. The latter was the brainchild of Guy Debord, the French Situationist (and self-proclaimed marxist). It is also the title of an important book which he wrote in the late sixties. Debord defines the 'spectacle' as: not merely a 'decorative element' ; rather, 'it is the very heart of [contemporary] society's real unreality'. The corporate news media, along with advertising and the consumption of entertainment, 'serves as a total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system'. Furthermore, 'it governs almost all time spent outside the production process itself.'<sup>9</sup> [Guy Debord, 'The Society of the Spectacle', Zone Books, NY, 1994, p 13.]

Clearly what Debord is saying here is that there is another level of alienation at work, apart from that of the workplace. As Georg Lukacs wrote in 'History and Class Consciousness' (1923), in modern societies we have 'the phenomenon of Reification': This is a real extension of alienation which arises from the commodity form. Lukacs paraphrases Marx's comment in Capital I, 'the relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature - the relation between people.' This is commodity fetishism, wherein money is the most important, because it has been socially determined as 'the universal equivalent'. Without it an individual cannot consume all the other commodities that he needs; not just the necessities of life, such as food, shelter and clothing; but also items of pleasure and relaxation. In age of

increasing distractions, the latter includes films, DVDs of films, TV shows, digital games, the internet and Youtube, etc. Although Lukacs was writing at the very beginning of modern mass entertainment, that is in the 1920s, his remarks are still relevant today, if not more so: ‘...we must be quite clear that commodity fetishism is a specific problem of our age, the age of modern capitalism. [Commodity exchange and its alienating effects are not new. But] what is at issue here, however, is the question: how far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the total outer and inner life of society?’ 10 [Georg Lukacs, ‘History and Class Consciousness’, Merlin Press, London, 1990, pp 83-4]

This raises another question: The USA created the ‘societe de consummation’ and the ‘society of the spectacle’, which it then exported to the rest of the capitalist world. Although it would be quite wrong to attribute the fragmentation and atomisation of modern man to the effects of the ‘culture industry’ alone (Cf. Adorno and the Frankfurt School); on the other hand, in the absence of a proletariat, which has fought for its own independent organisations and the socialist ideal, to what extent does the culture industry contribute to this fragmenting and atomising process; so that the mankind ends up as ‘unsocial and inhuman man’, in both the subjective and objective sense. Thus Adorno’s pessimism, which is clearly evident in ‘Dialectic of the Enlightenment’ (1944), becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Thus the masses are anaesthetised to a capitalist system, which is increasingly destructive, not only to mankind, but also to the whole ecosystem upon which he

depends. It is this sort of advanced capitalism to which the emerging super powers, such as China, India, Brazil and Russia aspire to. Furthermore, today an unaccountable bureaucracy in Wall Street, which manages finance capital (and which was also responsible for the world financial crisis of 2007-8), is in charge, not the American Congress, which is elected by the people. (Cf. that other parasitic bureaucracy, the communist party or the oligarchs which succeeded it, who are still in charge in China and post-Soviet Russia.)

Once again, it is the United States of America which provides the model for the future of 'late capitalism': Following the collapse of Wall Street in 2007-8, Congress meekly acceded to a multi-trillion dollar bailout for the banks. Of course, it is the taxpayer who must foot the bill; albeit the burden falls unequally on the poorest sections of society. China is set to become the world's next superpower. Yet the system it has inherited, i.e. late capitalism, continues to destroy whole swathes of people, as well as the ecosystem itself. Today China is doing just that to its own people and their environment. For this is the price that humanity is currently paying for modern China's modern economic miracle.

On the other hand, for Marx, the capitalist system is also based on the 'socialisation of labour and concentration of production'. Therefore, sooner or later, it has to be challenged by a counter-veiling force, i.e. the proletariat which, as Lenin later observed, was 'moving in the direction of socialism'. (Despite the fragmentation and atomisation of mankind today, hopefully this will again be the case, i.e. before the system's destructive tendencies have reached the point of no return.) Given his his Enlightenment faith in the power of human reason, Marx also



argues that the 'nihilism of the capitalist mode of production is at the same time its greatest historical merit. 'All that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind'. (Communist Manifesto). Ultimately, therefore, the proletariat must develop a revolutionary consciousness; not just subjectively (on the part of individuals), but also objectively (at the level of a collectivity). Marx called this 'communist-mass-consciousness'.

Once again, here we have the notion that ideas must be transformed into a material force if they are to change anything. But there is a problem. As Marx points out in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844), it is the bourgeois division of labour and its 'man-crippling' effects, as far as the proletariat is concerned. (Cf. earlier epochs, e.g. antiquity. In order to point out this discrepancy, Marx found a line in Homer's 'Odyssey': 'Divers men take delight in divers deeds'. This was a much more humane and progressive division of labour, which Marx would like to see reinstated; albeit slavery will be replaced by machines, which have the power of 'shortening the working day'.) On the other hand, Marx also pointed that in a modern capitalist society, the proletariat, is also made 'stupid' and 'one-sided' by private property relations so that 'an object is only ours when we have it, when it exists for us as capital or when we directly possess, eat, drink, wear, inhabit it, etc., in short, when we use it.' Today, as I have already noted, western man is incorporated by 'societe de consummation', which has now become the 'society of the spectacle'; i.e. this dehumanising process is further exacerbated by commodity fetishism - and its own self-reflection via the world of entertainment (cf. Adorno's 'culture industry').

Finally, vis-à-vis the ‘man-crippling’ effects of the bourgeois division of labour, here we have yet another example of bourgeois rationalisation or the principle of ‘means-end necessity’. It is indeed unfortunate that today this attitude is ingrained in the brains of billions of people. Yet it is the antithesis of the original Enlightenment ideal, exemplified by Schiller and Blake, not forgetting Marx himself, all of whom expressed their faith in human reason, which, first and foremost, must be for humanity’s sake. (Cf. the bourgeois political economists: As Marx observed in his 1844 Manuscripts, the latter had already subordinated humanity to ‘the need for money’, which is the only genuine need created by political economy’.)

Clearly mankind has been falling down that particular ladder for far too long. Therefore, more than ever before, it needs the assistance of the intelligentsia armed with a totalising theory of knowledge. This is an essential precursor if the modern proletariat is to have any chance of acquiring the necessary ‘communist-mass-consciousness’; so that it can resume its historic task as the agency of the social revolution.

Yet Marx never argued that the proletarian revolution was inevitable, just because history is on the side of the proletariat. This is despite the fact that Marx realised that the proletariat is different from all previous classes in history: It is a ‘class with radical chains, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society. [But to become a part of the latter, one needs to have money, education, etc. The proletariat is therefore a class] which is the dissolution of all classes,...because of

its universal suffering' . 11 [Marx, 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', in 'Karl Marx: Early Writings', Ed. Lucio Colletti, Penguin Books, p 256.]

The accusation that Marx was an 'inevitabilist' arises from a misunderstanding. This includes generations of self-proclaimed Marxists, who were anything but. As for the latter, it has its origins in the Stalinist faction which arose from the ruins of the infant Soviet state at the end of an exhausting Civil War (1921-24). This was a conservative and parasitic bureaucratic current, which was looking to consolidate its own power in Russia, rather than advance the international revolution.

Therefore the idea that socialism and communism were inevitable, because history is on the side of the proletariat, proved to be an attractive ideology, however false. It covered 'a multitude of sins' committed in the name of revolutionary marxism, which led to many defeats for the revolutionary proletariat in different parts of the world. Moreover this ideology, combined with a whole series of mistakes and betrayals of the class struggle, had a cumulative and corrupting effect on the rest of the marxist movement.

In theoretical terms, it manifested itself through an inability - on the part of many erstwhile marxists - to distinguish between Marx's use of a systemic argument in order to explain a complex process, such as the inherently contradictory nature of the capitalist mode of production (above) and his dialectical method , which is rooted in material reality. Once again, there is nothing inevitabilist about the latter. Perhaps the best example of this distinction is to be found in Marx's 1859 'Preface'. It includes the famous passage in which he switches from one mode of argument to the other in the space of a single paragraph:

‘From forms of development of the productive forces these relations [between the productive forces - of which the most important is the proletariat - and the relations of production - private property, owned and controlled by the capitalist, whose primary interest is the accumulation of capital] turn into their fetters. Then the epoch of social revolution commences. With the alteration of the economic foundation [the expropriation of the bourgeoisie along with private property relations] the whole colossal superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. [But] In examining such transformations one must always distinguish between the transformation in the economic conditions of production, to be established with the accuracy of physical science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophical, in short the ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.’ 12 [Marx, ‘Later Political Writings’, Cambridge Texts, Ed. Terrell Carver, NY, 1996, p 160]

Given his Enlightenment faith in human reason, as its own end, Marx was staunchly optimistic about the prospects for the proletarian revolution, as the basis for human emancipation,. This is clearly evident in the Communist Manifesto of 1848: ‘the nihilism of the bourgeois mode of production is...its greatest historical merit. ‘All that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.’ On the other hand, Marx also envisaged the possibility of historical decay. Thus in a speech which he gave on the anniversary of ‘The People’s Paper’ in 1856, he said:

‘On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces which no epoch of the former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors recorded in the latter times of the Roman Empire. In our days, everything seems pregnant with the contrary, machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and [enriching] human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The newfangled sources of wealth, by some strange, weird spell, are turned into sources of want. The victories of art seem to be bought by the loss of character. At the same time mankind masters nature, man seems to be enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure life of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance. All our invention and progress seems to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and stultifying human life into a material force...’ 13 [Lifshitz, p 102]

If anyone were to read that speech today; albeit out of context, he could be forgiven for assuming that it was made only yesterday, not 150 years or so ago. For every single point which Marx made in that speech is just as relevant today, if not more so!

Capitalism can and must be superseded by conscious subjects (the proletariat and its allies, including a significant section of the intelligentsia), organised into a collectivity; only then can revolutionary ideas become their own own ‘material force’ and therefore have any chance of transforming the world. But in the absence of ‘communist-mass-consciousness’ (as Marx put it), ultimately material reality

has the final say: capitalism begins to sink into a period of decay under the weight of its internal contradictions (between the forces and relations of production).

Therefore 150 years after Marx published the first volume of 'Capital', we in the west find ourselves living at the centre of 'late capitalism'; concretely the post-industrial society, whose driving force is finance capital; traditional industry which once employed millions of workers has given way to a highly mechanised 'societe de consommation', which has now become the 'society of the spectacle', within which the image is king. Finally, at the same time, the system is underpinned by 'commercial totalitarianism - a single value (profit) and a single power (monopoly holder) submerging all distinctions and rendering all choice tenuous and all diversity a sham....a kind of default totalitarianism without totalising government'.

14 [See Evelyn Cobley's essay, 'Decentred Totalities in 'Doctor Faustus': Thomas Mann and Theodor W. Adorno'.]

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