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Our Weimar Moment, Part Two

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I am not the person to solve these dilemmas however. I am a philosopher not an activist and my only job is to help clarify our thinking about the mess we find ourselves in. In that spirit I offer the following observations. They take the form of a reflection on Karl Marx whose writing seem to take on new life in the era in which we live. Marx has been gravely disserved by the elevation of his writings into a kind of holy writ.

Though I have deep reservations about certain aspects of his thinking (which I will discuss below) it is surprising to me how accurate a diagnosis he offers of our current crisis. I will not comment here on the strange tension between brutal dialectical realism and hazy utopianism that is the ambiguous legacy of the Marxist tradition. Nor will I be reviving such difficult and contentious notions as the theory of surplus value or Marx's arcane analysis of Victorian economics.¹

If Marx is still relevant as a prophet for the 21st century it is not for these things but for his central insight that Capitalism as a system is unsustainable: of its very nature it absolutizes the profit motive and the relentless pursuit of profit at all costs must bring the system itself crashing down. It is clear to me, for instance, that untrammelled markets will destroy the social and ecological capital on which they rest and on this point at least Marxism seems to me correct.

Only a system where the means of production are radically democratized is capable of wielding the instruments of modern technology in a way that is sustainable and broadly fair. Marx got many things tragically wrong but at the beginning of the 21st century we may wonder if he has gotten this one thing right. Not ten years ago this would have seemed a ridiculous question: the consensus surely was that the second half of the 20th century had left Marx's thought far behind.

However, is it true that current conditions (as so many have claimed) falsify not only the details of Marx's account but its spirit? The reason for saying so has hitherto been powerful: beginning with the post-depression era and continuing after the Second World War liberal democratic states have been governed by a consensus. Markets have been given freedom to operate on the assumption that in certain key areas Government will intervene to even out the cruelties and inequities of the market place, for example with labor laws, social security

¹ Of course fundamental challenges exist to Marxist economics and the anthropology underlying it. Of particular note here is Jean Baudrillard, whose *Mirror of Production* castigates Marx for failing to question the principles of 'political economy' as defined in the 18th Century and making a fetish of Bourgeois notions of 'labor' under the all-encompassing sign of 'production'. Thus, Marxism, far from being a radical critique of Capitalism simply reproduces its underlying logic. I cannot weigh in on this critique here but simply note its importance. I will say, however, that confronting Marxist notions of labor and productivity with, say, the ontologies of indigenous peoples shows just how dependent they are on the theoretical foundations of bourgeois Liberalism. Indeed, the Lockean stance towards nature, expropriation as property through productive labor, does not disappear from Marx but is simply socialized. The capitalist expropriation of the surplus value of labor disappears to make the social expropriation of land, "waste lands" as the *Manifesto* puts it, proceed apace. (54) Progressive advocates for the rights of indigenous peoples will have to rethink fundamental aspects of the Socialist tradition if they are serious about accommodating the indigenous viewpoint on land and ecological responsibility.

systems etc. The true answer to Marx has always been that democratic states have the power and will to balance the demands of the market with basic social goods to a degree sufficient to prevent revolution.²

Of course, corporations and their apologists have never really accepted this consensus and, as the post war interventionist state has been fundamentally secular in outlook neither have the people we now call social conservatives. If Marx is right the post war consensus that has hitherto governed us is inherently unstable: corporations who face the imperative of ever improving their bottom line can, indeed must, do so by incrementally chipping away at every aspect of the state that embodies a higher good than the pursuit of individual profit. Since the whole *raison d'être* of the liberal state has been to make the world safe for capitalism and the indefinite growth it promises the political class must more and more cede to these demands.

However, man does not live by bread alone: to ensure electoral success corporate interests must align themselves with nationalists, racists, religious zealots and other disaffected groups as these are the one great mass of people outside the corporate sector who regard the post-war state as inherently corrupt. Thus, one sees the strange alliance between evangelical Protestants, conservative Catholics and the kleptocrats of the corporate elite: both fundamentally hate the progressive state and wish it dismantled, if for diametrically opposed reasons.

Anyone who reads the *Communist Manifesto* will see that Marx understood this dialectic perfectly well: the liberal state will always be threatened by an alliance of Capital with ethnic, national and religious exclusivism, in a word, fascism. As the liberal state is, in its essence, aligned with capital anyway it will inevitably lose this fight, making concession after concession until it is fundamentally toothless and an object of general contempt.

Ironically, given Marx's notion that the state must ultimately wither away, the Liberal state will weaken itself to a point where it simply becomes expendable. The resultant unfettered pursuit of profit will produce such environmental devastation, such immiseration of what was once the middle class and such a cheapening of core values in spheres such as education and health-care that it will not be sustainable: the question of an alternative economic model will then present itself whether we wish it or not.³ It is not for philosophers to predict the

² Or complete ecological collapse. Whatever the consequences to the planet corporations have made it clear that they wish to exploit fossil fuels until they are gone: one can only conclude that they prefer death to the intolerable burden of ecological responsibility. So far no national government or coalition of national governments has been able to tell them no. Of course a government that cannot tell private interests no is no government at all. So far, the liberal state has been failing one of its most significant tests and to that extent playing in the general rhetoric that states are useless anyway and might as well be replaced by private corporations or anarchist communes.

³ We do not suffer from a lack of such models but from an excess. Trying to pick one's way through the proposals of participatory economists, anarchists, mutualists, syndicalists, anarcho-feminists and so on is rather like trying to decide which of a hundred sects of Protestantism represents the true religion. I offer no opinion on whether social forms like these may play a role in a post capitalist order. For all this author knows they

future or to dictate to practical people what they need to do. I only make the general point that the question of *laissez faire* economics is one of the handful of human notions on which the data appears to be in.

Yet it is clear too that without markets (of some kind) there is no way to adjust production to the real needs and demands of individuals (markets, after all, long predate capitalism). The grim catastrophe that was international communism was both the triumph and downfall of the technocratic dream: a universal society devoted to the conquest of nature and of chance. I do not simply refer here to ecological disasters such as the destruction of the Aral Sea or nuclear testing in Kazakhstan. I refer to the entire notion of a state that absorbs society in order to subject it to authoritarian technocratic control.

I think the lesson is clear that no party or political movement no matter how well intentioned can absorb the government. No government can absorb society in its economic, cultural or scientific aspects. This is illustrated, for instance, by the utter failure of centrally planned economies to meet the needs of actual human beings.⁴ Contingency and difference, whether in the form of an economic market or a ‘marketplace of ideas’ or a culture of criticism and resistance *within* the state (in the form of a free press, political opposition and so on) are essential to a free society. As Robert Heilbroner points out a free market at very least provides a place where dissidents and non-conformists can earn a living. (69)

I prescind here from the question of whether Marx (who is still as I have noted a major social theorist) is to blame for the fate of Marxism in the 20th century: certainly Marx says some potentially disturbing things about a temporary ‘dictatorship’ of the proletariat where the workers, or more disturbingly, people who have appointed themselves as representative of the workers, take on the power of the Hobbesian sovereign.⁵ State absolutism seems set as the precondition for abolishing the state.

might have many useful things to contribute. They do seem, however, to embody one principle which is surely erroneous: that the community will never have to exercise sovereignty over the will of individuals. As will be pointed out below the most anarcho-syndicalist of communes will still have to function in some minimal sense as a *state*. I point this out because the utopian notion that the human being can, in her immediate natural will, embody the will of the community is a dangerous delusion which lays the groundwork for 20th century totalitarianism. One way of reading the current essay is as a critique of the utopian impulse as it afflicts both Capitalist and other societies. The problem with all these suggestions is that, for now at least, they are merely ideal and do not reflect forces immanent in the world, a thing Marx himself deprecated.

⁴ Ironies abound here. Robert Heilbroner notes: “As citizens of the former Soviet Union are discovering to their consternation, a market system means the end of the long queues for bread that were a curse of life under a system of centralized command, but it also means the introduction of a queue which did not exist formerly—namely, standing in line at employment offices and looking for work.” (73-74) The curse of a command system is the inability to provide goods in sufficient quantity as and when people actually need them. If bread runs low the command system cannot pivot and continues producing other items (like the notorious black lamps) for which there is no demand at all. The curse of Capitalism is its inability to supply a sufficient amount of meaningful and non-exploitive work for its citizens: one accepts ‘structural unemployment’ and alienated labor rather as the Soviet citizen made due without toothpaste.

It is no doubt possible to find a reading of Marx that insulates him from all that has subsequently been done in his name: such a procedure, though, runs the risk of turning his doctrine into a mere idealism, something that *should* have been a moving force in history but, alas, *wasn't* due to Lenin, Plekhanov, the backwardness of the Russian people or what have you. Does Marxism allow any judgment but that of history? Does it not seem to fail its own most fundamental test?

I note however that many of the people who currently flaunt the symbols and language of international socialism are (barring the odd lunatic who still pines for forced collectivization) social democrats at heart or anarchists rather than orthodox Marxist/Leninists. Certainly their concerns over environmentalism and the rights of indigenous peoples belong more to the progressivism of this century than of the last.⁶ Crucial notions for Marx are the technological conquest of scarcity and the full automation of labor and this certainly now looks naive from an ecological viewpoint. It looks increasingly like a Faustian delusion to believe that nature sets no limits on the possibility of abundance and prosperity. To truly eliminate scarcity, we must redefine our wants and needs, boring as that sounds, rather than overwhelm demand with supply.

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⁵ *Communist Manifesto* pp.53-54. Of course, barring Cincinnatus of early Roman times, no 'dictatorship' has ever been temporary by choice. A realist like Marx ought surely to have known that power does not renounce itself. Of this section of the *Manifesto* Jacques Barzun comments: "Nowhere does Marx's imaginative weakness and inconsequence appear more clearly than in this mishmash of bloody revolution with reformism." (*Darwin, Marx, Wagner*, 188) This may be harsh but there is a grain of truth to it nonetheless. Barzun deftly points up the naiveté underlying Marx's apparent worldliness: "One therefore wonders by what secret mechanism he expected that in *this* case (i.e. the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie) men goaded to destruction and sadism would settle down into artisans of peace and order." (187) In any violent revolution you will have men with guns and men with guns do not readily give them up. Most likely they will then become a militant clique who appoint themselves as *representatives* of the proletariat assuming its dictatorial function. This clique will already be criminalized by a long standing habit of identifying ethics with political expediency. A revolutionary general (in a depressingly familiar pattern) then becomes the next autocrat after killing or jailing his rivals. A new autocracy is the result and as Eagleton points out: "...a Socialism which fails to inherit from the middle class a rich legacy of liberal freedoms and civic institutions will simply reinforce that autocracy." (43) Perhaps it is this dynamic of armed insurrections, rather than supposed 'material conditions' in Russia or elsewhere that vitiated 20th Century Communism. We might then judge the insurrectionist approach to be largely a failure.

⁶ Assimilation of indigenous peoples (so called 'futureless societies') was as firm a part of Soviet doctrine as of Canadian or American Liberalism. Indeed, what could it possibly mean to be an indigenous person in the universal technocracy envisaged by Marx and his followers? A person who claimed and expressed indigeneity would be, from this perspective, clinging to outmoded forms of life (i.e. forms of life that do not reflect current modes of production) and would, for that reason, be counter-revolutionary (see *German Ideology*, 44 for Marx's dismissive account of indigenous societies). At any rate nothing could be further from the scientific character of Marxism than the mania for *ad hominem* attacks and personal invective typical of certain contemporary radicals. Whether a capitalist is a loving father or steps on puppies is perfectly irrelevant. Marx is concerned with how *institutions* affect the perceptions and attitudes of the people who inhabit them. Capitalism is not oppressive because individual capitalists are bad people. A capitalist system run by kindly old grandfathers would not be a whit less oppressive. To be fair though, this contradiction is in Marx himself who never reconciled the vituperative *rhetoric* of Marxism with its actual substance.

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