

Re-visiting the east... and popping in at Marx's

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June 2002

It's crucial to understand why Russia was capitalist in 1980, or 1930, or 1920, if we wish to understand what capitalism really is, and what can and must be revolutionized in Russia as well as in Britain in the XXIst century.

Capitalism is not just a system of domination whereby a minority of bourgeois or bureaucrats force the masses to work and earn them wealth. In 1950, in Prague as in Chicago, money was buying labour, which was put to work to valorize sums of money accumulated in poles of value called companies or corporations. These firms could not go on unless they accumulated value at a socially acceptable rate. This rate was certainly not the same in Prague as in Chicago. Czech firms worked as separate units but (unlike Chicago-based firms) had no private owners that could sell or manage them at will. Still, a Czech company manufacturing shoes did not just produce them as objects supposed to fulfill a function: it had to make the best profitable use of all the money that had been invested to produce them. Value formation mattered as much in Prague as in Chicago. Those shoes weren't given free to the Chicago or Prague pedestrian who would then have tried them on, put them on and walked away. In both towns, the pedestrian paid for his shoes or went barefoot.

Of course, the Czech State could decide to subsidize shoes and sell them at a low price, i.e. below production cost. But in each country, value had to be finally realized on the market. Czech planners kept bending the rules of profitability, but they couldn't play that game for ever. These rules always asserted themselves in the end, through poor quality, shortages, the black market, etc. The State protected the Prague company against bankruptcy. But that was artificial. Limiting competition helps maintain social cohesion: over-limiting competition stifles productivity. No-one can fiddle the logic of valorization for too long. One firm, ten firms, a thousand could be saved from closure, until one day it was the whole society that went bankrupt. If the Belgian or French State had kept bailing out every unprofitable company from the early days of industrialization, capitalism would now be defunct in France or Belgium. In short, the 'law of value' functioned in very different ways in bureaucratic and in market capitalism, but it did apply to both systems. (Nobody denies the capitalist nature of Bahrein or Togo, though these capitalist forms are quite different from the British or Italian ones.)

Just like its Western versions, the rise and fall of State capitalism depended on class oppositions and compromises, at the centre of which was the necessity to put labour to profitable work. In the USSR and in Eastern Europe after 1945, this took the particular form of constant political repression coupled with protected jobs (both in the factory and in the collective farm), which achieved value accumulation in spite of low productivity. After all, Russian bureaucratic capitalism did work for over 60 years.

The whole system did not collapse because it got too repressive and the people had had enough, but when the class compromise ceased to be socially productive – especially when it could not stand the pressure of a world market dominated by a much more dynamic West.

1989 certainly heralded a different historical era, but not the dawning of a renewed communist (= in the sense of Marx, not Stalin or Dubcek) movement. The fall of the Berlin Wall opened up a spate of economic reshuffling, workers' militancy and democratic pressure, and left little room for a critique of capitalism as such. Since 1989, in most ex-Comecon countries, the class struggle has indeed developed but led neither to real Western style reformism (which Eastern capitalisms are unable to satisfy), nor to significant radical minorities. The evolution of Poland or that of Serbia provides ample proof of the way working class militancy either withered or was channelled into national (sometimes nationalist) perspectives. Often, workers have to fight not for higher wages, but merely to get their wages paid: this is true in the Czech Republic as in Kazakhstan.

We're not suggesting that 'Eastern' proles would be more backward than others. In Western Europe, in North America and Japan too, 'anti-capitalism' mainly presses for more social justice, and only a tiny fraction of it is revolutionary. Actually, this is an important point we'd like to make, although it can't be developed here for lack of space: everywhere, reform is still the order of the day .

Re-visiting State capitalism is no academic debate. What's at stake is the nature of capitalism and communism. If the Politburo and KGB could not bend the logic of productivity and profitability, Right or Left well-wishers won't be able to put real checks on it either. The present economic stagnation (and often decline) of nearly all ex-Comecon countries does not come from the rapacity of bureaucrats turned bourgeois (no more than unemployment and low wages in the West are due to excessive greed on the part of the bosses and shareholders). There simply isn't enough room for most Czech or Russian companies on the world market. Capital is uncontrollable: it manages its managers. The analysis of bureaucratic capitalism tells us what capital really is: not just the imposition of work and shopfloor or office discipline, but the selling of one's labour power, of one's life, in exchange for money. Work as an activity separated from the rest can't be free. Money can't be equally or fairly shared or re-distributed. As long as money exists, there never will be enough of it for everyone. Nothing short of the suppression of wage-labour will deeply change our lives.

One question arises, though. How does the vision of people like Marx relate to the monsters that called themselves Marxist in the XXth century ? There is a connection indeed. State organized capitalism is undoubtedly contrary to the spirit of Marx's lifelong activity and writing, but it could claim to be faithful to some of its aspects. Let's just give one example. Capital's volume I does not end with an utterly communist conclusion (how to get to a world without commodity, State and work), but on the expropriation of the expropriators through the socialization of capitalism brought about by historical necessity. Now, this is not enough to warrant the SPD taking part in the management of Germany after 1918, let alone the suppression of Kronstadt or the Gulag. But this is certainly far from the clear affirmation of communism that we read in Marx's

early texts and in his numerous notebooks on the mir and 'primitive' societies that he kept in his later years (none of which, as we know, he made public) .

In the late 1960's and in the 70's, we weren't the only ones to go back to Marx, as we thought it necessary for a better understanding of what we were experiencing. The essays collected here are part of this effort. This meant a return to the whole of revolutionary history and thinking, and included the Left opposition to the IIIrd International (the 'Italian' and 'German-Dutch' Lefts), but also pre- and post-1914 anarchism⁴. We were and still are convinced that (contrary to Marx's statement in one of his weakest works), a veritable split happened in the mid-XIXth century within the revolutionary movement between what became stultified as Marxism and anarchism. Later of course the split got worse.

The reader of this book will realize that we're not adding little bits of Bakunin to big chunks of Marx (or vice-versa). Such a patchwork would look like an irrelevant puzzle. We are only trying to assess both Marx and Bakunin as Marx and Bakunin themselves had to assess, say, Babeuf or Fourier.

It is hard to deny the progressivist dimension in Marx: he shared his time's belief in today being 'better' than yesterday, and tomorrow surely better than today. He held a linear view of history, and built up a deterministic continuity from primitive community to communism. Basically, he reconstructed early history as if, when human groups had been able to produce more than was necessary for immediate survival, this surplus had created the possibility of exploitation, hence its historical necessity. A minority forced the majority to work and grabbed the riches. Thousands of years later, thanks to capitalism, the huge expansion of productivity creates another possibility: the end of exploitation. Goods of all kinds are so plentiful that it becomes absurd to have a minority monopolize them. And the organization of production is so socialized that it becomes pointless (and even counterproductive) to have it run by a handful of rulers each managing his own private business. The bourgeois were historically necessary: then their own achievement (the growth of the modern economy) turns them into parasites. Capitalism makes itself useless. History has thus moved from scarcity to abundance.

True, such an evolutionary pattern was never actually written down by Marx, but it is the underlying logic beneath a lot of his texts and (what's more important) a lot of his political activity. It was no accident or mistake if he supported the German national bourgeoisie or clearly reformist union or party leaders: he regarded them as agents of the positive change that would eventually bring about communism. By contrast, he looked down on such insurrectionists as Bakunin whom he thought stood outside the real movement of history.

It's interesting to note that major anarchist figures, like Kropotkin and Elisée Reclus (both renowned professional geographers) also supported deterministic views, with an emphasis more on social organisation than production. To them, the worldwide spread of industry and commerce created a potential universal human and open society where ethnic differences, borders and States were made meaningless.

In Marx's case as in Kropotkin's, 'society' ceased to be the result of relationships between beings and classes, and revolution was supposed to be bound to happen because of a universal drive towards a unified humankind. This was more a technological explanation of history than a social one.

The deterministic Marx, however, was not the whole Marx, who showed a long-standing deep interest in what did not fit within the linear succession of historical phases. He wrote at length about self-organizing peasant communes with collective ownership of land, and clearly envis-

aged the possibility of skipping the capitalist stage in Russia. Whatever Kropotkin thought of Marx, quite a few ideas of the Russian anarchist echo those of the famous London exile.

Yet, as we know, those insights were later discarded by reformist and revolutionary Marxists alike. Marxism became the ideology of economic development. According to it, since capitalism gets more and more socialized, there's little need for revolution: the organized masses will eventually put a (mainly peaceful) end to bourgeois anarchy. To sum it up, socialism does not break with capitalism: it completes it. Radicals only differed from gradualists in that they included the necessity of violence in this process. Lenin made much of the fact that big German konzerns and cartels were already organized and centralized from the top: if bourgeois managers were replaced by working class ones, and this rational planning was extended from each private trust to the whole of industry, the general social fabric would be altered⁵. This was no breakaway from the commodity and the economy.

Our return to Marx around 1970 probably failed to realize how much Marxism owed to Marx.

Any economic definition of communism remains within the scope of the economy, i.e. the separation of the production moments from the rest of life. Communism is not a society that would properly feed the hungry, nurse the sick, house the homeless, etc. It can't be based on the fulfillment of needs as they exist now or even as we might imagine them in future. Communism does not produce enough for everyone and distributes it fairly among all. It is a world where people get into relationships and into acts that (among other things) result in them being able to feed, nurse, house... themselves. Communism is not a social organization. It is an activity. It is a human community.

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This is a preface to the Czech edition of Eclipse and Re-emergence, to be published by Solidarita (ORA-S).

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