

The Crisis of Dialectical Materialism and Libertarian Socialism

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If there is one sentence in all that has been written by Marx that summarizes his thought, it is this: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past”. (*The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, p.15). Constantly vying with each other are two processes: the attempt by human beings to change the world into a human world and the self-preserving inertia of this world they are trying to change. On the one side human life, the source of all meaning, a free consciousness bent on making its freedom real and on the other the sheer weight of circumstances that not only resist this freedom but threaten to turn human actions into inhuman results.

As long as people do not make history with the consciousness that they are doing so, the power of circumstances prevails – “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living”. (*ibid.* p.15). History remains the captive of economic necessity and therefore loses its right to be called history since that word can only be correctly applied to a record of human achievement whereas history prior to liberation is a record of the rule of necessity. History proper begins when this rule has been broken, i.e., when history becomes the enterprise of free individuals acting collectively out of solidarity with each other. Till then men make history not as human beings but as objects blindly reacting upon one another.

Still even if they do it blindly, it is men and women who make history. Were it not for that there would be no hope of liberation. The rule of necessity would be permanent and freedom would not only be unattainable but also unintelligible.

Libertarian socialism starts from this simple but profound truth. People make their own history. Therefore oppression which has so far been the predominant theme of history is not a natural principle. And it is not a supernatural one either. What rules and oppresses one person is always another person. Of course it is in the interest of all oppressors to justify their actions on the basis of immutable natural laws or to disguise them as the actions of impersonal forces (Gods, nature, the market, machines and so on). But these forces by virtue of their very impersonality are neutral. The winds do not oppress, lack of shelter does. Machines do not go out of their way to injure or to stultify life, the ones who own them do. Oppression then is not inevitable, the world is not unchangeable because quite literally the world is what we make it.

Why?

Because the world for us is not so much the physical reality that surround us but its significance for us. By virtue of being given to us all things are given to us as situationalized objects. We do not see abstract trees littering the landscape but this or that tree, close or far away, blocking our view or giving us pleasure, caught in a glimpse or observed leisurely etc. Thus while it may be impossible to actually move mountains through sheer faith it is quite possible to change the situation within which they are seen. And that for us amounts to the same thing. Situations can be altered radically – the world can be turned upside down. But can it be turned upside down just by closing our eyes? Is that what we are saying? Obviously not, since when we close our eyes we know perfectly well that the world has remained the way it was. We know, in other words, that we have closed our eyes. If we try to deceive ourselves and start walking with our eyes shut the pain of bumping into things will rudely expose our deception. Hence our ability to change the world and our inability to do so purely through contemplation.

The originality of the Marxian idea is to be found in its simultaneous recognition of the creativity of the human subject and the power of circumstances. As against those idealists who would reduce people to thought-objects Marx asserted the irreducible concreteness of human life. Human beings suffer and this suffering is unique to every person. It establishes irrevocably the reality of each individual and resists the attempt to drown individual experiences in the totalizing movement of history. In the sense that Marx emphasizes the materiality – the “sensuousness” – of the subject he is a materialist.

Nevertheless the word “materialist” is misleading. It hides the originality to which we have already alluded, namely, the attempt by Marx to go beyond both idealism and materialism. In his “Theses on Feurbach” and again in “The Holy Family” he makes it quite clear that he rejects “scientific” materialism. The materialists of the 18th century, with their mechanistic view of the subject as a passive receptor of data emanating from objects, failed to grasp the self-creative character of the human subject. Insofar as materialism liberated its adherents from the dreadful mythology of religion it was progressive: it expressed the experience of those who denied comfort and luxury yet knew all too well that the material world was far from being an illusion. As a partial truth therefore, materialism had its function to perform. As the truth, however, it turned itself into a mythology. True, “Materialism is indisputably the only myth that suits revolutionary requirements” (J-P Sartre “Materialism & Revolution”) but it remains a myth and under certain circumstances a dangerous one.

These abstract considerations have very practical consequences. Marx was the first to point out that “The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator himself needs educating” (Theses on Feurbach III).

Why then has Marxism come to be associated with a doctrine that proclaims the overwhelming importance of objective circumstances? In part through propaganda. Capitalism being mechanistic in its practice is well suited to denounce opposing theories as mechanistic. Having made freedom precious by denying it it finds it useful to attribute its own sins to the doctrines of others. Still its task would have proved far harder than it has if Marxists had not been so anxious to justify their critics.

When Marx said in *The German Ideology* that “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” he does not seem to have realized the extent to which this applied to him too.

Even less did his followers. But Marx was quite adamant about this: “circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances” and “Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge ... a period of transformation by its own consciousness” (Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*). Certainly as Marx himself demonstrated so brilliantly we cannot judge the actions of the bourgeoisie by what the bourgeoisie thinks of them, or for that matter, by what the proletariat thinks of them. Are Marxists exempt from historical conditioning?

It would appear that they are not. The materialist conception of history applies to Marx just as much as it applies to Guizot and if it is correct it could only be proven so by the historical limitations of its discoverer. The problem is that the ideas of the ruling class are dominant precisely to the extent that they are universal. It follows that the most profound expressions of the ruling class – those ideas that are most closely associated with its character – will seem the most harmless and perhaps even beneficial. That is what allows them to become dominant. There is therefore a constant danger that revolutionary thought will become infiltrated with counter-revolutionary concepts absorbed from the surrounding milieu, a process that is facilitated by the alienation which the revolutionary, no less than the average worker, is afflicted with. It is only after these concepts have been re-exteriorized through praxis that they can be identified for what they are. Revolutionaries will then recognize that their activities have reproduced, albeit in a different form, the pre-revolutionary conditions that they were trying so hard to eradicate. By that time, however, it is quite possible that the original revolutionaries will have become imprisoned in the circumstances of their own acts. It is then up to other revolutionaries to learn from the lessons of those who came before them and avoid their mistakes.

It is in this peculiar situation that we find ourselves today. We realize now that starting with the later Engels (and to a smaller extent with Marx himself) the fine balance between idealism and materialism, subjectivity and objectivity, was upset. The original synthesis, delicate because it was a purely theoretical concept, disintegrated when the attempt was made to turn it into a practical, revolutionary doctrine. Whereas the original balance meant that a distinction was made between economic conditions and the meaning assigned to them by the human agent, the new ideology reduced all human acts to their economic foundation.

From this disintegration two different but ultimately related movements were spawned: in Western Europe, Social Democracy and in Russia, Leninism. Both viewed “men as the products of circumstances and upbringing”. The difference was that in Germany circumstances seemed to be changing in the right direction without too much effort while in Russia they were changing erratically and offered the opportunity for intervention. In Germany Marxism developed into an evolutionist doctrine modeled on Darwin’s theory and in Russia it developed into the doctrine of vanguardist revolution.

For a crucial period of time, these two movements together, comprised the world total of Marxist praxis. There was of course Rosa Luxembour, who opposed both. However not only did she die before she had a chance to make a significant impact on the European revolutionary movement but there is also some indication that prior to her death she was on the verge of changing her attitude towards the Bolsheviks. (See Lukacs’ “Critical Observations on Rosa Luxembour’s ‘Critique of the Russian Revolution’”. Lukacs has to be read with caution since his admiration of Luxembour was eclipsed by his worship of Lenin. Nevertheless his suggestion that Luxembour was changing her views is plausible. With the success of the revolution even anarcho-syndicalists went over to the Bolsheviks.)

What this meant was that Marxism had succumbed to that ideological trend which Edmund Husserl has called the “naturalization of consciousness”: the view that consciousness is caused by physical objects. This and the related “naturalization of ideas” inevitably led to the belief that human behaviour could be reduced to the rigid and “exact” laws of nature. Previously the world was as God had intended it to be. The new ruling class however had no place for a deity so it replaced Him with nature, a secular God. The laws that govern billiard balls were thus extended to cover relations between human beings proving once again that things could not be other than they were.

Husserl had the insight to point out that this attitude was at the heart of what he called the “crisis of European man”. In progressively reducing the embarrassing contribution of the subjective to experience, the naturalist replaced the “life-world” (the world of actual, human experience) with a lifeless, abstract world composed of mathematical relationships. This extreme objectivism however ultimately rested on a subjective, ideal foundation. The attempt to naturalize consciousness and ideas is therefore self-defeating since it presupposes precisely the opposite of what it seeks to establish, namely, that consciousness and ideas, rather than being the products of a reaction between physical entities (physical sense data impinging on a physical receptor, the brain) are the basis of all experience. It is only after the world is presupposed to be governed by natural laws that such laws can be discovered. The presupposition itself cannot be discovered by the same method.

The spiritual barrenness of the Western world and the triumph of irrationalism were according to the idealist Husserl reflections of the poverty of naturalist thought. Science was able to provide a cure for diseases of the body but found itself incapable of curing the Western soul since it itself was a symptom of the disease. “In our vital need — so we are told — this science has nothing to say to us. It excludes in principle precisely the questions which man, given in our unhappy times (the mid-1930’s) to the most portentous upheavals, finds the most burning: questions of the meaning or meaninglessness of the whole of this human existence”. (*Crisis p.6*) As a solution Husserl attempts to construct a science of the “life-world”. Not accidentally, some passages in this project read like paraphrases of Marx. Whereas Marx tied his hopes to radical action, Husserl believed in radical contemplation. Moreover, unlike Marx, he attributed the actual decay of Western civilization to the decay of thought; whereas for Marx the relation was the opposite.

Sartre, another phenomenologist, explicitly identifies naturalism as a form of bourgeois thought. In his early writings this identification was intuitive. Sartre did not become a Marxist till after the war but for a long time before that he regarded the bourgeoisie with revulsion. This revulsion made him allergic to all manifestations of bourgeois thought, the most hateful of which was the spirit of “seriousness” with which the “salauds” assured themselves of their own necessity. “Imbeciles”, he writes in *Nausea*, “they make laws, they write popular novels, they get married, they are fools enough to have children. And all this time, great vague nature has slipped into their city ... and they don’t see it, they imagine it to be outside, twenty miles from the city. I see this nature ... I know that its obedience is idleness, I know that it has no laws: what they take for constancy is only habit, and it can change tomorrow.” Why? Because human beings are not what they are the way stones are. A pebble cannot be anything other than a pebble. Its progression from boulder to pebble to sand is totally determined by laws exterior to it. Not only that but its disintegration only has meaning to a human observer. The pebble is the slave of fate. By contrast the life of a human being becomes frozen into fate only at the

moment of death. At that point all that one has done in one's life becomes all that one could have done. Before that point arrives however it is impossible to reduce one's life to a resultant of conflicting natural forces the way one can do for the path followed by a billiard ball. One may have no choice but to become a thief, for example, but the juncture of circumstances that force this decision on one must first acquire a pressing significance for oneself. The poor state of the economy and my persistent need for food and shelter are of themselves only abstract principles. Without the meaning I attribute to them they can never determine anything. It is in fact only in the light of my decision that they take on the character of determining circumstances. If I was caught and asked why I "turned to a life of crime" I could reply that my poverty was intolerable and that I could foresee no way to alleviate it other than through robbery. Poverty and lack of work would thus have acquired meaning through my thievery and not the other way round. And that is what distinguishes us fundamentally from billiard balls. The laws of nature determine the outcome of a collision between two balls a hundred years from now, whereas for specific human beings "prediction" must always be in the form of hindsight. That is why we are forever saying "I should have known" and always failing to know.

We understand then that by the simple virtue of being human we are in possession of the freedom to alter that very world which is constantly altering us. This freedom is what makes revolution possible and at the same time denies any guarantee for its success. Naturalism is an indirect attempt to relinquish this troublesome freedom, a self-deception aimed at hiding the utter lack of necessity in the way we behave.

Such a deception, tempting as it is under the happiest of circumstances, is even more tempting in a world where human beings do actually experience each other as objects. The naturalization of consciousness is preceded by the fossilization of everyday life: the two perpetuate each other. Revolt too can be naturalized: it occurs as a predictable reaction to the fetishization of the objective, to which is opposed the fetishization of the subjective — "decadent" self-indulgence in everyday life and in art, romantic idealism in popular philosophy. Either that or in the case of Leninism classical materialism is taken to the extreme. The hippie and the Bolshevik might at first glance appear to be the antithesis of each other but they have one thing in common which brands both (ultimately) as conformists: the tendency to fetishize, the "religious" outlook. One can always of course distinguish between extreme subjectivism and extreme objectivism, solipsism and naturalism, but in practice they are merely components of a single, stable complex.

Nevertheless, of this complex what concerns us most is the authoritarian component. Disorder can in time correct itself, if only because it leaves individuals the freedom to reject it. Authoritarianism, on the contrary, only stabilizes itself with time. Libertarian socialism is defined first and foremost by the negation of political authoritarianism and theoretical determinism. It is this negation which is announced in the First Thesis on Feurbach. In the first thesis however this negation is purely "contemplative". The actual negation had to await the dissolution of classical Marxism itself.

If I have gone out of my way to discuss naturalism it is because of its disastrous effect on Marxism. We simply have to acknowledge that the principal bourgeois ideology during the early years of Marxism was not so much political liberalism — which even then was well on the way to exposing itself as a deception — but faith in the natural sciences and their objectivism. It was precisely because this faith was shared by all that we have to consider it the principal ideology of capitalism. It was this universality that gave it its effectiveness. And if today there is such a thing as libertarian Marxism it is because naturalized Marxism was a catastrophe that cannot be

forgotten. For us this failure is the equivalent of the Holocaust in Jewish tradition, For better or for worse the conception of libertarian Marxism issues from the negation and transcendence of classical Marxism.

In the first Thesis on Feuerbach, Marx had lamented that the active side of sensuous activity, the subjective side of human experience, had been developed by idealism rather than materialism. The aim of Marx's own brand of "materialism" was, as we have noted already, to go beyond the limitations of both traditional materialism and idealism. Almost to this day however what Marx wrote in the first thesis remains true: the subjectivity of human experience has had to be championed not by Marxists— who have all along been bent on denying it — but by idealist philosophers like Husserl. So that when the Western world was plunged into a deep spiritual crisis, Marxism automatically excluded itself from providing any answers. How could it? From the perspective of a scientific materialist the crisis did not exist: diseases of the soul show themselves only to those who believe in souls and the communists only believed in matter. So the fascists took over and shot the communists.

Could it have been any different? I think not. Men make their own history: Marxists could have chosen to be libertarians from the beginning. But men make history under the power of circumstances and near the end of the last century the circumstances were more conducive to the brand of socialism they ultimately produced than to the kind we would like to see. Indeed, our being libertarians has a lot to do with the authoritarianism of our socialist predecessors. If they hadn't made a mess of things they would be less anxious to avoid their mistakes, the effects of which form the circumstances under which we make our own history.

For the early Marxists, materialism represented an ideology which the bourgeoisie had successfully used against the ancient regime, and which the Marxists, with some minor modifications, would use against the bourgeoisies. Plekhanov ("the father of Russian Marxism"), for example, viewed Marxism as "contemporary materialism". What he and other Marxists did not realize was that it was not enough to turn bourgeois thought against the class that had given rise to it. A genuinely socialist theory could only arise out of the active dissolution of bourgeois materialism. To merely "appropriate" the old thought would only lead to a perpetuation of the old system. Similarly it was not enough to take over state power. The objective was to smash it and build something different.

Now Marxism as Marx had conceived it did make a serious attempt to transcend the shallow materialism inherited from the Enlightenment. The problem was that to the degree that Marxism was anti-bourgeois (and not just anti-aristocratic i.e. anti-idealist) it was also idealist. A critique of bourgeois thought and reality would inevitably have to counterpose some form of subjectivism ("idealism") against bourgeois materialism. The critique of bourgeois political economy, for example, is a critique: precisely because, not satisfied with examining the appearance of economic phenomena, it directs its attention to the thoroughly subjective lives of those responsible for these phenomena. Marx's critique demonstrated that underneath such objective terms as "value", "commodity" and "labour costs" lay a world of human suffering towards which it was impossible to adopt a neutral position. Indeed if Marx's critique achieved anything it was the demystification of "objectivity".

But how could this theoretical critique be translated into a program of action? How could one attack bourgeois materialism when the idealism of the ancient regime was still a concrete ideological force? This problem is simply the theoretical counterpart of a very practical question: what to do when capitalism, a hateful system, is consolidating itself against feudalism, an even

more hateful system. If, as indeed seemed the case, socialism was not possible without a preparatory period of capitalism, then the correct strategy was to align oneself with the bourgeoisie in those countries where it was a revolutionary class and oppose it wherever it had consolidated itself.

But it did not work out that way. Even in those countries where the bourgeoisie was no longer threatened with a restoration of the system it had overthrown, bourgeois ideology still had a universal, revolutionary ring to it. This was especially true of those theories and values which were not overtly political. These could stay “undercover” longer than theories that could be linked directly to the new ruling class. In consequence it was not easy for revolutionaries to detect their real enemies. What could be more radical, in the face of a declining and therefore exceptionally embittered autocracy, than to affirm scientific rationalism, the theory of a new age? What could be more disreputable than the atheist belief in progress at a time when for reactionaries, civilization was disappearing beneath the waves? But that which is disreputable in a society is precisely what a revolutionary will go out of his/her way to promote.

So the revolutionaries fooled themselves. They accomplished in fact what bourgeois thought left to itself would never have done: the destruction of those humanist “prejudices” that were left over from the feudal era. Naturalist Marxism with its endless vituperation against the subjective and the “unscientific” lent the bourgeoisie a valuable weapon against its early enemies. If then Marxism, through German Social Democracy, eventually reconciled itself with that very society it had earlier vowed to overthrow, this was only natural, since this Marxism had been nothing more than the most radical form of bourgeois ideology: Marxists, so to speak, had merely played the part of Janissaries, shock troops preparing the way for the bourgeois onslaught ... All they asked, these Social Democrats, was that the workers not starve, a demand which capitalists eventually understood to be in their interest to accept. Once that was settled, the subsistence wage came to include not only the cost of perpetuating the physical power of the labourer but also his loyalty. The capitalists simply revised their accounts. Personally perhaps they still despised the workers and they increased wages only grudgingly. Still they increased them because romantic hatred could no more than romantic love compete with the profit motive. Starting with this modification the early and unstable form of capitalism evolved towards an equilibrium. A symbiotic relationship was set up between socialists and reactionaries: the former provided the motive power behind a set of stabilizing reforms, the latter supplied traction by putting up resistance.

In Russia this same naturalist Marxism encountered different conditions and consequently developed differently. In Western Europe, Marxism encountered a nascent and vigorous capitalism within which it was eventually integrated. In Russia, as the nihilist Tkachev pointed out, revolution was possible only as long as Russia was still a backward country. In other words revolution in Russia was possible precisely because there was no capitalism to speak of. Hence there was never any question of Marxism integrating itself into the structure that preceded it. Finding no capitalism within which to lose itself Russian Marxism had to invent something like it.

One ought to remember here that in Russia capitalism started too late to develop in the same way that it had developed in England and France. Had it attempted to take the latter’s example it would have quickly fallen prey to foreign capital in much the same fashion as for example Latin America. The solution was supplied by the Bolsheviks: primitive accumulation under forced conditions. Superexploitation of Russian labour and autarchic economic development took the place of foreign investment and allowed the Soviet Union to become an independent industrial power.

In both cases Marxism objectified those tendencies it had internalized earlier. In the West it helped to develop the system it was born into. In Russia where Marxism was an import it recreated in a distorted form the Western milieu on which it had been originally reared.

Despite its authoritarianism the USSR is not a capitalist state. Neither was Lenin an “objective” agent of capitalism. Indulgence in such simple-minded schematism is appropriate to Stalinists not libertarian socialists. Bolshevism is imbued through and through with bourgeois ideology but nevertheless it remains a revolutionary ideology. To transcend it, rather than just negate it, we have to historically situate it without overlooking its uniqueness. Instead of doing this libertarian thought has for the most part been preoccupied with villifying it.

This practice more often than not ends in absurdity. It is for example fashionable today to make oneself respectable by claiming to be a “pure” Marxist. Pure Marxism can only exist however if Marxism is reduced to an abstract ideal. If in fact the villains by virtue of their villainy automatically excommunicated themselves as Marxists, then we have to admit of long that if the Nazis had been *real* Germans they would have stopped being Nazis.

If we give up trying to be respectable however we will view Leninism as the first attempt to realize Marxism. It failed. If there were any doubts about this while Lenin was alive they were dispelled by his successor. But without this failure, without Stalin, Marxism would not have grown up, would have effectively remained unaware of its deep neurosis. It is indeed tragic that this neurosis had to develop into murderous lunacy before it could be purged. The crimes of the past however can only be expiated by the good deeds of the future. One cannot simply dissociate oneself from them through a mere word. To say “I am a libertarian” is to take upon oneself the responsibility of diminishing the horrors of the past. In the same way to say that you are an adult is to admit that once you were an adolescent trying to become an adult. You may have made serious errors but without them you would not have grown up. “It is only those who do nothing who make no mistakes”, said Kropotkin and he was an anarchist.

Unless we want all our heroes to be martyrs we have to learn that the world will not be changed without getting a few hands dirtied. Not enough ruthlessness and disorganization can betray a revolution just as much as too much ruthlessness and authoritarianism. We should give Makno, the Kronstadt sailors, the Spanish anarchists, the French students and all other libertarians their due and then we should note that they *failed*. To become a symbol is not enough. As it is we have enough saints and martyrs to fill a liturgical calendar. Of course there is glamour in tragic failure but only those who survive can appreciate it. For too long now libertarianism has been an outlet for those who can’t accept the existing order but who at the same time can’t be bothered with doing anything about it. They find in libertarianism a dream of unmatched purity which they take care to define in such a way as to make it unattainable (See “Why the Leninists Will Win” elsewhere in this issue). Then lo and behold, quietism becomes revolutionary. It is not at all surprising in fact that the various Leninist sects are still able to attract recruits. Anybody serious about radical social change can’t help but notice that while anarchists have beautiful sentiments Bolsheviks are more likely to do something about it.

Which brings us back to that synthesis of object and subject that has been prominent throughout these reflections. Through this synthesis revolutionary socialism attempted for the first time to overcome the one-sidedness of materialism while at the same time avoiding the perils of romantic idealism. It should be recognized that libertarian socialism must start from this synthesis. One-sidedness in whatever form it occurs destroys the whole project. It is obviously a difficult error to avoid — in view of the Bolshevik experiment it is very easy to say that one cannot be too

subjective — but then “the revolution is not a tea-party”. Vanguardism ultimately oppresses the working class. Lack of leadership leaves it stranded in oppression. Bureaucratism stifles revolutionary tendencies. Pure spontaneism dissipates them. Rigid centralization is authoritarian. Lack of coordination and discipline is ineffective.

No movement can consider itself socialist that does not put in practice the synthesis that has eluded Marxism since that first thesis. Bolshevism failed by succeeding. Anarchism failed by failing. We'll see what we can do.

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