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Review: A contribution to the Critique of Marx

Bob Dent

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A CONTRIBUTION TO THE CRITIQUE OF MARX by John Crump
(published jointly by Social Revolution/London, c/o 83 Gregory
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The aim of this pamphlet is to trace a connecting line of thought from Marx and Engels to Leninist state capitalism. In this, John Crump succeeds. At least in so far as success is to find quotations and examples from Marx and Engels' writings paralleled in Lenin. So here we have a stick with which to beat the non-Leninist Marxists. (For Marxist-Leninists the argument that Lenin follows Marx is of course already accepted, but with a different interpretation.)

But herein lies my first criticism. The pamphlet is very much in the trend of Marxist exegesis: the "what-Marx-really said/meant" school. My usual response is 'so what?'. The question applies to this pamphlet and I don't think it is answered adequately.

The minor these is more interesting though, unfortunately, not developed in terms of its relevance to us today. John Crump argues that, unlike Lenin Marx did have a view of communism which was

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not state capitalist. So how come much of Marx's writings lend weight to the state capitalist school? This anomaly is attributed to the fact that Marx was an 'activist' eager to 'get involved'. As he lived for the most part through a non-revolutionary situation, he was obliged to water down his communism to make his ideas more relevant to the actual on-going (capitalist) struggles of the day. The alternative was to remain 'pure' in theory, but impotent in the sense of shying away from day-to-day practice (a la SPBG, a party which, until recently counted the author of this pamphlet among its members). John Crump asserts that the dilemma is still with us today and will not be resolved until the working class gets on the move and develops a communist consciousness.

Here I begin to part company over the view of communist consciousness (not explained — when is it ever? — but implicit throughout). Many times in this short pamphlet there are references to the 'correct' theory of communism, and Marx is criticised for deviating from this. But what is this 'correct theory'? Or, to bring out my point more clearly, whose 'correct theory'? To me, there is something false about a dilemma which counterpoises on the one hand theoretical purity and on the other the theoretically murky areas of activity. It is no use us bemoaning the fact that Marx, Lenin, the working class, or whoever are deviating from 'the correct theory'. The task of revolutionaries (whatever that means!) is to observe and learn from what is already going on in society, what is already revolutionary, and to participate with others in those activities in which we find value. (I know this is begging lots of questions, but for the time being, as they say in Yorkshire — 'nuf said!)