

What is Orthodoxy?

Sidewinder

2009

A spectre is haunting the Left, the spectre of orthodox Marxism. In order to fully exorcise this pernicious spirit it is necessary to first understand its true nature. The orthodox interpretation of Marxism arose after Marx's death through the work of Engels and the founders of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), most significantly, Karl Kautsky

Kautsky eventually became the undisputed "Pope" of the orthodox interpretation of Marxism within the SPD, after the excommunication of the reformist heresy of Eduard Bernstein. Orthodoxy (literally: right thinking) discovers its formulations through the process of opposing the first heresy that threatens its continued existence. By this process, orthodoxy to a degree preserves, like the negative image of a key pressed into wax, the imprint of the heresy or heresies it originally defined itself against, long after those heresies have passed out of existence and been forgotten. Often then, the deconstruction of an orthodoxy most fruitfully begins with the study of the heresy it suppressed. However, for the purposes of brevity, we will skip the examination of Bernstein's revisionism and move directly to outlining the core framework of orthodoxy itself.

Reduced to its most basic framework, we can characterise orthodoxy as having three core pillars and a fourth, compensatory element. The three core pillars remain relatively constant in all the different branchings off the orthodox tree, but the fourth compensatory element changes and, as such, constitutes the main difference between the different branches. If we use the metaphor of a restaurant table on an uneven dining terrace, the fourth element is the folded beer mat that is placed underneath the shortest leg to bridge the gap and damp down the instability of the rocking table. Of course, if a table has only three legs, this problem does not arise, similarly, the three core theoretical pillars of orthodoxy are made unstable by the fourth leg of the table - the contingent reality of the situation of the day, resting on the uneven rocky terrace of history.

The three core pillars are **1) Economism**, **2) Scientism** and **3) False consciousness**.

Economism or economic determinism is a hard version of the base/superstructure interpretation of Marxism, that is, this (in)famous passage from *The Poverty of Philosophy* -

"Social relations are closely bound up with productive forces. In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing the way of earning their living, they change all their social relations. The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist."

Is read as meaning "social relations are *determined* by productive forces"¹. This notion that social relations in general and the relations of production in particular, are determined by the forces of production, can lead in the extreme case, to technological determinism. That is, that technological advance revolutionises the forces of production, which in turn revolutionises society. This kind of thinking is more widespread than Marxism or the Left, and has persistent appeal amongst the skilled scientific, technical and engineering strata of capitalist society. Witness the number of plant biologists who still seem to think that one more increase in crop yields will banish world hunger and poverty, or the "net nerd" enthusiasts who believe that the internet is going to magic humanity into a new age of digital freedom. It is also the root of a peculiar blindness which leads the sufferer to miss the fact that technology is neither politically or socially neutral, but determined by the struggles and contradictions of our society.

Scientism is the unshakeable conviction that Marxism is more than a theory, it is a science of society and the "laws of motion" of capitalist society, in an analogous fashion to engineering science being the science of engines and the laws of motion that govern them. The most obvious thing that must be pointed out about this deeply held conviction that Marxism is a science, is that it is deeply unscientific. Popper's criticism of orthodox Marxism that it's belief system had more in common with a religion than a science, is not entirely without merit. The other aspect of Marxism as the science of the laws of motion of capitalist society including its inner contradictions, especially the so-called "Law of the Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall", combined with economism, leads to historicism. Historicism is the idea that there is a direction to history, that society is progressing towards a particular goal. It was a common idea in the 19th century, linked to ideas of big-P Progress, going back to the Enlightenment. It was also part of the teleological (tr: goal-directed) schema of Hegel, Marx's philosophical mentor. However, Kropotkin is another example of how hard old revolutionaries find it to resist the temptations of the "scientific inevitability" of the triumph of the revolution, even without a background in German Idealist philosophy. Historicism and a belief in the "objective" economic laws of development, tend to lead to the downplaying of class struggle as an active force in making history. At first sight, this may seem a surprising feature of any kind of Marxism, given that "all history is the history of class struggle" is one of Marx's more well-known quotes², but it is a definite tendency of orthodox Marxism.

The third pillar of orthodoxy is the notion of **false consciousness**. Again for the sake of brevity, we will skirt around a full treatment of Marx's notion of ideology and class consciousness, save in noting that he made a distinction between class in itself (*an sich*) and class for itself (*für sich*), the latter concept being that of a body of people united by a conscious recognition of their common interests as a class and their common interest in overcoming capitalist relations. It was also clear that the class consciousness associated with class for itself was a precursor for revolution. Combined with historicist notions that the "objective laws" of capitalist development are headed inevitably towards revolution and is building it's own grave diggers in the proletariat, the

¹ At this stage it should be pointed out that the tradition is when critiquing a certain reading of Marx, to counter perceived misreadings by other, contrasting quotes from Marx. We are not going to do this here, for the sake of brevity let's just take it as read that the orthodox reading of Marx is not the only one available.

² Like most popular quotes, this isn't entirely accurate. The actual phrase (at the beginning of the Communist Manifesto) is "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Die Geschichte aller bisherigen Gesellschaft ist die Geschichte von Klassenkämpfen). But, whatever, see previous note.

lack of such a wide-spread, consistent revolutionary class consciousness amongst actual workers of the day creates a problem. This is a classic is/ought question. Why does the consciousness the workers *ought* to have differ so much from the one they actually *do* have? False consciousness is the solution to this problem. The workers development of the scientifically-determined "proper" consciousness is being blocked by an obstacle - a false consciousness that is taking up the room that the correct consciousness should be developing within. Of course this solution is itself a riddle - what are the origins of this usurping false consciousness and how is the correct consciousness to be restored to its rightful place?

Thus the three core pillars of orthodoxy, destabilised by an inconvenient reality, require a **fourth, bridging element** - a fix to the false consciousness riddle, to bridge the gap between *what is* and *what ought to be*.

In the SPD of Kautsky, the solution to the riddle of false consciousness was found in a reading of Marx on ideology and the famous fetishism of commodities, that inferred that the social relations of market exchange in capitalism separated the sphere of production from the sphere of exchange, thus hiding the reality of social production beneath the appearance of private economic intercourse, mystifying the overall social reality from the ordinary worker, re-invented as consumer. In Kautsky's view, only bourgeois specialists with the education and time to study the new social science of Marxism could bring the proper consciousness back to the workers, from the outside as it were. The **mass membership parliamentary party** was the proper pedagogic vehicle for "scientific" specialists, such as himself, to school the workers in the correct way of viewing the world and developing their capabilities while waiting patiently for "the objective conditions to be ripe" for the glorious day. In the meantime the worker should dutifully pay party and union subs, study hard, support the party's social clubs, vote for the party at the elections and, above all, not do anything rash until their leaders told them the time was right and what their new orders were.

Already within German socialdemocracy there were some dissenting voices who, while rejecting the Bernsteinian revisionist heresies, were growing less convinced that this strategy of "actionless waiting" was the correct response to the requirements of the political struggles of the day. Let's focus on the two most well-known - **Rosa Luxemburg** and **Antonie Pannekoek** (who was the originator of the "actionless waiting" tag for the Kautsky strategy). Both of their challenges were prompted by the upsurge of syndicalist unrest that followed the Ruhr Miners strike and Russian Revolution of 1905, the Charter of Amiens in France and so on. Above all, how to react to the popular syndicalist slogan of the General Strike (or Massenstreik as it was termed in German). The divisions that emerged from the debate that raged over the Massenstreik within the SPD in 1906 were later deepened by the European crisis that culminated in WW1.

The spectre of a spontaneous working class uprising naturally fills the bourgeoisie with existential terror. Good bourgeois that he was, Kautsky had a visceral horror of working class spontaneity. Consequently he was violently opposed to the idea of the General Strike, particularly as the onset of a proletarian uprising and revolution.

Luxemburg had a more instinctive impulse to move part-way towards granting the working class some spontaneous agency, albeit one that would still be ultimately reliant on the leadership of the Marxist party in order to finish the job worker's spontaneous action had started. But, in face of the rising inter-imperialist European crisis, Luxemburg was led to re-examine Marx's work on accumulation and reproduction of capital and actually revise it in order to come up with a theory of Imperialism. To this degree, Luxemburg not only questioned the parliamentarism and

anti-spontaneism of Kautskyite orthodoxy, but actually had the temerity to begin undermining the core orthodox principal of Marxism as an infallible and complete "science". Despite the undoubted nerve it took to take this step (particularly as a woman in a thoroughly unreconstructed male-dominated movement), Luxemburg did not stretch to breaking with the SPD until she was forced out, the attempts to take the initiative in the chaos of defeat, revolution and counter-revolution, were too little and too late. Despite her initial critical noises about the direction Lenin and the Bolsheviks were taking, she did not have enough time to establish a branching of orthodoxy distinct from Leninism or Kautskyism. Her legacy is also compromised by the opinion of many non-orthodox theorists that her unique theoretical contribution to Marxism - *The Accumulation of Capital*, is based on an underconsumptionist argument that is basically wrong.

Antonie Pannekoek, however, went further than Luxemburg in breaking from Kautskyism. Not only did he support spontaneous workers actions such as wildcat strikes and the general strike, but he grew increasingly critical of the role of the SPD in opposing and putting down worker's strikes. Eventually this lead him to see the SPD and their tame unions, as being a barrier to class self-activity and hence their development of revolutionary class consciousness. In Pannekoek and his fellow Council Communists, the Kautskyist answer to the riddle of false consciousness is inverted. Here it is the outside bourgeois "revolutionary specialists" who are the source, not of the correct consciousness, but the false consciousness. The solution to the problem of false consciousness then, the fourth element, is the politically independent, rank and file controlled worker's organisations aiming to build **worker's councils** - the bodies that will be the new agency of class power and the transformation of society. Of course this is in radical opposition to both Kautskyite orthodox socialdemocracy and it' Leninist offshoot both, but it still retains the three basic pillars of orthodoxy - economism, scientism and false consciousness - only the fourth, bridging element has changed. The mass parliamentary party has been replaced by the rank and file workers networks and the workers councils.

The case of **Lenin** is probably more familiar to readers than the others, and has been dealt with extensively elsewhere. Suffice it to say that Lenin was the last person to break with Kautskyist orthodoxy and was at a loss to explain the "betrayal" of his hero at the outbreak of WW1. Lenin's full acceptance of the Kautskyist notion that worker's could not transcend "trade union consciousness" without the intervention of bourgeois intellectuals bringing them the proper consciousness from outside, as stated in "*What is to be done?*" has been remarked upon many times before. In this context we should see that Lenin's modification of the fourth element from mass parliamentary party to a covert, compact **vanguard party** of professional revolutionaries was simply a tactical adaptation to the changed conditions of Russia - i.e. relative backwardness and absolutist repression - as was explicitly stated as such. Hence why Lenin is incapable of explaining Kautsky's "betrayal" on any factor other than the subjective one - a "failure of leadership". Here, ultimately, lies the progression of Leninism and it's remaining descendants, principally Trotskyism, from the mass party tactic. Now the fourth, bridging or substitutive element is a voluntarist subjectivism. For the Leninist or Trotskyist, all problems of revolution can be reduced to "the leadership question". In the face of actual situations which force orthodox Marxists to remember that they are supposed to be revolutionaries, the subjective element, completely eradicated from the orthodox universe by its "objective laws", must, like Freud's return of the repressed, return even stronger and yet not related to any materialist analysis of consciousness itself, as an autonomous agent.

The final actor in our brief survey of post-Kautskyist orthodoxy is **Amadeo Bordiga**. His case is a little different from Luxemburg, Pannekoek or Lenin, as he was less directly influenced by German socialdemocracy, Italian socialism having its own separate tradition going back to the Italian wing of the First International. Bordiga is often called "more Leninist than Lenin", however, the anti-democratic extremism of Bordigism conceals a subtle but important difference. For Bordiga it is not the party, whether mass or vanguard, that is the bridging element, but **the programme** itself. The programme is the solution to the problem of false consciousness. The development of the correct revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat is carried out by its most conscious minority who formulate the revolutionary programme. Once formed, the programme then represents the answer to everything. It **is** the correct revolutionary consciousness, written down in a proper scientific manner. Hence calls for democracy within the party or in the relationship between the party and the rest of the class can only be confusionist, and thus, objectively counter-revolutionary. Bordiga himself was from working class origins but had educated himself and worked his way into a career as an agricultural engineer. To him notions such as the Kautsky/Lenin thesis that the working class were reliant on outside forces to intermediate scientific knowledge were self-evident nonsense. Still and all, he held to the core notions of economism (if anything he was the most deterministic of all), scientism (hence the disdain for democracy) and false consciousness (any deviation from the programme). In many ways, although an outsider compared to the SPD mainstream that formed Luxemburg, Pannekoek and Lenin, Bordiga was the most orthodox of them all.

In the post-war period, all of the dissidents from the "official" communist movement of the Comintern linked parties, whether from Trotskyist, Council Communist or Bordigist origins remained trapped within the orthodox framework, despite their different bridging solutions and attempts to locate the origins of the failure of the Russian Revolution. Attempts to escape from rigid orthodoxy by going back to early dissidents like Lukács and the re-discovery of the writings of the early Marx on alienation, tended to lose themselves ineffectively in abstruse philosophy or simply end up falling back onto one or other of the micro-tendencies of the orthodox ultra-left. The **Situationists**, in the heady environment of the wave of struggles of the late 60s, were the first to raise the flag for a post-orthodox Marxism with their manifesto in which they rejected both economism and scientism. However, their escape was incomplete, entranced as they were by the false consciousness problem. Unable to fully recognise the objectivist origins of this concept or overcome it on anything other than with a superficial, idealist critique that was not itself able to overcome the apparent separation of circulation and production, they ended up falling back into the orthodox councillist politics of **Socialisme ou Barbarie**, albeit that they had formally broken their organisational ties some time before. Similarly a lot of the so-called "New Left" of the late 60s was clouded with variants of Maoism or Guevarism, which, as an alternative to orthodoxy, was as much an advance as giving up Poker for Snap.

However, in Italy things were stirring. With the rise of the *operaisti*, Marxists at last encountered a new formulation that went beyond the cage-like framework of orthodoxy. The concept of class composition finally transcended the is/ought problem of false consciousness, economism was overturned with a renewed emphasis on class struggle as the motor of capitalist development, not some transcendent "objective laws of motion". Technology was no longer a neutral power, but a weapon deployed in the class war by bosses against workers, but one which could harm the wielder as well as the target and was not immune from being taken off the bosses and turned back against them. Naturally these developments were met with howls or protest from

the orthodox faithful, Stalinist, Trotskyist and ultra-left alike, and indeed they still are. But the requirements of brevity have already been sorely tested, even stretched beyond all recognition, so we must leave it there for now.

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