

Drawing a Balance Sheet on Marxism

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A major contribution of Marx to the socialist movement was his analysis of the structure and dynamics of the capitalist regime or social formation. The influence of Marx's social theory went beyond the self-avowed "Marxist" parties and intellectuals, and had an influence on the broader socialist movement which has always included a variety of different viewpoints and ideas about strategy and social change.

Looking at the long arc of history, Marx distinguishes various "modes of production" that have existed since the emergence of states and systems of class oppression and exploitation. The idea here is a kind of hypothesis about how we understand the dynamics of social struggles and changes. A "mode of production" is a social structure that governs production – the way the society is structured to make a living, producing the things that are needed in a society at a given time.

I follow G.D.H. Cole in interpreting Marx as a realist. In the realist approach to explanation of events and changes over time, two causal components are necessary. There is the course of events that provide the triggers for new events and changes. If a bridge collapses after a large truck has crossed it, it may be that rolling of this heavy truck over the bridge was the trigger that led to the collapse.

But a complete explanation always has a second component: the causal powers and structures of the agents and objects in which the change occurred. In this case we would look at the structural capacity of the bridge, the weight limits for that structure, and any recent defects.

The "mode of production" provides, for Marx, the structural component in explanations of social events and changes. Strikes, social movements, elections, military revolts, even religious movements, may contribute triggering events but these take place in a structural context. For Marx the "mode of production" is made up of two parts: the "social relations of production" and the "forces of production." In capitalism the "social relations of production" is the economic structure which generates certain inherent developmental tendencies. Central to the capitalist "social relations of production" are the capital/wage-labor relationship. Capital is not stuff or equipment but a social power relation between the capital-possessors and the proletarian class. Capital owners can go out into markets for factors of production and buy or rent whatever they need to run a business: hire workers, managers, and experts. They can buy or rent equipment, land, buildings. And then they can carry on, as their firm will own the commodities that are

produced by the workforce, and thus the revenue from their sale. Capital is also divided into competing firms.

These features generate characteristic “laws of motion” of capitalism, such as its tendency to constantly search for ways to reduce labor expenses per unit of output, its competitive drive for profit, and expansion of firms to survive in competition with other firms.

The proletarian class is a dispossessed class — dispossessed of means for its own livelihood, such as land to grow food. Thus workers are forced by circumstances to submit to the managerial autocracy of the firms, and are systematically stripped of their control over their own labor. Workers are forced to “alienate” (give up) their control over use of their own abilities to the employers. “Alienated labor” is thus a core part of class oppression.

Thus far, syndicalists and other libertarian socialists accept this part of Marx’s analysis.

Classes are seen as arising from the institutional power that dominating classes have over the immediate producers in social production — production of goods and services for each other. Marx was aware that class oppression is the basis for the ability of a dominating class to exploit labor. Profits arise out of this exploitation. Hence the whole capital accumulation process is built on a framework of oppression and exploitation.

However, this is where I think we need to point to a serious hole in the Marxist class theory of the early 1900s. Marxism focuses on the capital-possessing power as the sole basis of class oppression in capitalism. Thus Marxism did not predict or account for the growth of the bureaucratic control class which emerged as a major class with the growth of the state and huge corporations in the twentieth century.

“Bureaucratic control class” is my term for the class of middle managers, supervisors, and high end professionals who are part of the whole bureaucratic apparatus for controlling labor and the firm — managers, the “industrial engineers” who apply “scientific management” techniques, HR experts, corporate lawyers, and professional politicians, judges and prosecutors who play important roles in running the state for the benefit of the class regime. Since the billionaires do not usually interact directly with workers, class antagonism is experienced by workers in their dealings with the layers of the bureaucratic control class. But the institutional power of the bureaucratic control class is not based on ownership. As with the capitalists, the power of this class — their existence as a dominating class over workers — is based on an institutional structure that gives power in social production. But the power of the bureaucratic control class is not based on ownership but on the relative monopolization of decision-making authority (and forms of expertise directly related to the decision-making control) in social production and the state.

This hole in Marxism probably contributed to the failure to see how a bureaucratic managerialist conception of “building socialism” could simply empower some new mode of labor oppression based on the power of the bureaucratic control class.

Marxists sometimes counter the thesis of the bureaucratic control class by referring to the rather different theory of a so-called “Professional Managerial Class” advanced back in the 1970s by John and Barbara Ehrenreich. But the Ehrenreichs’ theory is different than the theory of the bureaucratic control class. The Ehrenreichs make the mistake of trying to shoehorn ordinary lower-level professional employees — such as school teachers, newspaper reporters, librarians, and such — into the same class as managers, corporate lawyers, and state officials. On the Ehrenreichs’ theory, the “professional-managerial class” are “salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production, and whose major function in the social division of labor may be de-

scribed broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations.” For example, reproduction of “capitalist culture” is the role of school teachers and journalists, on their view.

But this is inconsistent with how both Marxists and syndicalists understand class. On our view, class is created by institutional structures of power over the immediate producers in the system of social production. School teachers, for example, are hired to teach students, and they don’t participate in management of schools as part of their work. As college-educated workers, they may exhibit elements of elitism towards manual workers or paternalism towards working class students and parents. So, the Ehrenreichs are not entirely wrong in seeing an element of antagonism between the more college-educated section of skilled workers and the core working class of manual workers. But historically there was also elitism of skilled manual workers — the “skilled trades” — towards less-skilled workers. We do not regard that as sufficient to say that a tool and die maker or electrician is not part of the working class.

Lower-level professional employees often form unions and have a similar structural position to manual workers. As such, they are not in the same class as the bureaucratic control class. Corporate lawyers defend the legal interests of the firm, help in breaking unions and providing legal defense of the ways workers are treated by the firm. “Industrial engineers” are the people who use the “scientific management” techniques such as task analysis and timing work tasks. Their role is to define the jobs people do — and thus play an important role in the control of labor.

Marxism’s failure to develop a theory of the bureaucratic control class is tied in with another mistake in the Marxism of that era. Marx notes that for some thousands of years there has been a variety of different “modes of production” based on exploitation. Why does society change from one type of economic structure to another? Marx’s theory to explain this is called “historical materialism” by his followers. As we saw, the “mode of production” has two parts: the “social relations of production” and the “forces of production.” The forces of production include the abilities and technical knowledge of various people in the labor force, and the technologies that are employed at a given time. We can take a technology as a set of productive techniques or methods, and their underlying theoretical basis, as well as the tools or hardware and software built and employed in production.

Marx notes that various conflicts can develop between the social relations of production and the development of the productive forces. The interpretation of historical materialism that had become dominant in social-democratic Marxist circles before World War I tended to hold that the development of the productive forces had an absolute trans-historical primacy over the social relations of production. The idea was that social conflict and the potential for change grows when the social relations of production blocks development of the productive forces. Advocates of this view point to periodic depressions that brought industrial growth to a halt. This was said to be an example of how capitalism fetters the development of the productive forces.

This version of historical materialism assumes that the development of the productive forces — growth in human productive power — is somehow a trans-historical force that can blow up inadequate schemes of social relations of production. The idea is that growth of labor productivity is inherently progressive because it builds up the potential standard of living. This also assumes that this primacy of the development of the productive forces is a class-neutral force since it is independent of — and prior to — the class structure. This became the standard interpretation of “historical materialism” in the communist movement by the 1930s and ’40s.

In the Marxism that Lenin and Trotsky were working with at the time of the Russian revolution, it might be argued that Taylorism and managerial bureaucracies set over workers must be progressive because these are the methods through which capitalism has increased productive output. When Lenin and Trotsky started beating the drum for Taylorism and one-man management in 1918, they falsely assumed that productive effectiveness could not be achieved through the development of the skill and knowledge of workers, under workers' self-management.

But this interpretation makes historical materialism implausible. First, a trend towards constant change in techniques to enhance labor productivity has really only existed since the emergence of capitalism. For centuries human technique tended to improve in a slow and sporadic way — via one-off inventions, like the changes in medieval plowing techniques.

Secondly, the theory reverses cause and effect. As we can see from looking at capitalist development, the social relations of production completely shape the way technical development takes place within capitalism. There are two aspects of the social relations of production that are especially important here. First, there is the systemic tendency of capitalist firms to ensure profitability by shifting costs. Firms shift costs onto workers through work intensification — as under the speed up of the “lean production” regime. And through lack of adequate safety precautions or chemical exposures to workers — as with exposures of farm workers to pesticides and herbicides. They develop forms of work organization that systematically under-develop worker skills. And cost shifting is especially a social problem with widespread pollution and fossil fuel burning that generates global warming. A power firm may prefer to generate power by burning coal as this lowers their expenses per kilowatt hour. But the plant generates emissions that damage human respiratory systems and contributes to global warming — but the firm doesn't have to pay for this. Technological development shaped by the capitalist regime is certainly not class neutral. But this brings us to another hole in Marxism: It's failure to understand how cost-shifting is an inherent part of the capitalist development process which also shapes “the development of the productive forces.”

Some Marxists might suggest Lenin and Trotsky would not have made their proposals for Taylorism and bureaucratic managerialist hierarchies set over workers if it weren't for the dire circumstances they faced in 1918 and during the civil war. But this is doubtful. Trotsky denied that it was the dire circumstances of the civil war that account for his support for one-man managers appointed from above: “I consider that if the civil war had not plundered our economic organs of all that was strongest,...most endowed with initiative, we should undoubtedly have entered the path of one-man management in the sphere of economic administration much sooner.” Moreover, this explanation assumes that these methods would be in fact a way to improve working class productivity in that situation. Actually, these methods tend to lead to worker resistance. Studies show that worker control improves productivity and worker morale.

Another aspect to Marxism is the emphasis on a political party as a vehicle to gain government power for implementing a program. In both social-democratic Marxism of the Kautskyan variety and in Leninist practice, this means implementing a program top-down through managerialist bureaucracies of the state. Because Marx talked about organizing workers in general into a party, this led his followers to build mass parties like the German Social-Democrats by the early 1900s. But electoral parties and trade union bureaucracies tend to develop their own interests — and these bureaucracies tend to operate to keep the working class captive to capitalism. After a century and a half of experience with political parties, I think we can say that all parties are merely factional organizations. So, it's hard to see how they can be vehicles of working

people directly exercising class power, that is, control over the decisions that affect them in the workplaces and communities.

There is one more aspect to Marxist thinking about social change that makes Marxism internally conflicted. In the 1860s Marx advocated the principle that “the self-emancipation of the working class is the task of the workers themselves.” Marx saw “social relations of production” based on class oppression and exploitation as generating class conflict. And thus class struggle itself becomes a force for social change. Marx emphasized self-activity of the working class — workers building collective struggles and self-organization around their issues. Marx saw this as the basis of the process of class formation — the working class changing itself from an objectively exploited “class in itself” to a “class for itself” — having developed the organizational strength, skills, and “class consciousness” to create a fundamental challenge to the dominating classes. This is a side to Marxism that syndicalists agree with.

But if the working class “emancipates” itself through the building of socialism, doesn’t this imply that the workers must seize direct power over the labor process and the organization of social production? In 1918–21 this was the view advocated in the Russian revolution by a number of different tendencies, such as the anarcho-syndicalists and SR Maximalists but also “left” Bolsheviks like Bukharin. This aspect of Marxism was a major influence on the Marxist-syndicalist tendencies in the World War I era who were advocates for collective worker self-management of production, such as the Socialist Labor Party and the “industrial socialists.” Bill Haywood was an influential “industrial socialist” in the USA. His conception of the transition to socialism was often laid out in syndicalist style as an “expropriating general strike” where workers seize control of industry. In the years after World War I, however, this form of Marxism faded as the Leninist interpretation of Marxism became dominant in Marxist circles — based on enthusiasm for the Bolshevik “success” in gaining power in Russia.

In conclusion, we can say there are a number of features of Marxism that syndicalists see as sympathetic to our viewpoint:

- The class analysis that recognizes the oppression and exploitation of the working class by capital
- The need to confront the state as an institution central to protecting the whole capitalist setup
- The process of class formation as the way the working class develops class consciousness, overcomes internal divisions, and develops the internal cohesion and organizational strength to challenge the dominating classes
- The encouragement of worker self-activity and self-organization in the building of class struggle and resistance to the capitalist regime
- The class struggle as the overall process through which the working class builds its potential to build socialism
- The need to build “socialism from below” through the organized efforts of the working class itself.

On the other hand, there are also features of Marxism that are antagonistic to the orientation of syndicalists and other libertarian socialists:

- The state itself is built on class oppression. You can see this in the subordination of public sector workers to the top down managerial bureaucracies of the state. This is why socialism cannot be built on the state or state-management of production. From a syndicalist point of view, socialism has to be built from below, and built on worker self-management of the industries. To the extent Marxists favor a strategy that is built on a party gaining control of the state, and using the state to build socialism, syndicalists oppose this as we see it as leading to empowerment of an oppressor class over the working class.
- A political party or ideologically defined organization is merely a factional organization. They might be able to have positive influence in the battle of ideas, building anti-capitalist consciousness, organizing and in building militancy against the employers and building class solidarity. But we should not look at them as the means to working class control or governance of society. Working class power has to be based on mass democratic organizations.
- There can be a class struggle over technical change, in struggles over workplace health and safety, and in the larger struggle against ecological devastation. Thus we can't simply accept the technological direction that the corporations push for. This is especially clear in the struggle to overcome the basis of global warming in fossil fuel burning.

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