

## Capital in History

### The need for a Marxian philosophy of history of the Left

Chris Cutrone, for Platypus

[Presented at the Marxist-Humanist Committee public forum on *The Crisis in Marxist Thought*, hosted by the *Platypus* Affiliated Society, Chicago, Friday, July 25, 2008.]

I want to speak about the meaning of *history* for any purportedly Marxian Left.

We in Platypus focus on the history of the *Left* because we think that the narrative one tells about this history *is* in fact one's theory of the *present*. Implicitly or explicitly, in one's conception of the history of the Left, is an account of how the present came to be. By focusing on the history of the Left, or, by adopting a Left-centric view of history, we hypothesize that the most important determinations of the present are the result of what the Left has done or failed to do historically.

For the purposes of this talk, I will focus on the broadest possible framing for such questions and problems of capital in history, the broadest possible context within which I think one needs to understand the problems faced by the Left, specifically by a purportedly Marxian Left.

I will not, for example, be focusing so much on issues for Platypus in the history of the various phases and stages of capital itself, for instance our contention that the 1960s represented not any kind of advance, but a profound retrogression on the Left. I will not elucidate our account of how the present suffers from at least 3 generations of degeneration and regression on the Left: the first, in the 1930s, being tragic; the second in the 1960s being farcical; and the most recent, in the 1990s, being sterilizing.

But, suffice it to say, I will point out that, for Platypus, the recognition of *regression* and the attempt to understand its significance and causes is perhaps our most important point of departure. The topic of this talk is the most fundamental assumption informing our understanding of regression.

For purposes of brevity, I will not be citing explicitly, but I wish to indicate my indebtedness for the following treatment of a potential Marxian philosophy of history, beyond Marx and Engels themselves, and Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky, to Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and, last but not least, the Marx scholar Moishe Postone. And, moreover, I will be in dialogue, through these writers, with Hegel, who distinguished *philosophical* history as the story of the development of *freedom*. — For Hegel, history is only *meaningful* the degree to which it is the story of freedom.

Capital is completely unprecedented in the history of humanity, hence, any struggle for emancipation beyond capital is also completely unprecedented. While there is a connection between the unprecedented nature of the *emergence* of capital in history and the struggle to get *beyond* it, this connection can also be highly misleading, leading to a false symmetry between the transition *into* and *within* different periods of the transformations of modern capital, and a potential transition *beyond* capital. The revolt of the Third Estate, which initiated a still on-going

and never-to-be-exhausted modern history of bourgeois-democratic revolutions, is both the ground for, and, from a Marxian perspective, the now potentially historically obsolescent social form of politics from which proletarian socialist politics seeks to depart, to get beyond.

Hegel, as a philosopher of the time of the last of the great bourgeois-democratic revolutions marking the emergence of modern capital, the Great French Revolution of 1789, was for this reason a theorist of the revolt of the Third Estate. Marx, who came later, after the beginning of the Industrial Revolution of the 19th Century, faced problems Hegel did not.

It has often been stated, but not fully comprehended by Marxists that Marx recognized the *historical* mission of the class-conscious proletariat, to overcome capitalism and to thus do away with class society. Traditionally, this meant, however paradoxically, either the end of the pre-history or the beginning of the true history of humanity. — In a sense, this duality of the possibility of an *end* and a true *beginning*, was a response to a Right Hegelian notion of an end to history, what is assumed by apologists for capital as a best of all possible worlds.

Famously, in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels stated that all history hitherto has been the history of class struggles; Engels added a clever footnote later that specified "all *written* history." We might extrapolate from this that what Engels meant was the history of civilization; history as class struggle did not pertain, for instance, to human history or social life prior to the formation of classes, the time of the supposed "primitive communism." Later, in 1942 (in "Reflections on Class Theory"), Adorno, following Benjamin (in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 1940), wrote that such a conception by Marx and Engels of all of history as the history of class struggles was in fact a *critique* of all of history, a critique of *history* itself.

So in what way does the critique of *history* matter in the critique of *capital*? The problem with the commonplace view of capitalism as primarily a problem of exploitation is that it is in this dimension that capital fails to distinguish itself from other forms of civilization. What is new in capital is social *domination*, which must be distinguished both logically and historically, structurally and empirically, from exploitation, to which it is not reducible. Social domination means the domination of society by capital. This is what is *new* about capital in the history of civilization; prior forms of civilization knew overt domination of some social groups over others, but did not know as Marx recognized in capital a social dynamic to which all social groups — all aspects of society as a whole — are subject.

So we must first draw a demarcation approximately 10,000 years ago, with the origins of civilization and class society, when the great agricultural revolution of the Neolithic Age took place, and human beings went from being nomadic hunter-gatherers to settled agriculturalists. The predominant mode of life for humanity went from the hunter-gatherer to the peasant, and was the case for most of subsequent history.

Several hundred years ago, however, a similarly profound transformation began, in which the predominant mode of life has gone from agricultural peasant to worker: wage-earner, manufacturer, and industrial producer.

More proximally, with the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries, certain truths of this bourgeois epoch of civilization and society manifested themselves and threw this history of the emergence of modernity into a new light. Rather than an end of history as bourgeois thinkers thought, modern social life entered into a severe crisis that fundamentally problematized the transition from peasant- to worker-based society.

With Marx in the 19th Century came the realization that bourgeois society, along with all its categories of subjectivity, might itself be transitional, that the end-goal of humanity might not be found in the productive individual of bourgeois theory and practice, but that this society might point beyond itself, towards a potential qualitative transformation at least as profound as that which separated the peasant way of life from the urban proletarian one, indeed a transition more on the order of profundity of the Neolithic Revolution in agriculture that ended hunter-gatherer society 10,000 years ago.

At the same time that this modern, bourgeois society ratcheted into high gear by the late-18th Century, it entered into crisis, and a new, unprecedented historical phenomenon was manifested in political life, the "Left." — While earlier forms of politics certainly disputed values, this was not in terms of historical progress.

The Industrial Revolution of the early 19th Century, the introduction of machine production, was accompanied by optimistic and exhilarating socialist utopias suggested by these new developments, pointing to fantastical possibilities, finding expression in the imaginations of Fourier and Saint-Simon, among others.

Marx regarded the society of bourgeois right and private property as indeed already resting on the social constitution and mediation of labor, from which private property was derived, and asked the question of whether the trajectory of this society, from the revolt of the Third Estate and the manufacturing era to the Industrial Revolution, indicated the possibility of a further development.

In the midst of the dramatic social transformations of the 19th Century in which as Marx put it in the Manifesto that "all that was solid melted into air," as early as 1843, Marx prognosed and faced the future virtual proletarianization of society and asked whether and how humanity in proletarian form might liberate itself from this condition, whether and how, and with what necessity the proletariat would "transcend" and "*abolish* itself." As early as the 1844 Manuscripts, Marx recognized that proletarian socialism (of Proudhon et al.) was itself symptomatic of capital: proletarian labor was *constitutive* of capital, and thus its politics was *symptomatic* of how the society conditioned by capital might reveal itself as transitional, as pointing beyond itself. — This was Marx's most fundamental point of departure, that proletarianization was substantial and not only relative to the bourgeoisie, and that the proletarianization of society was not the overcoming of capital but its fullest realization, and that this — the society of *capital* — pointed beyond itself.

Thus, with Marx a philosophy of the history of the *Left* was born. For Marx was not a socialist or communist so much as a thinker who tasked himself with understanding the *meaning* of the emergence of proletarian socialism in *history*. Marx was not simply the best or most

consistent or radical socialist, but rather the most *historically* and hence critically *self-aware*. By "scientific" socialism, Marx understood himself to be elaborating a form of knowledge aware of its own conditions of possibility.

For a Marxian and Hegelian clarification of the specificity of the modern problem of social freedom, however, it becomes clear that the Left must define itself not sociologically, whether in terms of socioeconomic *class* or a principle of collectivism over individualism, etc., but rather as a matter of *consciousness*, specifically *historical* consciousness.

For, starting with Marx, it is consciousness of history and historical *potential* and *possibilities*, however apparently utopian or obscure, that distinguishes the Left from the Right, not the struggle against oppression — which the modern Right also claims. The Right does not represent the past but rather the foreclosing of possibilities in the present.

For this reason, it is important for us to recognize the potential and fact of regression that the possibilities for the Left in theory and practice have suffered as a result of the abandonment of *historical* consciousness in favor of the *immediacies* of struggles against *oppression*.

Marx's critique of symptomatic socialism, from Proudhon, Lassalle, Bakunin, et al., to his own followers in the new German Social-Democratic Party and their program at Gotha (as well as in Engels's subsequent critique of the Erfurt Programme), was aimed at maintaining the Marxian vision corresponding to the horizon of possibility of post-capitalist and post-proletarian society.

Unfortunately, beginning in Marx's own lifetime, the form of politics he sought to inspire began to fall well below the threshold of this critically important consciousness of history. And the vast majority of this regression has taken place precisely in the name of "Marxism." Throughout the history of Marxism, through the disputes with the anarchists in the 1st International Workingmen's Association, and disputes in the 2nd, Socialist International to the subsequent splits in the Marxist workers' movement with the Bolshevik-led Third, Communist International and Trotskyist Fourth International, a sometimes heroic but, in retrospect, overwhelmingly *tragic* struggle to preserve or recover something of the initial Marxian point of departure for modern proletarian socialism took place.

In the latter half of the 20th Century, developments regressed so far behind the original Marxian self-consciousness that Marxism itself became an affirmative ideology of industrial society, and the threshold of post-capitalist society became utterly obscured, finding only obtuse expression in various recrudescing utopian ideologies, and, finally, in the most recent period, with the hegemony of "anarchist" ideologies and Romantic rejections of modernity.

But, beyond this crisis and passage into oblivion of a specifically Marxian approach, the "Left" itself, which had emerged prior to Hegel and Marx's attempts to philosophize its historical significance, has virtually disappeared. The present inability to distinguish conservative-reactionary from progressive-emancipatory responses to the problems of society conditioned by capital, is inseparable from the decline and disappearance of the social movement of proletarian

socialism for which Marx had sought to provide a more adequate and provocative self-consciousness at the time of its emergence in the 19th Century.

Paradoxically, as Lukács, following Luxemburg and Lenin, already pointed out, almost a century ago, while the apparent possibility of overcoming capital approaches in certain senses, in other senses it apparently retreats infinitely beyond one's horizon of possibility. Can we follow Luxemburg's early recognition of the opportunism that always threatens us, not as some kind of selling-out or falling from grace, but rather the manifestation of the very real fear that attends recognition of what risks are entailed in trying to fundamentally move the world beyond capital?

Worse, and, for the present, prior to any danger of opportunism, with the extreme coarsening if not utter disintegration of the ability to apprehend and transform capital through working-class politics, has come the coarsening of our ability to even recognize and apprehend, let alone adequately understand our social reality. We do not suffer simply from opportunism but from a rather basic disorientation. Today we are faced with the problem not of changing the world but more basically of understanding it.

On the other hand, with Marx, are we dealing with a "utopia?" And, if so, what of this? What is the significance of our "utopian" sense of human potential *beyond* capital and proletarian labor? Is it a mere dream?

Marx began with utopias and ended with the most influential if spectacularly failing modern political ideology. At the same time, Marx gave us an acute and incisive critical framework for grasping the reasons why the last 200 years have been by far the most tumultuously *transformative* but also *destructive* epoch of human civilization, why this period has promised so much and yet disappointed so bitterly. The last 200 years have seen more, and more profound changes, than prior millennia have. Marx attempted to grasp the reasons for this. Others have failed to see the difference and have tried to re-assimilate modern history back into its antecedents (for instance in postmodernist illusions of endless medievalism).

What would it mean to treat the entire Marxian project as, first and foremost, a recognition of the history of modernity *tout court* as one of the *pathology of transition*, from the class society that emerged with the agricultural revolution 10,000 years ago and the civilizations based on a peasant way of life, through the commodity form of social mediation and the global civilization dominated by capital, to a form of humanity that might lie beyond?

In Marx we are faced with a self-consciousness of an obscure and mysterious historical task, which can only be further clarified theoretically through transformative practice — the practice of proletarian socialism. But this task has been abandoned in favor of what are essentially *capital-reconstituting* struggles, attempting to cope with the vicissitudes of the dynamics of modern history. But this re-assimilation of Marxism back into ideology characteristic of the revolt of the Third Estate means the loss of the true horizon of possibility that motivated Marx and gave his project meaning and urgency.

Can we follow Marx and the best historically revolutionary Marxists who followed him in recognizing the forms of discontent in the pathological society we inhabit as being themselves

symptomatic of and bound up with the very problem against which they rage? Can we avoid the premature post-capitalism and bad, reactionary utopianism that attends the present death of the Left in theory in practice, and preserve and fulfill the tasks given to us by history? Can we recognize the breadth and depth of the problem we seek to overcome without retreating into wishful thinking and ideological gracing of the accomplished fact, and apologizing for impulses that only seem directed against it, at the expense of what might lie beyond the traps of the suffering of the present?

We urgently need an acute awareness of our historical *epoch* as well as of our fleeting moment *now*, within it. — We must ask what it is about the present moment that might make the possibility of recovering a Marxian social and political consciousness viable, and how we can *advance* it by way of *recovering* it.

For the *pathology* of our modern society mediated by capital, of the proletarian form of social life and its self-objectifications, the new forms of humanity it makes possible, which are completely unprecedented in history, grows only worse the longer delayed is taking the possible and necessary steps to the next levels of the struggle for freedom.

The pathology grows worse, not merely in terms of the various forms of the destruction of humanity, which are daunting, but also, perhaps more importantly — and disturbingly — in the manifest worsening social conditions and capacities for practical politics on the Left, and our worsening theoretical awareness of them. If there has been a crisis and evacuation of Marxian thought, it has been because its most fundamental context and point of departure, its awareness of its greater *historical* moment, the possibility of an epochal transition, has been forgotten, while we have not ceased to share this moment, but only lost sight of its necessities and possibilities. Any future emancipatory politics must regain such awareness of the *transitional* nature of capitalist modernity and of the reasons why we pay such a steep price for failing to recognize this.