

BACK TO THE FUTURE: THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF MARX

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In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* Marx and Engels wrote: 'The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society.'¹ Marx thought enough of these words to reproduce them in *Capital*.² Much of what has been written by Marxists since Marx has been to document that statement, but not always with an understanding of its total meaning. Some writers complain, a century after his death, that Marx did not document the working out of his predictions. What this position reflects is an unwillingness to understand and use Marx's methodology, as Lenin did in his work on imperialism.

What needs to be understood is that 'revolutionizing... the whole relations of society' includes the working class and Marx's conception of the working class was dialectical and concrete. In the passage that provides a climax to volume 1 of *Capital*, on the general law of capitalist accumulation, Marx wrote:

[W]ithin the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productiveness of labour are brought about at the cost of the individual labourer; all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of, the producers; they mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil; they estrange from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour-process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they distort the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour-process to a despotism more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working time; and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the Juggernaut of capital....Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole, i.e., on the side of the class that produces its own product in the form of capital.³

Marx thought that the proletariat was revolutionary or it was nothing. Was this Marx's revolutionary proletariat? Where is the socialist proletariat? Most Marxists, writing in the second half of the twentieth century, do not understand Marx's dialectical conception of the working class. In *The Holy Family* Marx and Engels say: "It is not a matter of what this or that proletariat or even the proletariat as a whole *pictures* at present as its goal. It is a matter of *what the proletariat is in actuality* and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do."⁴ This is difficult for intellectuals trained in positivist science to comprehend. But Marx and Engels carry it further in *The German Ideology*:

¹ Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, New York: Norton, 1978, p.476.

² Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, Moscow: Progress Publishers, undated, p.457.

³ *Ibid.*, p.604.

⁴ Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, pp.134-35. Emphasis in original.

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a *revolution*; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the *ruling* class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class *overthrowing* it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.⁵

In other words, working class consciousness is not a matter of verbal statements of belief, but of activity. Such things can be difficult to document but there is a fascinating example of the dialectical contradiction contained in working class consciousness in the history of the American working class during World War II.

Near the end of the war the United Automobile Workers Union (UAW) held a membership referendum on the question of the war-time no-strike pledge. In a national vote through a postcard ballot, auto workers were asked to vote on whether to retain or overturn the no-strike pledge. In the vote, auto workers voted about two to one to retain the no-strike pledge. However, at the same time that this vote was taking place, an absolute majority of auto workers went out on wildcat strikes.⁶ What was the consciousness of American auto workers? Was it patriotic and conservative or was it militant? Which was more important, checking a box on a postcard or participating in an action at work? You can be sure that the employers were more concerned with the latter than the former.

Hal Draper has made the point that 'the proletariat is more than the sum of its individual atoms.'⁷ A worker sitting at home alone or with his or her family is not the same as a worker at work, bonded together with other workers. There is another question involved. While an absolute majority of auto workers went on strike, a majority did not vote. Most left activists would assume that workers who do not participate in union activities, attend union meetings and participate in the electoral process are more backward than workers who do. The wartime referendum on the no-strike pledge belies that understanding; workers who didn't vote but who were willing to stand up to the pressure of politicians, union leaders, and representatives of the military in the plants (risking being drafted into the army) were not backward in any serious sense. Often enough, both points of view existed in the same person. In our own experience, in a major wildcat strike that shut down virtually all Chrysler plants in the Detroit area in 1943, we saw union picketers who consistently favored the no-strike pledge become militant participants in picket lines that kept plants closed.

How did Marx and Engels apply their methodology, which was based on their dialectical view of the working class? Engels pointed out that '[t]he Communists know only too well...that revolutions are not made deliberately and arbitrarily, but that everywhere and at all times they have been the necessary outcome of circumstances entirely independent of the will and the leadership of particular parties and entire classes.'⁸ They based their theories on the peaks of revolutionary working class activity.

⁵ Ibid., p.193. Emphasis in original.

⁶ Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1980.

⁷ Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, vol. 2, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978, p.40.

⁸ F. Engels, 'Principles of Communism', in Marx and Engels, *C.W.*, Vol. 6, p.349, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976.

The Paris Commune of 1871 did not amount to much. (Marx praised it for ending night work for bakers. A century later Wonder Bread was advertising ‘the bread that’s baked while you sleep’.) It was crushed. But Marx made it the basis for his theory of the workers’ state. Thirty-four years passed before Russian workers invented soviets in the 1905 revolution without the leadership of socialists or communists. The 1905 revolution was also crushed, but Lenin added the experience to Marx on the Commune and produced *State and Revolution*. He also learned from the experience to abandon the view he put forward in *What Is To Be Done*: that socialism can only come to the proletariat from the outside.⁹ But most Marxists chose to ignore this latter fact and stuck to the discarded views contained in *What Is To Be Done*.

The point is not to belabor readers with quotations from Marx *et al*. The point is that Marx had developed a theory of the proletariat that worked. But it was only partly understood by his followers in this century. In their influential work *Monopoly Capital*, Baran and Sweezy said that they were conscious that their approach ‘has resulted in almost total neglect of a subject which occupies a central place in Marx’s study of capitalism: the labor process’. But then they went on to say:

Our neglect of the labor process does not, however, mean that this book is not concerned with the class struggle.... The revolutionary initiative against capitalism, which in Marx’s day belonged to the proletariat in the advanced countries, has passed into the hands of the impoverished masses in the underdeveloped countries who are struggling to free themselves from imperialist domination and exploitation.¹⁰

Two years after this book was published 10 million French workers occupied all the factories of France and came close to overthrowing the DeGaulle government. That Baran and Sweezy did not deal with the labor process would have been acceptable, except that they did deal with working class activity: they dismissed it. Class struggle and the struggle against ‘imperialist domination and exploitation’ in this context are ambiguous. Peasant revolutions and national revolutions, important and progressive as they are, do not substitute for the proletarian revolution which Marx, Engels, and Lenin assumed to be equivalent to socialist revolution.

Harry Braverman, in his important book *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, does not dismiss the working class or avoid the labor process. However, he says: ‘No attempt will be made to deal with the modern working class on the level of its consciousness, organization, or activities. This is a book about the working class as a class *in itself*, not as a class *of itself*.’¹¹ As a result it is mainly a book about the victimization of the working class.

Both of these books leave the door ajar for narrow, empirical studies of the working class that find the working class backward and conservative. It is not that such studies would not have been done in any case. It is that a whole series of left academics can now find their work acceptable to renowned Marxists.

⁹ See Lenin: ‘The St. Petersburg Strike’, *C.W.*, Vol. 8, p.9; ‘Revolutionary Days,’ *Ibid.*, pp.113,117; ‘Two Tactics’, *Ibid.*, pp.154-55; and ‘The Reorganization of the Party’, *C.W.*, Vol. 10, p.32.

¹⁰ Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966, pp.8, 9.

¹¹ Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974, pp.26-7
Emphasis in original.

Relevant questions that need to be answered include: How do we apply Marxist methodology to the post-World War II world?; What peaks have the working class of the industrial world reached in its struggle? In 1953 there was a working class uprising in East Germany.¹² To make sure that it did not spread, the western powers of England, France and the United States built a wall of police and military might to prevent West Berlin workers from marching to join their brothers and sisters in the East. The East German revolt was crushed by Soviet tanks.

In the summer of 1956 working class resistance was beginning to form in Poland, including the formation of workers' councils, as a dispute between the Polish and Soviet Communist Parties began to escalate. Unrest in Poland was repeated in 1970-71 and 1980-81.¹³ Unrest in 1956 was also evident in Hungary.

On October 23 a demonstration was organized by students and intellectuals. To show support for the Polish resistance, it was held in a square in Budapest graced by a statue of Josef Bem, a Polish revolutionary who had fought in the Hungarian revolution of 1848. The Communist regime wavered but finally allowed the demonstration to take place. At the end of the meeting, not being sure of their next steps, the demonstrators decided to march to the Budapest radio station to try to get their demands broadcast. By this time it was late in the day and the marchers were joined by workers getting off work. In the square in front of the radio station the demonstrators were met with gunfire from the secret police. The Hungarian Revolution had begun. Within 24 hours workers' councils blanketed Budapest. In another 24 hours all of Hungary was covered with workers' councils which had taken over all the productive facilities of the nation. The Hungarian army had disintegrated. Soldiers had either joined the revolution or had turned over their arms to the revolutionaries and had gone home. Even significant sections of the Soviet garrisons in Hungary defected. Ultimately much of the Soviet occupying force was withdrawn and replaced by troops from the far East who had had no contact with the people of Hungary. On November 4, after two weeks of dual power, Soviet troops attacked. It took a week of fighting to crush the revolution, although resistance continued afterward. Nothing in Hungary could crush the revolution. It took an invasion of Soviet tanks.¹⁴

Since the beginning of the Cold War, Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America had called on East Europeans to revolt. After the Hungarian Revolution, the call to revolt was never heard again. The West provided a cover for the Soviet attack when Britain, France, and Israel invaded Egypt to conquer the Suez Canal. The western press consistently tried to diminish the significance of the Hungarian Revolution by emphasizing the question of refugees and the freeing of the Hungarian Cardinal Mindszenty. (Mindszenty had been freed from prison by

¹² See Rainer Hildebrandt, *The Explosion: The Uprising Behind the Iron Curtain*, New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, and Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955; and Arnulf Baring, *Uprising in East Germany: June 17, 1953*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1972.

¹³ See, Informations Correspondence Ouvriere, *Poland: 1970-71, Capitalism and Class Struggle*, Detroit: Black and Red, 1977; Henri Simon, *Poland: 1980-82, Class Struggle and the Crisis of Capital*, Detroit: Black and Red, 1985.

¹⁴ See, Bill Lomax, *Hungary 1956*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976; Bill Lomax, ed., *Hungarian Workers' Councils in 1956*, Highland Lakes, NJ: Atlantic Research and Publications, and Boulder, Colorado: Social Science Monographs, 1990, distributed by Columbia University Press; Andy Anderson, *Hungary '56*, London: Solidarity and Detroit: Black and Red, 1957; and Melvin J. Lasky, ed., *The Hungarian Revolution*, New York: Praeger, 1957.

several Hungarian army officers and then disappeared into the American Embassy, playing no role in the revolution.)

In 1968 Europe erupted again. After a couple of weeks of street fighting between students and police in Paris, a sit-in strike at an aircraft factory in Nantes triggered a massive take-over of production by the French working class. In 48 hours 10 million French workers occupied all the factories of France and came close to overturning the DeGaulle government. Here, however, there were differences to Hungary.

The element of national liberation that was evident in Hungary was absent in France. In addition, the cracks that immediately appeared in the military structure in Hungary did not appear in France. In both revolutions there was no evidence of any support by the traditional organizations of the proletariat. The French Socialist and Communist Parties and the unions they controlled fought bitterly to get the workers out of the factories and to limit the struggle to traditional union demands. They also fought to prevent significant contact between the workers and the students. As a result, the French revolt receded without the workers being defeated, but with the winning of only limited demands such as wage increases.¹⁵ Further working class struggles took place in 1968 in Czechoslovakia.¹⁶

These are only truncated summaries of the highlights of the experience of the international working class in the last half of the twentieth century. But the history of working class revolt presents us with some interesting questions. Why did the Left, on the whole, insist on ignoring these events? In 1963, Everett C. Hughes gave an important presidential address to the American Sociological Association. He raised the question of why sociologists, with all the research they had done on the question of race, could not predict the explosion of the civil rights movement. He wrote:

It is but a special instance of the more general question concerning sociological foresight of and involvement in drastic and massive social changes and extreme forms of social action...

Some have asked why we did not foresee the great mass movement of Negroes; it may be that our conception of social science is so empirical, so limited to little bundles of fact applied to little hypotheses, that we are incapable of entertaining a broad range of possibilities, of following out the madly unlikely combinations of social circumstances.¹⁷

Do leftists suffer from the same limitations that Hughes attributed to sociologists? It might be too much to ask why left sociologists, political scientists, economists, or historians failed to predict the Hungarian Revolution or the French Revolt. After all, these were, like all popular

¹⁵ See, Daniel Singer, *Prelude to Revolution: France in May 1968*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1970; Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, *Red Flag/Black Flag: French Revolution 1968*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1968; and R. Gregoire and F. Perlman, *Worker-Student Action Committees: France May '68*, Detroit: Black and Red, 1970.

¹⁶ See, Vladimir Fisera, ed., *Workers' Councils in Czechoslovakia Documents and Essays 1968-69*, London: Allison and Busby, 1978; and Robin Alison Remington, *Winter in Prague: Documents on Czechoslovak Communism in Crisis*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1969.

¹⁷ Everett C. Hughes, 'Race Relations and the Sociological Imagination', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 28, no. 6, Dec. 1963, pp.879, 889.

uprisings, massive and spontaneous events.¹⁸ (Spontaneity should not be thought of as rising with the sun one morning. A spontaneous revolt could not take place if it were not preceded by a generation or so of resistance, i.e., day-to-day struggles, both defensive and offensive, involving small gains, victories and defeats.) But it is not too much to ask why these events did not become the subject of intensive study and theoretical analysis.

There are two answers. The first is that the events contradicted the received wisdom of the Left; proletarian revolution is impossible without the leadership of a revolutionary party, without a press and the ability to communicate, without a depression or any other major crisis in society. The second is that these events did not lend themselves to the limited empirical analysis which passes for science in the academy. Empirical research is the necessary foundation for any theory. Problems arise, however, when the only theory is *empiricism*, which utilizes a method of inquiry that leads all too easily to a discovery that revolution is impossible, i.e., that the working class is incapable of massive social change. There are any number of works, such as those by Mike Davis and Michael Burawoy, that show workers as essentially conservative and backward. They have plenty of evidence. The working class is divided by race, by gender, by age, by skill, by ethnic group, etc. This much is true. However, if some social scientist had examined the workers in the industrial suburbs of Budapest in September of 1956, or the industrial suburbs of Paris in April of 1968, the same would have been found. There would have been no evidence of the coming social upheaval. How could there have been? The workers themselves did not know.

Does anyone seriously believe that the Russian workers who invented soviets in 1905 or overthrew the Tsar in 1917 were free of bigotry, anti-Semitism, sexism, or national chauvinism? For that matter, does anyone believe the same of the Hungarian workers of 1956 or the French workers of 1968? (In France there had been a considerable display of racism toward African immigrants: a racism, however, which was significantly reduced for a while during the events of May 1968.) Were the Polish workers who created Solidarity in 1980 free of anti-Semitism, sexism or the influence of the Catholic Church? What is missing in most of these empirical studies is the theory of Marx. They are based on the depths the working class has reached under capitalism, not the peaks. As a result, they are inherently conservative.

This is not to say that most empirical research is useless. But unless it is infused with the theoretical understanding of the nature of the working class integral to Marxism, it is quite limited. There are left academics doing fine work in analyzing working class activity.¹⁹ But that work needs to become part of a fundamental understanding of the capacity of the working class, the real, existing working class, to change society.

How does this relate to the United States? Can American workers do what Hungarian workers or French workers did? That cannot be answered. It should be clear that none of this assumes that radicals have to accept the divisions in the working class as absolute. Working class unity is a relative value. Radicals should (and have) supported black struggles against white workers, women's struggles against male workers, and so on. Changes in the

¹⁸ There was one Marxist theoretician who did see the possibility of events like the Hungarian Revolution. C.L.R. James, in abstract theoretical form, prefigured what happened in Hungary in a study of how to apply the dialectic to an examination of working class organization in *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin*, London: Allison and Busby, 1980 (1948), pp.175-76.

¹⁹ I would like to call attention to a few whose work has not been widely acknowledged: James W. Rinehart, Ken C. Kusterer, and Tom Jurovich.

relationship of forces within the working class have been made. African Americans and women have penetrated the bastions of the white working class to a considerable degree. What leftists should not assume is that all of these problems must be solved before substantial social change is possible. First, that is impossible. Second, if that were possible, capitalism would not have to be overthrown.

What made it possible for the French working class to take over all the factories of France in opposition to their leaders and their organizations? What made it possible for the Hungarian working class, male and female, blue collar and white collar, to take over all the workplaces of the country and run most of the towns and cities outside of Budapest? Why is hardly anyone interested in finding the answers to these questions?

It should be remembered that what the Hungarian and French workers did was thought of as being impossible. What can be predicted is that there will be another rising, however its time and place cannot be predicted. As long as there exists the fundamental source of working class resistance, which is alienation, another rising is imminent.²⁰ If someone proves that alienation can be done away with under capitalism, i.e., that workers no longer resist their conditions of life and work, then we will be open to a theory that announces the end of the working class as a force for social change. All of the new names used to describe the society in which we live (post-industrialism, post-capitalism, the information society, globalization, etc.) do not get rid of the proletariat. They simply make it easier not to think about it. But that is what we all have to think about – and Marx still makes that thought and study fruitful.

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²⁰ See, Martin Glaberman and Seymour Faber, *Working for Wages: the Roots of Insurgency*, New York: General Hall, 1998.