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Karl Marx

1983: Emancipation, science and politics in Karl Marx

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Human beings, as “the supreme value for human beings”

Marx's intellectual activity was based on the necessity of emancipation. It quickly merged with his practical activity into a homogeneous whole that lasted until the end of his life. In this sense, it was a product of the ideas of freedom that had broken through in various forms since the Enlightenment, or rather since the Reformation. From the French Revolution and its heirs, through to the revolutionary democrats of the 1820s and 1830s, to the Young Hegelians and the first socialist groups in Europe and America. It can be summed up in the desire to “overturn all conditions in which man is a degraded, enslaved, abandoned, despicable being”. [1]

Throughout his life Marx remained faithful to the goal of emancipation. He did not abandon it in the transition from petty-bourgeois to proletarian democracy and communism, nor in the development of the theory of historical materialism and the beginning of revolutionary practice. We find it in all his major works, as well as those of Friedrich Engels, from the 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, from the Grundrisse and Kapital to the Civil War in France and the Critique of the Gotha Program. [2] This goal is upstream, so to speak, of the scientific and political activity. Maximilien Rubel calls it a moral concern, [Maximilien Rubel, *Karl Marx, Essai de biographie intellectuelle*, Paris 1957 (Bibliothèque Philosophique), p. 444.] others speak of a philosophical approach. Be that as it may, this approach is sufficient to lead ad absurdum the accusation made by many critics of Marx that Marxism amounts to an absolutization, a hypostasis, of history. [3] After all, Marx repeatedly made fun of, or was annoyed by, people who worship their chains just because those are historically created chains...

It seems more appropriate to speak of an axiomatic starting point that can be summed up in the formula: the human being is the supreme value for human beings. At least this formula can be justified anthropologically. An orthodox Marxist, i.e. one who “acts” in the spirit of Marx, remains bound by the obligation to resist all inhuman social conditions. He can only be relieved of this obligation if it were proved that inhuman conditions favour the humanization of people, which is obviously absurd. If hell is brought to earth, this is no reason to make it home, and even less to proclaim it a necessary stage on the way to Paradise. In any case, millions of people would psychologically and practically be unable to cope with such a situation. They experience hell as hell; and in the long run no mystification can prevent them from rebelling against it. It is an elementary duty to fight against inhumanity at their side. This is the duty that led Marx throughout his life and that should guide us all.

Far from relieving us of this obligation, the theory of historical materialism and partisanship for the proletariat in the ongoing class struggle in bourgeois society justify it more. It is a scientific insight that the history of all civilized societies up to now has been, and still is, the history of class struggles. This means that this history revolves around material interests: the distribution of the social product between necessary product and surplus product. The income and privileges of all rulers, as well as rule itself, can be attributed in the last instance to the surplus labour they force on producers and the concomitant struggle to expand or reduce that surplus labour. The theory of historical materialism states that the division of society into classes is an inevitable transitional stage in history. Without the development of the productive forces this era gives rise to, a truly human classless society, based on the satisfaction of needs, would be impossible. A parallel conclusion is that the exploited classes periodically rebel against their

exploitation and often even seek to establish a classless society. However, under pre-capitalist or early capitalist conditions they can not achieve this goal because of the lack of a sufficiently developed material, and therefore spiritual and moral, basis.

The theory of historical materialism therefore concludes that modern capitalism, by unleashing enormous productive forces, for the first time in history is laying the foundations for general emancipation, i.e. for a classless society. But such emancipation presupposes the abolition of private property, of commodity production and of the market economy, as well as of the competition, the private enrichment and generalized egoism that follow from it. The realization of these goals is only possible when the socialist (communist) struggle for them is merged with the real struggle of a class that is materially interested in it, intellectually prepared for it, and socially inclined to it. This means a class that is potentially capable of 'bringing all wheels to a standstill' if it so wishes; a class that, organized into the associated producers, is capable of taking over the organization of production.

This class is the modern proletariat, the class of the wage-earners. It is prepared for this task by its position in bourgeois society and the development of capitalism with all its contradictions, but also by a high level of collective capacity for organisation and solidarity in which capitalism educates it.

Marx's formula that the emancipation of the proletariat is the emancipation of humanity must not be misunderstood to mean that from the moment of this realization on, for Marx the emancipation of the proletariat takes the place of the emancipation of humanity. Marx's passionate support for the emancipation of black slaves and oppressed nations such as the Poles and the Irish, his identification with the Taiping insurgency in China and rebelling sepoys in India—all social groups that can certainly not be covered under the term proletariat—is enough to warrant this conclusion. [4] Proletarian emancipation is an absolute precondition for general, human emancipation, but it is only a precondition, not a substitute. If historical experience proves that parties acting "on behalf of" the working class introduce new forms of exploitation and create new inhuman conditions, then these must be fought with just as much determination as capitalist or pre-capitalist ones. This applies even if such "socialist" exploitation and oppression are seen as historically progressive compared to the capitalist ones. Is it justified to come to this conclusion based on Marx's thinking, even if to our knowledge Marx never explicitly addressed this problem? Indeed, this conclusion follows from the dialectical (not mechanical) concept of progress. This two-way and non-linear concept of progress runs through all of Marx's writings.

As consistent materialists, Marx and Engels worked out a measuring instrument for the material progress of mankind. The level of development of the productive forces can be measured by the average social productivity of labour. On the basis of this criterion, it is quite possible to speak of progressive social formations or to judge successive modes of production as "progressive" or "regressive". If in a well-known passage of *Anti-Dühring* Engels states that ancient slavery was progressive because without it the great development of ancient art, philosophy and science would not have been possible, this remains VI on the basis of current knowledge a scientifically founded judgement. [5] But from this material basis of the concept of progress Marx and Engels in no way drew conclusions that would condemn the rebellion of the exploited and oppressed social classes in pre-capitalist or early capitalist times. They did not reject such rebellions as "directed against progress".

On the contrary, they sided with anti-slavery revolts, peasant revolts in the old Asian mode of production, the peasant revolts of the late Middle Ages, and the rebellious, machine-storming workers of early capitalism. Without ignoring or suppressing that these struggles had little historical chance of success or even were destined to failure, they saw a justification of such rebellions in the general justification of human struggle against inhuman conditions. Furthermore, in the historical continuity of the struggle against social exploitation lies a tremendous tradition of forms of struggle and organization as well as of revolutionary thoughts, ideals, dreams and hopes from which the proletarian struggle for emancipation draws nourishment. The proletarian struggle even emerges directly from such fights. Without such predecessors, the development of the proletarian struggle would have been incomparably more difficult. Countries without a pre-proletarian revolutionary tradition—fortunately there are hardly any—or with only a weak tradition of this

kind are places where a political workers' movement has been incredible difficulty to develop. [6]

In the treatment of machines in volume I of Marx's *Capital*, this double-track concept of progress comes to the fore particularly strongly. Contrary to all the romantic, shallow, moralizing critics of capitalism, Marx coolly and objectively underlines the huge material progress and the enormous liberating potency of machinery, i.e. the potency to abolish compulsory human labour. In an age of incipient automation and unfolding micro-electronics, these are almost prophetic-sounding statements. But Marx at the same time opposes the positivist, cynical or problem-blind apologists of the bourgeoisie. Marx points out the difference between potency and reality and underlines the inhuman effects of machinery under capitalism (cf. the application of micro-electronics today, which stimulates unemployment). He links the specifically capitalist use of fixed capital and the factory system with the capitalist forms of technology and industry, which can only develop by endangering, undermining and potentially destroying the two sources of human wealth: nature and human labour. In developed capitalism the worker is a mutilated, alienated, enslaved, miserable worker. Because of this, the worker's rebellion against these conditions is as progressive as capitalism itself. Such rebellion is a driving force of economic and social progress and of economic and social history, even if it does not lead to the abolition of inhuman conditions in the short or medium term. And what is obvious to Marx regarding capitalist (and pre-capitalist) societies would for him apply fully to post-capitalist societies as well.

On the way to scientific socialism

The development of scientific socialism as a science creates its own internal laws, which do not necessarily follow the logic of emancipation. Science is strictly objective and cannot be subordinated to any non-scientific project. It collects, sifts and orders, it interprets data which it must first acquire. It tries to understand, explain and examine such material for its later development. Should it embezzle or falsify data, or sweep 'unpleasant' facts and unforeseen developments under the carpet, it nullifies itself. Science never works with absolute certainty, but formulates theoretical hypotheses that must be critically examined again and again on the basis of new data and new developments. It is therefore fundamentally doubtful, as Marx succinctly put it when he was asked about his preferred motto: *de omnibus est dubitandum*. There is not a grain of dogmatism in this mental attitude, although the doubt always concerns only the (preliminary) results of research, never the potential for truth of research itself. Conclusions that are judged by their practical implications and in the light of their predictions are either confirmed or they must be modified. This is therefore an optimistic doubt, one based on the unlimited possibilities of social, human practice ("the second nature of humanity"), which in the end, like the quest for emancipation, can be traced back to anthropological foundations.

Data that is discovered or emerges later may prove any scientific theory partially or fully incorrect. One must not jump hastily to such a conclusion, but rather consider whether it is based on provisional or on (more or less) definitive data (cf. the false conclusion in the 1950s and early 1960s, drawn from the long period of post-war prosperity, that late capitalism had finally overcome the danger of mass unemployment and that crises of overproduction were not—or no longer—inherent in the system of bourgeois society). [7] One must not be tempted by temporary impressions to question partial conclusions without considering what such revision would mean for the overall understanding (of a historical period, a mode of production, a social class, a historical phenomenon such as the state, etc.).

The difference between real science (including scientific socialism) and positivism or pure empiricism does not lie in the disregard of empirical data by the former and their recognition by the latter. It lies in the constant effort of science to provide a general, internally coherent explanation of relevant data. This includes the discovery of internal laws of development. Empiricism is characterized, among other things, by superficiality of its observation and its blindness to fundamental problems. In economics, the empiricist only acknowledges what is immediately visible (prices, income, etc.) and believes that a value-theory such as the labour theory of value, which asks the question of what determines and regulates price dynamics in the long term, is "dogmatic" and "irrelevant". No natural scientist would, for example,

dare to approach physical or biological data in such a superficial way. In doing so, the positivist usually stumbles when it comes to interpreting empirical data. For example, the huge increase in the price of gold in recent years is tautologically “explained” by the inflation of paper money and not attributed to the different, long-term dynamics of on the one hand average labour productivity in gold mines and manufacturing industry, and in agriculture on the other. [8]

Marx was a scientist in the true sense of the word. He based his scientific theories, in the domains of economy (value theory, theory of surplus value, monetary theory, capital theory, wages theory, theory of the laws of movement of the capitalist mode of production, crisis theory, etc.) as well as in the fields of sociology and history (theory of historical materialism, class, state and revolution theory, etc.), on a painstaking study of the scientific data available in his time. As he himself said, nothing was more repugnant to him than a pseudo-scientist who, in order to prove a thesis, knowingly withholds data or denies facts: “When a man seeks to accommodate science to a viewpoint which is derived not from science itself (however erroneous it may be) but from outside, from alien, external interests, then I call him ‘base’.” [9]

Undoubtedly, the strength of scientific socialism lies in presenting an emancipatory goal—the liberation of the proletariat, of work and the whole of humanity from all inhuman conditions—as flowing from a real social and historical movement. The scientifically proven contradictions of the capitalist mode of production cannot be resolved by any state, religion, terror, nor by “consumption society” or “idiotification of the masses”. From these contradictions follows a chain of successive systemic crises of an economic, social, cultural, political, military, moral, ideological nature. This is confirmed by two centuries of historical development. Out of the same contradictions follows a historical tendency towards the self-organization of wage labour (meaning of the wage-earners). This is one of the most significant predictions that can be derived from Marx’s analysis of class society in general and capitalist society in particular.

One needs only to consider how many unionized wage workers there were in 1847/48, how many in 1900, how many in 1948 and how many today in order to see the correctness of this statement (who else could have foreseen this in the middle of the 19th century?). There is no country in the world today, not even the smallest island in the Pacific, where wage labour exists without the inevitable elementary class struggle between capital and labour, without the wage earners attempting to create basic self-defence and fighting organizations.

The overthrow of capitalism, the transition to a classless society, the replacement of domination by a free association of producers can emerge from the self-organization and inevitable, elementary class struggle of the modern industrial proletariat. For the first time in history, the project of emancipation acquires a revolutionary subject with the objective and subjective capacity to make it a reality. The fact that this is only an ability, that this outcome is not inevitable, does not need to be emphasized further. If it were inevitable, the educational and organizational activity, the stimulating of class consciousness and class organization by socialists, beginning with Marx and Engels themselves, would be largely unnecessary and in any case unimportant.

The collapse of capitalism is inevitable: this is the only certainty resulting from Marx’s analysis of the internal contradictions of capitalism. After the experience of two world wars, two world economic crises of the magnitude of those of 1929 to 1933 and of the present one, we have little reason to doubt this. But this collapse can lead to two completely opposite results: forward to socialism, or backward to barbarism. After the experience of fascism, and of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, in the current age of a nuclear arms race and growing threats to the ecosystem, this is certainly not a demagogic formulation, but a terrible medium-term danger.

In turn, the relevance of the proletariat as a revolutionary subject, hence of the proletarian revolution, is based on a number of strictly scientific premises: the growing polarization of society between wage-earners and a decreasing number of large, medium and small capitalists exploiting wage labour; the tendency that wage-earners become the

overwhelming majority of the active population; the tendency towards their growing homogeneity in terms of income, standard of living, working conditions, their growing trade union organization and the growing importance of at least periodically emerging mass struggles.

Up to this point, there is almost complete overlap of the project of emancipation with the results of scientific analysis of bourgeois society's laws of motion. But beyond this point they can diverge. If instead of the further maturing of the objective preconditions for socialist revolution, an increasing rot of these conditions begins, then one would have to conclude that the creation of a socialist classless society is becoming impossible. This would be the case if over the long term (apart from cyclical ups and downs) in most or even all highly industrialised capitalist states the number of wage earners no longer increases but decreases, and their weight in society becomes less and less. If their ability to truly paralyse the economy and take over and manage it on their own is diminishing, if their degree of organization decreases (e.g., that in the year 2000 there will be fewer unionized wage earners than in 1948 or even 1900), and if their ability to fight disappears for decades on end—then the relapse into barbarism becomes inevitable. No one has so far proved that there is any other revolutionary subject than the modern proletariat in modern society: a subject that has the objective power as well as the subjective interest and at least potential consciousness to overthrow capitalism and build a truly classless society, a society without private property, production of goods, money, enrichment, competition and nation-state.

But history and empirical data do not confirm that socialism has become impossible. And in our opinion such confirmation will not come in the following decades. And in any case, such proof would not mean abandoning the struggle for emancipation. Two-thousands years ago, slaves repeatedly stood up against slavery, even though under the given conditions this could not lead to a liberated society. Should we in the future fall back into barbaric conditions, there will still be rebellions against slavery and against all inhuman conditions. It would then be the elementary duty of Marxists to fight side by side with these slaves, to specify their aims, to make their forms of struggle as effective as possible, to steel their will to fight, to let every spark of rebellion against humiliation, degradation, oppression, exploitation, torture, grow into a flame—and this rebellion is inevitable: this is what the entire history of humanity teaches us. Even if science could prove that scientific socialism and its aims amount to a utopia and an unrealizable project, it would still fertilize and stimulate the elementary struggles for the partial and temporary emancipation of the oppressed. Even in this extreme case—which we believe will not happen—Marx did not think, study, discover, and fight in vain.

In a well-known passage in his foreword to *Finance Capital*, Rudolf Hilferding drove the thesis of the separation between science and socialist commitment to the point of paradox. Karl Korsch answered him sharply, for the most part rightly so, but he did somewhat overstep the mark. [\[10\]](#)

It is true that there is no such absurd thing as a “proletarian science”, but only science *tout court* that obeys its own laws, which are detached from all class conditions. What else would science be in a classless society? But it is also true that, especially in the field of the humanities (or rather, the social sciences, i.e. all sciences dealing with aspects of humanity, including psychology and medicine), scientists are socially determined people, part of a class society. The thoughts of people working in science do not only have “purely scientific” sources, but are also subject to class-societal prejudices. Scientists too wear the blinkers produced by class society. [\[11\]](#) To the extent that this is the case (i.e. can be proven theoretically, empirically and practically, otherwise it is in turn an ideological prejudice, a false consciousness), their thoughts are not scientific, or only partially scientific. The scientific researcher must make an effort to separate the scientific seed from the ideological chaff. In other words, there is no “bourgeois” science; but there is a science of “bourgeois” ideologists, i.e. science combined with unscientific ideology. Insofar as it is scientific, it is not bourgeois; insofar as it is bourgeois, it is not scientific.

That a scientist who was trapped in bourgeois ways of thinking would have been able to develop a strictly scientific and complete theory of surplus value, class and state theory is therefore at the least improbable. This is hardly a matter of abstract speculation. History proves that it did not happen. Empirical evidence shows that only through a

complete break with bourgeois society, its ideology and thought forms, and through partisanship for the proletariat were Marx and Engels able to develop a strictly scientific theory of surplus value, class and state. In this sense, there is an indestructible dialectical nexus, if not necessarily between science and emancipation, then at least between emancipation and science, at least in class society. Social science and even more so natural science can develop in separation from any emancipation project. But so far only Marxism, which unites social science and the emancipation project, has proved capable of developing a coherent science that thoroughly reveals and examines all inhuman conditions.

The “categorical imperative” of Marxist politics

In a certain sense, the *Theses on Feuerbach* represent the birth of Marxism. They culminate in this sentence: “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” With this, Marxist thought changes from an anthropologically conditioned obligation (an anthropologically conditioned emancipation project) to a practical political task. Changing the world can only be done by concrete, really existing people: people who are conditioned by their social being and who in bourgeois (and other class societies) are tied to certain social classes. The practical task of abolishing the bondage of humanity thus becomes a practical task of class politics: to recognize the conditions under which one or more social classes can realize this emancipation.

Emancipation can in a small way separate itself from science. It would continue to exist as a project, even if science proved that it could not be fully and permanently realized. But for Marx and a Marxist, it can never separate itself from politics, nor politics from it. At least not if we use the term “politics” in the broadest meaning of the word: all activity that amounts to a collective influence on the changing of state and society (to the point of a classless society and the withering away of the state). Every non-political emancipatory activity is only an emancipatory activity of individuals or of small groups. It remains elitist and excludes the ability of the broadest masses to liberate themselves, even if it aims at a ‘propaganda by deed’.

Historical experience proved that only the revolutionary action of the broad masses in pre-revolutionary and revolutionary situations can radically overthrow all conditions of subjugation. In the process, people themselves radically change. [\[12\]](#) This is politics—revolutionary politics—and it must be prepared systematically and on a long-term basis through continuous action. This requires continuous organization, even in non-revolutionary times. Everything that goes beyond attempts at individual or micro-group emancipation (which in bourgeois society are anyway doomed to failure) is therefore politics, emancipatory, socialist politics.

In general, the criterion of practice is emphasized as the measuring instrument for socialist politics—politics derived from scientific socialism. This is appropriate as only practice can decide whether a particular political activity (“strategy and tactics”, to use rather hackneyed terms) and the scientific hypotheses on which it is based (“analyses and perspectives”) bring us closer to the goal, i.e. whether they are effective. There is no other means of assessing politics than to evaluate its results. The criterion of practice is therefore based on that of effectiveness in relation to the objective.

But what is this objective, and over what time period must effectiveness be measured? Here we encounter major conceptual and analytical difficulties. Is the goal simply “the next step forward”? But what happens if in reality a “next step” turns out to be a bigger obstacle to the following step than was previously recognized or foreseen?

Is the goal only the “change of circumstances” or is it at the same time the self-change of the revolutionary subject? The third thesis on Feuerbach points out the contradiction between mechanical materialism and pure voluntarism that

must be escaped. Can “the next step forward” simply be equated with or at least be subordinated to the end goal? This raises the problem of reform and revolution, of minimum and maximum programmes, and of the mediating category of transition, of transitional goals (slogans, programmes) in its complex whole. As is well known, the organised labour movement has been deeply divided over this issue for a century and has repeatedly split over it. Up to today, political practice has not provided a decisive argument for settling this dispute once and for all.

Practical proletarian class struggle has shown that a total renunciation of manoeuvring, of tactics, of temporary compromises and retreat is unrealistic and impossible. Such a renunciation means facing a heavily armed opponent with the hands tied. But the reverse is equally true. Endless scheming, unlimited willingness to compromise, unprincipled manoeuvres, constant retreats, the fatalistic adaptation to the “relationship of forces” (which are always “unfavourable”) and total exclusion of self-activity, initiative, and action of one’s own class lead to nothing. Rather than bringing us even a millimetre closer to the goal, this leads to permanent defeats.

Marxist Realpolitik is unlike “pure Machiavellianism”, i.e. vulgar Realpolitik, if only because the emancipatory goal is not a small-minded but a radical one: to overturn all conditions in which man is a degraded, enslaved being. Lenin (1920), Trotsky (1938), Rosa Luxemburg (1918) and many other Marxist politicians therefore succinctly put forward the thesis that only such tactics, only such compromises, only such manoeuvres that “raise—not lower—the general level of proletarian class-consciousness, revolutionary spirit, and ability to fight and win” bring us closer to the goal. [[13](#)]

This is also how Lenin’s formula that there is a “communist morality” (ethics), but that “our morality is completely subordinated to the interests of the proletarian class struggle” must be understood. [[14](#)] We fully accept this formula, because in the struggle between large social groups, and certainly between antagonistic social classes, no one has ever respected or even proposed absolute universal moral principles to be consistently applied by both sides. Anyone who claims the opposite is either an ignoramus or a hypocrite. [[15](#)]

But the general formula of the subsumption of socialist interests under that of the proletarian struggle for emancipation only sets out an abstract framework for judging political actions. A concrete assessment of concrete decisions cannot be directly derived from this. When we recognize the dialectical, not the mechanical, unity of theory and practice, we see there is a relative indeterminacy. To a certain degree, judgments on what is of concrete use to the proletarian class struggle have a provisional character. This means that the periodic revision of (provisional) experience, and the (always provisional) stock-taking of the consequences of a particular course of action are absolutely necessary.

That only practical results can be the measuring stick remains without doubt. But practical results of what kind, with what priorities, in what time frame? And who has the right to make such judgements and by what criteria?

Paradoxically, one can by analogy with a well-known sentence by Jean Jaurès conclude that a little “socialist ethics” seems to lead away from the proletarian class struggle, while more “socialist ethics lead to the proletarian class struggle, to the ‘strategy and tactics’ related to the final goal, to a strictly scientifically based class policy, to the self-liberation of the “really existing working class” (the class consisting of the totality of people who are dependent on wages). This is the weak point of the otherwise excellent work of William Ash, *Marxism and Moral Concepts*, which in an uncritical, apologetic way avoids the sticky question of proletarian democracy and proletarian self-organization, in the East as well as in the West. This means avoiding the problem of the bureaucratization of workers’ organizations. [[16](#)]

From this point of view, the formula used by some Marxists who insist on “unity of means and ends” is at least confusing, inaccurate and therefore also wrong. This formulation presupposes a mechanical unity, but we are dealing with a set of contradictions that can only be judged over time by its results. Certain means cannot lead to the goal

because they contradict it too much (because, to again quote Lenin's formula, they diminish the average or general class consciousness of the working people). Other means that lead to temporary, partial successes have long-term effects that are so devastating that nobody would have chosen them if they had known about them beforehand (cf. the long-term effects of Stalin's forced collectivization of agriculture on the social attitude and working morale of the peasants, which today, half a century later, still have not been overcome).

Most of the time, when self-declared Marxists resort to pseudo Realpolitik short cuts we are not only dealing with a pronounced refusal to recognize the complexity of problems, as in the case of bourgeois ideologues. It also shows an astonishing inability to make a critical scientific analysis. When for example Hanke writes that the accelerated industrialization of Russia in the late 1920s was "only" possible through bureaucratic means, this is a pure *petitio principii*. [17] It is by no means a scientifically proven insight, unless one starts out from purely apologetic historicism, assuming that everything that happened was the only rational, possible way to resolve the bundle of contradictions (was then perhaps Hitler also the "only possible" way out of the crisis of the Weimar Republic and the German economic crisis of 1930-33?).

Marxism, on the other hand, sees history in most (but not all) situations as a range of different possibilities, whereby even small shifts in the economic, social, political, organizational conditions of different social classes and strata can lead to completely different results. Otherwise, to repeat, revolutionary politics would be insignificant or even wasted effort.

Nobody has yet given proof that "primitive socialist accumulation", as proposed by the great economic experts of the Left Opposition Eugene Preobrazhensky and Georgy Pyatakov, would not have led to a completely different result. A "primitive socialist accumulation" spread out over the decade 1923-33 instead of being concentrated in the years 1928-32, would not have required forced collectivization nor terror against the peasants or the lowering of living standards of the workers. Only a tolerable taxation of rich peasants and traders would have been necessary. This would have avoided the terrible social tensions of the years 1930-33 which led to mass terror and to the purges. Such industrialization would also have been socio-politically and administratively based on the working class and not on the bureaucracy; it could have led to a resurgence of real soviet democracy instead of the totalitarian dictatorship of the bureaucracy.

The problem of political variants does not only lead to an understanding of the necessity of political pluralism in the labour movement, since only practice can prove who is right and who is wrong (neither "the party" nor "the Central Committee", nor "the" chairman nor "the" general secretary are "always right"; only pluralism ensures rapid correction of inevitable mistakes). It also leads to an understanding of the organic nexus between proletarian, socialist democracy and the construction of socialism, which is not an ethical but an eminently political obligation. This understanding is reflected in the famous sentence by Friedrich Engels in a letter to August Bebel: "You, the Party, need socialist science, and that cannot exist without freedom of movement." [18]

In other words, this calls for the autonomy of science, the freedom of science to ruthlessly expose all contradictions of a situation and its development, without glossing over or keeping silent about things that do not suit "the Party". Adhering to strictly scientific criteria for truth is not a luxury for "better times". It is an absolute precondition for socialist politics, not in the sense that the "educated" and the "competent" should dictate socialist politics in place of the "raw masses". Not at all. But certainly in the sense that they have to provide the "raw masses" with all the necessary analytical tools to make the right decisions. [19]

This whole problem thus ultimately leads back to the issue of emancipation. The unique nature of the socialist revolution towards classless society is that it can only be realized as a conscious project. It cannot be derived "organically" from the development of bourgeois society. For the first time in history a class that is not already economically dominant but economically oppressed, the proletariat, has to reshape society. To this end it must

conquer political power. The goal can only be achieved through the self-organization and self-activity of the broad proletarian masses.

This in no way contradicts Lenin's concept of a vanguard party. The need for such a party is conditioned by the social heterogeneity of the proletariat and of its consciousness as well as by the discontinuity of mass activity. But it does imply, as Lenin put it in 1907, that such a concept can only be realized in the concrete context of a truly revolutionary social class, which is won over (and not administratively forced to accept) a specific programme and strategy, a specific politics.

In all aspects of Marxism, emancipation, science and politics thus come together. On the level of 'pure' theory, on the level of applied theory and on the level of daily political practice. Only a politics which, on small and large scale, raises the class consciousness, the self-confidence and the capacity for self-action of broad masses corresponds to Marxist criteria.

Hence, the spirit of Marxism is best summarized in the second verse of the Internationale:

No saviour from on high delivers

No faith have we in prince or peer

Our own right hand the chains must shiver

Chains of hatred, greed and fear.

* * *

Translated by Alex De Jong for the [IIRE](#).

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[1] Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Introduction", in *Early Writings* (London, 1975), p. 251.

[2] Two quotations suffice: "As soon as labour in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and hence exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use value. *The surplus labour of the mass* has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as the *non-labour of the few*, for the development of the general powers of the human head. With that, production based on exchange value breaks down, and the direct, material production process is stripped of the form of penury and antithesis. *The free development of individualities*, and hence not the reduction of necessary labour time so as to posit surplus labour, but rather the general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, which then corresponds to the *artistic, scientific etc. development of the individuals in the time set free*, and with the means created, for all of them." Marx, *Grundrisse*, Notebook VII, The Chapter on Capital, online at [marxists.org](#). Emphasis added by Mandel.

"Fanatically bent on making value expand itself, he ruthlessly forces the human race to produce for production's sake; he thus forces the

development of the productive powers of society, and creates those material conditions, which alone can form the real basis of a higher form of society, a society in which the full and free development of every individual forms the ruling principle." Max, *Capital*, Chapter Twenty-Four: Conversion of Surplus-Value into Capital, online at marxists.org Emphasis added by Mandel.

[3] The best example is Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London, 1945).

[4] This of course does not mean that Marx and Engels made no mistakes in wider questions than the emancipation of the working class. Engels' rejection of the right to self-determination and national existence of the smaller Slavic peoples does not withstand an objective critique. See Roman Rosdolsky, *Engels and the 'Nonhistoric' Peoples: the National Question in the Revolution of 1848* (Glasgow, 1987). The same applies to Marx's contention that the loss of California by "the lazy Mexicans" was progressive.

[5] "It was slavery that first made possible the division of labour between agriculture and industry on a larger scale, and thereby also Hellenism, the flowering of the ancient world. Without slavery, no Greek state, no Greek art and science, without slavery, no Roman Empire. But without the basis laid by Hellenism and the Roman Empire, also no modern Europe. We should never forget that our whole economic, political and intellectual development presupposes a state of things in which slavery was as necessary as it was universally recognised. In this sense we are entitled to say: Without the slavery of antiquity no modern socialism," in *Anti-Dühring* by Frederick Engels 1877, online at marxists.org.

[6] It is interesting to keep in mind that reactionary, anti-socialist ideologues like the Russian dissident Igor Shafarevich cannot comprehend the socialist support for all liberation struggles of all exploited classes in history, regardless of the chances of success. See *The Socialist Phenomenon* (New York, 1980). Still, such ideologues pretend to represent moral principles. Is it moral to remain neutral or even condemn a revolt of slaves? Was the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising not justified maybe? What "negative" results did it have?

[7] We can quote countless authors. It suffices to list John Strachey, *Contemporary Capitalism* (New York/London, 1956), Herbert Ehrenberg, *Zwischen Marx und Markt. Konturen einer infrastrukturierten und verteilungswirksamen Wirtschaftspolitik* (Frankfurt am Main, 1973) and Paul Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital: An essay on the American economic and social order* (New York, 1966). For a different view, see Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London, 1999).

[8] Ernest Mandel, *La Crise 1974-1982. Les faits, leur interprétation marxiste* (Paris, 1982), chapter 16.

[9] Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (Moscow, 1968), p. 119. Online at marxists.org.

[10] Rudolf Hilferding wrote: "so far as Marxism is concerned the sole aim of any inquiry – even into matters of policy – is the discovery of causal relationships. To know the laws of commodity-producing society is to be able, at the same time, to disclose the causal factors which determine the willed decisions of the various classes of this society. According to the Marxist conception, the explanation of how such class decisions are determined is the task of a scientific, that is to say a causal, analysis of policy. The practice of Marxism, as well as its theory, is free from value judgements. [...] But acceptance of the validity of Marxism, including a recognition of the necessity of socialism, is no more a matter of value judgement than it is a guide to practical action. [...] It is quite possible for someone who is convinced that socialism will triumph in the end to join in the fight against." Preface to *Finance Capital*, 1910, online at marxists.org. Similar views were already voiced by Karl Kautsky, *Ethik und Materialistische Geschichtsauffassung. Ein Versuch* (Stuttgart, 1906). See Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy* (New York, 2008), especially p. 60-98.

[11] Probably the best example is that one of the greatest thinkers in history, Aristoteles, was unable to avoid the ideology of the slave society in which he lived and which spoke of the 'non-humanity' (or shall we say in Nazi-jargon, the 'subhumanity'?) of slaves.

[12] See *The German Ideology* (1845-6) "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." Online at marxists.org.

[13] V.I. Lenin, *'Left-Wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, 1968 [1920], online at marxists.org, Leon Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours*, 1938,

online at marxists.org, Rosa Luxemburg, *What Does the Spartacus League Want?*, 1971 [1918], online at marxists.org.

[14] V.I. Lenin, *The Tasks of the Youth Leagues* [1920], online at marxists.org.

[15] Marx and Marxists are often criticized for supposedly having double moral standards. For example, see Julien Freund, 'La Double Moral', in *Comprendre – Revue de politique et culture*, 45/36, 1981, pp. 42-59, especially pp. 46, 49. We are clearly dealing here with a confusion over terms, similar to the one that leads to the objection that Marx "considered" labour power a commodity. Marx and the Marxists conclude the existence of certain wrongs and try to explain those in order to change them. It is absurd to blame them for the existence of such wrongs when they merely state a certain reality. As we already said; only an ignoramus or a hypocrite can deny that in history so far there exist double moral standards. For example in the relations between social groups, classes, states etcetera the rule "Thou shalt not kill" is not applied even though it is normally upheld in individual relationships. And it is in the first place the ruling classes that do not obey this imperative! The problem amounts to the question whether the evil of double standards can be overcome if in the fight for a classless society revolutionaries tie their own hands by renouncing the use of force. The contradictions in which one gets caught up as result of such a dogma have become especially clear in light of the experience of fascism (consider the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943).

[16] William F. Ash, *Marxism and Moral Concepts* (New York, 1964).

[17] See the letter of Rudi Hanke to Isaac Deutscher of 26.4.1956 included in Hermann Weber (ed.) *Unabhängige Kommunisten: Der Briefwechsel zwischen Heinrich Brandler und Isaac Deutscher, 1949 bis 1967* (Berlin, 1981), p. 231.

[18] Letter from Friedrich Engels to August Bebel, May 12, 1891 in *MEW*, vol. 38, p. 94.

[19] Obviously we are aware this is no magical formula that solves all the problems of political praxis but only describes a general framework in which to look for answers.