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Introduction

Georgina Blakeley and Valerie Bryson

Until the late 1980s, socialist and Marxist theories were an important strand in academic and public policy debates in the west. A rich, complex and fiercely contested body of thought, they provided a language and an analytical basis for radical critiques of both western and so-called communist societies, and claimed to provide the key to understanding both how societies function and how they might be changed for the better. As such, they were the starting point for a wide range of radical political movements. Concepts such as capitalism, imperialism, oppression and class were underpinned by a distinctive methodology that was grounded in conditions of material life and that rejected the individualistic assumptions of liberal thought. This gave rise to an analysis of the class-based nature of state power, linked to radical interpretations of equality and democracy, which many believed could only be achieved through international class struggle and revolution.

In recent years, however, such approaches have been widely abandoned, shorn of their radical associations or replaced by such newly fashionable concepts as social capital, empowerment and the 'Third Way'. These 'new' concepts do not align themselves clearly with discrete ideological perspectives, but are used and endorsed by those from both the left and the right of the political spectrum. In contrast, the classic concepts of the left often seem to be the 'four-letter words' of political discourse, no longer to be articulated in polite company. Their theoretical building blocks have also fallen into a degree of disuse and disrepute, while the previously radical vocabulary of democracy and equality has been watered down to such an extent that even conservatives can claim these concepts as their own.

It would, however, be premature to consign radical approaches to the dustbin of history. Some theorists and activists have always insisted on their relevance. More generally, and contrary to the 'End of History' heralded by Fukuyama, we are living in an era in which the assumptions of liberal democracy and free market capitalism are facing national and international challenges, and the growing worldwide

anti-capitalist movements show that belief in the possibility of emancipatory politics is certainly not dead. In this context, there has been something of a revival of interest in alternatives to liberalism, and it seems timely to re-examine the rich and complex perspectives provided by socialist and Marxist theory.

This volume, which brings together the work of academics from a range of disciplines, reflects both a desire to think beyond the narrow confines of liberalism and the belief that, although the classic concepts of the left have sometimes been misused and misunderstood, they can make important contributions to radical political analysis today. Its starting point is an agreement with Marx's claim that theory should not be an abstract end in itself, but a means to understanding society in order to improve it. It therefore aims at providing a critical exposition of key concepts and ideas which is not only accessible but also grounded in practical concerns, so that concepts are applied to specific historical situations rather than treated as universal abstractions, and particular contemporary issues and debates can be understood in a wider context. As such, it is relevant for all those interested in exploring radical alternatives to existing society, be they academics, students, political activists or simply concerned citizens.

However, the authors are aware that the traditional left has not always provided a welcoming home for radicals. Rather, it has often seemed inhospitably jargon-ridden and dogmatic, with a rigid and impenetrable theoretical framework which allows no space for new forms of political engagement or creativity and may be hostile to non-class-based movements such as feminism. This book, therefore, aims to disentangle the potential insights of Marxist thought from the rigid interpretations of some of Marx's more dogmatic followers; in this context it is worth remembering that, according to Engels, Marx said 'I am not a Marxist' (1970:679).

The contributors are united by the belief that western liberal democracy is not 'as good as it gets', and many explicitly criticise the shortcomings of dominant conceptions of democracy and equality. They are also agreed that traditional Marxist approaches provide a starting point from which to understand and critique the world in which we live. In particular, there is general agreement on the need to ground theory in materialist analysis.

A number of other themes also run through the book. Perhaps the most important of these is the above-mentioned belief that theory should be judged by its usefulness, and that it should therefore be

applicable to specific historical situations. Rather than indulging in what E.P. Thompson (1978:384) eloquently referred to as 'Capital navel scrutinising', the authors believe that concepts are only useful if they can be applied to the 'reality' around us rather than treated as universal abstractions. Marx, after all, was as much a practitioner as he was a theorist. Moreover, a useful theory is one that recognises complexity and ambiguity rather than attempting to provide neat categories that gloss over these, and the contributors believe that if Marxism is to be useful, it should not be seen as a rigid and formulaic doctrine. They therefore take the ambiguities in Marx's work seriously and none offers an entirely uncritical defence of his thought. Much of the contemporary repudiation of Marxist theory comes from the mistaken, almost messianic, belief, shared by critics as much as by followers, that it constitutes a universal 'meta-theory'. On the contrary, we should not expect it to provide answers to all of the questions thrown up by the world around us.

General agreement at this level means that none of the contributors interprets Marxism as a doctrine of economic determinism. This in turn means that such issues as the relationship between objective interests and class consciousness, or the extent to which the state, politics and ideology may be autonomous from class interests, are not predetermined but are likely to be highly variable – and such variation is something to be explored. It also means that local, national and global concerns cannot be understood separately: for local and national issues occur in a global context, while global issues are experienced in specific national and local situations.

Another running theme, more explicit in some chapters than others, is the belief that capitalism is an increasingly inefficient, conflict-ridden and self-destructive mode of production. This is linked to a sense of moral concern and indignation about the hypocrisies and suffering of capitalist class societies, and the belief that, as well as providing indispensable tools of analysis, Marxism can help provide an alternative set of ethical values and goals.

The contributors to the volume are not, however, in full agreement on all issues. On the contrary, they disagree over the likelihood or desirability of proletarian revolution, the nature and significance of non-class-based oppressions, and the possibility of achieving meaningful social change short of revolution. They also place differing degrees of emphasis on ideology and the role of ethical theory. The importance of these differences should not be understated. Nevertheless, all are agreed that Marxist thought still

provides a relevant starting point for both interpretations of the world and attempts to change it.

Deciding in which order to present the chapters has not been straightforward. Historical materialism provided the methodological foundations for Marx's thought, while capitalism was the primary focus of his analysis. As such, they were the obvious choices for the first two chapters. The concepts and issues discussed in later chapters are, however, inherently interconnected, with debates in one area having consequences for and being influenced by those in others. The chapter ordering that follows might be logically defended as a progression from key concepts, to issues of political practice, to the analysis of goals. However, this would be to impose the kind of schematic reductionism that we are anxious to avoid. Like the 'reality' it seeks to analyse, the world of theory is inherently messy: the chapters do not fit into neat categories, and they could have been ordered quite differently.

THE CHAPTERS

The theme of historical specificity is clearly established in Philip Wood's opening chapter on *historical materialism*. Rather than treating this as an abstract theory of economic determinism, he advocates a more open-ended approach which, through a 'turn to the concrete', can acknowledge and analyse the role of politics and ideas as well as economics in producing particular outcomes. He applies this to the racialisation and expansion of the American prison system, and argues convincingly that, while there are clear problems with using a more rigid and orthodox version of historical materialism to interpret this, a revisionist approach provides a sound basis for analysis.

Keith Faulks similarly refuses to reduce *capitalism* to either an abstract set of principles or to its economic arrangements. Drawing on humanistic elements in Marxist thought as well as Marx's economic analysis, Faulks analyses capitalism's changing historical manifestations and the distinctive political/value system that these have entailed. In terms of the world today, this enables him to combine a trenchant critique of the dehumanising consequences of capitalist values with an analysis of capitalism's increasingly negative economic consequences, particularly its generation of large-scale inequalities and its inability to confront such global problems as environmental damage. He finds that Marx's diagnosis of the 'deeply pathological nature' of capitalism remains powerfully relevant today, and argues

that it should be central to building an alternative. Faulks is in broad agreement with the authors of later chapters in maintaining that the state both consistently serves capitalist interests and does so in a range of ways, and that capitalism is in stark opposition to key principles of democracy. However, in contrast to Paul Blackledge's later chapter, he does not see proletarian revolution as a likely or desirable way forward. Indeed, he argues that a resort to violence will be counter-productive, and that radicals should instead work to connect more closely with mainstream politics.

As with the first two chapters, Peter McLaverty's discussion of *class* interprets Marxism as a flexible theory and rejects the view that politics can simply be 'read off' from economics. He argues both that defining the working class can never be straightforward, and that there is no necessary link between economic class position, political interest and political action. While he agrees that class remains critically important to the analysis of contemporary society and that class should not be written off as a mobilising force, he insists that there is nothing inevitable about the development of class-based politics. This provides the basis for an open-ended approach to contemporary society which recognises that interests cannot always be reduced to class position and stresses the importance of subjectivity in the development of political consciousness. This in turn means that we must recognise the continuing relevance of ethics and ideas of social justice to the development of progressive politics, and that the relationship between traditional forms of class politics and new movements against global capitalism remains an open question.

Andrew Taylor's chapter on *the state* is even more pessimistic about the potential for radical working-class consciousness and anti-capitalist change. Drawing on the analyses of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Gramsci, he both rejects the view that the nature and activities of the state are economically determined and argues that the modern representative state does nevertheless have a universal function in serving the interest of the economically dominant capitalist class by maintaining a class compromise. This compromise means that capitalists no longer rule directly, and may indeed have to accept particular state policies that are against their immediate interests. However, it secures the long-term interests of capitalism, by securing ideological domination and the integration of the working class into the state. In particular, Taylor uses rational choice theory to argue that the democratic electoral cycle protects capitalism, because, although workers would benefit in the long term from a move to socialism, in

the short term such a move would produce acute economic costs; a government that introduced socialist measures would therefore not be re-elected. The short-term costs of revolution would be even greater; most workers therefore support state repression of revolutionaries, who are seen as a threat to their economic security. This explains why class compromise has been able to survive so much longer than Marx expected, and Taylor agrees with Lenin that democracy provides 'the best political shell' for capitalism. However, the modern representative state remains inherently both coercive and unstable: because the conditions in which compromise emerged were historically specific, class compromise can never be final and the interests of capitalists and workers remain opposed.

A useful concept alerts us to things we might not otherwise see, and may help us challenge dominant versions of 'reality'. Graham Harrison's chapter suggests that *imperialism* can perform this function by exposing the violently negative impact of capitalism as it has expanded beyond the west. Harrison provides a powerful exposition of the hypocrisy that lies at the heart of global capital accumulation by contrasting the dominant rhetoric of development and progress with the reality of mass dispossession, insecurity, war and environmental degradation. Although Marx himself did not use the term imperialism, Harrison traces this critique of bourgeois hypocrisy back to original Marxism and finds it to be a common theme as the concept of imperialism has developed. However, its history has also been highly erratic and uneven, leading Harrison to describe imperialism as a 'radically elastic' concept, giving rise to a range of competing approaches and strong disagreement over the nature, causes and significance of the economic processes involved. The concept also has a shifting relationship (sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting) with dependency theory. Despite these difficulties, and although the full potential of imperialism as a concept has yet to be explored, Harrison argues that it remains the most appropriate theoretical starting point for developing a critique of the double standards of global capitalism. Not only does the concept highlight the misery and destruction that theories of globalisation ignore or marginalise, but it enables us to see these as the historically structured outcomes of a capitalist 'heartland' and to analyse the ways in which inequalities of power between states are intertwined with the combined and uneven development of capitalism. Such analysis places the 'war against terrorism' in a wider politico-economic context and suggests that we

have to understand it in relation to strategic economic thinking in the United States. It also leads us to expect that, as well as producing inequality, the processes of global capitalist expansion will produce resistance, although Harrison does not attempt to discuss whether or not we can expect this to succeed.

Marx's critique of the manufacturing *division of labour*, explored in Renzo Llorente's chapter, was central to his condemnation of capitalism as both destructive of human potential and ultimately inefficient. Llorente shows that although classical economists and sociologists such as Smith and Durkheim claimed that an extensive division of labour was economically and socially beneficial, they acknowledged that it also had harmful effects, such as the loss of mental, social and physical capacity on the part of the worker. Llorente draws on recent research to support Marx's analysis of the detrimental effects of the extensive division of labour on human well-being. He agrees with Marx both that such human impoverishment and disempowerment are not a price worth paying, and that after a point the division of labour hinders the greater productivity, autonomy and social cohesion it is supposed to provide. Although the division of labour has received only limited attention on the left in recent years, Llorente argues that its critique remains highly relevant, particularly in formulating and justifying demands for people to be enabled to realise their potential through 'a right to meaningful work'. As such, it will, he says 'rightly continue to provide inspiration and orientation for emancipatory social theory'.

Marxist analysis has usually focused on class as the primary social division, and in her chapter on *oppression* Mary Davis agrees that this is right. However, she also argues that class has usually been seen through a white and male lens, and that the specific oppression of women and black people is not reducible to their class position. Understanding this, she says, enables us to see the ways in which class exploitation is maintained by sex and race oppressions. Not only are these oppressions materially linked to capitalist class interests (as they enable the super-exploitation of women and black people at the point of production), but they also serve a critical ideological function by preventing the unity of the working class. This means both that if we are to analyse class society we must examine oppression, and that oppression cannot be understood outside of its class context. At a practical level, it means that working-class politics must be based on the recognition that most workers are not white men, while those

opposing racist and sexist divisions can only hope to do so as part of a wider movement aimed at ending class society.

The claim that male perspectives see only half the picture is reiterated by Valerie Bryson in her chapter on *production and reproduction*. She returns to the classic concept of historical materialism, and argues that the insights therein have been limited by a narrow view of productive work which excludes the socially necessary labour that is disproportionately performed by women. She argues that biological reproduction, domestic work, caring activities and human sexuality are neither naturally given nor by-products of productive activity as conventionally understood. On the contrary, they are a part of human history and at times have their own dynamic. This means that they must be included in any materialist analysis, and she introduces the term '(re)production' to refer to this hitherto invisible aspect of productive life. From this reformulated materialist perspective, challenging oppressive conditions of (re)production is a central economic issue which should be treated as a political priority by men as well as women.

The first eight chapters agree that capitalism's inhumanity and/or exploitation should be condemned and that it is in the long-term interests of the majority to challenge it. However, while there is a general sense that the growing anti-capitalist movements give some grounds for optimism, none appears to think radical change is imminent, and several are decidedly pessimistic. In contrast, Paul Blackledge's chapter on *revolution* argues that the revolutionary transformation of society is not only possible but necessary and desirable, although not inevitable. He argues that, although involvement in reform movements should not be rejected, reform alone cannot bring about a radically better society: it cannot solve the economic crises inherent in the capitalist system, it cannot achieve any fundamental change to its social relations, and it is only by participating in the democratic revolutionary process that working people will become fit to rule themselves. Blackledge does not see working-class revolution or victory as any kind of automatic outcome of capitalist development. Rather, he argues that it will be fiercely opposed and, like Andrew Taylor, he expects the ruling class to use all the coercive and ideological weapons at its disposal. Nevertheless, unlike Taylor, he finds grounds for optimism about the prospects for the growth of a mass revolutionary socialist movement. If such a movement is to achieve its goals, he says, it must be led by ordinary workers, grounded in workers' own experience of capitalism and

expressing a collective growth of class consciousness. In reaching this understanding, Blackledge draws on contemporary theory, but argues that it is necessary to return to the key concepts of original Marxism to understand the ways in which the socialist political project must be informed by a scientific analysis of capitalism, but cannot be reduced to it.

For Blackledge, the revolutionary proletarian movement is clearly international, and there is general agreement amongst the contributors that, because capitalism is a global economic system, effective movements for change will have to transcend national boundaries. This point is addressed directly by Mark O'Brien in his chapter on *working-class internationalism*. He accepts Marx's original claim that capitalism's increasingly international character means both that working-class struggle has an international dimension and that in their own interests workers in imperialist nations should support movements elsewhere against colonial oppression. He also agrees with Marx that this will not be an automatic development, and he cautions that in terms of practical strategy the relevance of internationalism will be highly variable. In surveying the uneven history of internationalism, O'Brien stresses its ideological as well as economic significance. Like McLaverty in Chapter 3, he sees the importance of ethical ideals of social justice in the development of consciousness and unity. He argues that working-class internationalism has the potential to provide such a transformative vision, and he finds particular grounds for optimism in the involvement of organised labour in a range of new international movements against capitalism and for social justice.

As the final two chapters show, the concepts of *equality* and *democracy* have long provided the inspiration for such a transformative vision. Both have, however, frequently been used in much more limited ways, and the chapters argue that the radical potential of these concepts should be reclaimed. Brendan Evans identifies a continuum from Marxist to social-democratic to social-liberal conceptions of equality within the socialist tradition, and argues that only the first enables us either to think beyond the confines of the status quo or to understand its nature. He argues that the contemporary focus on equality of opportunity represents a degradation of the concept, which seeks to redistribute inequalities rather than challenge them and obscures the underlying reality that 'the dynamic of capitalism is unequal rewards' and that the needs of capital and labour are inevitably in conflict. In contrast, Marx's vision of a society in which

people contribute what they can and receive according to their needs may be utopian at present, but it is the basis both for more robustly egalitarian policies and for alternative ethical values.

As Georgina Blakeley shows, the concept of democracy today is equated with liberal democracy, and its original Athenian meaning, which linked it to the working class, has been forgotten. Marxist analysis, however, enables us to see that liberal democracy is simply one historically specific and very limited form of democracy, which has been made possible by capitalism's separation of economic and political power. At the same time, Marxism enables us both to envision a radically different model of working-class democracy, and to understand that this cannot be realised without fundamental economic change. Blakeley argues that, by abandoning material analysis, post-Marxists have lost these insights, and are left with a severely impoverished theory of democracy. Echoing Wood's arguments in the opening chapter, she also insists that, if it is to help us develop effective political strategies, democratic theory must undertake the difficult task of 'returning to the concrete', rather than remaining at the level of abstraction. Moreover, as Blakeley argues, the challenge lies in applying Marxist theory to those parts of the world where capitalism appears in its most blatant form. In this respect, though liberal democracy may well have triumphed over communism in the short term, the celebrations which accompanied this victory may well have been premature. The problems which inspired the communist challenge in the first place are still very much apparent, and it is indeed questionable whether or not liberal democracy, as opposed to Marxism, can provide either the 'means or ideals' to confront them.

CONCLUSION

The chapters in this book show that radical debate today is alive and well. Taken together, they provide a powerful argument for the continuing relevance and importance of classical Marxism, not only as a means of understanding the contemporary world and developing more realistic political strategies, but also as a rich source of inspiration that enables us to think beyond the ethical limitations of existing society. This does not mean that Marxism provides all the answers or any ready-made formulae. The problems the chapters are grappling with are much too complex for that, and Marxism itself is full of ambiguities. It is however an indispensable starting point.

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