

Marx in his Time

Marxism is not a dogma, not a record of the sayings and doings of Karl Marx to be carefully preserved and uncritically applied whatever the circumstances. Marxism is a method of assessing what, at any particular time, is in the best interest of the working class and should be done to hasten the establishment of Socialism.

Marx was born in 1818 and died in 1883. He became a Socialist around the end of 1843 so his period of socialist political activity covered nearly forty years between 1843 and 1883. Inevitably, and in accordance with his own theories, Marx's political activity to further the cause of Socialism was shaped by the conditions of this time. Let us recall what those conditions were.

Capitalism was then a comparative new social system, still in its phase of expansion. By today's standards its technology, though immensely productive compared with what went before, was backward being based on coal and iron. The electric motor and the diesel engine were unknown; transport was by steam locomotive or horse-drawn carriage; houses and streets were lit by gas; many - no, most - workers were still employed in small workshops not the large factories we know today.

On the political side too capitalism was still in its growth stage. Capitalist political forms - parliamentary control, a wide suffrage, a professional civil service - only existed in a few countries, and then incompletely. Most of Europe was governed by openly anti-democratic regimes under hereditary rulers supported by a landed aristocracy. The three most powerful of these - Tsarist Russia, Hapsburg Austria and the Kingdom of Prussia - constituted a permanent threat to capitalist political forms wherever they had begun to be established.

Marx, in short, was politically active in an age when capitalism had yet to become the dominant world system, economically or politically. This decisively shaped his political tactics. Since he believed that capitalism paved the way for Socialism and that it still had part of this work to do, he advocated that, in this circumstance, socialists ought to work not only for Socialism but also for the progress of capitalism at the expense of reactionary political and social forms. This involved Marx in supporting campaigns to establish political democracy or which he felt would have the effect of stabilizing or protecting it. So we find him supporting independence for Ireland in order to weaken the power of the English landed aristocracy, who were an obstacle to the development of political democracy in Britain, and Polish independence in order to set up a buffer state between Tsarist Russia and the rest of Europe so as to give political democracy a chance to develop there.

Marx in fact was very anti-Tsarist Russia, so much so that it led him to support the British-French side in the Crimean war (a clear error of judgement in our view) and to be lukewarm about Slav movements for independence from Austria or Turkey (which at least shows that Marx never supported independence movements because he believed in some mythical abstract "right to self-determination for small nations"). Marx supported the establishment of centralized States in

Germany and Italy as he felt this would allow a more rapid capitalist development in these countries; and he supported the North in the American Civil War since he felt that a victory for the slave-owning South would slow down the development of capitalism in America.

These policies made certain sense at a time when capitalism had not yet fully created the material basis for Socialism as a means of hastening this. But once capitalism had done this, as it did within thirty years of Marx's death, then they became, in accordance with Marx's own theory, outdated and reactionary. The thirty years following Marx's death saw the electrification of industry, the invention of the internal combustion engine, the coming of radio and other technological developments which clearly showed that the problem of production had been solved, that scarcity had finally been conquered and that mankind could at last begin to enjoy the benefits of the forced labour of past generations of toiling producers - provided they abolished capitalism and established Socialism. Then in 1914 came the aptly-named first world war which marked the emergence of capitalism as the unchallenged and predominating world system and ended in the break-up of the three reactionary Empires Marx had seen as threats to democratic and socialist advance in his time.

In these changed circumstances, an application of the Marxist method showed that Socialists need no longer help capitalism prepare the way for Socialism - it had now done this and so became a completely reactionary social system - but should rather concentrate exclusively on encouraging the growth of socialist consciousness and organization amongst the working class. This has been the policy of the Socialist Party of Great Britain since our formation in 1904 and why we have always refused to be sidetracked into advocating or supporting democratic or social reforms or movements to set up new States or to take sides in wars.

There is one other problem that concerned Marx which the further development of capitalism since his day has solved: the transition to Socialism. Living in the age he did when, as we saw, capitalism had not yet fully created the material basis for Socialism, Marx stated, when pressed on the question, that had the working class won political power at that time (which we can now see was most unlikely in view of its political immaturity, indeed in view of the fact that many of them still worked in petty industry) there would have had to be a longish period during which, first, control of the not yet fully socialized means of production would be centralized in the hands of society and then, this done, the means of production would be rapidly developed towards the stage at which they could provide plenty for all. In the meantime, even on the basis of the common ownership and democratic control of the means of production, consumption would have to be restricted (Marx mentioned labour-time vouchers as a possible way of doing this). Free access according to individual needs could not be implemented till the means of production had been further developed. Marx did not mention how long he felt this might take but, judging by the subsequent technological advance under capitalism it could have been up to thirty years.

Once again this perspective made some sense in Marx's day, but not now. Today "transition periods", "revolutionary dictatorships", "labour-time vouchers",

"first phases of socialism" are irrelevant, nineteenth-century concepts. Full free access to goods and services can be introduced almost immediately after Socialism has been established, and Socialism can be established almost immediately after the socialist-minded working class wins political power. This is what Marxism implies today and why we in the Socialist Party of Great Britain feel fully justified in claiming to be the Marxists of the twentieth century.

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