

Rediscovering Marx

Michael A Lebowitz

It is well known that when Karl Marx heard what people calling themselves Marxists were saying, he commented, “all I know is that I am not a Marxist”. It is not as well known, however, that Marx had little respect for disciples in general. A theory disintegrates, he said, when disciples try to “explain away” problems in the theory—when they engage in “crass empiricism”, use “phrases in a scholastic way”, and employ “cunning argument” to support the theory. A theory disintegrates, he said, when the point of departure of the disciples is “no longer reality” but the theory that the master produced.

Although Marx had in mind what had happened to the theories of Hegel and Ricardo at the hands of their disciples, the problem he detected applies to his own theory. Marx has had too many disciples—too many people who simply repeat the theory, too many people who argue endlessly that it is correct in the form that Marx left it. These are people whose mantra is the “two whatevers”—whatever is in *Capital* is right, whatever is not in *Capital* is wrong. With a dialectical perspective, however, one should recognise that what is outside *Capital* is essential to understand what is inside it.

Among other things, *Grundrisse notebooks* (1857-8) are filled with a discussion of needs. And, indeed, Marx noted there that the contemporary power of capital is based upon the creation of new needs for workers. (Can one deny the significance of the constant generation of needs by capital, of the power that consumerism gives capital?) But, where was the discussion of the needs of workers in *Capital*? Further, Marx explained that he would assume that the standard of necessity of workers was given for a given time and place, but that this assumption would be removed in the book on wage labour. What book on wage labour? In the *Grundrisse*, Marx indicated that the book on wage labour would be one of his six books (of which *Capital* was only the first).

What happens if one allows the standard of needs of workers, that set of needs which underlies the value of labour power, to vary? It was like pulling on a loose thread. The more one pulled on this thread, the greater the implications that were revealed (and continue to be revealed). Except this is really not a good analogy. Because the theory did not unravel. On the contrary, the theory in *Capital* became so much more consistent with the bulk of Marx's work on politics and struggle. In short, it was more like a chemical experiment—adding an element and producing exciting results.

That Marx's *Capital* is a critique of the political economy of capital—that it is an inner examination and critique of the way things look like from the perspective of capital. That book looks at things from the side of capital and not from the side of the working class. It articulates and develops the goal and impulse of capital, its drive for surplus value, but it does not articulate and develop the alternative goal, what Marx called the worker's own need for development.

Thus, one can see that there is a whole set of alternative categories which are not developed which marxists need to think about. The concept of productive

labour introduced, for example, is productive labour for capital—labour which produces surplus value. What is not explored is productive labour for the worker—labour which supports the education, health and the nurturing of human beings, and which aids in the development of human capacities. The concept of wealth introduced is wealth from the perspective of capital—an accumulation of commodities, an accumulation of money. What is not considered, though, is wealth from the perspective of workers—the full development of their capacities, the creation of what Marx called rich human beings.

However, one does get little glimpses of that alternative political economy of which Marx spoke—the political economy of the working class, the political economy which points to a society in which people are able to develop all their capacities. In that society, “all means for the development of production” do not cripple workers and turn them into fragments of human beings, “alienated from the intellectual potentialities of the labour process”. That is a society in which productive forces are not infected by capital's need to divide workers; that is a society in which “the original sources of wealth”, human beings and nature, are not destroyed because they are only means to capital's goal.

Marx refers repeatedly to capitalism and capitalist relations as an inversion, an inversion of this alternative society. Nowhere, though, does he describe that society; rather, it is his premise. In this respect, Marx's *Capital* is not neutral science. Rather, *Capital* is filled with indignation, hatred of the system that exploits and, even worse, destroys human beings. How can one read *Capital* without recognising that his condemnation of capitalism is from the perspective of that inverse situation in which means of production are used to satisfy “the worker's own need for development”? When one recognises Marx's understanding of real wealth as the development of human capacities, one understands the horror implied in the opening sentence of *Capital*, where he describes a society in which wealth appears as “an immense collection of commodities”.

Indeed, one of the most important findings flowing from this particular intellectual experiment is the recognition that Marx's focus upon human development and the development of human capacities is present in *Capital* as a spectre haunting the political economy of capital. The importance of human development is essential there just as it is in his other works. Of course, Marx does not think of human development as falling from the sky, as coming as a gift from above, or as a present for those who have been good enough to develop productive forces. Always central to his conception is that people produce themselves through their activity—in other words, that “simultaneous changing of circumstances and human activity or self-change”, which he defined as “revolutionary practice”.

People transform themselves through their activity. The particular kind of activity in which people function within capitalism produces a particular kind of person. This concept of the key link of human development and practice, which is Marx's concept of revolutionary practice, thus points to the importance for the development of socialist human beings of democratic practices and protagonism at the level of neighbourhoods, communities, workplaces and society as a whole. It points to the necessity for the simultaneous development of socialist

productive forces and socialist human beings—that concept of which Che Guevara spoke. □□□

[source : [http://mail.google.com/mail#label/Marxlab/124 feb8b6c lab579](http://mail.google.com/mail#label/Marxlab/124%20feb8b6c%20lab579)]d crit