

Karl Marx and the Global Economic Crisis

Are we getting good Marx? I think not

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I often wonder how Karl Marx would react were he to find himself here, right now? After all, he too lived through momentous and world-changing times, perhaps even more so than the changes we are experiencing, given that his was the world that gave birth to the rise of the Machine and capitalism as we know it. Born on the cusp so-to-speak and I too, was born on the cusp, 23 July, 1945, a couple of weeks before the empire showed the world that it was truly barbarian when it dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

I also caught the tail-end of 20th century socialist culture, warts an' all. But I did more than just catch the tail-end, I inherited the culture of the two generations of lefties that preceded mine, one that stretched from here in the UK to the edge of the Black Sea. Worker intellectuals are a unique product of the Industrial Revolution, my father was one of them. Self-taught, multi-skilled (and talented), *his* father started out working for some lordship or other as a plantsman, growing orchids I think; moved to the city where he managed a Cross & Blackwell warehouse. He was a socialist by nature, a believer in 'natural justice' and he communicated it to all of his eight kids.

On the other side, my mother's family were first generation immigrants from Russia who got here some time in the late 19th century and they brought with them their Russian/Jewish socialist experiences. The connection between the two families is of course politics, a shared culture of struggle and ideas. Fascinating really, and I'm really very lucky to have been born into it as it gave me a unique window through which to view the world.

Okay, the 17th century was the real incubator of capitalism, the world of Hobbes and his *Leviathan*, the world where the European merchants and their banker pals, fat from slavery, trade and general pillage of the known planet, were able to finance those nascent scientific/philosophical investigations that produced, amongst other things, the idea that a human being could be reduced to a mere machine, a collection of gears, pulleys, springs and levers.

"Life is but a motion of limbs... For what is the heart, but a spring; and the nerves, but so many strings; and the joints but so many wheels, giving motion to the whole body." — Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1650)

The entire period has been named the Age of Reason by our historians, though its contemporaries knew it as the Iron Century, and with good reasons all their own. It was by any standard a rapacious age and full of itself, much like the USA of today as it happens and the similarities are not coincidental.

What strikes me about the political life of the past, that is up until the 20th century, is how much more intimate and personal it was, perhaps because of the smaller scale of things. I think for example that in the latter half of the 17th century there were some 600 newspapers being printed in London. Most were a single page and some were considered subversive and could result in the publisher doing time under the Sedition laws. Nevertheless and even though it was mostly the affluent producing these 'penny papers', it reveals the fact that a new consciousness was emerging, one that challenged the hegemony of church and state.

Commensurately, during Marx's time, progressive political life was truly international in scope. Marx and his peers were known and read and acted on, right across Europe and beyond. When the working class organized and they started to create their *own* political culture, it changed the way they thought about themselves. No longer were they the defenceless victims of a ruthless capitalism and its political class, they could organize politically and change things. They discovered that collectively, they had real power to challenge the status quo and over time they acquired the necessary skills and knowledge to formulate an alternate vision of how we should live.

I think particularly of visionaries like William Morris, whose small scale, co-operative/private ventures that fused the artist/crafts person with machine technology, looks remarkably like the kind of sustainable economy that's being put about today, over one hundred years later.

It's the gigantic scale of the economy that's important here, something corporate capitalism created and it's also where the Soviets went wrong. Instead of building a new kind of economy, they copied the capitalist industrial model and tried to make it work like a socialist one, one that ignored the natural environment and also it wasn't very 'efficient'. To justify such a large investment in infrastructure, factories and assembly lines are designed to maximize profit, if they didn't—under capitalism anyway—they would go out of business. But not so in the Soviet Union, it was illegal to fire anyone and everyone was guaranteed a job for life.

The contradiction is obvious, building on such a gigantic scale, and virtually from scratch, required an immense human and material investment and one that could only work through rigid central control, the complete opposite of William Morris and his contemporaries ideas. Instead it was all about 'competing' with the capitalist world, and in the process democracy went out of the window. Not the most auspicious introduction to socialism it's true but it still proved that another world was possible, else why is socialism still on the front burner, in fact more so than it has been for thirty-plus years?

But clearly something went really pear-shaped come the 20th century, the ideas that drove those early socialists were overtaken by events and sadly, instead of building on the real democratic traditions that the 19th century radicals gave birth to, we found ourselves lumbered with same old top-down, we know best setup of the ruling class, something that to this day, haunts what's left of the left and I contend that it's central to the dilemma that confronts us, namely how to produce a coherent and practical alternative to the current barbarism?

The first thing that strikes me is that today's working class bears no resemblance to the working class of Marx's time (or of my father's for that matter) yet the left still operate as if it's a white, male factory thing. With a handful of very large unions that have shrinking

memberships, the biggest of which is the public service union (and the state is the single biggest employer in the UK), talking about them as a revolutionary working class seems lightyears away from the reality.

Yet the 'left' seems not to have noticed the massive transformation that has taken place. Our ruling elite by contrast seem to have a good idea of what section of the working class could possibly challenge the power of capital,

“The Middle Class Proletariat — The middle classes could become a revolutionary class, taking the role envisaged for the proletariat by Marx. The globalization of labour markets and reducing levels of national welfare provision and employment could reduce peoples' attachment to particular states. The growing gap between themselves and a small number of highly visible super-rich individuals might fuel disillusion with meritocracy, while the growing urban under-classes are likely to pose an increasing threat to social order and stability, as the burden of acquired debt and the failure of pension provision begins to bite. Faced by these twin challenges, the world's middle-classes might unite, using access to knowledge, resources and skills to shape transnational processes in their own class interest.” — [UK Ministry of Defence report, The DCDC Global Strategic Trends Programme 2007-2036](#) (Third Edition) p.81, March 2007 (for more on this see, [‘The Obama Phenom or revolving door ‘democracy’](#))

Part of the problem for the left seems to be with the definition of class, the 'middle classes' are not considered working class, yet they sell their labour just as all working people do (at least the MoD describes its managers as members of the proletariat, which is more than the 'left' do). The root of this paradox lies in the fact that the 'middle classes' are seen as somehow in cahoots with capital, they're not really working class, but if that's the case, then so too were the traditional working class who benefited *directly* from colonialism.

As far as our 'left' is concerned the only 'real' working class people are the poor and disenfranchised embraced as the 'underclass', blacks, old people, manual labourers and the unemployed. How this diverse, unorganized and unempowered section of the working class are to be organized to lead a revolution is not revealed to us by those on the left in positions to articulate policies.

And of course, as the MoD paper points out, if the relative privilege of the middle classes, who are after all, the people who make corporate capitalism function, feel that their position is under threat, could they, would they organize to overthrow capitalism in an alliance with the rest of the working class? Not if our existing 'left' has anything to do with it.

This is not a question the 'left' wants to address let alone answer and the reason lies in the lock that the leading members of the 'left' have over debate, trapped as they are in a time warp of their own creation. In turn this brings me back to where I came in, namely the nature of democracy. The theorists on the 'left' invariably occupy positions of power and influence over programmes and policies, they are after all, articulate and educated. So there is more at stake here than mere reputation, you challenge them at your peril when *their* privilege is threatened.

An example of how this works comes to mind: not long after I returned to the UK in 2002 I

went to the founding meeting of the RESPECT party at Friends House in Euston Road, hoping against hope that some new kind of structure would emerge. How wrong can one be! *Deja vu* in operation once again.

It was the usual suspects in control of the proceedings, mostly from the 'Trotskyist' Socialist Workers Party who made it quite clear that any ideas that came from the floor that ran counter to their 'programme' would not be entertained. The reason being, we were told, was that 'contentious' issues, for example, a principled position on immigration and abortion would lose them votes in an election! Pure opportunism in action and worse, the notion of democratic and open debate also vanished in the process. I might add that this is nothing new on the 'left', it has been part of our 'tradition' for decades hidden under the guise of 'democratic centralism', but in actuality it's just centralism, the democratic bit having been jettisoned in the name of 'discipline, comrades'.

How therefore can we be advocating a democratic socialism if we can't tolerate open debate and democratic decision-making within our own structures? Is it any wonder therefore why we can't gain any traction over events or why we are simply not trusted?

No democratic process is perfect, for example in a time of crisis when decisions have to be made literally on the spot, it is unrealistic to engage in a general debate with the members about what to do, but this constitutes an exceptional circumstance and in any case, if meaningful democratic debate and discussion has taken place prior to the 'emergency' and members are confident that the 'leadership' can make the right decisions even if it turns out to be the wrong decision, trust is maintained, lessons are learned and we move on.

It is clear, at least to me, that if we want to complete the revolution initiated by our 19th century brethren, we need to completely restructure the left and the way it operates starting with the way our political structures are organized. No more leadership from on high with dictats being issued to the 'rank and file', or else.

It means a political party composed of two essential elements the first being an elected administrative body tasked with making sure that it operates democratically and that the party functions effectively on a day-to-day basis. This body would have absolutely *nothing* to do with programmes and policies, these would be handled by a different body, if you like an ideas committee, which unlike today's hierarchy would be tasked by the membership to produce a programme that reflected the objectives of the party that in turn *originate* with the membership.

This is a far cry from today's left organizations where decision-making is made by the very same people who formulate programmes and policies and thus they have a vested interest in making sure that their view dominates, if for no other reason than ego.

Yes, I know it's all very small potatoes, a veritable storm in a teacup but this top-down approach has dominated the left for decades. It stifles debate, it leads to never-ending splits as the 'real' revolutionaries depart for their chosen barricade. All in all, it's a very depressing situation that if we are to stand a chance of saving what's left of the planet, we surely have to change.

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