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Marx's Theory and Philosophy of Praxis: Between Academia and Ideology

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Global Research, April 20, 2018
The Bullet

Theme: Global Economy, History

*Hungarian writer and historian **György Dalos** described his relationship to Marx in a short, reflective piece that appeared in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung on 25 October 2017. In it, he claims that Marx drew upon that age-old human ideal of a society living in wealth and security and without fear of violence or retribution; and that Karl Kautsky canonised Marx's teachings as "Isms". This involved a need to understand the principle of social evolution and its socioeconomic formations, starting with primitive-communal, moving to capitalist and then culminating in communist.*

Dalos writes that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, having secured the supposed legalities, was able to assert its claim that it would pull level with the advanced capitalist countries by the 1980s and then outpace them ten years later. Dalos states that we are now a generation further on from the collapse of the Soviet system. In light of these experiences, he writes that all political "Isms" are now a thing of the past for him. But Dalos also pensively asks if the world would be a better, more peaceful, more rational place without Isms? He wonders whether, without such doctrines and their reassuring, forward-looking regularities, we would be condemned to a lifelong present?

The question that must be asked, however, is a different one, as it would be disastrous to once again bind the promise of a more open future to legalities. Is it not true that it is precisely Marx who claims that materialist theory is involved in those very efforts of people to collectively – and with knowledge and awareness – shape their own circumstances independently and avoid having to follow laws? One could then additionally ask if the Left's refusal to use "Marx-Ism" separates them from this contradiction-laden history, from their experiences and their understanding, and from being spurred on by historical struggles to develop materialist theory further? Does the loss of "Marx-Ism" not contribute to individuals and political groups losing their ability to interpret and take a stance toward constant changes and contradictory processes; does it not deny them a terminology that would allow them to collectively understand their world and a common vocabulary to agree on shared practices, even if such progress is steeped in conflict? Is that why, when confronted with the many questions thrown up by everyday life, they uncreatively reach for seemingly obvious ideologemes, for prevailing approaches, ideas and feelings that hold out promises of inspiring action and suggest certain goals?

A less promising alternative seems to be emerging: if Marx's scientific theory on philosophy of history and ideology is reduced to a general "Ism", it becomes authoritarian; if it is done away with entirely, the theory no longer performs its intended function precisely within the social-political conflict, namely when social conflicts arise, explaining them, revolutionizing common sense and thereby helping to bring about a more comprehensive, emancipatory

scope for action.

Theorists of Conscious Praxis to Redefine Structures

In light of this dilemma, it would be conceivable to consider Marx solely as a scholar. He rejected any canonization and dogmatization of his theories – after all, that would compromise the very scientific character of his work. Before the eyes of those that invoked his writing, he professed that he himself was no Marxist. He expressly rejected the idea that his theories were an *a priori* construction, or even that they held the historical and philosophical key to every secret and had an answer ready to every question ("It's the economy, stupid!"). He considered research and the conceptual penetration of the subject to be key points in materialistic attitudes to the world, and as relationships are changing as a result of human practices, materialist theory is not gradually merging with reality, moving toward a conclusive end; it is intrinsically linked with these practices, refining them and thus systematically remaining open.

Marx believed that he was contributing to an academic revolution. The object of his analysis was the capitalist mode of production in its ideal standard. After decades of academic research, he himself only managed to uncover parts of the "anatomy" of this mode of production, not the overall process, i.e. of capital and standard bourgeois society. He suggested this was the aspiration of his research programme. Despite a series of analyses of specific social struggles, he left behind no political, philosophical, legal or moral theories that were comparable with critiques of political economy; at best, they were possible avenues for exploration. Many who cited him and who comprised the Marxist school focused on expanding such analyses and even added several additional research fields.

Marx himself opted to observe economic conditions with all the precision and rigour of a scientist. At the same time, however, he stressed that the principles of the capitalist mode of production were transitory and that their inherent logic of capitalist reproduction would one day drive them to their limits. Such reflections are not the product of a philosophical consideration of history; rather, they are the result of sober, abstract and empirical analysis. Marx's theory aims to make understandable precisely those internal dynamics by which the struggles within the capitalist mode of production were taking place. The problems created by the capitalist generation of wealth cannot be solved by the bourgeoisie, they can only be deferred. One could argue that Marx already considered that the knowledge he had developed would go some way to help solve these problems and that humanity thus had the means to change its own course. Of course, there is no way that Marx could have known the dimensions social relations would take within the class struggle. But he was able to name the consequences of the bourgeois idea of wealth and those contradictory movements which would lead to wealth being created: the compulsion for growth and the destruction of capital (i.e. factories, plants, workplaces, human skills), the constant alternation between prosperity and crises both large and small, market liberalization and regulation, democracies and dictatorships, unrest and repression, "surplus" and underpopulation, workers being granted a share of the wealth they had generated and their renewed impoverishment.

All of these and other movements were already taking shape during Marx's lifetime. And he was constantly willing to flesh out his understanding of the ideal standard of the mode of capitalist production, that is to specify, firstly, what would inevitably and logically be its defining features; secondly, set out what the historical impacts of a specific society would be; and, thirdly, define rapidly moving current events. In light of where capitalism was on its

historical trajectory, Marx was at the time unable to contribute any musings on the way in which the logic of accumulation, of the global market, of class relations and of the different forms of the capitalist state, as well as the many superstructures, were shifting. This led to premature revisions and to theories being refuted.

When during the era of the Fordist welfare state it was suggested that poor working conditions, unemployment, starvation wages and precarious pay structures were all a thing of the past, not only was this an attempt to whitewash the continuing structures of exploitation, violence and discipline; it was also an inadmissible generalization. This is because the contradictory movements were not suspended but reproduced on a larger and more destructive scale (democracy, human rights, and the expansion of access to education and mass consumption went hand in hand with ecological destruction, military conflict and genocide, authoritarianism and "surplus" population on an international scale) and today they affect the lives of the entire global population. Neoliberal policies have resulted in a resurgence of precarious living conditions, such as low wages, insecure prospects, exhausting working conditions and rising competition among labourers, including for many wage earners in developed capitalist states. Marx was neither an evolutionist nor was he a voluntarist; his academic opinions and his political analyses and activities aimed to contribute to a social organization in which people could live with one another free from all forms of domination.

Academia or Ideology?

Attempts to dogmatically pin social development down to specific legalities in Marx's name and commanding actions to ensure its final completion marked a terrible regression to the bourgeois materialism of the 18th century. These efforts failed on such a monumental scale that to this day the praxis of parties, trade unions and movements largely ignores the traditions of that *other* form of Marxism, the one that advocates radical emancipation and freedom. The theory is restricted to critical political economy or the occasional use of Marxist terminology for individual research disciplines. This broadly corresponds to what Marx might have referred to as contemplative materialism, which takes the reality "out there" for granted and then feels it has the right to simply take terms used in different schools of thought, including Marxist theory, and – using a detached comparison – pick and choose from them depending on their purported usefulness. Here the connection between theories and specific social trends and social practices is forgotten; the dominant definitions of existing problems are accepted. The adoption of such knowledge practices indirectly suggests that drawing upon the Marxist school of critical economic theory offers little insight into many social processes – and that perhaps no insight ought to be sought, as this would unduly overstretch the theory's specific terminology. To then go one step further and use them to construct a "Marx-Ism" would suggest that all that was required to deduce certain guidelines from Marx's works, which could then be used to solve all those issues and problems confronting modern-day citizens in their political decisions and everyday lives, was the correct interpretation of or further reflection on his texts. Certain actors could use "Marx-Ism" as a pretext to impose their own views and modes of living, despite the fact that such acts would undermine the theory's scientific credibility.

Radically speaking, it is true that, as a crucial component of critical theory, Marxist theory follows the logic of no particular viewpoint – if, that is, a viewpoint is understood as a place that can be occupied and from where it is possible to speak and judge others. Marx takes a critical stance against those scholars who well-meaningly argue from a staunch bourgeois

perspective and betray the scientific truth. But Marx's theory is also not an unbiased, empirical, analytical academic discipline. It resolutely sides with labour within society and advocates for the creation of a collective world and the emancipation of humanity. For Marx, the antagonistic social principle – a society's living labour capital – was symbolically embodied by the proletariat. Marx has a critical understanding of class: his aim is to overcome the class-based society and to emancipate the individual from all forms of power imbalance, including forced labour. Viewed from this angle, Marxist theory challenges the totality of existing modes of living and the way society is organized.

Historically speaking, "Marx-Ism" claimed to be representing the interests of the working class. It was inevitable that it would be completely incapable of acknowledging the differential emancipatory needs within the class and in many other social groups, or could generally do so only within the scope of instrumental viewpoints. By taking a critical stance against this problematic generalization, social movements not only forgot about this particular class entirely – many of their intellectual proponents even contested the fact that the "proletariat" could be that empty signifier which contained the general sense of emancipation. As they pursued their own individual emancipatory goals, "Marx-Ism" was subjected to a volley of criticism for all manner of reasons: for the reductionist one sidedness of its partiality toward a single class, for its economism, its claim to classification as well as its academic rationalism and Eurocentrism – but the call for emancipation from domination brought to the fore by Marx was simply abandoned.

Toward a New Wold View

These criticisms are an opportunity to reflect on the status of Marxist theory. If it is simply understood as an academic theory, and perpetuated as such, it loses almost every link to everyday lives, to concepts and convictions as felt by the individual, and to their everyday experiences of contradictions, habits and struggles. This type of positivistic understanding of the theory suggests that what we are dealing with is standard academia, i.e. research conducted in isolation and thus separated from political practices and the individual's mode of living. Such a conclusion has far-reaching consequences. *Firstly*, the authority of Marxist theory becomes limited: there are too many aspects of the macro social process to which it does not apply. As a result, an eclectic range of other theories are cited. However, as a theory that emerged from conflict and which sees itself as integral to a process of the struggle gaining its own sense of self, it is partial in every issue and insists upon full emancipation.

Secondly, this has significant consequences for scholars as they may consider themselves experts in the critique of political economy and cultivate Marxist-philological or specific specialist knowledge. It can be observed that this understanding of materialism can lead them to believe that they are facing the harshness of material living conditions, and are thus superior to all those who still hold on to illusions inherent to the exploitative drive behind capital or who are taken in by its fetishistic character in some other way. But in all other aspects they can be ignorant, or even cold, devoid of any reflexivity on their own communication and authoritative behavioural patterns; blind toward sexism; ignorant to ecological concerns about the dominant mode of living and toward prevailing cultural practices. They themselves might foster conventional bourgeois modes of living, or even affirm them: zealous consumption of meat, that liberated feeling of a ride in a sports car, extensive travel and the hedonistic nature of the creative industries. Any criticism is rebuffed as a form of moralising asceticism. Lifestyles and everyday habits appear to have no inherent connection to the theory.

Which brings us, *thirdly*, to the question of why individuals should be convinced by the logical value of this theory when there remain a multitude of everyday and political practices in which it is not applied. Holding firm to the theory when it is challenged by political actors or scholars requires a unique level of conviction. *Fourthly*, Marxist theory is ultimately losing its autonomy from current academic research. This means it is not seen as the struggle to achieve human emancipation without recourse to a religious, ethical or purely political rationale as was the criticism levelled by Marx in his disputes with the early socialists.

From the perspective of full emancipation, Marx was clearly working on an unprecedented form of knowledge and sooth-saying that aims to reverse the separation between academia and "ideology". Despite the fact that Marx and Engels' work adhered to a materialist, critical understanding of the world, their criticism of Feuerbach suggests that this did not necessarily entail a detached view of the world as an object; rather, to use the words of Gramsci, it involves an active, appropriative and changing conception (*concezione del mondo*) that brings together spontaneous emotions and thoughts as a single bloc. Individuals should be capable of acknowledging both theory and the truth; the shape their coexistence takes should be determined by collective decisions that everyone is able to come to using their own judgement, i.e. common sense. Freedom means that common sense is not a courthouse; it is shaped by collective cooperation. It is not some final authority; it is the medium of sharing.

Reflective Marxism: A New Form of Knowledge and Soothsaying

Among those theorists who expand upon Marx's work, there are some critical proposals that allow for Marxism to be discussed in a reflective manner. Those who represent more established schools of critical thought consider the idea of Marxism as a world view with scepticism, as it was reduced to formulaic textbook theory cut off from the experiences and contradictions of the individual. Marxist thinking hardly touched upon the individual's way of life. Conventional and authoritarian lifestyles, subaltern modes of thought and conformist attitudes were able to persist. The questions that subsequently arose were how everyday patterns of behaviour, thought and feeling could be changed in order to achieve emancipation, and how the individual could acquire a belief in their own autonomy. This encapsulates all areas – and as the gravitational pull of economic and political conditions meant that they were more difficult to change, Adorno proposed starting with subjectivity with the aim of strengthening the individual's sense of autonomy. This meant empowering a person to resist collective pressure, not to be afraid to appropriate challenging concepts, to tolerate contradictions and to expound the problems of harmonious, positive, smooth, as well as logically and theoretically sound ideas, to question the subordination of thought to praxis, to engage critically with one's own emotions, to allow space for introspection and self-reflexivity, and to examine one's everyday habits, i.e. enjoyable behaviours implicit to interactions with others.

In light of the Gramscian argument that everyone is a philosopher, but under the conditions of the authoritative organization of the social division of labour, unable to fully realise their ability to appropriate the world in an active, conceptual way, focusing on the subject and their intellectual activities is by no means a half-baked solution. The subalterns frequently live at different speeds. Through their specific form of labour, they participate in state-of-the-art production methods to process the natural world; at the same time, they are incapable of rationally developing their common sense and continue to be subjected to religious, metaphysical, provincial or bourgeois aspects of the world as disseminated by

schools or the creative industries. Their common sense is compiled in a bizarre fashion and makes them passive and incapable of action. In this respect, Gramsci understands the importance of the Philosophy of Practice as initiated by Marx. It helps the subalterns develop an independent world view that empowers them to participate in the highest level of culture and social life and make it their own; in being able to "actively participate in the shaping of world history" and to become their own leaders (Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Book 11, 1375).

The aim is to make truth the foundation of vital actions and a crucial element of the coordination of intellectual and moral relations between humans, i.e. a uniquely new moral and intellectual bloc. This is characterized by individuals – previously separated from their intellectual functions – who were capable of coherently reflecting on their actual present and of overcoming the heterogeneity of theory and praxis by rationally organizing their coexistence based on a level of cooperation that encompasses every activity. That would be a far-reaching change as the context – shared existence – would no longer be experienced and understood through the valuation of social activities in the form of abstract labour, i.e. in the competition and conflicts between individuals within a sclerotic collective for whom world views, interpretive models and interpretations are still considered aspects of social struggles. The general concept would submit to the emancipated individual and their reconciled "metabolism" with nature.

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Source

Gramsci, Antonio, 1995: *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 6, eds. Klaus Bochmann, Wolfgang Fritz Haug et al, Berlin/Hamburg.

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