



MARXISM AND ITS INFLUENCE IN OUR TIMES

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Abstract

This paper argues that despite the twin failures of the existing socialist societies in the late twentieth century and of the socialist revolutions to take place in the advanced capitalist countries as postulated and predicted by Karl Marx as an emancipatory goal, Marxism has its own relevance in our times. With this end in view, it seeks to delve into how Marxism has been able to influence and revitalize a number of theoretical approaches and practical emancipatory activities of a number of movements in real life. Accordingly, attempts have been made to interpret the views of four towering figures such as Antonio Gramsci, Michael Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Ernesto Laclau who worked with post-foundational Marxism, seeking to reformulate classical Marxism. Antonio Gramsci not only reformulated Marxism but also enriched civil and political discourse in the twentieth century. Michael Foucault saw Marx's work as fundamental to what he was enacting in his archeological, genealogical and historical studies. Jacques Derrida believed that Marx's analysis could illuminate the contemporary world as well as the character of the new dominant discourse. Ernest Laclau goes beyond Marxism and prescribes radical democracy, hegemony, and populism for emancipatory goals. Following the economic recession which jolted the world economy in the first decade of twenty first century, it is indispensable to reassess the relevance of Marxism in our times.

Keywords: Socialism, Capitalism, Emancipatory, Hegemony and Relevance



INTRODUCTION

Classical Marxism has been regarded as a sophisticated paradigm of the philosophy of history, and social theory because of its insightful analysis of the evolution of human society, trenchant critique of capitalism and its ambitious teleology for the transformation of human society on the trajectory of progress more or less privileged as a goal of the Enlightenment Project. However, the twin failure of the existing socialist societies in the late 1980s and early 1990s and of socialist revolutions to take place in the advanced capitalist countries as postulated and predicted by Karl Marx as an emancipatory goal has marred the teleological element of Marxism (Muravchik, 2002: 36-38). Nevertheless, Marxism has its strong defenders. One of them is A. G. Cohen, a Marxist philosopher of history and another is Professor Alex Callinicos, a British philosopher of history. Professor Cohen argues that the intellectual force of Marxism supersedes all previous discussion (Cohen, 2001). In the same vein, Professor Callinicos argues that Marxism or Marxist theory of “historical materialism is still the most influential of the grand narratives (Callinicos, 1995).” No doubt, both proponents and opponents of Marxism can marshal their arguments in support of their views.

However, the purpose of this modest research paper is not to be dragged into the polemics because the superiority of the Marxist philosophy of history has aptly been proved. And despite its twin failures, it can still be regarded as relevant for our era (Best and Kellner, 2003: 85). This explains why Paul Lewis defends and explains the resurgence of Marxism even in a liberal publication like *the New York Times*. In fact, Paul Lewis reviews some literature critical of neoliberal-led globalization and finds that one way or other everyone now brings back Marx to back up their arguments while making a critical analysis of capitalism-driven globalization (Lewis, 1998). It is true that history did not unfold the way Marx predicted. Nevertheless, “...it has also inspired,” claims Professor Michael Burawoy, “some of the century’s greatest and most creative thinking-for and against Marxism- in philosophy, history, economics and politics, not to mention sociology.” (Burawoy, 2000: 151). Anyway, a leaner and revised Marxism based on post-foundational ontology can still withstand the assaults of its opponents and act as the radical enlightenment project for human emancipation. In this light, this paper will seek to delve into how Marxism has been able to influence and revitalize a number of theoretical approaches and practical emancipatory activities of a number of movements in real life. In other words, it will seek to explore how other emancipatory approaches and movements have borrowed from Marxism and how these have been revitalized in the works of certain thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci, Michael Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Ernesto Laclau. A caveat is in order since this paper concentrates on several theoretical approaches, it does not seek to deal with any emancipatory movement inspired by Marxist philosophy because of space

limitations. We seek to interpret the views of four towering figures such as Antonio Gramsci, Michael Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Ernesto Laclau who worked with post foundational Marxism and thus sought to reformulate classical Marxism. A short conclusion follows their views.

Antonio Gramsci has been regarded by many as one of the most important Marxist thinkers of the twentieth century, particularly as the greatest thinker in Western Europe who developed Marxism in the context of Western Europe in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the attendant failure of revolutions in advanced capitalist states in Western Europe as predicted by Karl Marx. In fact, while the “existing socialist countries” almost disappeared from the map of the world under the “hegemony” of neo-liberalism and while classical Marxism stands discredited since its normative prediction did not materialize the way Karl Marx wanted, the international fortune of Antonio Gramsci, the greatest of the Marxist thinkers of the West has continued to rise and rise not only among his leftwing followers and scholars but also among students of a variety of academic disciplines such as Political Science, History, International Relations, Philosophy, Cultural Studies, Linguistics, Sociology and Anthropology. To be sure, publishing on Antonio Gramsci has almost become a cottage industry in our times. Professor Eric Hobsbawm has rightly pointed out, “Yet, while one hopes that Gramsci may still be a guide to successful political action for the left, it is already clear that his international influence has penetrated beyond the left, and indeed beyond the sphere of instrumental politics.” (Hobsbawm, 2000: 13)

As a Marxist thinker as well as political activist, Gramsci worked within the tradition of Marxism but he always demonstrated his own independence because he criticized the positivistic elements in Marxism while simultaneously seeking to develop its critical analytical power (Salamini, 1975:65-86). He raised objection “to any mechanical or economic interpretation of the base-superstructure- in other words to an opposition which reduces the complex political and ideological spheres to an underlying economic foundation.” (Gramsci, 2000: 30-31). He attacked the Bolshevik Revolution for its privileging as well as prioritizing political solution on economically immature conditions. He wrote:

It is not the economic structure (base) which directly determines political activity, but rather, the way in which that structure and the so-called laws which govern its development are interpreted... Events... depend on the wills of great many people [and] on the knowledge of minority possesses concerning those wills.” (Ibid:2000: 31).

No doubt, Gramsci agreed that human beings enter social relations which are independent of their will but to him, these relations are not totally external because individuals’ acquired knowledge can change them. Thus Gramsci regarded the superstructure as arising out

of the economic base but it was possible for the superstructure, human will to react back in the base (“economic structure”) (Burawoy, 1990: 788).” Thus the hallmarks of Gramsci’s reformulated Marxism are the degree of independence that he prescribes for the realm of “superstructures.” Likewise, Gramsci reformulated the role of economy within his overall commitment to historical materialism. He acknowledged that the relations of production would fetter the force of production and thus generate economic crisis, but he did not believe that by themselves these economic crises would lead to the collapse of capitalism. Politics and ideology acquired much greater importance without a theory of economic collapse in Gramsci’s reformulation. Gramsci, therefore, made much of the distinction “between the relations of social forces and the realm of subjective will formation—the political and ideological forms in which men become conscious of the conflict between forces and relations of production and fight it out.” (ibid:) Thus Gramsci expanded the positive heuristic of Marxism, granting greater autonomy to the realm of the superstructures. Instead of periodizing the history of capitalism on the basis of economy, he “periodized it on the basis of its political institutions, specifically the rise of civil society.” (ibid: 789)

Gramsci also found the classical Marxist definition of state as a class instrument inadequate and sought to reformulate a theory of socialist state whose role would be limited to that of organizing production and exchange. While engaging himself in reformulating, he did not reduce the state to the expression or instrument of an already unified social class. Rather, he found the mature bourgeoisie state as an arena or domain in which inner conflicts among different competing sections of the bourgeoisie are regulated and the dominance of one section over the others is secured. Instead of regarding state as a static organization, he treated the state in general as a dynamic entity and sought to delve into the peculiarities and recent transformation of the Italian state in particular. Based on this general analysis of state and the Italian state in particular, Gramsci postulated that the task of the Socialists would be not to seek to perpetuate the bourgeoisie form of state but to replace it by a socialist states. (Gramsci quoted in ibid:29).

Gramsci revised the theory of politics and ideology, calling for change in revolutionary strategy from one that emphasized seizure of state power to one that called for the conquest of civil society which entailed the transformation of schools, trade unions, churches, and political parties and the creation of new arenas of opposition to capitalism (ibid: 31). Using metaphors from military science, he articulated how a war of movement which means an assault on the state could only be possible after a war of position has rebuilt civil society. Explaining the Leninist model of revolution, he showed how revolution was possible in Russia because state was weak whereas the civil society was primordial. Similarly, Gramsci showed how revolution

could not take place in advanced capitalist countries in Western Europe where civil society was strong but the state was weak. He criticized the conventional Marxist theories of revolution advanced by Lenin, Roza Luxemburg and Trotsky but still remained a Marxist par excellence.

Hegel first introduced the concept of civil society but the role of civil society articulated by Gramsci has become one of the most important intellectual contributions in our time (Buttgeig, 1993). While delving into the causal connection between revolution and civil society, Gramsci also added the role of the subaltern classes in a civil society which is illuminating, indeed. He said:

The historical unity of the ruling classes occurs in the state and their history is essentially the history of state or groups of states. But one must not think that unity is only purely juridical and political, although that form of unity has its importance which is not merely formal. The basic historical unity, in its concreteness, is the outcome of the organic relation between the state or political society and "civil society." The subaltern classes by definition are not unified and by definition they can not be unified unless they are able to become a state: their history is therefore intertwined with that of the civil society; it is a "disjointed" and discontinuous history of the civil society and hence of the history of state or groups of states (Gramsci, 2000, 19).

Not only in the area of civil society but also in other areas like education, the party, the state, ideology, democracy and social movement, Gramsci has provided us myriad of theories. His formulation of hegemony, counter hegemony and the role of intellectuals have gone beyond Marxism and thus enriched both civil and political discourse in twentieth century. Similarly, Gramsci theories have provided an important terrain for political and ideological struggle. Above all, his rewritings of Marxist theory proved prophetic (Burawoy, 1980: 789). "

Michael Foucault had been influenced by Marxism since a Marxist spirit persists in his later writings. Just as Karl Marx campaigned forcefully against institutional powers that exploited the less privileged ones, Foucault did not lose his sympathy for the disadvantaged and marginalized ones of the society. Many of his books and articles thus exposed the mechanism responsible for social oppression. In fact, it was Foucault's destiny to become the champion of those under oppression and domination in the society (Wicks, 2003: 243-244). The structure of domination that pervades modern society has been amply theorized by Foucault who uses the Panopticon to articulate the system of domination in prison. It is true that the Foucauldian system of domination is not grounded (Poster, 1987-1988:105-121). on the system of labor as postulated by Karl Marx. Nevertheless, one can argue that both Karl Marx and Foucault are complementary to each other while seeking to articulate the system of domination in modern liberal societies. Moreover, it is Foucault who draws from Marx and continues to articulate how modern society has developed a system of domination under the guise of liberal institutionalism.

Some critics like Mark Poster,(1984: 105-121) may seek to undermine Marxist influence on Foucaultian theory of domination but Foucault has laid to rest all these critics. What Foucault said about his relation with Karl Marx is worth quoting. He said:

There is also a sort of game that I play with this. I often quote concepts, texts and phrases from Marx, but without feeling obliged to add the authenticating the label of a footnote with a laudatory phrase to accompany the quotation... Bu I quote Marx without saying so, without quotation marks, and because people are incapable of recognizing Marx's texts I am thought to be someone who doesn't quote Marx. When a physicist writes a work of physics, does he feel it necessary to quote Newton and Einstein? (Foucault, 1980: 52).

The import of this statement is that Foucault drew heavily from Karl Marx and thus never intended to distance himself from Marx, though one can say that he articulated a position free from a particular tradition of Marxism (Macdonald, 2002:259-284). Reflecting upon as to why he could not distance himself from Marxism, Foucault himself said:

For many of us young intellectuals, an interest in Nietzsche or Battallie did not represent a way of distancing oneself from Marxism or communism. Rather, it was almost the only path leading to what, of course, thought could be expected of communism (Foucault, 1991: 50-51).

Thus we see that Foucault does not seek any distance from Marx; rather, he saw Marx's work as fundamental to what he was enacting in his archeological and genealogical studies. (Macdonald 2002: 276).

More particularly, emphasizing the importance of Marx in historical writings, Foucault confirmed in another context by saying:

It is impossible at the present time to write history without using a whole range of concepts directly or indirectly linked to Marx's thought and situating oneself within horizon of thought which has been defined and described by Marx. One might wonder what difference there could ultimately be between a being a historian and being Marxist (Foucault in Faubion, 1988:282).

Jacques Derrida, the philosopher of deconstruction as well as post-structuralism, had also been influenced by leftist ideas including those of Karl Marx. Derrida's first great works were first published in Paris on the eve of the political explosion of May 1968 at a time when he was close to, but critical of, the French Communist party. Since the party had cravenly supported the French repression of Algeria in the 1960s and since Derrida was an Algerian Jewish colonial, his oblique relations to official Marxism were understandable. But he continued to be a staunch member of the political left (Eagleton, 2004).

Following the demise of existing communist states in the 1980s, Derrida wrote *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* because for him, the spirit of Marx became even more relevant than ever before. Derrida's Specter of Marx

has been more an interesting work in that when many in the West became triumphalists and started celebrating the end of ideology as articulated by Francis Fukuyama, Derrida sought to inherit the work of Marx. Derrida attempted to formulate a social critique befitting the post-1989 world which appeared to him to be dark time, a time of no ethics or politics. To be sure, Derrida made a critique of the contemporary world which needed, he felt, a fundamental break with the present. Dr. Moishe Postone approvingly states that when claims were repeatedly being made that Marx and Marxism were finally dead following the collapse of the Soviet Union and European Communism, Derrida took a strong stand against the triumphalism of economic and political neoliberalism. He trenchantly criticized capitalism, uncompromisingly presented deconstruction as the heir to a certain spirit of Marx and called for a new International as response to the new Holy Alliance of the departing twentieth century (Postone, 1998:370).

However, Derrida's theoretical strategy was complex in that whereas he argued that an adequate critique of the world must positively appropriate Marx, he also sought to criticize Marx. In fact, he sought to contribute to such a social critique by separating out a certain "spirit of Marx" from what regarded as the ontologizing and dogmatizing aspects of Marxism (ibid). Nevertheless, Derrida asserted that the lessons of the great works of Marx had become particularly urgent because of the ensuing new World Order. He also found appropriating Marx easier because of the collapse of European Communism and the concomitant dissolution of the Marxist ideological apparatuses. He laid stress on Marxism by warning that neglecting Marx would be a failing of theoretical, philosophical, and political responsibility. (Derrida, 1994: 11-13). In fact, Derrida believed that Marx's analysis could illuminate the contemporary world as well as the character of the new dominant discourse. He also approvingly pointed "to the reflexive historicity of Marx's theory, its openness to its own transformation and reevaluation, its lucid analysis of the ways in which the political is becoming worldwide, as well as the continued importance of the Marxist "code" in analyzing the contemporary world." (Postone, 1998:374).

Ernesto Laclau started his political career as Marxist student leader in Argentina but he was never a dogmatic Marxist. He sought to borrow ideas from others like Althusser and Gramsci. In fact, Laclau delved into popular democracy which he believes could not be dealt within the framework of classical Marxism. Hence, he went beyond Marxism and developed his theory of popular democracy which focuses on the construction popular identities and how the people emerge as collective actors. He opposes liberal democracy because it does not solve problems. As a solution, he proposes radical democracy. As part of radical democracy he seeks to unite all the new political subjects, feminist and ecological movements, minority groups, racial minorities and struggles within institutions and make them people but acknowledges the difficulty in achieving it. To achieve unity, he prescribes hegemony but this hegemony "must

exclude all authoritarian unification (Laclau, 1983:119):” And this must, according to him, be compatible with the autonomy and plurality of social movements in which party will have no role at all. His political practice as articulation and hegemony also imply a more democratic form of socialism and the defense of a new radicalism. The latter, according to him, acts as the unique guarantor of socialism.

Laclau believes that the fundamental ontology of politics is demand. However, he warns us not to confuse politics with essentialized or fetishized position such as class. He thinks that there are myriad types of politics but antagonism can flare up as politics at any time from both culture and society and the loci of antagonism can be race, gender, sex, ethnicity, environment, etc. He acknowledges social antagonism but seeks to reduce it by retrieving the best dimensions within Marxism.

Like Karl Marx, Ernesto Laclau is committed to equality but he differs from him on the contours of equality. Whereas Marx sought to ensure equality by simplifying capitalist economic system, Laclau seeks to ensure equality by increasing diversity, recognizing plurality, difference and so and so forth. What he seeks to emphasize is that whereas Marx sought to ensure equality by obliterating differences, he seeks to bring equality by recognizing differences of different sorts. He warns against particularism and thus seeks to promote universalism but thinks that ensuring universality is the challenge of political theory in our times. However, his notion of universality is very much related to equality because he believes not in the equality of representation but in “performative dimension” which is, Laclau observes, “the very condition of equality.”

He also developed the concept of populism which is political and, indeed, he claims that all politics is populism (Laclau, 2005). While reflecting upon populist reason, he seeks “to go beyond class struggle and its eclectic combination of political logics and sociological descriptions (ibid: 248). In fact, he argues on another occasion that there is no essential centrality of class despite the exacerbation of exploitation in advanced capitalist countries (Laclau, 1983: 119). However, he calls for boldness and a return to the people for political engagement through collective efforts in the widening horizon characterized by what he calls “globalized capitalism.” A lengthy observation by Laclau is really illuminating. He said:

The politico-intellectual task as I see it today- and to which I have tried to make modest contribution here- is to go beyond the horizon drawn by this faintheartedness, in its praises and in its condemnations. The return of the ‘people’ as a political category can be seen as a contribution to this expansion of horizons, because it helps to present other categories- such as class- for what they are: contingent and particular forms of articulating demands, not an ultimate core from which the nature of demands themselves could be explained. This widening of

horizons is a pre-condition for thinking the forms of our political engagement in the era of what I have called globalized capitalism. The dislocations inherent to social relations in the world in which we live are deeper than in the past, so categories that synthesized past social experience are becoming increasingly obsolete. It is necessary to reconceptualize the autonomy of social demands, the logic of their articulation, and the nature of the collective entities resulting from them. This effort -which is necessarily collective- is the real task ahead. Let us hope that we will be equal to it (Laclau, 2005:250).

CONCLUSION

As a social praxis, classical Marxism has been discredited to a certain extent but since its teleological thrust is emancipatory, it can never be disavowed. Rather, it will continue to be in the imagination of a new generation of social theorists across disciplines as the most important emancipatory philosophy in the years to come. It is true that the Occupy Movement has not lived up to the high expectations amidst the ravages of neoliberalism-inspired global capitalism but there has been revival of interest in Karl Marx and his thoughts. Sales of Marx's classic, *Das Capital*, *The Communist Manifesto* and the *Grundrisse*, or (in English, *The Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*) have gone up (Jeffries, 2012). Marxist scholars are getting mainstream exposure in the world of ideas. Even liberal publications like *Foreign Policy* is now inviting a Marxist scholar like Leo Panitch to explain the current economic crisis (Shunkara, 2013). In fact, the epistemology of Marxism has didactical value in the sense that it is capable "to teach us as we struggle through economic depression, other than its analysis of class struggle in its analysis of economic crisis. In his formidable new *tome Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, Slavoj Žižek tries to apply Marxist thought on economic crises to what we're enduring right now. Žižek considers the fundamental class antagonism to be between "use value" and "exchange value" (Jeffries, 2012). The more neoliberalism is embedded in our society, the more class antagonism is sharpened in our times. This has been well exposed by Thomas Piketty who sought to capture unprecedented inequalities and disparities between the two classes in the twenty first century (Piketty, 2017). This short paper could not delineate the continuing relevance of Marxism as comprehensively as it should in the context of widening disparities and inequalities between classes under the ravages of neoliberalism. However, further studies can highlight the continuing relevance of Marxism with much more rigor and elegance in our times both as an ideology and methodology.

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