

Marxism: some contemporary misconceptions

Mike Cole, Dave Hill, and Alpesh Maisuria
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Contrary to the assumptions of some, Marxism is as relevant as ever. It is firstly of huge importance to note that Marxism is not a political project, past its sell-by date. It is not static and exclusive to certain condition of existence that belonged in history. Marxism is, as Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out, a "living philosophy to the course of the world; it adapts itself by means of thousands of new efforts, thousands of particular pursuits, for the philosophy is one with the movement of society". There is simply no better tool for analysis of contemporary society and politics than Marxism. The current global ruling class assault on the global environment and on the living standards and conditions of billions in developed and developing countries, the "class war from above", is relatively invisible to many outside the Marxist tradition.

There is a failure to recognise the class nature of anti-union legislation, reduction in benefit entitlements such as pensions, changes to the taxation system, denigration and then privatisation of public and of welfare services. Take for example New Labour's education policy. Marxian theory explains how so-called education "reform" or "modernisation" via marketisation, commercialisation, private control of academies and trust schools in the UK (or charter schools in the USA) are designed to benefit the capitalist class, and also how the capitalisation of the education provision in Britain (and elsewhere) has taken place. Now the economic ends of education serving capitalism, albeit mediated, is dominant and dominating. This is, to an extent, different from historic and alternative or complementary aims of schooling, further and higher education as education for social, community, and/or for individual rounded development and autonomous and critical thinking. This new neo-liberal consensus, accepted and promulgated by all three major political parties is accompanied by the derision and silencing of socialist/ Marxist views- with, for example, George Galloway's socialist views being replaced, on Big Brother, by recorded birdsong. Big Brother indeed!

Others have argued that the absolute pauperisation of the working class does not exist. In reality, the wealth of the poorest 50% of the population in Britain shrank from 10% in 1986 towards the end of the Thatcher government's second term to 7% in 1996, and 5% in 2002. The wealth of the super-rich has doubled since Tony Blair came to power in 1997 according to a report on social inequality produced by the Office for National Statistics in 2000. Nearly 600,000 individuals in the top 1% of the UK wealth league owned assets worth £355bn in 1996, the last full year of Conservative rule. By 2002 that had increased to £797bn. Part of the gain was due to rising national prosperity, but the wealthiest 1% also increased their share of national wealth from 20% to 23% in the first six years of the Labour government.

On a global level, statistics from the International Labour organisation (ILO) has found that 40% of India's population has lived in abject poverty since the 1990s. Virtually half the world lives on less than US\$2 a day and more than one billion people struggle on \$1 a day or less. In the light of these statistics, it would seem Marx's prediction is not far off the mark.

Another common misconception is that "the percentage of the industrial proletariat has shrunk". In fact the global working class is growing. Whether we use the standard neo-Weberian classifications of social class (such as official government classifications in the UK and the USA, relating to occupation, status and consumption/ lifestyle patterns), or those derived from Marxist analysis, it can be seen, as Chris Harman points out, that "the working class [exists] as never before as a class in itself...with a core of perhaps 2 billion people", around which there are another 2 billion or so people with lives which are "subject in important ways to the same logic as this core".

If the total size of the working class includes, not only those engaged in waged labour, but also those who are dependent on income that comes from the waged labour of relatives or savings and pensions resulting from past wage labour, that is, non-employed spouses, children and retired elderly people, then the worldwide total figure for the working class, those completely dependent on wage labour, comes to between 1.5 and 2 billion.

Although Marxists welcome social democratic and other progressive measures to alleviate injustice (such as the introduction of the minimum wage) it is realised that these are superficial, if valuable, initiatives, and the silver bullet argument is that capitalism cannot, by its very purpose and essence, be democratic or humane. This is why Marxists are skeptical of claims by New Labour politicians, for example, that globalization can be a force for good. In reality, organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are constitutionally destined to fail in any attempt at addressing the marginalisation of 'the developing world'. The WTO can only set maximum standards for global trade, rather than the minimum standards that might restrain big corporations, while the World Bank and the IMF, entirely controlled by the creditor nations exist to police the poor world's debt on their behalf. Rather than recognize these inherent defects, their backers blame the poor countries themselves. George Monbiot cites, Peter Sutherland, former head of the WTO, who has asserted that it is "indisputable that the real problem with the economies that have failed [is] their own domestic governments", while Maria Cattui, who runs the International Chamber of Commerce, insisted that the "fault lies most of all at home with the countries concerned". These world organizations are the rent collectors and debt enforcers for the transnational and national robber baron capitalists and their compliant governments.

As well as a tool for analysis, Marxism also provides a different conception of how the world could be run. Marxism is not as some would have us believe, a "utopian fantasy". It is a common misunderstanding that Marxists believe in "an ideal world" utopia, a blueprint for the future. How often has one heard in response to the argument of Marxists, the "common sense" reply: "it sounds all right in theory, but it won't work in practice"? Utopianism is, in fact however, the province of *utopian socialists*, rather than Marxists. Utopian socialism conventionally refers to the 18th/19th Century writings of Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier and Robert Owen.

With respect to a *Marxist* vision of the future, "we are locked", as Rich Gibson and Glenn Rikowski point out, "into capitalist society, and our capacity to visualise anything beyond it, such as socialist society is impossible". Furthermore, the trajectory of socialism cannot be decided *a priori*. Thus Marxists do not have blueprints for the future. Marxism is not about specifying typifications for future societies. Moreover, there is no final destination. Glenn Rikowski points out that

“[t]he social drive to form a truly human society is infinite, just as capital’s social drives (to create value, to enhance human labour-power) are also infinite”.

In sum, the proliferation of globalised neo-liberalism exemplifies Marxist analyses that social class is the essential salient structural cleavage, and form of exploitation, in this current period, as in all other capitalist periods. In any successful transformation of capitalism into democratic socialism, the working class and its political organisation(s) must play the central role. The choice is not between life in the neo-liberal global capitalist world, or a return to Stalinism. There is a burgeoning recognition that this is the case from the mass global movements against globalization and in the growing anti-neo-liberal politics throughout Latin America, from Venezuela to Bolivia, from Argentina to Brazil. There is also growing support for Marxist parties in Europe, such as the German Linkspartei, Italian Rifondazione Comunista, Portuguese Bloco Esquerda, the Scottish Socialist Party, and, in England and Wales, Respect.

For Marxists, the choice is quite simple: that choice is between continuing to support the state of barbarism, that is neo-liberal capitalism or to advocate democratic socialism. It is not inevitable that socialism will lead to authoritarianism, any more than it is inevitable that neo-liberalism is the only future for humankind. Both possibilities depend on the thoughts and actions of human beings.

Mike Cole is Research Professor of Education and Equality at Bishop Grosseteste College, Lincoln;
Dave Hill is Professor of Education Policy at the University of Northampton;
Alpesh Maisuria is a Lecturer in Education Studies at the University of Northampton.