

Is Marxism Still Relevant?

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Is Marxism still relevant? Asking this question in the year of the bi-centenary of the birth of Karl Marx may sound somewhat counter-intuitive. With the breakup of the Soviet Union and the integration of China into the global order, what remains of Karl Marx's vision of a proletarian revolution and the ensuing egalitarian socialist or communist society has melted into the air. However, it was reported that after the financial crisis of 2008, Marx's magnum opus, the three-volume *Capital* was much in demand. As a matter of fact, Marx spent the better part of his adult life analysing the logic, power and contradictions of capital. As a study of capital and capitalism, the three-volume *Capital* is still unsurpassed. On second thought, asking whether Marxism is still relevant is by no means far-fetched or outlandish. In this regard, it is helpful to take a look at what Stuart Hall, a founding member of the British New Left as well as British Cultural Studies, has to say regarding the relationship between Marxism and British Cultural Studies.

In a paper presented at the large international conference on cultural studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1990, Stuart Hall recalls that he "entered cultural studies from the New Left and the New Left always regarded Marxism as a problem, as trouble, as danger, not a solution."¹ But he is quick to add that cultural studies is by no means not profoundly influenced by "the questions that Marxism as a theoretical project put on the agenda: the power, the global reach and history-making capacity of capital; the question of class, the complex relationships between power...and exploitation; ... the notion of critical knowledge itself and the production of critical knowledge as a practice."² Hall

¹ Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson & Paula Treichler eds, *Cultural Studies* (New York, Routledge, 1992), 279.

² Ibid.

suggests that cultural studies is working within “shouting distance” of Marxism. It involves “working on Marxism, working against Marxism, working with it, working to try to develop Marxism.”³ Hall also cautions that while working on the agenda put forward by Marxism, cultural studies has to be wary of “the great inadequacies, the resounding silences and the great evasions”⁴ of Marxism.

Stuart Hall’s paper is titled “The Theoretical Legacy of Cultural Studies.” The relationship between the new discipline of cultural studies and Marxism discussed in the paper pretty much sums up the relevance of Marxism in the wake of the breakup of the Soviet Union and the integration of China into the global order. The fact that China, a country ruled by the largest communist party in the world has been fully integrated into the capitalist global order speaks volumes of “the power, the global reach and history-making capacity of capital.” Paradoxical though it may sound, it is precisely due to the integration of China into the global order that Marxism as a theoretical project is still very much relevant. However, despite its phenomenal economic growth in recent decades, China today is anything but a free and democratic country. This brings back to mind the caution made by Hall regarding “the great inadequacies, the resounding silences and the great evasions” of Marxism. It is ironic, to say the least, that Marx spent the better part of his adult life analysing the nature of capital and capitalism, culminating in his magnum opus, *Capital*. On the question of socialism or communism, he said very little. As someone living in the 19th Century, Marx was fully aware of the rise of the bourgeoisie and the part they played in the French Revolution. He only had disdain and contempt for the bourgeoisie, despite the declaration of Universal Human Rights by the latter in the course of the French Revolution. As someone living in the 19th Century, Marx was fully aware of the American Revolution and the ensuing political system emphasising the separation of powers. In any case, a contemporary of his, Alexis de Tocqueville, published his influential *Democracy in America* in 1835. Marx had nothing to say on the safeguards of human rights in

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

a socialist or communist society. Neither did he address the question of democracy as he seemed to suggest that when the proletarian revolution comes about, the state will wither away. His position on the question of democracy is vague at best and evasive at worst. As for how the proletarian revolution would come about, he seemed to suggest that the very logic of capital renders the proletarian revolution a certainty.

As early as in *The Communist Manifesto* (published in 1848), Marx correctly foresees the trend for capitalists to increase investment in fixed capital in order to enhance the productivity of labour power. Marx also correctly foresees that increased investment in fixed capital will only lead to the de-skilling and impoverishment of the proletariat. However, the plight of the proletariat cannot be translated into the inevitability of the proletarian revolution. The evasion on Marx's part of the question of the proletarian revolution results in various revisions of Marxism. The most notable as well as the most fateful revision is the one made by Lenin. In *What is to be Done* (published in 1902), Lenin argues that for the proletarian revolution to come to fruition, the proletariat must be led by a vanguard party, namely, a well-organised communist party. To his credit, but to the misfortune of people in Russia and Eastern Europe, Lenin did manage to organise a disciplined and highly efficient party, the Bolsheviks. With such a party at his disposal, even though he was in exile when workers in St. Petersburg spontaneously organised themselves into workers' cells or soviets in Russia and rose up in October 1917 against the temporary government set up in March of the same year, Lenin was able to manoeuvre himself and the Bolsheviks as leaders of the October Revolution of 1917 when he arrived on the scene in the nick of time with the help of Germans who found his idea of ending the war with Germany by exchanging space for time to their liking.

Whether the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia is a proletarian revolution is highly debatable. In any case, the course of history charted by the subsequent Soviet Union renders the question rather academic. What is crystal clear is that the revision made by Lenin succeeded in setting up not so much the first socialist state as the first socialist empire. If the state will wither away on its own once the proletarian revolution occurs, events following the October

Revolution are substantial proofs that it is anything but a proletarian revolution.

If the proletarian revolution (seen by Marx as a certainty) has yet to take place as the bi-centenary of Marx's birth comes and goes, it is unsurprising to hear voices saying that his ideas are no longer worth discussing. But here "the great inadequacies, the resounding silences and the great evasions" of Marxism cautioned by Stuart Hall come to the rescue. True, the proletarian revolution has yet to take place. But Marx said very little on this vital question and he is therefore guilty of the sin of evasions. However, as the proletarian revolution has yet to take place, the common view that the collapse of the Soviet Union renders Marxism as a theoretical project no longer tenable is highly questionable. It can certainly be argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union means that Lenin's revision of Marxism has been proven wrong. Now the fact that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which modeled itself on the Bolshevik (not only in its party structure, but also vitally and fatefully in the Leninist ideology of the party as the vanguard of the proletariat), has been fully integrated into the capitalist global order speaks volumes of how Lenin's revision distorted Marx's vision of the proletarian revolution. As previously observed, China's integration into the global order and its subsequent phenomenal economic development are precisely the reasons why Marxism as a theoretical project is still relevant. The CCP today constantly brandishes its so-called socialism with Chinese characteristics. However, socialism with Chinese characteristics may well be one side of the same coin and the other side is obviously capitalism with Chinese characteristics. No matter what label is attached to China, the integration of the latter into the global order represents first and foremost the further expansion of capitalism with China serving as both a cheap source of labour and a market for high-end products.

Even more importantly, the trajectory of China's economic development, as well as the difficult situations China now finds itself in, calls for theoretical input from a Marxist point of view. After coming to power in China, the CCP briefly adopted the Soviet model of a command economy. When Mao launched his ill-judged program, "The Great Leap Forward," disasters followed. According to Hong Kong-based Dutch scholar, Frank Dikötter, at least forty

million died of hunger or malnutrition. Mao was forced to take a backseat. Unable to stomach his defeat, Mao launched his most sinister political campaign, The Cultural Revolution. When the dust finally settled, the CCP had no choice but to open China to the outside world.

The year was 1978, precisely four decades ago. The CCP often boasts of its singular economic development since 1978. From a Marxist point of view, the year 1978 is highly significant. Five years before that saw another Arab-Israeli war and another Israeli victory. In the aftermath of the war, the Arab countries unleashed their most potent weapon. At first, OPEC raised oil prices and then Arab countries placed an embargo on oil exports. The long boom enjoyed by the capitalist west at once came to a halt. As markets shrank, the problem of over-capacity was mercilessly exposed.

The long boom following the end of the Second World War allowed countries in the West to orientate their economy entirely on mass production and mass consumption. The oil crisis of 1973 fully exposed the fatality of an economy that presumes constant growth in invariant consumer markets. As pointed out by Marx, capitalism as a system can only function when capital keeps on accumulating. To ensure the accumulation of capital, subsequent to the oil crisis of 1973, a series of novel experiments in the realm of industrial organisation to counter the complete reliance on mass production and mass consumption appeared. New sectors of production emerged, followed by new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organisational innovation. Production no longer centered solely on mass production. Instead, production turned to production for specialised markets. Such production typically produced a variety of goods in small batches. Out-sourcing production can now be explored as the risk involved is low since the amount of production involved is small.⁵

It is precisely at the historical juncture when capitalism adapted and changed from its complete reliance on mass production

⁵ For further discussions, see David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts & Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 141-172.

and mass consumption that the CCP decided to open China to the outside world. With a huge reserve of labour power and the non-existence of independent labour unions, hence an unlikelihood of strikes, China quickly became a magnet for multinational companies seeking to outsource their productions. Brandishing its success on China's part is actually advertising the strength of capitalism. However, after four decades of phenomenal growth, China's economy is dominated by state enterprises which enjoy monopoly status in many sectors of the economy. Installed in these state enterprises are party secretaries who are the ones who call the shots. If Marx's vision of a proletarian revolution was revised and distorted by Lenin's idea of a vanguard party, Lenin's idea in turn has now been not so much revised as discarded by the CCP. The very term proletariat has now disappeared from official communications. The party itself is both *alpha* and *omega*. When the Soviet Union was critiqued by some as "state capitalist," there was doubt about the term used since The Soviet Union abided strictly by the model of a command economy. With today's China, there is not the slightest doubt or ambiguity about how state capitalism functions. Well, it functions as any capitalist enterprise functions. The CCP holds the largest reserve among governments in the world, but in China, there is neither universal health care nor universal education. Like any capitalist enterprise which reinvests profits made, the CCP invested its huge reserve in infra-structural projects as well as in American bonds. Recently China embarked on the so-called "One Belt, One Road" project, extending its infra-structural projects overseas. All in all, thanks to demonstrating how state capitalism functions, the CCP has rescued Marxism from obscurity. Marxism is very much alive since Marx's analysis of capitalism is still unsurpassed.