Marx’s Concept of Socialism

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Although the work of Karl Marx continues to cast an enormous influence on debates concerning the nature of capitalism, one of the least theorised dimensions of his body of thought is his conception of the society that must supplant capitalism. While Marx never devoted a specific work to a discussion of life after capitalism, in large part due to his aversion to indulging in utopian and speculative reflections about the future, his distinctive critique of the central realities of capitalism—such as the dual character of labour, socially necessary labour time, and the law of value and surplus value—intimates a form of future social relations that is far more liberatory than has generally been appreciated.

The discussions and debates that have accompanied the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx’s birth since 2018 have provided an important opportunity to re-examine heretofore neglected aspects of his political and philosophical legacy. Foremost among them is the extent to which his body of work provides conceptual resources for developing a viable emancipatory to capitalism in the 21st century.

The need for such an alternative has become all too clear. Capitalism’s commodification of human relations is producing unprecedented levels of social anxiety and distress, at the same time as its destruction of the natural environment raises serious questions about the sustainability of life on this planet. Nevertheless, a viable alternative remains largely out of sight. One reason is the nature of capitalism itself, which centres on augmenting economic value and profit by commodifying ever-more areas of the life-world. As human relations increasingly take on the form of relations between things, this inversion appears normal and even natural. Capital does not only colonise nations, economic resources, and social spaces, but also the human imagination insofar as it presents itself as the ne plus ultra of human existence. At the same time, there is another (and no less important) reason it is proving difficult to develop a viable alternative—the failures of the so-called “socialist” or “communist” regimes.

Social democracy, despite introducing at times some valuable reforms, utterly failed to pose an alternative to capitalism; its capitulation to neoliberalism has discredited it and left the field open for resurgent xenophobic nationalism and racism. The putatively “socialist” Marxist–Leninist states, despite obtaining freedom from imperialism, proved no less of a failure; their replacement of “market anarchy” with state-command economies led to repressive regimes that embraced market capitalism when their non-viability became evident.

The problem we face today is that the idea of socialism and communism that was long advocated proved to be inadequate, and no alternative vision that speaks to the aspirations of masses of people has been developed to take its place.

A Post-capitalist Society

So, how to begin anew? The answer, in my view, is with the vision of a post-capitalist society that flows from Marx’s critique of capital. This may seem counter-intuitive, since Marx is widely known for refraining from speculation about the future. He opposed writing blueprints of a new society and sharply opposed utopian socialists for doing so. Moreover, he never wrote a work or even a single published article on socialism or communism. So, why look to Marx to respond to our predicament?
The reason is that Marx’s critique of capitalism—most fully developed in the three volumes of *Capital*—is not an empirical critique of an economic system; it is instead a systematic critique of the law of motion that governs it. *Capital* is often referred to as a theory of capitalist development, but it actually delineates the process of capitalism’s dissolution, which ultimately thwarts its development. Marx’s analysis of its law of motion shows that “under penalty of death,” the system must give way to a higher form of social organisation—socialism or communism (these terms are interchangeable in Marx’s work and do not denote distinct historical stages). It should therefore come as no surprise that important discussions of the nature of a post-capitalist society appear in various writings of Marx, including in the text of *Capital* itself.

The fact that a positive vision of the future is intimated by a negative critique of an existing social phenomenon should not surprise us, since it is integral to dialectical (as against merely empirical) analysis. As Hegel, whom Marx considered his “master” until the end of his life, wrote, “In order that the limit applying to something in general should also be the barrier, something must pass over into itself beyond the limit; it must, referring to itself relate itself to it as something which it is not” (Hegel 1929: 144). In other words, it is not possible to grasp an object as a totality simply by describing what it is; to know it in full is to grasp its process of becoming into what it is not. This is exactly what Marx achieves with his 40-year effort to grasp the logic of capital, which is why he could not avoid intimating what life can be like after capitalism—even while refraining from abstract, utopian speculation. Herbert Marcuse brilliantly captured this in his Preface to Raya Dunayevskaya’s *Marxism and Freedom* (1958):

Marxian theory does not describe and analyse the capitalist economy ‘in itself and for itself’ but describes and analyses it in terms of another than itself—in terms of the historical possibilities which have become realistic goals for action. (Marcuse 2000: xxii)

As I detail elsewhere, references to a future socialist society are found throughout Marx’s works (Hudis 2016). They appear in letters, drafts of works, excerpt notebooks, and especially his polemics with other radical thinkers of the time such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Ferdinand Lassalle, and Mikhail Bakunin over what he saw as their defective understanding of socialism. I will focus here on his writings on political economy, as these most fully disclose his distinctive concept of post-capitalist society. The point is not to highlight one or another passing phrase by Marx and construct some theory of socialism from it. At issue is rather the conception of socialism that logically follows from his critique of capitalism. Even if Marx never wrote a single word about post-capitalism, that would not lessen the importance of the concept of socialism that is intimated in his work.

**Democratic Conception of New Society**

Before turning to Marx’s writings, we must note the radical divide that separates his position from orthodox Marxism. Marx never conceived of socialism or communism as state control of the economy. Nor did he ever endorse the notion of a single-party state that rules on behalf of the masses. His conception of the new society is thoroughly democratic, based on freely associated relations of production and in society as a whole. He was primarily concerned with freeing individuals from alienated and dehumanised social relations—not simply with increasing the productive forces so that developing societies can catch up with developed ones. The debris that has been heaped upon Marx’s legacy by critics as well as followers has made it all the harder to grasp his concept of a new society.

Marx did not, of course, invent the concept of socialism or communism. When he broke from bourgeois society and became a revolutionary in the mid-1840s, he joined an already-existing socialist movement that long predated him. This movement emerged in an era of highly unregulated, competitive market capitalism. It is therefore not surprising that most anti-capitalist thinkers and activists viewed private ownership of the means of production as capitalism’s defining feature which needed to be overcome through the nationalisation or collectivisation of individually owned property. Even many anarchists, who opposed the statist approach of mainstream socialists, tended to assume that collective or cooperative property was incompatible with capitalist social relations.

This identification of “socialism” or “communism” with statist and/or communal property forms has prevailed ever since—even as capitalism became (in various times and places) more regulated and subject to state control. Few of the theoreticians of the Second or Third International bothered to say much about post-capitalist society since it was taken for granted that its basic nature was already known. Why speculate about the finer points of how to organise the society of the future when present-day realities made it clear that capitalism comes to an end with the abolition of free markets and private ownership? That capitalism largely came to the non-Western world through imperialist powers acting on behalf of privately owned business interests further strengthened the conviction that the alternative to capitalism centres on replacing private property and “market anarchy” with planned production.

To be sure, the outstanding theoreticians of “classical Marxism”—Karl Kautsky, V I Lenin, and Rosa Luxemburg—knew full well that capitalism is defined by a definite mode of production. Nevertheless, they tended to assume that the abolition of anarchic market and property forms would lead of necessity to the transcendence of capitalism. Very few anticipated that a new form of class domination could result from putatively “socialist” revolutions. That regulated markets and collective property forms are not only compatible with capitalism, but may even be necessary in certain contexts for capitalist relations of production to arise in a given society, for the most part did not occur to them.

Things began to change when the Russian Revolution of 1917 was transformed into the opposite under Joseph Stalin. His declaration (in 1936) that socialism had been “irrevocably established” through the nationalisation of property under the First Five Year Plans, even as millions perished in slave labour camps and tens of millions more were subjected to an unprecedented degree of totalitarian social and political control, led a small number of radical theoreticians to question the premises that had largely governed the socialist and communist
movements up to that point. Groupings such as the Johnson-Forest Tendency in the United States (led by C L R James and Raya Dunayevskaya), Socialisme ou Barbarie in France (led by Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort), and autonomist groupings in Italy, Latin America and elsewhere, argued that property forms do not determine the mode of production; instead, the mode of production determines property forms. Changing the latter without transforming the former only leads to another variant of capitalism: state capitalism. As several of these tendencies noted, Marx stated in Volume 1 of Capital that the basic nature of capitalist society would remain unchanged even if all social capital were concentrated into the hands of a single entity. This marked the beginning of a decades-long series of efforts by independent Marxist currents in the West and the non-Western world to challenge the mental confines that had led so many to equate the alternative to capitalism with either reformism or statist authoritarianism.

Nevertheless, such currents never achieved a mass base—not least because all instances of a successful seizure of power by opponents of capitalism was achieved by adherents of the view that nationalised property and central planning equals socialism. Yet, today we face a new reality. The failure of the “peoples’ democracies” to steer a course independent of capitalism has thrown the traditional view of socialism into crisis. In its wake, the claim that “there is no alternative to capitalism” has gained a new lease on life. Yet history does not come to an end because some have a defective understanding of the new society. New passions and new forces for liberation continuously arise, as seen in new movements in recent years by women, national and racial minorities, peasants, and gays, lesbians, and the transgendered. Many among this new generation of activists are reaching for a vision of a new society that transcends the limits of both existing capitalism and the so-called “socialist” and “communist” regimes of the past. Nevertheless, the dead hand of the past continues to exert a pull on the living, as shown by the fact that many continue to equate socialism with state or collective control of the economy, even as they search for new conceptual resources with which to forge a new socialist alternative in the face of capitalism’s threat to our social and natural existence.

The present historical moment therefore provides a vantage point for grasping Marx’s concept of socialism that was not available to earlier generations.

**Alternative to Capitalism**

No sooner did Marx convert to communism at the end of 1843, than he entered into intense debates with other radical tendencies over their understanding of the alternative to capitalism. Like his fellow revolutionists, he sharply opposed private ownership of the means of production. However, in the *Economic and Philosphic Manuscripts of 1844*, he takes issue with “crude communists” for presuming that the replacement of private with collective property ensures the abolition of capitalism. The negation of private property, he argues, is only a first, partial negation that does not get to the essential issue—the transformation of conditions of labour. He refers to crude communism as the “abstract negation of the entire world of culture and civilisation” (MECW 3: 295) in which alienated labour “is not done away with, but extended to all men” (MECW 3: 294). It leads to a society, he states, in which “the community [is] the universal capitalist” (MECW 3: 295). A “leveling-down proceeding from a preconceived minimum” does not transcend capitalism, but reproduces it under a different name. The fullest expression of this is that in such a system “a woman becomes a piece of communal and common property” (MECW 3: 294).

Marx’s statement that a fixation on changing property forms at the expense of transforming conditions of labour leads to positing “the community [as] the universal capitalist” (MECW 3: 295) is a remarkable anticipation of later 20th century developments. It implies that the abolition of the capitalists does not necessarily mean the abolition of capitalism. If alienated conditions of life and labour remain intact, collective property can serve as the vehicle of domination as much as private property. Marx of course supports collective ownership of the means of production. But by this he does not mean simply transferring ownership deeds from private to collective entities, but rather ensuring that the working class owns and controls the means of production. He makes this clear in writing, “When one speaks of private property, one is dealing with something external to man. When one speaks of labour, one is directly dealing with man himself. This new formulation of the question already contains its solution” (MECW 6: 281). The abolition of private property is a step towards liberation only if it leads to the transformation of human relations at the point of production.

This is further underscored by Marx’s statement, “Private property is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence of alienated labour” (MECW 3: 279). It may seem that Marx has hit backwards. Does not private ownership of the means of production cause workers to become alienated from their labour? His point is that so long as workers are alienated from the very activity of labouring, an alien group or class must exist that compels them to labour. Private property in the sense of class property—of a class other than the workers controlling the means of production—will continue to exist so long as alienated labour exists.

This emphasis on the priority of social relations of production over property forms carries through all of Marx’s later work, especially *Capital*. He there reiterates his early criticism of the notion that collective or state-owned property represents the new society: Capital … now receives the form the social capital … in contrast to private capital, and its enterprises appear as social enterprises as opposed to private ones. This is the abolition of capital as private property within the confines of the capitalist mode of production itself. (Marx 1981: 567)

The numerous drafts and text of *Capital*, developed over three decades of intensive theoretical work, marks the most systematic critique of the logic of capital ever attempted. It also provides important intimations and suggestions about post-capitalist society. *Capital* penetrates beneath the surface level of society where property forms, exchange relations, and political structures abound. Its analysis reaches deeper, by taking issue with what makes them possible. His critique of capitalist economics and politics is transcendental, insofar as it delineates the conditions for the possibility of a given set of phenomena.
This makes *Capital* a difficult work that is readily subject to misinterpretation, since judging things by their surface appearances always “make sense” for those not inclined to critical analysis. Marx was fully aware of how easy it is for even critics of capitalism to become ensnared in its superficial phenomenal forms of appearance, which is why he held that grasping its law of motion requires “the power of abstraction.” By this he means abstracting from secondary or tertiary factors that cloud an understanding of the object of investigation. He therefore begins *Capital* with the difficult chapter on the commodity-form, in which he delineates the abstract logic of capital.

**Self-expanding Value**

Beginning with Chapter 1, and continuing through the rest of the book, he shows that capital is a self-expanding value, and capitalism’s defining feature is that labour assumes a value-form. Value, or wealth measured in money, is the product of a specific form of labour—abstract or homogeneous labour. The value of a commodity is determined not by the actual amount of time taken to produce it but by the socially necessary labour time established on a global level. This average varies continuously due to technological innovations that increase the productivity of labour. Concrete labour—the varied kinds of labour employed in making use-values—becomes increasingly dominated by abstract labour, which is the substance of value. Value may be a rather abstract category, but it depends upon a very real kind of human activity: labour that is constrained by an abstract time determination outside of the workers’ control. This is the basis of capitalist class exploitation, its destruction of nature, and its depersonalisation of human relations.

The value-theoretic categories employed in Chapter 1 of *Capital*, as Marx notes on several occasions, pertain to capitalism alone. Production for the sake of augmenting wealth in monetary form is not a transhistorical reality. To be sure, trade based on exchange values existed before capitalism. However, this was restricted to the margins of society, in the trading zones between communities. Ancient or medieval societies were not defined by a drive to augment exchange value as an end in itself. Nor was labour power a commodity. Generalised wage labour only arises when the producers are separated from the objective conditions of production (such as the land) and deprived of any means of support other than to sell their capacity to labour. None of these conditions widely prevailed before capitalism, which means that the split between concrete and abstract labour was unknown to them. And since abstract labour, the substance of value, was unknown, production for the sake of augmenting value was as well. Labourers were surely exploited before capitalism; they experienced direct personal domination. But this is a world removed from capitalism, where impersonal, abstract forms of domination—such as socially necessary labour time—is the overriding form of control.

For this reason, the ancients looked upon retail trade, commerce, and usury as “unnatural.” As they saw it, they were external impositions upon social existence rather than its operative law. It could not be otherwise, since the separation of the producers from the objective conditions of production and the commodification of labour power had not yet arisen. In contrast, in capitalism even the greatest minds tend to view production for the sake of augmenting value as natural, since it is the operative law of society. This naturalisation of a social construction is reflected in the widespread view that value production characterises all of human history. However, the law of value is a contingent product of a peculiar social form of labour—abstract or alienated labour. Once the latter is overcome, the law of value is annulled; where it persists, capitalism lives on, regardless of what name is given to the particular system.

Marx deals directly with the mental obfuscation caused by value production in the famous section of *Capital* on “The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret.” Diverse products of labour can be universally exchanged for one another if they share a common quality. That common quality is their value. However, as Marx (1977: 167) noted, “Value does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic.” Since value can only show itself in a relation between physical, material entities, it appears that what enables products to be exchanged is the natural property of the things themselves instead of a historically specific form of labour. Capitalism has to appear natural and immutable, precisely because it is a system of value production. Marx (1977: 169) states that this mental constraint only begins to dissolve when we encounter “other forms of production.” He first turns to the past by surveying pre-capitalist economic forms in which common ownership of the means of production prevail. Relations of personal dependence predominate, in which “there is no need for labour and its products to assume a fantastic form different from their reality” (Marx 1977: 170). No abstract medium, such as exchange value, mediates human relations. He then turns to the future, writing: “Let us finally imagine, for a change, an association of free people, working with the means of production held in common” (Marx 1977: 171). This does not refer to a formal transfer of private property to collective or state entities. Transferring property deeds is a juridical relation, which does not end class domination. Marx refers to “free people” owning the means of production, which means they exert effective and not just nominal control over the labour process. And that is not possible unless the producers democratically control the labour process through their own self-activity.

He then goes on to state that in this post-capitalist society, products are “directly objects of utility” and do not assume a value form. Exchange value and universalised commodity production come to an end. Producers decide how to make, distribute, and consume the total social product. One part is used to renew the means of production; the other “is consumed by members of the association as means of subsistence” (Marx 1977: 171–72). He invokes neither the market nor the state as the medium by which this is achieved. He instead envisions a planned distribution of labour time by individuals who are no longer subjected to socially necessary labour time. Abstract labour is abolished, since actual labour time—not socially necessary labour time—serves as a measure of social relations. Distributing the elements of production on the basis of
actual labour time represents a radical break from capitalism, since it signals the abolition of its peculiar form of labour: abstract labour. This form of organising time is the core of Marx's concept of communism and the basis of his discussions of the new society in his other works.

The distinction between actual labour time and socially necessary labour time is absolutely crucial, since conflating them leads to the erroneous view—shared by both market and statist socialists—that socially necessary labour time is an inevitable part of human existence that will always be with us. But, if that is so, it follows that abstract labour, with all its alienated and dehumanising characteristics, will always exist. The “new” society becomes defined by the principles that govern the old one.

In contrast, Marx repeatedly stresses that in socialism or communism, socially necessary labour time is abolished. Time no longer confronts the worker as a person apart; instead, time becomes the space for human development. He writes in *Capital* Vol. II, with collective production, money capital is completely dispensed with. The society distributes labour power and means of production between the various branches of industry. There is no reason why the producers should not receive paper tokens permitting them to withdraw an amount corresponding to their labour time from the social consumption fund. But these tokens are not money; they do not circulate. (Marx 1978: 434)

And in an earlier drafts of *Capital*, he wrote that in socialism or communism,

*The communal character of production would from the outset make the product into a communal, general one. The exchange initially occurring in production, which would not be an exchange of exchange values but of activities determined by communal needs and communal purposes, would include from the beginning the individual’s participation in the communal world of products … labour would be posited as general labour prior to exchange, that is, the exchange of products would not in any way be the medium mediating the participation of the individual in general production. Mediation of course has to take place. (MECW 28: 108)*

Important aspects of Marx’s view of the alternative to capitalism can also be found in *Volume III of Capital*. Its object of critique is the surface phenomena that drives modern capitalism, such as prices, credit, finance capital, etc. But, he does not analyse these and related phenomena on the basis of the law of supply and demand. In discussing capitalism’s proclivity for crises, he argues that they result from the tendency of the rate of profit to decline. This follows from his tenet that capitalism is governed not by the needs of paying consumers but by the drive to maximise profit. It may seem, at first sight, that the difference between Marx’s approach and underconsumptionism—which holds that the lack of effective demand makes capitalism an inherently crisis-ridden system—has little to do with the alternative to capitalism. But, the appearance is deceptive. If the central problem of capitalism is that workers lack the buying power to absorb the surplus product, it follows that its defects can be overcome by equitably redistributing revenue. For Social Democrats the path to doing so was through peaceful, parliamentary means; for many Marxist–Leninists, it was through the violent seizure of power by professional revolutionaries. The policies of both were grounded in underconsumptionist approaches that went no further than advocating “equitable” income redistribution based on the nationalisation of private property. The need to abolish alienated labour, exchange value, and the state was set aside. The end result was that socialists and communists in power looked an awful lot like the capitalism they claimed to replace.

**Critique of German Marxists**

Marx’s fullest discussion of post-capitalist society, which further develops his comments about the new society in *Capital*, is his *Critique of the Gotha Program* of 1875. This consists of a sharp critique of the German “Marxists” of the time for agreeing to an organisational unity with the socialist party founded by Ferdinand Lassalle, whom Marx had earlier denounced as “a future worker’s dictator.” His own followers, Marx realised, suffered from an extremely defective conception of the alternative to capitalism.

Marx takes direct aim against the Gotha Programme’s failure “to discuss the future state of communist society” (MECW 24: 95). In doing so, he distinguishes between a lower and higher phase of communism. The word “socialism” never appears in the *Critique*, since for Marx socialism and communism are completely interchangeable terms. They are not distinct historical stages. One of the biggest barriers to understanding the text is that post-Marx Marxists (most notably Lenin) falsely read into it a distinction between socialism and communism. This remains the lens by which most approach the *Critique* to this day. Lucien Sève (2004: 37), a philosopher and former member of the French Communist Party, was shocked when he belatedly discovered that the distinction between socialism and communism that he (like many others) was raised on does not exist in Marx.

The lower and higher phases are two phases of the same society. Marx states that in the lower phase, the producers

*do not exchange their products; just as little does the labour employed on the product appear here as the value of these products, as a material quality possessed by them, since now, in contrast to capitalist society, individual labour no longer exists in an indirect fashion but directly as a component part of the total labour. (MECW 24: 85)*

Generalised commodity exchange comes to an end in the first, initial phase of communism, since now that the producers freely control the means of production, abstract labour—the substance of value that enables products of labour to be universally exchanged—no longer exists. Retail trade, commerce and “the market” die off. Sharing, based on use-values, replaces selling, based on exchange-values. Directly social labour replaces indirectly social labour. With democratic, freely associated control of the means of production, the producers themselves, and not some external force like socially necessary labour time, govern their interactions. Value production comes to an end from the very inception of a socialist or communist society.

Labour itself, however, is not abolished in the lower phase. Instead, actual labour time serves as a measure for distributing the social product. He writes, “The individual producer receives back from society—after the deductions have been made—exactly what he gives to it. What he has given to it is his individual *quantum* of labour” (MECW 24: 86). Individuals receive from society a voucher or token that they have “furnished such and such an amount of labour” time and in turn obtains “the social
stock of means of consumption as much as the amount of labour costs” (MECW 24: 86). He is not suggesting that the worker’s labour is computed on the basis of a social average of labour time. Here, labour time simply refers to the actual amount of hours of work performed by the individual in a given cooperative.

Individuals are compensated on the basis of the actual hours that they labour, regardless of their profession. Since no two individuals are exactly alike and they freely decide how much or little to work, some will receive more compensation than others. Classes are abolished, but inequalities exist. The application of an equal standard (actual labour time) to unlike individuals leads to unequal levels of compensation. Marx never adhered to the vulgar notion that in “socialism” everyone earns the same amount.

The lower phase is tainted by the “birthmarks” of the old world from which it emerges, since (as Marx notes) there is a “parallel” with commodity production in the very restricted sense that it is governed by an exchange of equivalents. He refers to this as the persistence of “bourgeois right.” This does not refer to a bourgeoisie, since classes are abolished by the time of the lower phase. It refers instead to a quid pro quo in which what you get from society depends on what you give to it. In this sense, contractual relations continue to exist in the lower phase. But this quid pro quo is a world removed from the exchange of abstract equivalents. What gets exchanged are human activities, not products bearing a value-form. Since these are freely associated and not mediated by class relations or abstract forms of domination, they are radically different from the contractual forms that prevail in capitalism, wherein the seemingly “free” exchange of labour power for wages belies a fundamentally unfree system of exploitation.

Moreover, Marx is not saying that what governs the lower phase is “to each according to their ability, from each according to their work.” No such formulation was ever penned by Marx, and for good reason—it is a formula for wage labour. Wage labour is premised on the notion that you are compensated for the value of your labour power. But Marx, as is very well known, defined socialism as the abolition of wage labour.

Marx actually discusses the lower phase at greater length than a higher phase, which is defined by “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” The reason is that he is thinking out what social relations would best provide the basis for the subsequent development of the principle governing a higher phase. We must first learn how to master ourselves and our environment freed of such abstract formations as socially necessary labour time and wealth expressed in monetary terms. Once this is achieved, along with the end of the division between mental and manual labour, the “all-round development of the individual,” and a point at which “all springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly,” a higher phase can be reached in which “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” can become actualised (MECW 24: 87).

But, why does Marx pose actual labour time as a measure in the lower phase of communism? The reason is that it is necessary to account for how to organise production and a society that has not yet reached a level of abundance sufficient to allow for the free distribution of all goods and services. Marx was living at a time when the forces of production were much less developed than now. However, it remains a problem today, since the world has surely not reached the point wherein “all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly” (MECW 24: 87). The crushing poverty and lack of economic opportunity, especially in the developing world, should make it clear that an instant leap from capitalism to a higher phase of communism is out of the question. Herein lies the importance of addressing how to organise society after a successful revolution on the basis of social relations that can prepare the way for a communist society that “stands on its own foundations.” If the issue is not addressed, the door is left open for conventional answers to be provided—such as relying on either a centralised state or a market economy (or both). Neither, however, points us beyond the horizon of a world in which human relations take on the form of relations between things.

A Transitional Period

For this reason it becomes especially important not to confuse the “dictatorship of the proletariat” with the initial phase of socialism or communism. The Critique clearly defines the “revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat” as a political transitional period between capitalism and the new society. Marx writes, “Between capitalist and communist society lies the period … in which the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat” (MECW 24: 95). This signifies democratic control of society by the immense majority, the labourers, who use political power as a lever to clear out the Augean stables of capitalism by displacing the property right and control of the capitalists. This does not represent (for Marx at least) a dictatorship by a minority party or group. As he specifies in his writings on the Paris Commune, the dictatorship of the proletariat marks the suppression of state power by the organised power of society.

Yet this still is not socialism, since law of value still exists (even if in suppressed form) so long as the world market persists. The dictatorship of the proletariat cannot pass into socialism so long as the revolution remains confined to a single country. This is why Marx insisted on referring to the proletarian dictatorship as a transitional period and not a transitional society. A transitional society is characterised by a distinct set of economic relations. A transitional period is when the old economic forms are in the process of being broken down and uprooted. A society remains capitalist, even if under democratic worker control, so long as the law of value prevails. The revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat can either become a transition to socialism if the revolution spreads globally, or it will transition back to the older social formations if it does not.

The conflation of the dictatorship of the proletariat with the lower phase of communism has done great damage by positing the state—which in a limited form exists in the political transition period—as integral to communism. This is contrary to Marx’s view, which holds socialism or communism as incompatible with the state, since the latter is an “excrecence” of class society that is superseded in a post-capitalist society (Marx 1972: 329).

Especially misread is Marx’s comment, “What change will the form of the state undergo in communist society?” (MECW 24: 95).
The original German does not actually speak of the “form of the state” in communism; it speaks of former state functions (staatswesen—not Staat) that can readily be employed without a state. This is made clear by the next sentence: “In other words, what social functions will remain even in existence analogous to the functions now performed by the state?” (MECW 24: 95). This suggests that various functions that in capitalism are associated with the state—such as legislative assemblies, coordinating bodies between cooperatives, planning bureaus, etc—can in the future be managed without one. Remarkably, this dimension of Marx’s discussion has received very little commentary; virtually all discussions of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” conflate the state with former state functions that can be readily employed without it. The fetish of the state runs so deep that Marx’s point barely merits notice.

At the same time, it is no less inaccurate to claim that Marx holds that political structure as such would cease to exist in communism. Not all political structures depend on the existence of a state. Moreover, political forms of mediation remain necessary in any complex society—especially ones based on cooperative forms of human association. Cooperation requires discussion, debate, and negotiation—all of which have a political character in the broader sense of the term. The “social functions” referred to in the Critique of the Gotha Program can also be rendered as “body politic.” Even the earliest forms of human association, such as hunter and gatherer societies, have some form of body politic; why presume that will not be so in the future? Hence, while Marx shared with the anarchists the goal of eventually abolishing the state, he was not himself an anarchist. He does not assume that political structures are inherently alienating. The transcendence of capitalism will make possible a non-coercive and liberatory politics that may be hard to envision today, but which is surely worth reaching for.

Radical and Liberatory

This brief survey—which touches on only a few of the many references in Marx’s works to a post-capitalist society—indicates that his conception of post-capitalism is far more radical and liberatory than has been widely assumed. This is especially reflected in his attitude towards the market. He opposed market economies, but not because he suffered under the illusion that a statist-command economy transcends the law of value. A generalised market economy is the necessary expression of the domination of socially necessary labour time over concrete labour and can be no more annulled by the dictates of government officials than the law of gravitational attraction. Which is why even the most violent efforts to suppress the market by Stalinist regimes failed to eliminate it; it persisted, albeit in a distorted form (the black market is but one example). The effort of market socialists to envision the transcendence of capitalism runs into the same problem from the other direction, since they likewise assume the continuance of production governed by socially necessary labour time. An exclusive concern with abolishing or preserving the market tends to dovetail with a lack of attentiveness to the social relations that make it possible.

Furthermore, while Marx is famously credited for his theory of surplus value, his primary concern is not with redistributive economics. Surplus value cannot be eliminated short of eliminating value production. The latter is not easy to achieve, since it entails a transformation of the very nature of human relations. Instead of treating people as a mere source of monetary value, society must become organised to meet human needs—not just material needs like food, clothing, and shelter but also spiritual needs like culture, art, and personal development. In contrast, it is relatively easy to achieve a short-term redistribution of surplus value, by using political power to expropriate wealth from the rich to the poor through parliamentary or more forceful means. Yet the constraints of value production place strict limits on the efficacy of such redistributive measures.

Given the extreme social and economic inequities of contemporary society, it is completely reasonable to demand a fairer redistribution of surplus value. But it is impossible to redistribute what does not exist. A political project defined by the redistribution of surplus value takes for granted the existence of value production. The need to abolish the latter is overlooked. And when that occurs, the need to abolish abstract or alienated labour, which serves as the substance of value, is likewise overlooked. The critique of capitalism becomes limited to its surface, phenomenal features, while its essential nature is left untouched. This defines the failed approach of all Social Democratic, Stalinist, and market socialist variants of distributive economics: since they assume that value production exists even under “socialism,” they fail to challenge the alienated human relations that constitute its substance. Humanism, at least in Marx’s sense of the word, vanishes from view.

It is therefore fitting to end with two statements from the young Marx, which ground much of the concepts I have elaborated upon in this essay:

Communism is the necessary form and the dynamic principle of the immediate future, but communism as such is not the goal of human development, the form of human society. (MECW 3: 306)

When the narrow bourgeois form has been peeled away, what is wealth if not the universality of needs, capacities, enjoyments, productive powers, etc, of individuals, produced in universal exchange ... What is this, if not a situation where man does not reproduce himself in any determined form, but produces his totality? Where does he not seek to remain something formed by the past, but is in the absolute movement of beginning? (Marx 1973: 488)

REFERENCES


