

WHY ARE WE STILL SOCIALISTS AND MARXISTS AFTER ALL THIS?¹

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At the beginning of the 1990s, Marxist socialists in the United States are on the defensive. The turmoil in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the massacre in China have been widely accepted as demonstrating a final failure of socialism. In the United States, the very long period of economic expansion, ignoring our repeated predictions of recession, seems to undermine Marxist analyses of the self-contradictory nature of capitalism; the expansion is all the more significant because it has come along with conservative policies, the rejuvenation of the market, and all that. It is easy for one to react, as much of the public has, to these recent developments with the conclusion that socialism and Marxism are dead and that capitalism will be increasingly triumphant.

These objective factors have a counterpart in intellectual life. Among left academics during the **1980s**, there has been increasingly important opposition to Marxism. While at times this opposition keeps the name of Marxism, the rejection of basic propositions of Marxism (even most liberally defined) is so thorough as to make the **rubric** meaningless. Sometimes this **intellectual** development goes under the title of 'post-Marxist analysis' and at other times its adherents call themselves 'analytic Marxists.' What is important, I think, is to recognize that the people who make up this movement are leftists; this is not just a new variant of rightist attacks or a renewal of 'the god that failed' movement.

Yet there are those of us who continue to identify ourselves as socialists and as Marxists. Among us are those who have simply stuck their heads in the sand or who, like any religious zealot, are not bothered in their faith by facts. Those of us who think we do not fall in either of these categories have an obligation, to ourselves as well as to the broader community, to explain why we are still socialists and Marxists after all this.

The unsatisfactory responses

There are numerous unsatisfactory responses that we have provided to the developments of the 1980s. I think that if we are ever going to develop a

satisfactory rationale for our position, it is first necessary to clear these weak (or wrong) arguments out of the way. Let me consider a few important examples:

1. The Soviet Union (or China, or Poland) never was socialist anyway. Many of us have been clear all along that what was going on in those countries was contrary to the goals of Marxists and socialists, and their crises should bring us a sense of satisfaction not a sense of defeat.

This response, however, ignores the fact that the great majority of the people in the United States – and, indeed, in the world – identify these countries as socialist and Marxist. For them, if not for us, the crisis in the USSR, the rise of the opposition in Poland, the increasing importance of the market in Hungary, and the repression in China are all signs of the failure of socialism. We are tarred with the same brush, our protestations to the **contrary** notwithstanding.

Furthermore, at the very least, experiences in these countries certainly do demonstrate the difficulty of trying to organize economic life in a highly centralized manner without recourse to the market as a coordinating mechanism. In a democratic social and political environment, there may be hope for planning. But the idea – held by many of us – that economic planning is a technically simple exercise, well, that is an idea whose time has passed. Also, these experiences certainly show that doing away with the capitalist markets as the mechanism of income distribution and establishing a more equal distribution of income is insufficient to assure a decent, democratic political structure. And without a democratic political structure, it is unlikely that income equality can be maintained.

The real issue here, however, is that, regardless of how we describe the social systems in this group of countries – William **Hinton's** use of the fascist label for the Chinese leadership may be quite reasonable* – we have to face up to the fact that they were created by people who embraced Marxism and socialism. It was, moreover, generally not a cynical or opportunistic embrace, as, for example, is the case when our own officials claim to be democrats and supporters of human rights. Lenin, Mao, and the others were as much Marxists and socialists in their beliefs as are any of us. So if we deny – as I would – that their efforts have led to something that should be called 'socialist' we are only left with the difficult question: why is it that our efforts will lead to something better?

2. The long expansion in the United States cannot be counted as a success for capitalism. Growth in the Reagan-Bush era has been slow growth and it has been devastating for people's well being, as income inequality has substantially increased. Moreover, the success of capitalism cannot be measured by the experience of a single country, since each country is tied in as part of an international system. Internationally, the crisis of capitalism in the 1980s matches in degree that in Eastern Europe; consider, for example, the devastation of living standards in much of the third world. Finally, the expansion is very precarious, built as it is on a mountain of debt, and the day of reckoning will surely come.

All of this is true and important, but it doesn't solve the problem. Part of the problem lies with popular consciousness in the United States, and that popular consciousness is a piece of the reality we must face. Also, we must own up to the fact that, while we may be able to explain the length of the expansion after the fact, very few of us expected it to last this long. We have, as the joke goes, predicted eleven of the last five recessions.

As to the devastating impact of the expansion on people both within the United States and in the third world, while this fits well with Marxist analysis, it raises another problem. Why is there so little resistance? Marxism, after all, does not just say that the lot of the masses will grow worse; it also says that the masses will do something about it. In the United States, while Marxists may take some intellectual satisfaction in the fact that things are getting worse (please don't miss the irony!), the lack of any growing opposition – indeed, there is what one might call an acquiescence by much of the labour movement – hardly gives any support to our analyses or our politics.

I do think capitalism is in a mess, that it is going through a crisis, and that we need to explain this to whomever will listen. But the problems for Marxism are still there.

3. Recent developments among left intellectuals should not be taken as a serious challenge to Marxism. These people are simply responding to the rewards of academia. They are taking the anti-Marxist course because in doing so they gain promotions, the acceptance and praise of their bourgeois colleagues, grants, and prestige.

This explanation may be true in particular cases (though I have no individual in mind when I say this), but it simply begs a new set of questions: why have we been failing in our efforts to sustain a Marxist culture that would provide a basis for people to resist the attractions of academic success? What happens to a Marxism that is so thoroughly enmeshed within and dependent upon academia?

Furthermore, regardless of why left intellectuals challenge Marxism, their challenges raise important questions about aspects of the Marxist paradigm. Many of us do not deny the validity of some of their criticisms, but at the same time we have not reconstructed Marxism in a way which would obviate those criticisms. In any case, why is it that many people have taken these criticisms, added them together, and found Marxism wanting? While others of us stick with Marxism in spite of its problems?

Self-criticism

Having rejected these unsatisfactory responses to the current crisis of socialism and Marxism, I want to present what I think are some elements of a better response. An effective defence of Marxism rests on its positive elements, the reasons why it provides us with an effective way to understand what is going on in the world and thus gives us a foundation for political work. An effective defence of Marxism also rests on a recognition of its limits. So to begin with,

I think we had better approach the matter with an attitude of self-criticisms. We will not be in a position to bring ourselves out of this crisis unless we recognize our own weaknesses.

For example, we – and here I mean virtually all currents on the left in the US – have not developed a reasonable response to the development of Communism. We have been apologists; we have been rabid anti-Communists; we have been ostriches; and we have committed many other sins. But we have not done the job.

Or on the question of the US economy, we have almost universally underestimated the capacity of capitalism in this country to maintain itself. We have seen recession, if not depression, around every corner. Focusing our attention on the system's failures and its degradation of the lives of millions, we have generally ignored or obscured the extent to which others – and certainly not just capitalists – have attained tremendous material gains. With each new economic upsurge and with each political triumph of conservative forces, we are left gaping.

We have **also** ignored many weaknesses in Marxist theory. In particular, we often try to maintain that the lack of democracy in the Communist countries has nothing to do with Marxism. One line of argument that supports this separation of Marxism from the evils that have been committed in its name begins with the claim that in the writings of Marx – and, for that matter, **also** in the writings of Lenin – there are repeated calls for more democratic processes, for better representative systems, and for extensions of direct democracy.³ This is all very well, but with Marxism, as with any other set of ideas, we need to go beyond the explicit statements on democracy and attempt to figure out the relation between the whole theory, the whole set of ideas, and democratic practices. Moreover, Marxism is something bigger than Marx, and bigger than Marx and Lenin. Reference to good ideas contained in the classics will no more absolve Marxism of its sins than reference to the Bible will wipe away the Inquisition.

A more substantive, historical defence of Marxism in light of the experience in Communist countries lies in the fact that Marxist movements have come to power in parts of the world which have been economically underdeveloped. This underdevelopment has, furthermore, been associated with political backwardness – a lack of capitalist democracy, a lack of parliamentary forms, and a lack of legal oppositional activity. Under these circumstances, the struggle for power – for example, in the Soviet Union – was organized in a **highly centralized** manner that did not allow the development of democratic experience within the struggle. When Marxists then did attain state power, the conditions of underdevelopment led them to give primary attention to production. Lacking a political movement with well-developed democratic experiences, production needs led to a top-down system of economic organization and a thorough erosion of the possibilities for building democracy – which meant, of course, a thorough erosion of the possibilities for building

socialism. (This argument **can** be elaborated by reference to the hostility of the imperialist powers. Ironically, if the 'imperialist threat' argument is made well, I think it undermines rather than supports Marxist movements. If socialist movements are forced to resort to dictatorial practices antithetical to socialism when faced with an imperialist threat, then I see no alternative to the conclusion that socialist movements will always end up being antithetical to socialism! For the imperialist threat will always be present – or at least until socialism is a world-wide system.)

The historical argument has a great deal of legitimacy. However, historical conditions are not the whole story; if they were there would be little point in conscious political action. The historical conditions can make the situation more or less favourable, but our own political practice has a lot to do with how things turn out. Consequently, we need to look more thoroughly at our Marxism – the set of ideas which forms the basis for our political practice – and see how it encourages or hinders the achievement of our goals.

As examples of what I mean, I want to point out two flaws in Marxism, not fatal flaws but factors that can lead us to work contrary to our goal of expanding democracy. One of the central contributions of Marxism, as I shall argue below, lies in its focus on the conflict between workers and capitalists that emanates from the 'point of production.' The particular Marxist understanding of class relations based in production has given coherence and force to anti-capitalist struggles. At the same time – and this is the first of my two flaws – it has created a tendency for Marxists to view all other social conflicts as theoretically secondary and practically of lesser importance than **worker-capitalist** struggles.

As a result, Marxists have often viewed the organization of the state, whether in capitalist or post-revolutionary societies, as a subsidiary issue. In the one case, there is a tendency to believe that if capitalists are in control of production, political procedures – bourgeois democratic rights in particular – cannot be very meaningful. In the other case, if workers are in control, then there is little need to **worry** about political procedures. Of course when the tendency is stated in such bald terms, few Marxists would subscribe, and many would simply dismiss such beliefs as perversions of Marxism. The problem is that Marxism has regularly given rise to such 'perversions,' and I think we can see their origin in the extreme emphasis we have given to the 'point of production.'

Seeing everything in terms of worker-capitalist conflict around production has also limited Marxists' ability to contribute to struggles which have a multi-dimensional foundation. Part of the reason why Marxists have often relegated issues of feminism and race to an auxiliary position has been that so many of us are white males. Yet another reason lies in our theory, which identifies the central issue in peoples' lives as their class position, defined by their role in production – and for us, like almost everyone else, until very recently 'production' has not meant production in the home. In post-revolutionary

societies and in revolutionary movements in capitalist societies, women and racial minorities have often been told to wait while the 'main struggle' around production solves everybody's problems.

The extreme emphasis on class and the point of production affects more than our views on race and gender. When people – who are, to be sure, mostly workers – are engaged in struggles away from the point of production, Marxism has not had much to offer. The needs of people as consumers has had little role in our analysis. Only recently have Marxists begun to address environmental concerns. It is widely perceived that people on the left must decide whether they believe class struggles are paramount or whether the struggles of new social movements are paramount. Marxism has, unfortunately, contributed to this perception, or misperception, by building a theory with a uni-dimensional focus.

A second flaw, or weakness, in Marxism that I want to point out derives from the fact that Marxism, true to its 19th century roots, has always seen the advances of production as the well-spring of human progress. Whatever its faults, capitalism has been, according to Marxism, a historically progressive system because it has revolutionized the forces of production, advanced our control over our environment, and created the potential for human freedom. This is all very well. But when we transfer our admiration for the accomplishments of capitalist history into policy prescriptions we run into trouble. As we have subordinated other struggles to class struggles, we tend to subordinate other avenues of progress to progress in production.

Within advanced capitalist societies, we often promote, or at least accept, a politics that demands a continual expansion of production. In the advanced countries, for example, we push the worthy demand of full employment and generally support Keynesian expansionary policies over conservative efforts to 'restrict inflation.' In the poor regions of the world, we attack capitalism for inhibiting productive advances, and we call for more rapid economic growth. The programmes we advocate have direct benefits, and they also strengthen workers as a class in struggles with capital. Yet when we adopt this 'productionist' politics, we generally fail to confront the bourgeois rallying cry that 'more is better', and we allow distributional issues and other goals to be pushed aside.

When Marxist forces have taken power in post-revolutionary situations, they have invariably placed central emphasis on the expansion of production. Of course these situations have always been ones in which capitalism had failed to accomplish its historic task, and socialists seemed to have had little choice but to follow a path of socialist accumulation. However successful this socialist accumulation has been, it has generally resulted in the subordination of other socialist goals, such as equality, the liberation of women and the creation of a humane work environment.

The real difficulty is that Marxists should be aware that economic welfare does not lie in attaining more and more products. As long as we live in a

world of great inequality, we will invariably be frustrated in our efforts to advance through expanding the output of goods and services. 'Our needs and enjoyments,' **Marx** pointed out, 'spring from society; we measure them, therefore, by society and not by the objects of their satisfaction. Because they are of a social nature, they are of a relative **nature**.'⁴ The experiences of the last 200 years – in post-revolutionary and capitalist societies – underscore the point, making it clear that more and more products do not meet our 'needs and enjoyments.' Yet, Marxism has been plagued by 'productionism' for decades.

I think Marxists' productionism and our uni-dimensional emphasis on class struggle at the point of production have contributed to the erosion of democracy in post-revolutionary societies and have limited the progress of revolutionary movements in capitalist societies. Of course neither leads in some automatic way to anti-democratic, dictatorial practices. Stalinism – in either its bloody form or its more common authoritarian and bureaucratic form – is not the necessary outcome of Marxism. It will help us avoid Stalinism, however, if we bring the flaws of our analysis to the fore and try to do something about them. We have, to be sure, moved far from the **dogmatic** era **when** Stalinism dominated so much left thought, but we still have a long way to go. I am just reminding us all that we can only move forward after we recognize the limits of what we have done and then approach things with a good deal of humility.

The strengths of Marxism

In order to move forward, we need to spend some time figuring out just what we mean by Marxism, just what it is we are defending. Marxism involves both a political commitment and an analytic approach that is connected to the political commitment. Together they comprise what is, somewhat grandly, referred to as a 'world view.' While I like the concept of a 'world view' because it implies a holistic approach to things, at the same time we should reject the idea that Marxism is 'totalistic,' that it provides an answer to everything. If, for example, we try to move from Marxist analysis to an understanding of sexuality, we will probably not get very far. (Certainly one aspect of self-criticism by Marxists should be a delineation of the limits of what we can do with our Marxism.)

Political Commitment

I think we should start by setting out the political commitment component of Marxism. When we are in a 'scientific' mode, we like to claim that our politics flows from our analysis, from our understanding of history. In fact, there is a dialectic between our political commitment and our analysis, and, if we are to be frank, we will recognize that, at least in part, we came to our analysis as a means to justify and support our political position. There is nothing wrong with this, but it is useful to recognize it.

In the modern history of capitalism, a commitment to Marxism has meant a commitment to serious opposition. By and large other forms of radical opposition have been either marginalized (even more than Marxism), or have been easily coopted and absorbed, or both. As Marxists we are committed to a rejection of capitalism, 'root and branch.' We do not seek to fix up the system; we seek to replace it with something different.

By emphasizing the oppositional stance of Marxism, I do not want to revive the stale revolution-versus-reform discussion. I never viewed that discussion as particularly useful, because in most of the instances where we in the United States are confronted with practical political options the revolution-reform choice is irrelevant. Revolution is not on the immediate agenda. The problem therefore is how do we push for reforms and what reforms do we push for that will challenge the system, lay the groundwork for structural change, bring about some desirable immediate gains, and also put us in a better position at a time when revolution – a fundamental and thorough-going change in the nature of our social system – becomes a realistic possibility.⁵

So how do you tell the difference in terms of commitment between the Marxists and others who also want change? How do you tell that the Marxists are the 'serious opposition?' Well, **often** in the short run you can't tell. There is no neat dividing line between 'reformist reforms' and 'revolutionary reforms.' But over the long run, it is a question of how we position ourselves in relation to society's institutional structures. A Marxist opposition does not ask simply the questions: will this reform make things better? will it improve people's lives? Instead, a Marxist opposition, having identified various reforms that might make people's lives better, goes on to ask: which of these reforms will provide a basis for further change? which challenges, in some way, how the system normally works? which provides more people with power to continue changes in the future? For example, consider the matter of environmental destruction. A programme for cleaning up rivers and waste dumps and having business pay for the clean-up is certainly a reform that would improve people's lives. But a Marxist programme would focus at least as much on prevention as on clean-up and payment, and would stress that controls on business decisions about investment and production are the most effective method of prevention. Of course, public control on these business decisions is a direct challenge to the prerogatives of capital.

Moreover, in addition to the content of reforms, it matters how reforms are accomplished. A Marxist way of doing things is one that relies primarily upon mass mobilization and popular organization, instead of working through 'existing channels.' When, for example, the Sierra Club hires skilled lobbyists to persuade Congress to pass laws limiting air and **water** pollution, they may achieve some desirable results. When, however, those same results are obtained by effective community organization and popular protests, they have a larger impact. Such activity teaches the participants to rely on their own power, and it gives them organizational experience and democratic

practice. This sort of strong oppositional stance, this Marxist way of doing things empowers people for further change.

Having identified Marxism with an oppositional stance, I must add that, while this is the case in the United States and much of the rest of the world, it is certainly not the case in those countries where Marxism has been adopted as official ideology. In calling ourselves Marxists we run the risk of establishing a barrier between ourselves and people who are our allies in many other places. I think it is a risk we should take, but we should not ignore it.

Analytic Approach

The other part of the Marxist world view is our analytic approach, our understanding of the world that provides a basis for our politics. I will not attempt to distill *the* essential features of Marxism. I suspect that for different people, finding themselves in different situations and with different primary concerns, the essential features of Marxism may differ. I do want to explain some of the ideas that I have found important to my own Marxist analysis. For me, working as an economist, it has involved three central concepts: the labour theory of value; the theory of accumulation; and theory of crisis. However, the reader will discover that the meanings I attach to each of these concepts is not universally accepted among Marxists!

The labour theory of value is an explanation of the social relations that emerge from the capitalist production process. Its primary usefulness in my view is as a *qualitative* theory, as a description of the production process – the value creation process – that goes a long way in helping us understand the basic conflict of capitalist society. The *crux* of the theory is that workers enter into employment by selling their capacity to work, their labour power, to the capitalists. The capitalists are then faced with the problem of getting the maximum amount of work done, labour, out of this labour power. Moreover, having bought the labour power, the capitalists have the formal right to control and direct it as they see fit. Because the capitalists own what the labourers produce, they are able to make a profit insofar as they are able to get labour to produce a value that exceeds the wage.

This view of the capitalist production process implies that workers and capitalists are necessarily in conflict with one another over two issues, control of the work process and the distribution of income. While real wages may rise as the system grows – the basis for the claim that workers share an interest in the expansion of capitalism – the conflict over control and distribution cannot be eliminated as long as one group of people is employed for wages by another group. The significance of this conclusion depends on the point that control over one's work and equality of income distribution are very important factors affecting people's economic welfare. I will not try to establish this point here, but its essential role in the Marxist argument is worth noting.⁶

The labour theory of value, then, leads to the conclusion that a fundamental conflict between workers and capitalists is endemic to capitalism. That conflict

may be alleviated, but it cannot be eliminated within the confines of capitalism. If all we got from the theory were this conclusion, I think it would be important. It would provide us with a well-reasoned foundation for anti-capitalist struggle, a strong ideological basis for our oppositional activity. But in fact we get a lot more from the labour theory of value.

The Marxist view of work has often been dismissed with the claim that it applies only to the harsh conditions of an early era of capitalist development. It involves, according to the criticism, a 'galley slave' view of work and also fails to see the changing living standards that have affected so many workers in today's world. It would be folly to claim that Marxists have been innocent of over-statement and over-simplification in our rhetorical attacks on capitalist work. However, the labour theory of value should lead us away from such errors, for it does not focus on the absolute level of workers' incomes and the degree of physical hardship that they face. In giving emphasis to the control of work and the question of income distribution, the theory provides a firmer basis for our politics. (Still, our rhetorical flourishes have some basis in reality. Throughout the third world – certainly a part of the modern capitalist system – as well as within the richest centres of the wealthiest countries, absolute poverty and physically degrading work are widespread.)

The labour theory of value also gives us an understanding of production that is very useful in developing the case for socialism because it gives us a basis to reject the notion that capitalism has provided the most productive technologies. Adversaries of socialism are fond of the argument that capitalism has already provided us with the best – that is, most productive – way of doing things. So, **they** claim, to take authority away **from capitalists** and place it in the hands of workers would either make no difference in how things were done, or it would make a difference only by leading to less productive technology. Yet in the Marxist view, the choice of technology – the way things are produced – is not a technical choice; it is a social choice, a product of social struggle between capitalists and workers. Capitalists choose technologies that maintain their control of the production process and therefore their profits, rather than technologies that are most productive. One can think of myriad examples: assembly lines where team production would yield higher output; computers used primarily to audit workers' activity instead of being used to enhance their production; work stations designed to separate workers from one another; and on and on. We do not need the labour theory of value to see that these technologies are poor ones, but the labour theory of value does give us a firmer foundation for our arguments against the ideologues of capitalism.'

Finally, the labour theory of value is politically useful because it treats ordinary people as actors in **economic** life, rather than simply as objects. It sees the production process as an arena of conflict, with workers, organized and individually, affecting the course of economic decisions. Technology, prices, the distribution of income, profits, and the overall level of output

– all these factors not only impinge on workers' lives, but they are also determined by workers' struggles. Socialists of all types have emphasized the way that workers are victims of capitalism, but Marxism stands out because it also emphasizes that workers are actors in creating their own history. This way of looking at things can provide an injection of power to workers' struggles.

The theory of accumulation is a second Marxist pillar in building an understanding of what's going on in the world. One of the distinguishing features of capitalism is its tremendous dynamism, its tremendous capacity for growth and change. The theory of accumulation explains this dynamism as a product of the force of competitive markets. As society increasingly becomes organized under competitive conditions, as pre-capitalist legal constraints and **protections** for certain groups are reduced, individual capitalists are caught in a continuing battle to cut costs in order to survive. To cut costs, they must find new technologies, and, more often than not, new technologies can be effective only if firms grow. Consequently, the competitive struggle to survive becomes a growth imperative; in order to take advantage of economies of scale and thus reduce costs, firms must become larger and larger.⁸

Although the growth imperative derives from very practical considerations, it becomes an ideological force that drives the expansion of both firms and the entire system. **Marx** expressed this in his famous: 'Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!' Growth defines the 'soul' of capitalism, and, while individual firms may provide exceptions, neither capitalist firms in general nor the capitalist system can 'choose' not to grow.

In leading to the conclusion that **continual** expansion is an essential feature of capitalism, the theory of accumulation carries powerful political implications. For when we identify various phenomena as products of expansion, we are in effect identifying those phenomena as intrinsic to capitalism. Capitalism is not an immutable system and expressions of accumulation may be attenuated through political action, but those phenomena which are intrinsic to the system will continually re-emerge while the system remains intact. Consider some examples:

'One of the major routes for firms' expansion is international expansion, a constant search for new markets and new resources. International expansion comes with it an extension of economic and political control, both directly by the firms and by the nation states which they rely upon in pursuit of their interests. This extension of control and the conflicts that come with it are what we call imperialism. The theory of accumulation thus ties imperialism and its multiple acts of military aggression to the fundamental nature of capitalism. The lesson is that a thorough anti-imperialist politics is necessarily also an anti-capitalist **politics**.⁹

Understanding the international operations of capitalism as part of the accumulation process, we also have a basis on which to interpret the recurring disorder of the world economy. This disorder has current expression in the so-called debt crisis of the third world, the huge build-up of the US foreign

debt, and the extremely large US trade deficits. Each of these phenomena has been precipitated by a particular set of events (**e.g.**, oil price increases in the 1970s) and policies (**e.g.**, the US government's tight money strategy of the 1979–82 period). But a political response that focused on these immediate factors and did not challenge the structures of capitalist accumulation would neither resolve the disorder nor remove the huge burdens it places upon millions of **people**.¹⁰

Similar to the politics of anti-imperialism, the politics of environmental protection, to be effective, is also anti-capitalist. The capitalist growth imperative leads firms to devour the world's resources without taking account of the non-market, social **costs** of their actions. Moreover, to expand their profits, firms will always seek to have society bear as large a share as possible of their production costs; in practice, this means dumping sludge into rivers, smoke into the air, and laying barren once fertile lands. These actions take place not because capitalists are especially malicious people, who choose waste and spoilage for the environment. They are, by and large, normal people who are compelled to behave this way in order to compete; in the context of accumulation, they have no **choice**.¹¹

Accumulation has also driven the great changes that have taken place in the economic activities of women during the last century. As the successful expansion of capitalism has created a 'universal market,' in which products and services traditionally supplied through women's labour in the home are produced and sold for profit, women have simultaneously been pushed out of the home and pulled into wage employment. The multitude of changes in the family and in public social services that have **come** as the consequence are not simply the result of individual 'choices' by women or policy makers; they are the product of the larger social process of accumulation. The theory of accumulation, then, provides a useful basis for building a politics that deals with the changes in the family and government's provision of social services, a politics that identifies the limits and impacts of various **reforms** and their relation to the general operation of capitalism.

Most generally, the theory of accumulation provides a basis for politics because in defining the foundation of capitalist expansion it helps us see the limits of reform within the confines of the system. It leads to an anti-capitalist politics because it demonstrates that the particular social disorders that motivate popular protest are outgrowths of the way capitalism works; and in particular circumstances, it helps us see how our demands can be formulated in a way that challenges the way capitalism works.

The theory of crisis is also valuable because of its implications for our politics. It has its usefulness largely in the realm of ideology, strengthening oppositional politics by demonstrating the fundamentally irrational nature of capitalism.

The theory of crisis takes several forms, and different people give emphasis to different mechanisms in their explanations of why capitalism repeatedly

disrupts itself. Some argue that, especially in the era of monopoly capitalism, there is a powerful tendency for the system's productive capacity to outstrip society's consumptive capacity, and thus the output cannot be profitably sold. Others stress that overproduction leads to a tightening of labour markets and a resulting wage squeeze on profits. Still others emphasize the classical argument that the changing composition of capital, the continual substitution of machinery for direct labour power in production, creates a tendency for the rate of profit to fall. Regardless of which tack one takes, however, the force of all of these arguments is to draw attention to capitalism's self-contradictory nature.

Defenders of the system do not deny that periodically capitalism suffers depressions and inflations, but they argue that these disruptions are not intrinsic to the system itself. Instead they are explained by 'outside events,' 'bad luck,' and 'poor policy.' The impact of these arguments is to generate a popular ideology favourable to the system, leading people to think that, no matter how severe their economic problems, capitalism itself is not at fault and should not be tampered with. Marxist crisis theory provides a direct challenge to this sort of apologia for capitalism, locating the source of disruptions **within** the system itself. Capitalism runs into trouble precisely because of its own success, its success in expanding production which, by one mechanism or another, disrupts the flow of profits. The troubles cannot be eliminated by making the system work better, but only by changing the system.

The weakness in many presentations of Marxist crisis theory is that we often go beyond developing this politically useful ideological argument and attempt to predict systemic demise, or at least severe disruption. Capitalism still stands, however, and the severe disruptions occur much less frequently than we predict – obvious facts, it would seem, but often ignored by many of us.

Yet the theory does have an additional usefulness. The contradictions and social **conflicts** which it identifies still operate, and, while they may not set the system on its ear, they do force change and adjustment. Figuring out the direction of this change and adjustment and pointing out the costs it imposes upon society is an important part of our political work. For example, the growing role of the state has been a central issue of political controversy in the United States over the last two decades. Marxists are well situated to affect this controversy because crisis theory provides us with the beginnings of a coherent explanation of the state's expansion. It has come as a response to the system's contradictions; the state has intervened in economic affairs to avert disruptions. In doing so, however, the state has created new problems which appear to be problems of the state itself, but, by the Marxist argument, have their origin in the way the capitalist economy operates. Moreover, these new problems can be extremely costly, as witness the savings and loan fiasco currently underway in the **United** States and the international debt and trade

problems I alluded to above, to say nothing of four decades of large scale Keynesian stimulation provided by military spending.

Paying attention to our Marxism

In attempting to pull Marxism out of its current difficulties and move forward in the struggle for socialism, we should pay some attention to our Marxism. At the roots of every component of Marxist analysis is a historical approach to social issues, an understanding of current events as a product of long term changes and conflicts. Marxist theory is not a set of abstractions with its own life, but a way of generalizing about historical processes. To use Paul Sweezy's phrase, we should view 'the present as history.'¹²

Often we set ourselves outside of history. With regard to both the situation in post-revolutionary societies and developments in the capitalist world, we often look for things to happen quickly. Yet a Marxist historical view should show us that, the excitement and sharp breaks of revolutionary moments notwithstanding, major social changes, revolutionary changes, do not take place quickly. A revolution, after all, is not a military seizure of power — though it will generally involve a seizure of power at some point. Instead, it is a long historical process of change. Paying attention to our Marxism means, first of all, that we recognize that the struggle for socialism is a long haul.

At the same time, we should not allow our Marxism to transform us into cynics who would say: oh, well, things take a long time to happen so we should not expect anything good in our lifetimes; we'll just have to wait a few centuries for a decent society. Aside from the fact that this attitude is depressing, the problem with such cynicism is that, regardless of how long it takes, we are going to get to a 'decent society' only if we continually engage in struggles to change things. Furthermore, there is really no such thing as an ultimate 'decent society.' The point is to keep pushing, to change things and make life now as decent as possible. By fully recognizing the limits on what we can achieve, by accepting the necessity of a long haul, we will avoid disillusionment and be more successful.

Paying attention to our Marxism and understanding the present as history also means that we should give a good deal of attention to the connection between the way we shape the struggle for socialism and the socialism we expect to attain. In particular, what can we do in building a socialist movement to assure that our 'victory' will not be an authoritarian, repressive perversion of socialism?

To begin with, it will help to devote some effort to elaborating our goal, to figuring out what we mean by 'socialism.' It is rather difficult to get someplace if you do not know where you want to go! My own view of socialism, as I would hope is evident from much of what I have said above, begins with democracy. Democracy certainly includes formal

procedures, contested elections, rights of opposition, civil liberties. Yet it must also include mechanisms for effective empowerment of people, mechanisms that encourage and assure their participation because they know that participation will make a difference. At the very least this means social ownership (which may include state ownership, but would not be only state ownership) of productive facilities. It also means placing a major stress on equality and people's control over their own work, for, while these are desirable goals in themselves, they are also a means to popular empowerment.

These generalizations may be useful, but they are of course little more than platitudes. They only begin the discussion of the really difficult issues, such as how the roles of market and planning would be balanced in a socialist future. The principle of democracy precludes the option of allowing our lives to be dominated by either markets or highly centralized, and thus necessarily bureaucratic, planning. Yet markets of some sort are almost surely necessary as mechanisms of coordination in a complex economy. And planning, in the sense of employing conscious human choice as the controlling principle in our economic lives, is essential. There is, in any case, a great deal of useful discussion that can take place on these issues. Marxists have often argued that it is impossible to construct a blue print for the future, but that is no excuse for ignoring the question of where we are going.

Even an incomplete statement of goals helps us recognize some of the ways we should organize ourselves right now. If we want to build a democratic social system, a meaningful socialism, we had better build a movement that leads in that direction. Much of the left has recognized this and has talked a lot about internal democracy, the legitimacy of multiple struggles, equality, participation, education through struggle, and so on. But I doubt I am wasting paper in reiterating the point.

There are, moreover, some ways that we can reinforce the point in our practice. I have said that 'a Marxist way of doing things' involves placing emphasis on accomplishing our immediate goals through the popular struggle of a mass movement. Beyond our immediate goals of attaining structural reforms ('revolutionary reforms' that challenge capitalist domination), 'a Marxist way of doing things' also forces us to build the right kind of movement. For the most effective way to build the popular struggle of a mass movement is through internal democracy and respect for the interests of many groups.

It will also help if we make some adjustments in our ideas; we need to straighten out our Marxism. Overcoming the productionism and **uni**-dimensional focus on class struggle at the point of production would be good places to start, and there are certainly other aspects of Marxism that are in need of amendment. Correcting our ideas is a good thing in itself, but its true importance lies in the way it affects our practice. It should help

us **build the kind of movement we need to build the kind of socialism we need.**

NOTES

1. This essay is based on a **talk I** gave at the annual meeting of the Union for Radical Political Economics (URPE), August 27th. 1989, Sandwich, Massachusetts. My ideas benefited a great deal from exchanges on the Progressive Economists' Network, an electronic mail network, and, in **particular**, from reactions by Tom **Weisskopf**, Michael **Lebowitz** and Michael Perleman.
2. **Hinton**, author of the famous *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (New York: Monthly Review Press, **1966**) and several other books on China, was in Peking at the time of the Tiananmen massacre. He made his comment about the fascist character of the regime in a speech at the **URPE** conference **referred** to in the previous note.
3. Ralph **Miliband**, 'Reflections on the Crisis of the Communist Regimes,' *New Left Review*, No. 177, **Sept.-Oct.** 1989, presents this line of argument. At the same time, he very **usefully** calls attention to the problem, which I shall take up shortly, regarding **Marxism's** heavy emphasis on struggle at the point of production.
4. From *Wage Labour and Capital*, as published in Karl **Marx**, *Selected Works*, In Two Volumes, Prepared by the **Marx-Engels-Lenin** Institute, Moscow, Under the Editorship of V. Adoratsky (New York: International Publishers, **n.d., circa 1936**), vol. I, p. 269.
5. The formulation here and in the following paragraph originated, for me, in **André Gon**, *Strategy for Labor: A Radical Proposal* (Boston, Beacon Press, **1967**); see especially the 'Introduction.' **Gorz** uses the terms 'reformist reform' and 'non-reformist reform' and writes: 'A reformist reform is one which subordinates its objectives to the criteria of rationality and practicability of a given system and policy. Reformism rejects those objectives and demands – however deep the need for them – which are incompatible with the preservation of the system. . .[A] struggle for non-reformist reforms – for anti-capitalist reforms – is one which does not base its validity and its right to exist on capitalist needs, criteria, and rationale. A non-reformist reform is determined not in terms of what can be, but what should be. And finally, it bases the possibility of attaining its objective on the implementation of fundamental political and economic changes.' (pp. 7–8)
6. The issues of **control** of work and of income distribution are often seen as goals by socialists. What I want to stress, however, is the importance of these factors in relation to the **analytics** of the labour theory of value and hence in relation to our understanding of fundamental conflicts in capitalist society. Harry Braverman's *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974) and other modern analyses of the labour process integrate the control issue effectively into general analysis. The role of income distribution in Marxist analysis has, I think, received less attention. I find the discussion in **Marx's Wage Labor and Capital** on this point to be especially useful, and the point is of course a key in **Marx's** theory of immiseration. Once we do recognize the importance of these two factors – as opposed to the mainstream concept that people increase their economic welfare by obtaining a higher absolute level of goods and **services** – we not only obtain a better understanding of conflicts in capitalist society. Perhaps we also get a better idea of how to structure a socialist society
7. This argument derives from Braverman's book and also from Stephen **Marglin**, 'What Do Bosses Do? The Origins and Functions of Hierarchy in Capitalist

Production,' *Review of Radical Political Economy*, Summer 1974, and Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1979). Of course, the most profitable technology might coincide with the most productive; the point is that the two are not necessarily the same.

8. Economies of scale in production – a situation where a larger amount of output distributes, for example, the **fixed** cost of machinery over a larger number of **units** – are easy **to understand**. Yet they are only the **beginning** of the story. Economies of scale are also **important** in research and development, marketing and distribution, finance, and **political** influence.
9. It should go without saying, but unfortunately does require saying, that when I argue that imperialism has roots in the nature of capitalism I am not denying that imperialism – in the sense of international domination by powerful nations over weaker nations – can have and has had other roots **as** well. Here, **as** with many other ills, the elimination of capitalism may be necessary to achieve a cure, but it is not sufficient.
10. See Arthur MacEwan, *Debt and Disorder: International Economic Instability and U.S. Imperial Decline* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990) and various essays in Arthur MacEwan and **William K. Tabb, eds., Instability and Change in the World Economy (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989).**
11. As I have noted above, flying the banner of socialism, post-revolutionary societies have embraced 'productionism' and adopted the growth imperative with which capitalism has presented them. The consequences for the environment have been disastrous. For socialism, however, there is the possibility of choice about growth, and therefore at least a possibility of avoiding environmental disaster.
12. See Paul M. Sweezy, *The Present as History: Essays and Reviews on Capitalism and Socialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1953). Concerning the title of his book, Sweezy writes in the preface: 'The title is not an attempt to define the subject matter but rather to suggest the angle of vision from which the various pieces were written. Everyone knows that the present will some day be history. I believe that the most important task of the social scientist is to try to comprehend it as history now, while it is still the present and while we still have the power to influence its shape and outcome.'