

Classical Marxism: What is out of Date, and What has Stood the Test of Time (Theses for Discussion)

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I. THE METHODOLOGY OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC RESEARCH

1. The most contentious methodological question of our time *is the relationship between the systematic dialectical materialist method on the one hand, and on the other, the positivism that is traditional for present-day social research and the post-modernism that flows from it.*
2. In our view, the dialectical method is as before entirely adequate for researching the strategic, qualitative shifts undergone by modern society in general and by socialism as a material and intellectual phenomenon in particular. As is well known, the dialectical method is based on a recognition of the historicism of social systems and similar phenomena; on the possibility of subjecting them to theoretical and practical criticism, and the need to do this; and on the need to replace them, with the help of an understanding of the laws of development of the particular social subject (equipped with theory and organised social force).
3. In present circumstances, the development of the systematic dialectical materialist method cannot follow the path of integration with “omnivorous” post-modernism. What is required is *dialogue* with the now-prevalent methods. This latter signifies a recognition of the validity of each of the methods in its field of research, and their dialectical, contradictory interrelationship, proceeding from the legitimacy of bracketing together the realities which these methods are used to research. Post-modernism, for example, is adequate for describing the forms of society and social consciousness that predominate in contemporary reality, forms which are alienated from human beings and which are based on a crisis of earlier institutions, ideologies and so forth. However, this method is absolutely inadequate for studying the possibilities of overcoming these distorted forms, this alienation, or the transforming of this alienated world (naturally, these transformations proceed from objective tendencies to progress in the world).

II. THE MATERIAL PRECONDITIONS FOR THE BIRTH OF A NEW SOCIETY

4. Within the context of this problem, overcoming two limited approaches to the analysis of such preconditions takes on fundamental importance. Analyses of the society of the future as “anti-capitalism” (Stalinism) and as a reformed capitalism have both outlived their usefulness. At the same time, both these approaches contain positive aspects. Capitalism needs to be removed through the unity of a qualitative, revolutionary negation (of exploitation and so forth), and of succession (of material and intellectual culture).
5. The new approach, which has made its effects felt in full measure during the second half of the twentieth century, and which can be discerned in the manuscripts of Marx, presupposes an analysis of the new society not only as post-capitalist, but also as characterised by the removal of the whole world of alienation (“prehistory”, “the realm of economic necessity”). Capitalism in general, and present-day post-classical capitalism in particular, can in this case be seen only as the highest phase of development of the “realm of necessity”). From this stems a conclusion which is rarely stressed even by modern

Marxism: *the left is faced with the task of doing away (through the methods of reform or revolution) not only with capitalism, but also with the whole society of alienation, and with all the forms and mechanisms of alienation.*

1. THE PRECONDITIONS FOR A NEW SOCIETY

6. The preconditions for such a new society (“the realm of freedom”, the post-economic world, “communism”), extend far beyond the processes of the socialisation of production and the development of the class of hired workers. The minimum requirements include:

- a) The shift to the predominance of creative activity and post-industrial technologies; the creation of a world of culture, and the consigning of material production to a secondary level; and the shift to a dialogue with nature and to a “noosphere” type of development;*
- b) The development of various forms of association of workers and citizens; the development of their capacities for social creativity, and of their experience of transforming the prevalent social relations (their experience in the struggle for their rights, for self-organisation and so forth, for the development of their “social muscle”);*
- c) The accumulation and mastering by working people of the wealth of human culture, without which creative activity in general and social creativity in particular are impossible (this thesis, which was already stressed by Lenin, has only a very pale reflection in present-day Marxism, which often forgets this question).*

7. The key parameter and measure of development of the new society is becoming not the replacement of the private owner by the state, but *the process of association (the self-organisation of citizens and their self-management), and their social creativity* in the whole diversity of its forms (from innovations by a trade union activist or teacher, through the activity of mass democratic organisations, to the revolutionary transformation of society). This point is of fundamental importance in the polemic with orthodox Marxism.

2. THE MAIN TASKS OF THE NEW SOCIETY.

8. As it proceeds, *the birth of a new society encounters the need to resolve the following tasks* (for the most part these were unknown to the “old” Marxism, and represent new perceptions by the modern creative Marxism).

9. First, it is necessary to overcome the hegemony of corporate capital, whose power permeates all spheres of individual and social activity, shaping a particular type of technological progress and of the organisation of economic life, political authority, ideology, child-raising and education, culture and so forth. This hegemony synthesises all the most modern and developed mechanisms of alienation: the power of the market and monetary fetishism; private property, the “privatisation” of all economic and social life, and capitalist exploitation; the exercise of power in the economy and politics by corporate elites through the use of a broad range of legitimate and illegitimate, institutional and spiritual forms of coercion; the domination of mass culture and of the psychology of individualism, etc.

10. The social basis for the reproduction of the many-sided hegemony of corporative capital is *conformism* (subordination to the dominant “rules” and institutions of social life as “natural”), which is typical of the workers, customers and “clients” of corporations. Consumer society and the cultivation of the utilitarian values fostered by mass culture are vital mechanisms helping to spread this power and this conformism.

11. The only form of social energy which workers are able to use to overcome this hegemonism is the energy of their united, common activity (social creativity). The most important means of destroying consumerism and mass culture is the development of genuine cultural values and their mastering by the masses. Aiding the accumulation of the potential for social creativity and the progress of genuine culture are consequently among the main tasks of the left forces.

12. *Secondly*, it is necessary to meet the challenge of social problems, setting forward realistic proposals for solving them - something which cannot be achieved by present-day world capital (in a certain sense it can be said that *the need to solve global problems is the main “negative” precondition for communism*). From this flows the need for an alliance between the left movement and organisations struggling to solve global problems; the socialist movement cannot count on success unless it transforms these organisations into its most important allies. How this can be achieved is a special question about which more will be said below.

13. *Thirdly*, the task of overcoming the old world of alienation must be tackled as an *international* goal, that is, one for all humanity. It is already clear that this will not be a simultaneous “world revolution”. It is just as clear that the strategy of trying to achieve a “breakthrough” in the course of which corporate capital breaks at its “weak link” inevitably leads to the degeneration of the first attempts at making isolated progress toward the new society. The task, consequently, is as follows: developing and at the same time achieving agreement on the implementation of a single and interrelated (but not uniform) strategy for the socialist (communist) transformation of the whole world.

III. THE THEORY OF SOCIALISM

1. SOCIALISM AS THE PROCESS OF NON-LINEAR TRANSFORMATION OF THE “REALM OF NECESSITY” INTO THE “REALM OF FREEDOM”

14. Taking this general approach to the question of the preconditions for the society of the future (communism) and of the tasks which this society has to resolve, socialism may be interpreted not as the first phase of communism and not as “socialised” (“Swedish” and so on) capitalism, but as *an integral (having a single nature) international non-linear and contradictory process of transformation of the world of economic necessity and alienation into the “realm of freedom”*.

15. This process goes forward along three interconnected paths:

a) —the development of the first shoots of the new society in distorted and transitional (that is, combining elements of the “old” and “new”) forms within the framework of contemporary postclassical capitalism (for example, the social and ecological regulating and limiting of the market, social welfare guarantees etc.).

b) —the activity of mass democratic and socialist organisations and movements, which constitute the direct moving forces of the socialist transformations, in carrying through reforms and revolutions and developing the initial elements of the new society (in a certain sense these organisations and the people who are active in them become oases of the future in the world of alienation);

c) —the fostering of the relations of the new society in countries where popular-democratic and socialist revolutions have already created the institutional preconditions for realising the simplest relations of communist society (naturally, alongside the powerful and only gradually withering heritage of the past).

16. It is only within the unity of these three mutually interconnected processes that the progressive development of socialism is possible. The degradation and/or degeneration (“mutation”) of any of them leads to the stagnation and/or crisis of the whole process. Hence the successful development of the first shoots of socialism (or as used to be said, the “victory” of socialism) in particular countries is possible only in unstable transitional forms, and only to the degree that capitalism is socialised and humanised (in the “citadels” of this society, reformism and not conservatism dominates) and that the power and influence of mass left-democratic organisations grows on an international scale. Socialism, consequently, appears as a *non-linear* process encompassing the victories and defeats of numerous revolutions and counterrevolutions, social reforms and counter-reforms, and proceeding as an *international*, integral world process.

17. As well as stressing the continuity and transitional character of socialism, this characterisation makes it possible to advance a relatively simple *criterion for the “socialistness” of the system*. Socialism should ensure a higher degree of economic efficiency and of the free, harmonious development of the individual than capitalism, even “postclassical” capitalism.

2. STAGES OF THE GENESIS OF SOCIALISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

18. The history of the modern epoch shows that in the course of its development socialism passes at a minimum through the following stages.

19. *The first* stage is linked with the possibility of beginning socialist transformations in the conditions of a developed industrial state-monopoly capitalism. The contradictions of this stage of capitalism have led to a series of socialist and national liberation revolutions, but for a number of objective reasons these revolutions have culminated in the genesis of a mutant socialism.

20. *The second* stage, marked by the crisis of the world capitalist economy during the first half of the twentieth century (the great depression, fascism, and the Second World War),

has been associated with the impact of the new preconditions of socialism, and above all with the objective need for the socialisation and humanisation (and not merely state regulation) of the world capitalist economy. The responses to this challenge of the twentieth century have included social democratic reforms and the transition to the “society of the two-thirds” in the developed countries following the collapse first of the efforts to resolve these contradictions by means of fascisation rather than socialisation, and then the collapse of the colonial system.

21. *The third stage*, associated with the new wave in the technological revolution, has been marked by computerisation, miniaturisation and flexible technology, and by growth of the role of individual innovative capacities and initiative. Postclassical capitalism has reacted to this with the rebirth of the tradition of liberalism, along with the simultaneous strengthening of the power of the largest international corporations and institutions (the International Monetary Fund and so forth). This has in fact been an irrational reaction, employing the achievements of the scientific-technical revolution primarily in the transactional sector (finances, management and so forth), and yielding only insignificant progress even in the field of the growth of consumption, not to speak of culture.

22. Mutant socialism has made a number of efforts at selfreform. “Perestroika”, with its attempts to carry through a transition to a model of “humane” and “democratic” socialism with the help of reforms from above (a sort of “bureaucratic reform of bureaucratic power”) proved a failure, since the decay of the system had proceeded so far that the potential for social creativity by the late 1980s had perished all but definitively.

3. SOCIALISM AND THE MARKET

23. As is quite widely understood, the analysis of socialism as a variety of the market system in practice ignores the fact that the market is a form of commodity productive relations which give birth to the corresponding mechanisms of alienation (in particular, commodity fetishism and competition) and to a particular personality type (the egoistical homo economicus), and which by force of its internal contradictions develops into capitalism. Moreover, in the late twentieth century the market as a ruling system cannot exist without the whole totality of attributes characteristic of “late capitalism” (in particular, the giant superstructure of the transactional sector, consisting of exchanges, banks and so forth, and consuming as much as half of the available resources). On the other hand, “non-market” socialism until now has existed either as a bureaucratic “economy of shortages”, or as the theoretical construct of a virtual system of relations of democratic planning and self-management.

24. Resolving this dilemma is possible through a dynamic analysis of socialism as a process of transition to communism as a society lying “on the other side” both of material production and of the market. Consequently, *socialism is characterised by the process of the withering away of the market* (or more precisely, of the economic forms and mechanisms characteristic of “late capitalism”) *as more efficient and progressive (in the economic, social, environmental and other senses) post-market relations of management, cost accounting etc. are developed* (their distorted and transitional forms are derived in

many ways from the practice both of capitalism and of “socialism”; a minimal task is to cleanse these forms of these deformations).

4. SOCIALISM AND DEMOCRACY

25. Interpreting socialism as a transitional process whose main “energising potential” is the social creativity associated with it, makes possible a further confirmation of the thesis of the dying away of political forms (in particular, of parties, of the state, and in general of the principle of representative democracy), and *the development of grass-roots democracy* and self-management as trends characteristic of all three currents of socialism (socialist-oriented reforms in the “countries of capital”, socialist movements, and socialist societies).

26. The elements of grass-roots democracy include: (1) the full and consistent realisation of all internationally recognised human rights and freedoms (freedom of speech, conscience and association, the right to form political and social organisations etc.); (2) the general development of productive (to differing degrees depending on the property forms in particular enterprises) and territorial self-management as basic forms of association of the population; (3) the transforming of mass democratic organisations and movements (trade unions, women's organisations, environmental and consumer groups) into fully valid subjects of the process of regulating social life; (4) the formation of a legislative power according to the principle of representation by deputies from base-level associations (organs of self-management) with an imperative mandate (the right of recall, replacement and so on); subordination of the executive (the government) to the legislative power; the election of an independent judicial authority without the involvement of presidential or analogous institutions; and (5) the activity of political parties (representing the dying classes) through mass democratic organisations, organs of self-management and so forth.

5. “MUTANT SOCIALISM”

27. The objective preconditions for and initial steps of the socialist transformations linked with the undermining of the relations of alienation at the end of the second millennium were substantially changed as a result of the deep internal crisis and later, the collapse of the initial (mutant) shoots of socialism in the USSR and the countries of Eastern Europe.

28. The reason for this was the very nature of this “socialism”. The essence of the former system might be summed up briefly as “*mutant socialism*” (by this is understood the historical dead-end represented by this variant of the social system located at the beginning of the worldwide period of transition from capitalism to communism - this social system going beyond the framework of capitalism, but not forming a stable model serving as the basis for a subsequent movement to communism).

29. This new socialist world, which appeared as a consequence of the worldwide tendency to the socialisation and humanisation of the economy, and as a product of the profound contradictions of imperialism which emerged during the First World War, proved sickly and deformed (mutant) from birth. This system should be characterised as “mutant” not by

comparison with an abstract theoretical ideal, but by comparison with the real tendency to the socialisation and humanisation of social life outlined in part 1.

30. *The reasons for the mutant nature of this “socialism”* (and together with this, the reasons for the rise and historically rapid defeat of this system) are not limited to the factors traditionally noted by researchers, such as Russia's low level of industrial development, the small numbers of workers and so forth. The essence of the problem lies deeper - in what has been called *the “trap of the twentieth century”*: the world as a whole was ready (by virtue of the depth of the contradictions involved) to destroy the existing system (particularly where it was really rotten), but it was not ready for the conscious creation of a qualitatively new society.

31. As a result of this historical “trap of the twentieth century”, there appeared various palliative forms for resolving the contradiction between the need to make changes to the world imperialist system and the inadequate potential of the reformist forces. One of these forms was mutant socialism. The worldwide tendency to socialisation (the conscious regulating of social development, its orientation toward the free development of the personality, social justice, collectivism and the mass striving of the workers to establish a new society - in Soviet parlance, “enthusiasm”) appeared in the world for the first time on a mass scale, but took the form of bureaucratic mutants (the command economy, the suppression of personal rights and freedoms, universal statisation, “levelling” and so forth).

32. *As a result of the self-disintegration of “socialism”*, a new reality appeared in the world. It was not by chance that this reality coincided with the third stage of the genesis of socialism and the process of self-negation of post-classical capitalism.

33. The various “clans” of corporate capital have now achieved near-absolute hegemony. But with contradictions immanent in the very nature of corporate capital, and also between the various capitalist “clans”, the end of the twentieth century is marking the entry of humanity into a *“new world disorder”*

IV. THE SOCIAL BASE OF SOCIALIST TRANSFORMATIONS

1. THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD COMMUNITY

34. Developments on the threshold of the twenty-first century have significantly altered *the social structure of the contemporary world community*.

35. *The class of hired workers* in the developed countries does not consist mainly of the industrial proletariat, but of workers in the sphere of services and the transactional sector. In the developing countries, meanwhile, industrial labour predominates, manual labour remains a massive phenomenon, and extra-economic compulsion has not been eliminated.

36. The earlier thesis about the industrial proletariat as the only consistently revolutionary force with an interest in the transformation of society now requires corrections as a result of the above-mentioned changes which are characteristic of the period around the end of the century - the beginning of the transition from “prehistory” to the “realm of freedom”.

37. In exactly the same way *the bourgeois class* has on the one hand been extensively changed by the process of mutual “diffusion” between this layer and the higher layers of white-collar workers; on the other hand, a further concentration of real economic and political power is occurring in the hands of a narrow circle of the corporate capitalist elites.

38. The fundamental shifts described above are bringing about a situation on the threshold of the twenty-first century in which the “classic” contradiction between hired labour and capital is developing (without being eliminated) into a *new social-class contradiction of post-classic capitalism*.

39. At one pole of this contradiction is personified international corporate-organised capital.

40. At the other pole of the contradiction are those workers (representing hired and free labour) who are capable in practical terms of resisting this power. Such workers are the subjects of social creativity, capable of self-organisation, self-defence, and the purposeful creation of new social relations in economic, political and cultural life.

41. As a result, society is not divided simply into owners of capital and hired workers. Another division is arising, cutting across the traditional class pyramid as if diagonally. This is an extremely mobile boundary - *the contradiction between conformists (from the milieu both of the owners and of the “slaves” of corporative capital), and those who are capable of joint social creativity*.

42. The conclusion can readily be drawn that the division of society into conformists and social creators is conditioned at a fundamental level by the *contradiction between the hegemonism of corporative capital* (the highest present-day form of alienation) *and social creativity*. This division, which is described here in a somewhat conditional manner, can be illustrated by a scheme [see p.9] (which is, naturally, considerably simpler than the actual relationships) showing the “superimposition” and interconditionality between the socio-class divisions of society (in which the poles are capitalists and hired workers, with a multitude of “layers” in between), and the socio-creative divisions (the distinction between conformists and subjects of social creativity).

43. The stress on the internal contradictions within the milieu of the workers and on the “diffusion” of the bourgeois class, on the questions of internationalisation and globalisation, requires a critical reappraisal of previous concepts of *the historical mission of the working class*.

2. "LEVELS" OF SUCCESSIVELY MORE DIFFICULT STRATEGIC TASKS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR SOCIAL LIBERATION

44. The modern international post-classical capitalist world community is divided by a complex system of social contradictions. Accordingly, we also see the rise of several "levels" of successively more complex strategic tasks in the struggle for social liberation. Particular social forces are capable of solving each of these tasks.

45. *The first level* is conditioned by the classical antagonism of the world of alienation - by the exploitation of workers, and in particular, the exploitation of hired labour by capital. The classical goal of this struggle (it is apposite to the degree to which (1) there is mass exploitation of the workers of the countries of the "third" and "second" worlds, and (2) despite some redistribution of surplus value to the benefit of the upper two-thirds of society, the exploitation of workers in developed countries continues), is the redistribution of surplus value to the benefit of the workers.

46. *The second level* is the reformist struggle by workers for the realisation of their more complex strategic interests, associated with the (albeit partial) overcoming of the alienation of management, property, labour and other forms of human activity within the framework of the "old" social system. The forms of this struggle that are familiar in practice include: workers' accounting and control, and participation in management and the development of self-management in enterprises; the combining of workers in associations for the purpose of concluding collective agreements at the local, national and international levels; the struggle by workers for the redistribution of shares to the advantage of the collective as a whole, rather than just of its individual members, and the founding of collective enterprises and associations of them; and the founding of open democratic associations of citizens in order to take the first steps toward overcoming their conformism and subordination to the establishment in social life (such bodies include consumer and environmental unions, local self-government associations, and peace, women's and youth organisations).

47. *The third level* of struggle for the liberation of labour is the formation of the subject of revolutionary social creativity. This subject must (1) be convinced, and not only in practice, that a reformist approach cannot achieve a fundamental solution of socio-class or global problems, and cannot overcome the hegemony of corporative capital, exploitation, poverty or unemployment. The subject must be convinced that it is impossible through reformist means to ensure the founding on a mass scale of new (socialist) forms of culture, labour, management and property, of the relationship of human beings to nature, and so forth. At the same time, the subject must (2) possess a good deal of socially creative energy, particularly on the level of culture, and must possess strong "social muscles". The subject must also be under the pressure of contradictions sufficiently powerful to break the settled, conformist stereotypes of life.

48. If such a social force is present in a country where (4) the preconditions for socialist transformations are relatively developed, and (5) the system of relationships of alienation (including the ruling classes and the state) are in crisis, *first the popular-democratic and then the socialist revolution can become a reality ("a revolutionary situation")*.

49. The popular-democratic revolution has to destroy the power of the corporative-capitalist bureaucratic structures, creating a consistently democratic political system and ensuring the possibility of an “equal” struggle between labour and capital. While this revolution is by nature peaceful and democratic, it may take the form of armed struggle in the case of violent resistance to the reforms from corporate capital and the old state apparatus, army and police etc., which do not enjoy the democratically expressed support of the majority of the population. Following the victory of the popular-democratic transformations, the socialist revolution will be able to take the form of the peaceful democratic victory of the working majority, organised in order to create a new society and possessing the capability of establishing it.

* * *

50. These theses have already been the topic of wide debate within the international association “Scholars for Democracy and Socialism”, and in the pages of the journal Alternatives. All of them arise from a single key premise: the new society is coming into being as the negation of the whole epoch of alienation, which at the end of its lifespan is giving birth to the means for its negation - associated social creativity. All the remaining theses are the result of the dialectical development of the initial premise using the method of proceeding from the abstract to the concrete, together with the constant juxtaposition of theoretical conclusions and practice, and resting on an understanding of the fact that this process is dialectical and non-linear

The Social Structure of Modern Post-Classical Capitalism

CONFORMISTS

(Subjects of Hegemonism)

 The corporative-capitalist elite (the subject
 of the hegemonism of corporate capital)

 The middle bourgeoisie, higher managers, the "elite"
 intelligentsia and other individuals directly "realising"
 the hegemonism of corporate capital

 The petty bourgeoisie, farmers

 Senior white-collar workers in the transactional sector

 Subjects of free creative labor

 Associated workers/co-owners

SUBJECTS OF
 ASSOCIATED
 SOCIAL
 CREATIVITY

 Hired workers engaged in creative
 labor (including the "rank and
 file intelligentsia")

 Hired workers engaged
 in reproductive industrial or manual labor

 Workers bound not only by economic
 but also by extra-economic compulsion,
 patriarchal traditions etc.

 Paupers, lumpens etc.

CONFORMISTS

(Objects of hegemonism)