

Marxism and the World Social Forum

ROBERT WARE

1. The 21st century brings new political and economic conditions and new activist methods never known before, even by those prescient giants of the 19th century, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Like you, I am not prepared to dismiss the insights, understanding, and theories of those great thinkers and activists. There may be some changes here and there, but what Levins and Lewontin said about Engels applies equally to Marx: they may have been wrong in many ways, but they were right about the important things.ⁱ
2. I will focus on some new developments of application, practices, politics, and activism appropriate to the 21st century, and in particular for marxist internationalism. Marx was an internationalist and knew that, as millions are saying today, a better world is possible. His principal goals remain. As the ringing conclusion of the Manifesto of the Communist Party made clear, the proletarians must break out of their chains and win a new world.
3. The Manifesto began with the observation that “[a] spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism”. (CW 6, 481)ⁱⁱ Marx and Engels proceeded in the Manifesto to recount ways in which capitalism was becoming a global phenomenon. It was only a matter of time that globalization would extend and tighten its tentacles. During that time capitalism has shifted its foundations from the British empire to the American empire. But there are also many capitalist roots, not only in Europe but in Japan and in formation elsewhere.
4. The battle is no longer one of contending national European powers or of global superpowers. At the beginning of the 21st century there is a dominant empire that serves the expanding capitalist oligopolies and financial institutions which suck wealth through new forms of imperialism. Moreover, capitalism in the 21st century has established global structures and institutions, now backed by unparalleled military power that can literally annihilate the world.
5. In the 21st century, capitalist imperialism has extended itself far beyond what Marx and Engels could ever imagine or a 19th century capitalist could ever dream. The Chinese walls have not been battered down, but they have been lined with fastfood stands. This capitalist expansion has been aided by new instruments of production like those of robotics, computers, and nuclear technology, and facilitated by new forms of communication and transportation.ⁱⁱⁱ Trillions of dollars (sometimes in euros and yens) are transferred daily, making financial capital adept, flexible, and dangerous. (No doubt Marx and Engels would be filled with ‘shock and awe’ by the US weapons of mass destruction lined up against Iraq

as well as the destruction of massive capitalist towers by a small number of al-Qaeda operatives.)

6. It is still also true, however, that the “union [of workers] is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another.” (CW 6, 493) Marx and Engels, who were amazed by the advantages afforded by the telegraph and the railways, would cheer on, and join with, those who use the internet, the telephone, and the airlines to organize meetings such as those of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, and of course the many other international meetings around the world.

7. The exploited and oppressed are also acting globally, like the capitalists, and are raising dissent and struggle to a new international level. The spectre is no longer haunting just Europe. It is haunting the world and the empire that pretends to rule the world. Proletarians of all countries are uniting—in ways unimaginable by Marx and Engels. This people’s unity of the 21st century was heralded by the demonstrations in Seattle in 1999. Much international work preceded that victory over the WTO, but international meetings have flourished subsequently. The increasingly international movement “chases the bourgeoisie [and their international capitalist organizations] over the whole surface of the globe.” (CW 6, 487; in this case it is their adversaries rather than their market needs that are chasing the bourgeoisie.)^{iv}

8. International activity has mushroomed, spreading throughout the world and uniting diverse causes and movements. Now demonstrators can be mobilized on a single day throughout the world, as we have seen in the anti-war demonstrations against a US attack on Iraq. The 30 million who demonstrated on February 15th (according to a Guardian (of Britain) report) constituted a massive show of dissent. Global demonstrations can now be organized and coordinated with relative ease. It is important that dissent can be organized, but it is also important that dissenting organizations can be established.

9. The World Social Forum, a freely developing movement of alternatives and dissent, is for this reason an important development. Noam Chomsky sees in it “at least the seeds of the first authentic international, the dream of the left and labor movements since their modern origins.” (personal communication) The international meetings at Porto Alegre, Brazil have brought together over 100,000 people (January 2003), but similar numbers have also met regionally as in the meetings of the European Social Forum in Florence in October 2002.

10. Is this the beginning, or seeds, of an international? Would Marx have seen it as an opportunity and a project worthy of activist resources and energy?

11. The world social forum process provides spaces for conferences, panels, testimonies, rallies, and meetings of all kinds. It brings together people from thousands of organizations for thematic discussions and presentations of experiences and proposals for alternative worlds. Their watchword is that a better world is possible. A myriad of ideas are put forward on multiple alternatives by innumerable groups. Sometimes, the meetings sound chaotic^v but nevertheless energizing. The world is discovering what we already knew: you cannot organize creativity, it comes in surprising ways from a variety of cultures, nations, and traditions. The varied sources for new practices and cooperation, make the international component of the world social forum especially important. The opportunities for regional and local meetings in that framework enrich and strengthen immediate cooperation for

significant results. It appears that these regional and local meetings are especially important for equitable and viable international forums. Michael Albert argues this in “WSF: Where To Now”.^{vi} Among other things, he proposes that we “[e]mphasize local forums as the foundation of the worldwide forum process.”

12. The world social forum process is a decentralized process spread out globally and loosely combining movements, groups, and political activists in “open spaces for dialoguing”.^{vii} It is not an attempt to “organize the forces of labor”.^{viii} It is not a single association to unite the working class in one political duty. In Marx’s Inaugural Address to the Working Men’s Association, he proclaimed that “[t]o conquer political power has ... become the great duty of the working classes.” (CW 20, 12)

13. It needs to be noted that the battle(s) has become even more involved as the world has become more advanced and more internationalized. Marx and Engels called on the proletarians of all countries to unite—to break out of their chains and to win a world. They have to rise up (throughout the world), take control (of corporations, corporate power, and international financial institutions), and build a new world (a world still to be created). These multiple tasks are more complex than Marx seemed to realize, although he did speak of a population as “a rich totality of many determinations and relations.” (CW 28, 37) Still it seems clear that the forms of oppression are wider and deeper than Marx realized. Sexism and racism are among the many divisions that challenge the working class and are still inadequately confronted. Class lines are also less clear than the Manifesto claims. People, not just proletarians at least in a narrow sense, should unite, but without losing their diversity.

14. Since Marx’s day, new international processes and organizations are developing. The World Bank, the IMF, the WTO, the UN, business councils of all sorts, and corporations that are much larger than most countries create new challenges. Those are structures that work for capitalism that need to be contained and then destroyed. We can find new ways of living and imagine a better world, but it is still true today that we also have to overthrow old structures that prevent our advances. There is a difference between developing the power to overthrow the oppressive structures and exercising the powers to develop a new world.

15. The two are interrelated. The interrelation was already foreshadowed in Marx’s discussion of the work of the International. While emphasizing the task of organizing the working class, he also emphasized the importance of experiments. Marx said of the co-operative movement and co-operative factories that “[t]he value of these great social experiments cannot be over-rated.” (CW 20, 11) Marx would have been impressed by the success of Mondragon, an experiment that long ago became an institution. There are many other co-operative experiments and co-operative associations that provide at least local and regional experience, which can be brought to international attention.

16. It is important to see that there are (at least) two aspects that are dialectically intertwined. We can learn from the “great social experiments” while at the same time organizing to “conquer political power”, to use Marx’s ideas about the first International. The point to be made is that socialism should be scientific and utopian. We need to analyze the structures and fight for their change while at the same time considering options and alternatives for better societies in a better world. We need alternatives for replacing capitalism as we also prepare to overthrow capitalism.

17. New alternatives are being developed, and the World Social Forum process is important in bearing testimony for this. Creating new alternatives is not simply a matter of laying down new ideals, whether or not they are from the poetry of the past. We cannot know ahead of time what to do when we take power. We need to act, explore, and experiment. Experiments are being carried out globally and are being made known internationally. As democracy degenerates in the capitalist states, democratic alternatives are blossoming everywhere. People are combining and joining together through diverse movements, organizations, institutes, unions, forums—everywhere. This is pluralism, socialist pluralism.

It is not what is usually thought of as uniting, but what is important is that it is combining, dispersing, dividing the work, and acting everywhere. We need to experiment with alternatives that will create a new world. There is no one future. The future is open, but the future belongs to the people. That is marxist internationalism for the 21st century.

ⁱ Richard Levins and Richard C. Lewontin, *The Dialectical Biologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), dedication to Engels.

ⁱⁱ Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 6 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), p. 481. Subsequent references to their collected works will be made in the text in the same fashion.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marx and Engels marveled at the “machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam—navigation, railways, electric telegraphs”, etc. And they asked rhetorically, “what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour?” (CW, 6, 489)

^{iv} As an example, recently (June 2002), the G7 countries met in the heavily guarded redoubt of Kananaskis hidden in the Rocky Mountains a safe distance from my very conservative city of Calgary.

^v For example, see the Znet Update of 31 January 2003 by Michael Albert on “The WSF and our involvement” where he reports on some of the difficulties for the Znet series of panels on Life After Capitalism.

^{vi} At www.zmag.org, to be revised and published in Z Magazine, March 2003.

^{vii} This is the characterization of the meetings at www.forumsocialmundial.org.br.

^{viii} Marx said that the task of the International “was to organize the forces of labor and link the various working—men’s movements and combine them.” (CW 22, 633)