

## ***Is Marxism dead?***

Preface for Chinese edition of *Beyond Capital*

Some people in China and elsewhere say that Marxism is dead. They say that Marxism is something for old scholars to think about and to argue over ambiguous points in a dead text.

Real economic science, they say, is the study of how people respond to economic stimuli. It is the prediction of how people react to an increase in prices. Look how impressive the mathematics of neoclassical economics is, they declare! Show us what Marxists can do that is comparable to this science, they challenge.

But Marx never tried to explain market prices or how people respond to changes in these. For him, this was self-evident and was understood by all the economists he read; and, nothing has changed about those explanations except for the increasing complexity of the mathematics. Rather, what interested Marx was--- what exactly is a price? The ratio of exchange of something for money? What is *money*? No, he argued, don't answer me by explaining the functions of money. Tell me what money *is* that allows it to perform these functions!

In other words, in his work *Capital*, Marx wanted to look *beneath* the surface, to look at the underlying structure, at the essence as opposed to the appearance. What exactly is money? And what exactly is capital? That is why he called his work 'a critique of political economy'--- it is an interrogation of the categories used by the political economists of his time.

In contrast to the economics which projects the situation of the abstract and atomistic individual to the whole (and makes the error of the fallacy of composition), Marx was a systems theorist--- he first analysed the whole and the conditions for its reproduction. As the result of his inquiry, Marx's most important discovery was that capital is the result of the exploitation of workers. Capitalist exploitation, he revealed, Yeah buzzy and OK OK its roots in the sale of a property right to capitalists by workers-- - the right to use their ability to work, the right to extract labour from their labour-power.

By selling their labour-power, workers obtain enough money to maintain themselves in their customary manner. However, having purchased this property right over labour-power, within the sphere of production the capitalist now has the right to direct the worker and also has sole property rights in what the worker produces (i.e., is the residual claimant). Naturally, the profit-oriented capitalist will try to extract as much labour as possible--- he tries to extend the workday and to intensify the work; further, he attempts to drive down the wage he pays the worker for that property right and to increase the productiveness of the worker relative to that wage. Precisely because of the power the capitalist has (to which unemployment and the competition of workers contribute significantly), he is able to ensure that what the worker produces (the value added) is greater than the money the capitalist pays the worker (the value of labour-power). This is exploitation, and this surplus value is the basis of the capitalist's profit.

Indeed, Marx demonstrated that the reproduction and exploitation of the worker as a wage-labourer is the necessary condition for the reproduction of capital and the system of capitalism. And, yet, *it necessarily appears as if there is no exploitation*. Why?

Because on the surface it does not *look* like the worker is selling the right to dispose of his labour-power in return for the money he needs to reproduce himself; rather, it looks like he is selling a specific quantity of *labour* for an equivalent amount of money. On the surface it appears that there is an equal transaction--- that the worker receives back his contribution to production and is thus not exploited. The form of the wage--- a quantity of money for a quantity of hours--- turns exploitation into its opposite.

A theory which starts from this appearance, therefore, *must* conclude that the capitalist pays for (all) the labour he receives, that surplus value (and capital accumulated from this source) accordingly cannot come from exploitation of workers and that therefore rent, profit and wages grow out of the role played by the land, produced means of production, and labour in the production process. Nothing is easier to understand than why Marx stressed that *every* mystification of capitalism has its roots in the appearance that what the working class sells to capitalists is a specific quantity of labour and not the right of disposition over its labour-power.

But, of course, this is the entire perspective of neoclassical economics! It *only* considers how things appear on the surface. It even asserts by definition that every factor of production receives a return in accordance with its marginal product. We all get, neoclassical economics declares, what we deserve. And, if some reason that isn't happening, it must be because there is interference with the market--- e.g., by the State; in the imaginary world of neoclassical economics (where, e.g., the reproduction of the working class is not necessary), markets are perfect and yield perfect results in which we all get what we deserve.

So, there is a very simple point to understand: Marxian economics reveals exploitation. Neoclassical economics hides it as a matter of principle. It's not difficult to understand, then, which economics is preferred by exploiters and which they are anxious to declare dead.

Marxist writers themselves, however, often haven't helped to keep Marxism alive. To the extent that they treat Marx's *Capital* as a sacred text, they contribute to the disintegration of the theory. Marx rejected such disciples who make the point of departure for theoretical work 'no longer reality, but the new theoretical form in which the master had sublimated it.'

The scholasticism of disciples, thus, is one reason why Marxism can appear to be dead. But, it is not the only one. Sometimes it is not sufficiently clear that *Capital* was written from the perspective of an alternative--- a socialist society which allows for the development of 'rich human beings', 'the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption.' Marx's critique of the 'crippling of body and mind' of the worker and the 'separation of the intellectual faculties of the production process from manual labour' had as its premise a new society which replaces capitalism's fragmented, crippled human beings with 'the totally developed individual.' After all, if Marx did *not* write from the premise of socialism, how could he describe the situation where means of production employ workers as 'this inversion, indeed this distortion, which is peculiar to and characteristic of capitalist production'? An inversion of what?

Why don't Marxists automatically begin from the question of human development and the concept of 'all-round development of the individual'? Why don't they start from there and then demonstrate the inhumanity of capitalism? Why do so many Marxists not grasp that Marx's *premise* in writing *Capital* was his understanding that real wealth is

human wealth and that he wrote from the perspective of a society in which the results of past labour are ‘there to satisfy the worker’s own need for development’? I argue in this volume, *Beyond Capital: Marx’s Political Economy of the Working Class* that the problem begins from the mistaken view that *Capital* is Marx’s study of capitalism rather than an exploration of the side of capital, conducted through the beginning of a critique of the political economy of capital.

It is important to remember that Marx intended to write six books for his study of capitalism and that *Capital* was only the first of these. In *Beyond Capital*, I explore the implications of Marx’s failure to complete his epistemological project--- in particular, the one-sided Marxism that flows from the failure to recognize implications of the missing book on Wage-Labour. Through that one-sidedness we lose an understanding of Marx’s conception of real wealth (as opposed to the capitalist conception of wealth--- that immense collection of commodities), an understanding of Marx’s alternative political economy of the working class (as opposed to the political economy of capital) and an understanding of the society of the collective worker, who produces for communal needs and communal purposes.

Why didn’t Marx ever write that book? Marx was less interested, I proposed, in the completion of his epistemological project than in his revolutionary project. What was that revolutionary project? Engels described it well at Marx’s funeral: Marx was before all else a revolutionary whose ‘real mission in life was to contribute, in one way or another, to the overthrow of capitalist society.’ He did everything he could to make the working class become ‘conscious of its own position and its needs, conscious of the conditions of its emancipation’?

Marxism will not die as long as we are not yet in that society of rich human beings. Although capitalist exploiters and their (conscious and unconscious) supporters in the academies may declare Marxism to be dead, it is an essential weapon for working people in struggle because it demonstrates that the problem they face is more than one of contingent unfairness and injustice (as revealed by the Gini coefficient). Let us all work to renew Marx’s project--- let us do everything we can to bring about the society of associated producers, that ‘association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.’

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