

Karl Marx, philosopher of praxis--- the theorist who rejected both the utopian socialists and the utopian putschists because of his core concept of the self-development of the working class through its own struggles. Was Marx necessarily limited because he lived and wrote in the 19th Century --- limited, not because capitalism was as yet ‘immature’ (as many would have it) but because the proletariat was? Felton Shortall (2000) proposes that, able to observe neither the struggles for (and fate of) workers councils and soviets nor ‘the limitations of the workers council form’ as revealed by revolutionary experiences such as the ‘refusal of work,’ Marx could not proceed beyond the dialectic of capital.

Why? Because he ‘could not see the development of the *counter-dialectic of class struggle*’ (Shortall, 1994: 136, 140, 146). Due to his historical context, Marx was incapable of presenting the side of workers--- i.e., of making the ‘great reversal within his thematic from the positive to the negative side of bourgeois society, from a theory of the dialectic of capital to its counter-dialectic of class struggle; from the critical standpoint of the bourgeoisie to the critical standpoint of the proletariat’ (Shortall, 1994:132-3).¹

You don’t have to be an orthodox leftist, though, to recognise that Shortall’s *The Incomplete Marx* explains neither why the same historical context which purportedly limited Marx did not limit Proudhon and Bakunin nor why Marx was unable ‘to make the great reversal’ (Shortall, 1994: 140) from the perspective of capitalists to the perspective of workers on the basis of the class struggle and proletarian subjectivity he had *already* observed. Shortall (1994,2) simply asserts his point (really, Debord’s point) about how Marx’s theory was delimited by ‘the limitations of his own epoch’.²

And, that assertion, it so happens, is inconsistent with the main theoretical thrust of his book, which stresses that Marx *provisionally* closed off proletarian subjectivity and the counter-dialectic of class struggle in *Capital* because of a logical imperative. Marx, Shortall tells us over and over again, ‘had to begin with an understanding of the dialectic of capital as such’ (129-30); taking classical political economy as his point of departure, his project was ‘to establish the objective laws of capitalist production independently and in abstraction from its subjective determinations’ (263). It was ‘to take up the *critical perspective of the bourgeoisie*, so as to understand what capitalism essentially *is*’ (165). Nor was this an abstract logical imperative:

If Marx was to theoretically arm the emergent communist movement so that it could consciously transform reality, if he was to develop an understanding of how capitalism could be overthrown, he had to first of all understand what capitalism *is* and how it perpetuates itself (120-1).

How capitalism perpetuates itself--- this, of course, is the absolutely critical question. Well over a century after Marx, and capitalist relations do not yet seem to have turned into fetters. All that development of productive forces as well as those crises, depressions, recessions and the like--- how is it that objective conditions have not brought an end to capitalism? How *does* capitalism perpetuate itself?

Marx’s answer in *Capital* was both simple and clear (although missed by Shortall in his elaboration of the dialectic of capital): capitalism stands on its own foundations as an organic system so

¹ Alternatively, if Shortall simply means (in his occasionally contradictory book) that Marx could not see every moment of class struggle affecting the trajectory of capitalism until it ends (*cf.*, Shortall, 1994: 129), this would be a trivial (and tautological) proposition.

² As an example of those limitations, after citing Marx’s 1865 statement that workers press to increase their wages, *The Incomplete Marx* described (139) the possibility of rising real wages in the 1860s as ‘perhaps too remote and speculative... at such an early stage in the development of the workers’ movement’; nevertheless, as Shortall (2000) now acknowledges, real wages *did* increase in this period. Accordingly, he shifts to the question of whether Marx *knew* (which has little to do with his original point about the immaturity of the working class). In fact, there is little doubt that in the 1850s and 60s Marx moved significantly away from his absolute immiseration argument of the 1840s. This can be seen in his comments on how trade unions and workers’ struggles can allow workers to participate in the growth of wealth (Lebowitz, 1992:73-82, 92-6); and it is reflected in his discussion in *Capital* of the possibility that, with increasing productivity, a constantly falling price of labour-power could be “accompanied by a constant growth in the mass of the worker’s means of subsistence” (Marx, 1977: 659) and his observation (702) that, while real wages were higher in countries with a more developed capitalist mode of production so also was the rate of surplus value. Shortall’s quotations, which are meant to suggest the contrary, unfortunately neither define “misery” nor take into account the rising productivity that can permit rising real wages while the value of labour-power falls.

long as capital is able to produce the working class it needs.³ The development of the capitalist mode of production, he explained, produces a working class which--- ‘by education, tradition and habit,’ by the constant reproduction of the reserve army (‘the silent compulsion of economic relations’), by the fetishism of commodities and mystification of capital, by the reproduction of dependence (and the *feeling* of dependence) upon capital---- ‘looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws.’⁴ As common sense. Although ‘direct extra-economic force is still of course used,’ Marx noted (1977: 899) that normally ‘it is possible to rely upon his [the worker’s] dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them.’

Did Marx really believe that the worker’s dependence and feeling of dependence on capital were guaranteed ‘*in perpetuity*’ by the development of the specifically capitalist mode of production? Hardly. But Marx understood both the basis this dependence provides for the continuation of capitalism--- as well as the way beyond the rule of capital. Through their struggles, he consistently stressed, workers transform both circumstances and themselves; they rid themselves of ‘all the muck of ages’, producing themselves as subjects no longer dependent upon capital, as subjects capable of going beyond capital (Lebowitz, 1992:142-5). With this self-development of the working class, capital no longer produces its most necessary premise.

If the counter-dialectic to the dialectic of capital means anything, this is what it is all about--- the self-development of workers through their struggles. So, how can Shortall assert that Marx was *incapable* of going beyond the dialectic of capital to the counter-dialectic of class struggle? In stark contrast to his (not completely unsympathetic) theme of Marx’s *provisional* closure, this contradictory claim about the limitations of Marx appears to be grounded primarily in Shortall’s desire to distance himself from Marx and those ‘bowing to the authority of Marx’ (Shortall, 2000).⁵ When we recall as well the enormous gap between *The Incomplete Marx*’s captivation by the mysteries of ‘the Dialectic of Capital’ (deliverance coming only with the onset of crisis) and Shortall’s mantra about working class subjectivity, there appears a curious phenomenon --- a theoretical work at odds with the political baggage it is designed to carry.⁶

Shortall’s political criticisms of Marx (*e.g.*, Marx’s responsibility for Stalinism and social democratic betrayals) and his apparent political stances (viewing trade unions as organising centres for capital rather than workers and rejecting the concept of a workers’ state) are those of many anarchist critics of Marxism. Prudently, however, he does not attempt to construct his immanent critique of the ‘bourgeois’ Marx upon their theoretical scaffolding but looks specifically for theoretical support to Antonio Negri’s *Marx Beyond Marx* (Negri, 1991)--- ‘a fiercely argued polemic that seeks to reclaim Marx for the side of the revolutionaries.’⁷ Negri (whose ‘theoretical efforts are invaluable to us’), Shortall announces, poses ‘Marx the revolutionary rather than Marx the dialectical scientist’ (Shortall, 1994:149-51).

In Negri’s fanciful reading of the *Grundrisse*, which portrays *Capital* as a backward leap into determinism and objectivism, Shortall finds the basis for his critique of *Capital*.⁸ Echoing Negri’s argument, he proposes that, by starting in the *Grundrisse* with the category of money, Marx immediately introduced (and privileged) class antagonism. Like Proudhon and Bakunin, who ‘clearly recognized money and state authority as the hostile will of the bourgeoisie,’ the *Grundrisse* discussion presents money as the social power of capital over the worker right at the outset (Shortall: 164-5). ‘Money,’ he approvingly quotes Negri (1991:23), ‘has only one face, that of the boss.’ Everything is, indeed, so clear: *money-power, money-command*.

³ ‘In the completed bourgeois system every economic relation presupposes every other in its bourgeois economic form, and everything posited is thus also a presupposition, this is the case with every organic system’ (Marx, 1973: 278).

⁴ Cf. Lebowitz (1992), especially 120-4, and Lebowitz (1997).

⁵ Was Marx incapable of setting out the side of workers or did he correctly attach priority to analysing the side of capital? Shortall wants it both ways.

⁶ Shortall’s (initially underacknowledged) debt to Tom Sekine’s account of the “dialectic of capital” and the impasse into which it leads him is discussed in Lebowitz (1999).

⁷ Shortall (1994:5) argues that ‘it is through this very closure of *Capital* that Marx has been both assimilated in academia as a harmless alternative to orthodox bourgeois theories, and appropriated as the ideology of the surrogate bourgeois rulers of state capitalism.’

⁸ Negri, who views (1991:18-9) the *Grundrisse* as ‘the summit of Marx’s revolutionary thought’, describes *Capital*, in contrast, as a text which served ‘to annihilate subjectivity in objectivity, to subject the subversive capacity of the proletariat to the reorganizing and repressive intelligence of capitalist power.’ For this prosaic reader, the revolutionary exuberance of *Marx Beyond Marx* is exceeded only by its revolutionary defiance of logic and evidence (which, of course, does not preclude the occasional insight).

But, not when it comes to *Capital*. There, Shortall argues, Marx proceeded to close off subjectivity and the counter-dialectic of class struggle--- (not to mention an alternative to state socialism!) by beginning with the (double-faced) commodity.⁹ The ‘will of the proletariat’ is ‘extinguished’ (or, at least, provisionally subordinated) by starting from this result of capitalist production, and this path of objectification is followed throughout *Capital*. In thus taking up the ‘critical perspective of the bourgeoisie,’ Shortall concludes that Marx turned away from the alternative of ‘the *critical perspective of a revolutionary proletariat*’, the perspective he (Shortall, 1994:165-6) identifies with Negri’s ‘insistence on the superiority of money as the point of departure for a Marxian analysis.

Negri’s inspiration goes beyond the premise (Negri: 8) that ‘the objectification of categories in *Capital* blocks action by revolutionary subjectivity.’ Shortall also draws from Negri the equation of *money-crisis-working class subjectivity*, which then runs throughout his discussion of *Capital*. As seen earlier (Lebowitz, 1999), Shortall stresses that the very existence of money as mediator in C-M-C already contains the possibility of a rupture in circulation; and, given that capital therefore also ‘contains the inherent possibility of its rupture and crisis,’ Marx is ‘logically obliged’ to defer this question of rupture in order to proceed with the dialectic of capital (Shortall: 199-200). This logical suppression of crisis and rupture mirrors capital’s success--- circulation by its very nature is ‘a capitalist victory over the crisis’ (Negri: 105). A contingent victory, though. With the focus on money, we see that ‘the movement of value is pure precariousness’; indeed, ‘crisis shows what money is (Negri: 40, 27).

The immanence of crisis (always threatening to erupt) thus demonstrates for Shortall the fragility of the dialectic of capital. Crisis also, however, unleashes working class subjectivity. Indeed, for Shortall, crisis is its *necessary* condition. In *The Incomplete Marx*, he declared (Shortall, 1994:430) that the emergence of the working class for itself ‘requires the mediation of crisis.’ Where he did entertain the thought that working class action also may generate rupture and crisis, this event occurs only *after* the onset of crisis which has broken up class compromises and led to ‘the intensification and opening up of class struggle’ (Shortall, 1994: 129). His latest discussion demonstrates a definite consistency on this particular point: ‘*To the extent that rupture and crisis develops*, capital and the working class confront each other as antagonistic subjects’ (Shortall, 2000. Emphasis added.).¹⁰ Nothing, though, is more explicit than the statement cited in my earlier discussion (and for which he offers no defence):

The dialectic of capital, through its inherent ruptures and crises, produces the objective conditions for the emergence of the counter-dialectic of class struggle which holds within it the possibility of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and thus of a future communist society (Shortall, 1994: 454).

This is the pure, unadulterated objectivism that Shortall purports to reject--- yet another example of discordance between theoretical work and political professions. Crisis-workers’ insurrection. Why assume, though, that workers automatically turn against capital as the result of crisis? Could it be because it is forgotten that money has another face for the worker--- the face of the commodity? For all the talk about worker subjectivity, what seems missing here is any consideration of the worker as subject. The idea that capital may produce workers who look to it as the necessary mediator for satisfying their needs or that rupture and crisis may lead workers to accept the necessity of ‘sacrifices’ by all has no place in this conception of things where once the objective conditions are ripe, subjectivity is unleashed.¹¹

A better description of this position is economism. At its core is the embrace of spontaneity. Shortall can so easily dismiss trade unions as organising centres for the working class and the struggle for a workers’ state because he does not appear to grasp the development of the working class as a class for itself

⁹ Cf Shortall (1994:154-5, 199). He proposes (164), further, that ‘this unreclaimed deferral of money and the state as the hostile will of the bourgeoisie, and consequently of the workers’ organizational response to it--- in contrast to its immediate recognition by the anarchists--- opened the way to Marx’s authoritarian statism, and subsequently to Marxism’s commitment to state socialism.’

¹⁰ Don’t capital and the working class confront each other as antagonistic subjects in the sphere of production--- even in the *absence* of rupture and crisis? Negri’s reading of the *Grundrisse*, in contrast to Shortall, proceeds well beyond his initial presentation of crisis as emerging out of the vagaries of money and exchange to stress class antagonism and struggle; nevertheless, crisis still appears as necessary for class struggle: ‘let’s imagine that circulation stabilizes its course, even if in the irreversible form of the crisis; let’s imagine that this immanence of the class struggle is stabilized and can only tendentially present itself as explosive;...’ (Negri, 1991: 104).

¹¹ See Lebowitz, 1992, Chapter 7 for an argument that explains why objective conditions (including crises) cannot be sufficient.

as a process.¹² Capital in his view (and that of Negri) objectively transforms the situation, alters class composition by its economic development; and the response is working class subjectivity--- working class rage, insurgency, insurrection— the working class says no.¹³

We end up, then, with the worship of spontaneity. The process, often slow and prosaic, by which workers come to recognise themselves as a class against capital, develop their capacities and make themselves fit to rule--- a process which takes many forms, cannot satisfy the passionate indignation of intellectuals.

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¹² For a brief discussion of Marx's conception of the workers' state as part of this process of development, see the essay Shortall cites, Lebowitz (1995).

¹³ Perhaps the pinnacle of such thought is Negri's (1991) theorisation of the 'refusal of work', which becomes for him (and his epigones) the concept of communism.