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Stagnation and Progress of Marxism

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In his shallow but at time interesting causerie entitled **Die soziale Bewegung in Frankreich und Belgien (The Socialist Movement in France and Belgium)**, Karl Grün remarks, aptly enough, that [Fourier's](#) and [Saint-Simon's](#) theories had very different effects upon their respective adherents. Saint-Simon was the spiritual ancestor of a whole generation of brilliant investigators and writers in various field of intellectual activity; but Fourier's followers were, with few exceptions, persons who blindly parroted their master's words, and were incapable of making any advance upon his teaching. Grün's explanation of this difference is that Fourier presented the world with a finished system, elaborated in all its details; whereas Saint-Simon merely tossed his disciples a loose bundle of great thoughts. Although it seems to me that Grün pays too little attention to the inner, the essential, difference between the theories of these two classical authorities in the domain of utopian socialism, I feel that on the whole his observation is sound. Beyond question, a system of ideas which is merely sketched in broad outline proves far more stimulating than a finished and symmetrical structure which leaves nothing to be added and offers no scope for the independent effort of an active mind.

Does this account for the stagnation in Marxism doctrine which has been noticeable for a good many years? The actual fact is that – apart for one or two independent contributions which mark a theoretician advance – since the publication of the [last volume](#) of **Capital** and of the last of Engels's writings there have appeared nothing more than a few excellent popularizations and expositions of Marxist theory. The

substance of that theory remains just where the two founders of scientific socialism left it.

Is this because the Marxist system has imposed too rigid a framework upon the independent activities of the mind? It is undeniable that Marx has had a somewhat restrictive influence upon the free development of theory in the case of many of his pupils. Both Marx and Engels found it necessary to disclaim responsibility for the utterances of many who chose to call themselves Marxists! The scrupulous endeavor to keep “within the bounds of Marxism” may at times have been just as disastrous to the integrity of the thought process as has been the other extreme – the complete repudiation of the Marxist outlook, and the determination to manifest “independence of thought” at all hazards.

Still, it is only where economic matters are concerned that we are entitled to speak of a more or less completely elaborated body of doctrines bequeathed us by Marx. The most valuable of all his teachings, the materialist-dialectical conception of history, presents itself to us as nothing more than a method of investigation, as a few inspired leading thoughts, which offer us glimpses into the entirely new world, which open us to endless perspectives of independent activity, which wing our spirit for bold flights into unexplored regions.

Nevertheless, even in this domain, with few exceptions the Marxist heritage lies shallow. The splendid new weapon rusts unused; and the theory of historical materialism remains as unelaborated and sketchy as was when first formulated by its creators.

It cannot be said, then, that the rigidity and completeness of the Marxist edifice are the explanation of the failure of Marx’s successors to go on with the building.

We are often told that our movement lacks the persons of talent who might be capable of further elaborating Marx’s theories. Such a lack is, indeed, of long standing; but the lack itself demands an explanation, and cannot be put forward to answer the primary question. We must remember that each epoch forms its own human material; that if in any period there is a genuine need for theoretical exponents, the period will create the forces requisite for the satisfaction of that need.

But is there a genuine need, an effective demand, for the further development of Marxist theory?

In an article upon the controversy between the Marxist and the Jevonsian Schools in England, Bernard Shaw, the talented exponent of [Fabian](#) semi-socialism, derides Hyndman for having said that the [first volume](#) of **Capital** had given him a complete understanding of Marx, and that there were no gaps in Marxist theory – although Friedrich Engels, in the preface of the second volume of **Capital**, subsequently declared that the first volume with its theory of value, had left unsolved a

fundamental economic problem, whose solution would not be furnished until the third volume was published. Shaw certainly succeeded here in making Hyndman's position seem a trifle ridiculous, though Hyndman might well derive consolation from the fact that practically the whole socialist world was in the same boat!

The third volume of **Capital**, with its solution of the problem of the rate of profit (the basic problem of Marxist economics), did not appear till 1894. But in Germany, as in all other lands, agitation had been carried on with the aid of the unfinished material contained in the first volume; the Marxist doctrine had been popularized and had found acceptance upon the basis of this first volume alone; the success of the incomplete Marxist theory had been phenomenal; and no one had been aware that there was any gap in the teaching.

Furthermore, when the third volume finally saw the light, whilst to begin with it attracted some attention in the restricted circles of the experts, and aroused here a certain amount of comment – as far as the socialist movement as a whole was concerned, the new volume made practically no impression in the wide regions where the ideas expounded in the original book had become dominant. The theoretical conclusion of volume 3 have not hitherto evoked any attempt at popularization, nor have they secured wide diffusion. On the contrary, even among the social democrats we sometimes hear, nowadays, reechoes of the “disappointment” with the third volume of **Capital** which is so frequently voiced by bourgeois economists – and thus the social democrats merely show how fully they had accepted the “incomplete” exposition of the theory of value presented in the first volume.

How can we account for so remarkable a phenomenon?

Shaw, who (to quote his own expression) is fond of “sniggering” at others, may have good reasons here, for making fun of the whole socialist movement, insofar as it is grounded upon Marx! But if he were to do this, he would be “sniggering” at a very serious manifestation of our social life. The strange fate of the [second](#) and third volumes of **Capital** is conclusive evidence as to the general destiny of theoretical research in our movement.

From the scientific standpoint, the third volume of **Capital** must, no doubt, be primarily regarded as the completion of Marx's critic of capitalism. Without this third volume, we cannot understand, either the actually dominant law of the rate of profit; or the splitting up of surplus value into profit, interest, and rent; or the working of the law of value within the field of competition. But, and this is the main point, all these problems, however important from the outlook of the pure theory, are comparatively unimportant from the practical outlook of the class war. As far as the class war is concerned, the fundamental theoretical problem is the origin of surplus value, that is, the scientific explanation of exploitation; together with the elucidation of the tendencies toward

the socialization of the process of production, that is, the scientific explanation of the objective groundwork of the socialist revolution.

Both these problems are solved in the first volume of **Capital**, which deduces the “expropriation of the expropriators” as the inevitable and ultimate result of the production of surplus value and of the progressive concentration of capital. Therewith, as far as theory is concerned, the essential need of the labor movement is satisfied. The workers, being actively engaged in the class war, have no direct interest in the question how surplus value is distributed among the respective groups of exploiters; or in the question how, in the course of this distribution, competition brings about rearrangements of production.

That is why, for socialists in general, the third volume of **Capital** remain an unread book.

But, in our movement, what applies to Marx’s economic doctrines applies to theoretical research in general. It is pure illusion to suppose that the working class, in its upward striving, can of its own accord become immeasurably creative in the theoretical domain. True that, as Engels said, the working class alone has today preserved an understanding of and interest in theory. The workers’ craving for knowledge is one of the most noteworthy cultural manifestation of our day. Morally, too, the working-class struggle denotes the cultural renovation of society. But active participation of the workers in the march of science is subject to fulfillment of very definite social conditions.

In every class society, intellectual culture (science and art) is created by the ruling class; and the aim of this culture is in part to ensure the direct satisfaction of the needs of the social process, and in part to satisfy the mental needs of the members of the governing class.

In the history of earlier class struggles, aspiring classes (like the Third Estate in recent days) could anticipate political dominion by establishing an intellectual dominance, inasmuch as, while they were still subjugated classes, they could set up a new science and a new art against obsolete culture of the decadent period.

The proletariat is in a very different position. As a nonpossessing class, it cannot in the course of its struggle upwards spontaneously create a mental culture of its own while it remains in the framework of bourgeois society. Within that society, and so long as its economic foundations persist, there can be no other culture than a bourgeois culture. Although certain “socialist” professors may acclaim the wearing of neckties, the use of visiting cards, and the riding of bicycles by proletarians as notable instances of participation in cultural progress, the working class as such remains outside contemporary culture. Notwithstanding the fact that the workers create with their own hands the whole social substratum of this culture, they are only admitted to its enjoyment insofar as such

admission is requisite to the satisfactory performance of their functions in the economic and social process of capitalist society.

The working class will not be in a position to create a science and an art of its own until it has been fully emancipated from its present class position.

The utmost it can do today is to safeguard bourgeois culture from the vandalism of the bourgeois reaction, and create the social conditions requisite for a free cultural development. Even along these lines, the workers, within the extant form of society, can only advance insofar as they can create for themselves the intellectual weapons needed in their struggle for liberation.

But this reservation imposes upon the working class (that is to say, upon the workers' intellectual leaders) very narrow limits in the field of intellectual activities. The domain of their creative energy is confined to one specific department of science, namely social science. For, inasmuch as "thanks to the peculiar connection of the idea of the Fourth Estate with our historical epoch", enlightenment concerning the laws of social development has become essential to the workers in the class struggle, this connection has borne good fruit in social science, and the monument of the proletarian culture of our days is – Marxist doctrine.

But Marx's creation, which as a scientific achievement is a titanic whole, transcends the plain demands of the proletarian class struggle for whose purposes it was created. Both in his detailed and comprehensive analysis of capitalist economy, and in his method of historical research with its immeasurable field of application, Marx has offered much more than was directly essential for the practical conduct of the class war.

Only in proportion as our movement progresses, and demands the solution of new practical problems do we dip once more into the treasury of Marx's thought, in order to extract therefrom and to utilize new fragments of his doctrine. But since our movement, like all the campaigns of practical life, inclines to go on working in old ruts of thought, and to cling to principles after they have ceased to be valid, the theoretical utilization of the Marxist system proceed very slowly.

If, then, today we detect a stagnation in our movement as far as these theoretical matters are concerned, this is not because the Marxist theory upon which we are nourished is incapable of development or has become out-of-date. On the contrary, it is because we have not yet learned how to make an adequate use of the most important mental weapons which we had taken out of the Marxist arsenal on account of our urgent need for them in the early stages of our struggle. It is not true that, as far as practical struggle is concerned, Marx is out-of-date, that we had superseded Marx. On the contrary, Marx, in his scientific creation, has outstripped us as a party of practical fighters. It is not true that Marx no longer suffices for our needs. On the contrary, our needs are not yet adequate for the utilization of Marx's ideas.

Thus do the social conditions of proletarian existence in contemporary society, conditions first elucidated by Marxist theory, take vengeance by the fate they impose upon Marxist theory itself. Though that theory is an incomparable instrument of intellectual culture, it remains unused because, while it is inapplicable to bourgeois class culture, it greatly transcends the needs of the working class in the matter of weapons for the daily struggle. Not until the working class has been liberated from its present conditions of existence will the Marxist method of research be socialized in conjunction with the other means of production, so that it can be fully utilized for the benefit of humanity at large, and so that it can be developed to the full measure of its functional capacity.