

Marxism-Leninism and the Class Struggle

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This article was written as a preface to the second edition of Marta Harnecker's Principes Elementaires du Materialisme Historique (Mexico-Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI ed 1971). Copyright by Louis Althusser, 1974.

Allow me, in presenting the new edition of Marta Harnecker's little book, to recall to you a very simple idea.

It is a simple idea: but its theoretical and political consequences are important.

Here is the idea: all Marx's theory, that is to say the science founded by Marx (historical materialism) and the philosophy opened up by Marx (dialectical materialism) have as their center and at their heart the class struggle.

The class struggle is thus "the decisive link" not only in the political practice of the Marxist-Leninist worker's movement, but also in theory, in Marxist science and philosophy.

Since Lenin we have clearly understood that philosophy represents the class struggle in theory; more precisely, that all philosophy represents a class viewpoint in theory against other opposing class viewpoints. Therefore we know that Marxist-Leninist philosophy (dialectical materialism) represents the proletarian class viewpoint in theory: it is the "decisive link" in order to understand Marxist-Leninist philosophy and to develop it. It is the "decisive link" in order to understand why this philosophy can cease to interpret the world in order to aid its revolutionary transformation.

But that the class struggle is also the "decisive link" in Marx's scientific theory, is perhaps more difficult to understand.

I content myself with only one example: Capital. Here is a book which contains the Marxist science, the fundamental principles of the Marxist science. However, we ought not to give ourselves illusions. It is not sufficient to have a book before us: it is necessary to know how to read. For there is a manner of "reading" Capital, a manner of "understanding" and of "viewing" the scientific theory of Marx which can be completely bourgeois. Bourgeois meaning: influenced, marked, permeated by bourgeois ideology, very precisely by the bourgeois economist or sociological ideologies.

For example, one can read Capital in the following manner: as a theory of the Political Economy of the capitalist mode of production. One will begin with the economic base, one will examine the "labor process", one will distinguish the "forces of production" and the "relations of production", one will analyze the commodity, money, surplus value, wages, reproduction of capital, rent, profit, interest, the falling

rate of profit, etc., etc. In short, one will tranquilly discover in Capital the "laws" of the (capitalist) economy. And when one will have finished this analysis of the "economic" mechanisms, one will add a slight addition: social classes, the class struggle.

Isn't the short unfinished chapter on social classes at the very end of Capital? Isn't it only necessary to speak of social classes after having taken apart the entire mechanism of the capitalist economy? Didn't Marx call on us to consider social classes (and thus the class struggle) as a simple product, the final product of the structure of the capitalist economy, its result? Aren't social classes a simple effect of the capitalist economy, and the class struggle a simple effect of the existence of classes?

This reading, this interpretation of Capital is a grave deformation of Marxist theory: an economist (bourgeois) deformation. Social classes are not at the end of Capital: they are present from the beginning to the end. The class struggle is not an effect (derived) of the existence of social classes: the class struggle and the existence of classes are one and the same thing. The class struggle is "the decisive link" in order to understand Capital.

When Marx gave to Capital the subtitle: A Critique of Political Economy, he didn't only want to say that he was proposing to criticise the classical economists, but the economist (bourgeois) illusions as well. He wanted to radically criticise the bourgeois illusion which carefully separates the activity of production and exchange (the economy) on the one hand, and social classes, political struggles, etc, on the other. Marx wanted to show that all the conditions of capitalist production, circulation and distribution (thus the entire political economy so-called) are dominated and permeated by the existence of social classes and the class struggle.

Let's explain in a few words the essential principle of Marx's thesis.

There is no "pure" economic production, there is no "pure" circulation (exchange), there is no "pure" distribution. All these economic phenomena are processes which take place within social relations which are, in the last instance, that is to say beneath their "appearances", class relations, antagonistic class relations, that is to say relations of class struggle.

Let's take the material production of objects of social utility (use values), such as it presents itself to the unaided eye in units of production (factories, farms employing wage labor, etc.). This material production presupposes the existence of "productive forces", where the "labor force" (the workers) set to work the instruments of production (tools, machines) which transform a raw material. A bourgeois "economist" or an "economist" reader of Capital will see here a simple process of technical labor. But it suffices to reflect back to Marx to see that this is a false reading. It is necessary to say: the productive forces are put to work in the labor process under the domination of the relations of production which are relations of exploitation. If there are workers they are wage laborers, thus exploited; if there are wage laborers who only possess their labor power and are constrained (by hunger: Lenin) to sell it, then there are capitalists who own the means of production and buy labor power to exploit it, to draw from it surplus value. The existence of antagonistic classes is thus inscribed in production itself, in the heart of production itself: in the relations of production.

But it is necessary to go much further: the relations of production are not something which are added to the productive forces simply as their "form". The relations of production pervade the productive forces, since labor power, which sets into motion the "productive forces", itself forms part of the "productive forces", and since the process of capitalist production tends ceaselessly to the maximum exploitation of labor power. And since it is this tendency which dominates everything else in the capitalist production process, it is necessary to say that the technical mechanisms of production are subordinate to the (class) mechanisms of capitalist exploitation. That which one calls the productive forces are at the same time the material base (the "technical base" said Marx) and the historical form of existence of the relations of production, that is of the relations of exploitation. Marx admirably demonstrated in Volume I (Section 4, chapters 14 and 15) that the successive bases and forms of the organization of the productive forces (from manufacture to large scale industry) were nothing more than the successive bases and forms of the material and historical existence of the relations of capitalist production. It is thus an economist and technocratic error to separate the productive forces from the relations of production. What, in fact, exists is the unity in their forms of material existence of the productive forces and the relations of production under the domination of the relations of production.

If such is the case, there is no "pure" production, and no "pure" economy. With the relations of production, antagonistic classes are present from the beginning in the process of production. With these antagonistic class relations are laid the basis of the class struggle: the class struggle is materially rooted in production itself.

Class struggle: the struggle of the capitalist class to exploit the working class, the struggle of the working class to resist the exploitation of which it is the victim. I carefully specify that the class struggle is not a one way affair. The struggle of the capitalist class is exercised over the working class with extraordinary ferocity, well before the working class begins to reply, to mobilize itself, and to engage in its great historical battles. The class struggle of the capitalists never ceases, it is part of the very system of the capitalist mode of production.

But this is not all. No society exists, that is to say continues in history, except by, at the same time that it produces, reproducing the material and social conditions of its existence (of its production). For the conditions of existence of capitalist society are the conditions of exploitation to which the capitalist class subjects the working class: the capitalist class must reproduce them at whatever cost. In order to understand Capital it is therefore necessary to raise the problem of reproduction; one then sees that the bourgeoisie cannot assure the stability and the continuance of the exploitation (which it imposes in production) except by conducting a permanent class struggle against the working class. This class struggle is conducted by perpetuating or reproducing the material, ideological and political conditions of exploitation. It is conducted in production (reduction of wages, repression, sanctions, anti-union activities, etc.). It is conducted at the same time outside production: here the role of the state, of the repressive apparatus of the state, of the state ideological apparatus (political system, schools, churches, news media) intervene to subjugate the working class by means of repression and ideology.

If one reads it in this manner, Capital ceases to be a theory of the "political economy" of capitalism to become the theory of the material, legal-political and ideological forms of a mode of production founded on the exploitation of wage labor, to become a revolutionary theory.

If one reads it in this manner, one puts back into their correct place political economy, the productive forces, technology, etc.

If this is so, one can turn to another idea of the class struggle and renounce certain illusions, "humanist" illusions for example, which are derived from petty bourgeois ideology (and which are the compliment of "economist" illusions). In renouncing "humanist" illusions one is forced to abandon the idea that capitalist society could have existed in some manner before the advent of class struggle, and that the class struggle which we know was the act of the proletariat (and its allies) in revolting against the "injustices" of society. In reality the class struggle of capitalist society is consubstantial with capitalist society: it began with it, it is the bourgeoisie who conducted it from the beginning with an unequalled ferocity, against the then unarmed proletariat. Far from simply revolting against "injustices", the proletariat only at first resisted the attacks of the bourgeois classes, before organizing itself, developing its consciousness, and passing to the counter-offensive, then to the offensive, until the taking of power.

If this is so, if Marx's scientific theory gives us proof that everything follows the class struggle, then one better understand the reasons for this event without precedent in history: the "fusion" of the theory of Marxism and the workers' movement. We have never reflected enough on this fact: why and how did the workers' movement, which existed before Marx and Engels wrote the Communist Manifesto, recognize itself in a work as difficult as Capital? It is their common point of origin: the class struggle. This was the heart of the daily practice of the workers' movement. This is at the heart of Capital, at the heart of Marxist theory.

Marx returned, in the form of scientific theory, to the workers' movement that which he received from it in political experience.

As Mao said: "Never forget the class struggle."

Paris, January, 1971.

