

Horst Müller

## Arguments for an Utopistic Turn of Marxist Theory

Commentary to Sean Sayers:  
On Karl Marx's Two-hundredth Anniversary

Sean Sayers gives an outline of the present situation: some features of capitalism have changed and some of its essentials have to be rethought. But in our times the dynamic of the capitalist system has again shown its "hostile and alien" traits. On the other side Marxism and the left have suffered a "setback of historic proportions" and revolutionary forces are scarcely in sight. But the need for an alternative social system comes to the fore and the "conditions that must lead to change are evident".

From this appropriate standpoint looking back and around the world, the question arises: What is Marxism? Sean Sayers indicates or sketches "a concrete and complex historical tradition with different schools and theories". In the context of this primarily descriptive characterization the existing of "different, often conflicting" positions is mentioned. But the author tries to avoid controversies about right or wrong - except an indication of Soviet communism as an "empty and rotten shell" - and recommends that it's better to be cautious and try to "unite" approaches as far as possible.

It seems, that in this general view upon different and maybe further emerging forms of Marxism something remains underexposed: The real, unavoidably and never ending need for an earnest dispute about Marxist or Socialist ideas, practices and experiments of the past and in the present, in order to learn for now and avoid errors, mistakes and, last not least, gigantic failures, which occurred in this history. Because of this I think: The picture of Marxist schools and theories as a "flourishing tree" seems to be a bit of simplifying or too optimistic.

Let's concede, it's more or less impossible, for example, to demand more disclosure about controversial Marxisms, about the economic system of the USSR or the meaning of "Socialism" today from such an overview and with respect to the given occasion. But problems like this are lasting and may confuse, whether we speak about them or not. For me, always involved in controversies, it seems necessary to remember this. Isn't the definition of the present situation not also a theoretical problem? I would like to make this more precise in two points:

A more generalizing view of modern "capitalism" runs the risk, to miss the situation as a multidimensional period of transition. In this regard Marx gave more concrete advises than the notion, that a conflict between productive social forces and "the confines of the capitalist system" is raising. Indeed: "Positive factors must also be present". Marx noticed: When the world market or, how it is called today, globalization is realized, the elements or the configuration of an alternative system will crystallize as a more or less latent reality. This will exist inside and against the hegemonial formation and thus all contradictions get activated and push for solutions.

This specific view of the current situation has enormous consequences for Marxist theory and practice: A new era of transition is opened and a new constellation of contradictions occurs. It not only provokes a comeback of an idea, but means a turning point for this idea and the related practice too. Hereupon my second point is: The current situation implies an ultimate challenge to Marxism, to find an advanced form, which enables to deal with this multidimensional, with forces and possibilities charged, and to a specific degree open situation. This means in particular, to activate not only analytical and critical functions of theory, but also an overall utopian inspiration and concrete conceptualization of praxis.

To elaborate this form means to go beyond a reductionist materialism, economism or backboneless political theorizing or activism, and, last not least, to distinguish carefully Marx from the historical manifestations of Marxism, which maybe inconsistent, misleading mixtures with alien paradigms or, from time to time, emerging Hype-Marxisms. Therefore I think, the very question is not the immediate one: "What is Marxism", but primarily, what's the spiritual center or core of Marx' thought itself?

To this end, we ought to refer to ideas, which are to be found originally in the thesis about Feuerbach and are expressed in the totality of Marx' work. In this perspective it might be useful to remember the approach of a philosophy of praxis, including thinkers like Marcuse, Bloch, the Praxis Group in former Yugoslavia, Henri Lefebvre and others, who are hidden behind the too unspecific term "Western Marxism". Here I see the decisive point, where to identify and develop Marx's superior conception of human reality in its totality, of cognition and science, especially its superior analytical power in political economy and for conceptualizing social and historical emancipation. I call this the "concept of praxis".

From this standpoint I disagree with the proposition, that there is not something like an "essential core" or "correct interpretation". The various interpretations of Marxism are different from those in ideological, for example religious, traditions. In fundamental Marxist debates the focus is on questioning the real, true constitution of social reality, as a totality of human relations, and its cognition in the sense of "praxis and conceiving the praxis". Sure, it's not only a "method" and one cannot press it into a textbook. But it comprises a specific ontological and epistemological paradigm, which is quite new and unique in history, opposes bourgeois ideas and after all is the key for "social truth".

This standpoint does not mean simply to judge about diverse manifestations or conceptions of Marxism or to say they were untrue. It means to have a key to understanding them in a deeper sense as historical and ideological manifestations along the way. Therefore, if necessary, one must discuss, criticize or sometimes fight against unwarranted pretensions and orientations: Ideas have very practical consequences. Which mistakes, defeats and to which extent are the actual weakness of the left due to theoretical aspects and problems?

When I imagine at the whole panorama and the state of Marxism and the left, I feel and perceive how far the distance is from the ambitious goal of a renaissance of emancipated Marxism in our just opened historical period. But I suppose this renaissance might be an urgent desiderate, because "the system can not simply stagger on indefinitely". The current situation implies a coming, unavoidable setting of a new historical course, more right or more left, and so an awakening seems to be almost a condition of the survival for Marxism, the left and the Marxist perspective of society and mankind.

When we look on the enormous pre-history of Marxism and socialist tendencies all over the world, we know to be right in principle, but feel and see that we are not yet fully up to date! For this I would like to shift the priority: We should not soothe our hearts by looking at a great tradition, and expose our proudness about maintaining Marxism 200 years after Marx's birthday. We should come to grasp urgent unsolved problems and concrete tasks. What are the pressing or "burning" questions today, and what to do? I emphasize three points:

Firstly, let's refer to the core of Marx' theory, method and perspective as a philosophy and science of praxis. What we will find is an absolute new, integral conception of reality and perception, an exposure of dialectical analysis and emancipating pathfinding in a complex and threatened world. To elaborate this modern world-philosophy and conquer its place on the field of sciences is by far not yet accomplished. This is also and not at least necessary for fighting affirmative ideas, decadence and for an emancipation of the social intellect.

Secondly I perceive problems with analyzing modern societies as definitely societies in transition, not one-dimensional capitalistic, in my opinion configured as "social capitalisms"

with highly developed transitional potentials. But ultimately pressing is the lack of a conception of an alternative or socialist political economy: Still to this day more than 90% of Marxist political economists are concentrated on repeating and defending Capital theory or elaborating critics of capitalism and particularly possible reforms. Therefore political economy itself must change from the traditional critics to a utopian inspired one. So far as a concrete and trustworthy alternative for the socioeconomic configuration of modern states and societies does not become more concrete, there is no “unifying vision” but a black hole in the future.

Thirdly, while reaching the stage of a historical transformation, an applicable historization for this period is needed. This means conceptualizing more concrete working points, phases and the long-time horizon for the period of transition, according to the specifically given economic, social, political, intellectual and cultural conditions of societies, and also with respect to the contradictory processes in a multinational and polarized world, wearing on chaotically.

At last Sean Sayers emphasizes, that crisis is not sufficient to bring about a fundamental change or an alternative. In search of social or revolutionary forces “the Marxist conception of social class needs to be rethought”, thereby also reflecting the enduring role of “the world’s industrial workers”. But how to find forward-looking “responses on the left”? I close with a provoking thesis:

While the contradiction between capital and workers continues brewing, the pressing, formational contradiction between the hegemonic capitalistic formation and a more or less latently existing, pre-arranged alternative configuration gets stronger. Therefore the decisive social and institutional forces are the ones, which’s future is connected with the real, hidden existing alternative, which means “a more fully social system of economic and social relations”. This may constitute the missed “unity of interests”. But without a conceivable idea of this, we cannot identify them, or these forces cannot find themselves amidst the chaotic and confusing circumstances: Therefore my demand for an utopistic turn of Marxist theory.

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