

Part 1

Marx's Concept of the Human

... endeavouring to shut out of the Creation, the cursed thing, called *Particular Propriety*, which is the cause of all wars, bloud-shed, theft, and enslaving Laws, that hold the people under miserie.

Gerrard Winstanley. 1649.

Signed for and in behalf of all the poor oppressed people of *England*, and the whole world.

CHAPTER 1 The Prospects for Socialism

In olden times- twenty years ago, say - I should have understood the title of this chapter quite clearly, and written pages on the subject without the slightest difficulty. I would have used a vocabulary and categories well-known to whoever might have happened to read them. Words like 'socialism', 'class', 'property', 'struggle' and 'crisis' would have tripped smoothly from the keyboard, and I should have wasted little effort asking myself what they meant, because 'everybody knew'.

Basically, for people like me, socialism meant an economic system in which state ownership and democratic planning replaced the anarchy of private ownership in the organisation of production. As a Trotskyist I might have explained how 1917 marked the beginning of the world transition from capitalism to socialism. The degeneration of the Russian revolution had held things up, and I knew that what others called 'actually-existing socialism' was really a monstrous, oppressive, bureaucratic nightmare. But I could explain this degeneration, and the rise to power of the Stalinist bureaucracy, as results of the isolation of the revolution in a single backward country. The spread of the proletarian revolution to the 'advanced metropolitan countries', as we called them, would soon make possible the overthrow of the bureaucracy and then the advance to a new social order would be resumed. All that was needed was a world party, founded on the scientific truths of Marxism-Leninism, which in each country would lead the working class to 'take state power'.

And what about 'prospects', or 'perspectives', (the non-existent English plural, into which the Comintern had translated the Russian word *perspektiviy*). This was something like a historical weather forecast. The course of history was law-governed and so amenable to scientific investigation by those who employed the 'correct' method. (We were always keen on being 'correct'. It meant conforming to a body of orthodox theoretical knowledge whose truth we asserted.)

There were other people who also thought of socialism as a change in the economic order. They assumed that capital and its power would disappear in the course of a long series of parliamentary elections, each of which would move things along a little bit with another small encroachment on the power of wealth. As a result, people would treat each other progressively better and inequalities would gradually get evened out, both within and between nations. As a serious prospect, such ideas died out long ago, replaced with various kinds of electoral gimmicks, as exemplified by the corruption of Blair's elusive 'Third Way'. To find traces of parliamentary socialism as actually aiming to get rid of capital, you'd really have to look back more than a couple of decades. (My father, like many of the generation which came through the First World War, saw politics in that way.) In so far as there was any theory behind such notions, it would have been some variant of liberalism. I should have called it 'social-democracy', and thoroughly disagreed with it. However, paradoxically, it had something very basic in common with my own

‘revolutionary’ views: like we Leninists, these ‘reformists’ also thought in terms of an elite which would take political power and do good things for working people.

Between them, these conceptions of socialism, the revolutionary and the reformist, attracted the devoted support of millions of working men and women and their allies, including some of the finest human beings of the twentieth century. But, after the passing of that terrible century, I believe that their ideas have now clearly shown themselves incapable of answering the problems of humanity.

Of course, any theoretical framework whose categories have been frozen solid gets into difficulties when the world exhibits its embarrassing habit of changing. Even if it had been true before the change, upholding it under the new conditions would demand some fancy theoretical footwork. (Did somebody mumble something about ‘dialectics’? Then you can be sure of trouble.) I don’t think I have to prove that the world has indeed profoundly changed and that those old ideas just can’t be patched up to fit the new world situation. Those who try to convince themselves otherwise are clinging to the old ‘Marxist’ language like a comfort blanket, under which they can hide from the horrors of the modern world.

Certainly, some things are the same. More than ever, money itself, and not just its owners, exercises inhuman power over all forms of sociality and of social production. Capital is even more powerful than before, distorting and destroying the lives of billions of people, whatever their living standards. Global deterioration of their well-being accompanies the ever-accelerating advance of technology. While the productivity of labour races forward, a hundred million children go to bed hungry each night. The omnipotence of the market invades every aspect of life and culture. State power takes the shape of tyrannies of appalling brutality. The threat of war involving nuclear destruction and biological devastation still hangs over the world. Trotsky’s description of ‘a crisis in human culture’ is even more apposite than it was in 1938.

But the forms of this ‘crisis’ are not those of thirty years ago, and we must stop pretending that they are. Transnational corporations now hold unprecedented power, rivalling that of states; industry has massively translocated to new areas of the world, in some of which it produces under near-slave conditions; production is controlled by purely financial enterprises of a wholly new kind, which decide the fate of entire continents; profit-driven technology threatens to degrade the natural environment and to disrupt life-support systems; developments in the former bureaucratic states show Mafia-type gangs dominating the state and financial systems; national and ethnic conflicts reach increasing levels of brutality.

These and other changes have basically altered the conditions for any possible social and political transformation, and thus demand a fundamental re-examination of the way the socialists used to look at their tasks. Both the power of the existing world order to destroy us all and the possibility for human advance are quite beyond anything the old Marxism considered. That is why, I believe, the traditional categories of Marxism now show

themselves quite inadequate to grasp the twentieth century, let alone the twenty-first. Indeed, they have become a major obstacle to finding any way to grasp possibilities for fundamental social transformation.

Of course, struggles against the more obviously repulsive aspects of modern society have never stopped. Militant trade union activity has arisen in places where it was previously unknown, notably in the new sweatshop areas of capitalist development. It is also found among migrant workers in the older industrial countries, who sometimes re-invigorate the old trades unions. In alliance with these struggles, a new coalition of environmentalists, feminists, motorway campaigners and human rights activists emerged in the 1990s. It became particularly prominent in demonstrations like those which disrupted the meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Seattle, and that of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Prague.

This movement, which sometimes thinks of itself as 'anti-capitalist', has some very encouraging features. It is healthily antipathetic to old ideas of leadership and programme and its activities are organised without hierarchy. Unlike the old Leninist attitudes, which kept means and ends, method and goal rigidly apart, it regards its forms of activity as themselves being the precursor of new social forms. No wonder that the forces of the 'old left' has been as highly suspicious of this movement as it has of them. The old slogans had no relevance for the 'anti-capitalist' marchers and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin had no place on the streets of Seattle last November. But, I shall argue, whether or not the demonstrators saw it this way, Karl Marx was well to the fore in Seattle. For the marchers were seeking a mode of struggle for a free association, but one which was itself already a free association. As we shall see, that was his aim too.

But, however much we might welcome the emergence of this movement, its ideas can only be described as confused and superficial. This is partly because it is a loose coalition of disparate forces - trades unionists, feminists, environmentalist, fighters for the rights of minorities and others - and because it is posing problems which have never been confronted before. But, for all their rhetoric, these 'anti-capitalists' never explain what they mean by either 'capitalism' or by 'anti'. They are thus left only with protest against the symptoms of social ills or the policies of particular states. They refuse to face the fact that the actions of their enemies, the transnational corporations and financial institutions, are not simply the expression of the unlimited greed of their personnel - although this certainly is there for all to see. But what is the reason for this greed and its power? It is the working out of the logic of a complete way of living, specifically, of the nature of private property and its money form. Only by tracing this lunatic logic to its source can humanity assure its future.

So to bring about the changes in the world sought by the 'anti-capitalists' demands the most drastic transformation of human society. And, since that change must also be quite conscious, it also requires the greatest possible clarity of thought. It makes necessary nothing less than a complete re-examination of the meaning of humanity and of its

inhuman way of living. Only this could match up to the magnitude of the task of learning to live humanly, without private property or state power.

What is humanity? In this age of genetic engineering and artificial intelligence, biological definitions are not much use. What is most importantly specific about *homo sapiens* is not our DNA or our intellectual talents – these we can take for granted - but our forms of social life and communal ways of satisfying our material and spiritual needs. To be human means, first of all, to participate freely in social production and to work as free individuals for each others' well-being. All of this is denied by the fact that we live under the sway of the market.

Living under the control of impersonal 'market forces' is crazy. How have we fallen under the sway of such powers? To answer such questions, we must turn for assistance to an unknown writer of the nineteenth century: Karl Heinrich Marx. [1] Discovering his ideas is not as easy as you might expect. For the millions of words devoted to 'Marxism' over the past century and more, rather than helping us to understand Marx's ideas, in fact built a massive ideological barrier which must be penetrated if we are to find out what he was trying to do.

First, let us say what he was not doing. He was not an economist, making theoretical 'models' of 'capitalism'. He was not a philosopher, with a unified 'theory of history'. He was not a sociologist, developing a science of social structure. He certainly did not manufacture 'an integral world outlook', 'cast from a single sheet of steel'. Neither was he the draughtsman of a utopian blueprint for an alternative kind of economic system. (It is interesting that Marx himself rarely used the term 'socialism', except as a label for ways of thinking and acting which he was criticising. As far as I know, he never spoke about 'capitalism' either.)

An important part of what he wanted to achieve was a demonstration that all such 'theoretical' projects were themselves symptoms of a false, 'alienated', way of living. They were alienated forms of thought because they saw themselves in opposition to their objects. They thus reflected a world in which the social relations between us dominated our lives independently of our wills and consciousnesses. Built into their foundations is a hidden assumption: that the actual producers, the 'doers', have to be directed by an elite group, who are the 'thinkers'. Universal human self-emancipation - and Marx's concern was nothing less than this - could not be grasped by theorists, for it was a practical task, in which the masses would become the subjects of history.

'Philosophers have interpreted the world in different ways' for a long time. A few of them have still not quite given up. But this activity is itself alienated, governed by its own products, as are the productive activities of wage-workers. Instead of trying to be theorists, stuffing the world into our preconceived categories, and then giving up in despair when it obstinately refuses to fit, Marx tells us to undertake the strenuous effort of allowing reality to unfold itself, objectively showing the origins and the defects of all

categories. Only then will it reveal its human meaning. As he explains in the **Theses on Feuerbach**, he takes as his standpoint 'human society and social humanity'.

Marx's achievement is precisely to distil, by means of his critique of philosophical science, the conception of humanity, and thereby inhumanity, for which the philosophers had sought in vain. 'Communism is the riddle of history solved.' Humanity is not a fixed essence, but is in essence freely and socially self-creating, and, only because of this, self-conscious. Humans are parts of nature, which engage consciously in the production of the objects to satisfy their needs. At the same time, they transform these needs in ways which mark them as specifically human.

Among the questions with which Marx was concerned, four stand out:

What is humanity?

How have we humans come to live inhumanly, treating ourselves as things?

How can a truly human life, a free association of individuals, emerge out of this internal conflict between humanity and inhumanity?

How can a scientific understanding be established which can grasp the collective and individual tasks implied by universal freedom?

Alienated life is dominated and fragmented by private property and money. Especially in its bourgeois mode, it denies everything that is characteristically human. That is why, as Marx said (**Capital**, Volume 3), it was not 'worthy and appropriate for our human nature'. Human productive powers are encased within social form alien to humanity, forms which restrict and pervert their content. All the struggles of society may be seen as expressing the efforts of this human content to free itself from its inhuman shell. To live humanly means undertaking as a conscious piece of work the formation of a free association of social individuals. (It is interesting to recall the famous words of Montaigne: 'To live properly is our greatest masterpiece'.)

So Marx did not study an economic system called 'capitalism' and seek its replacement by a different one called 'socialism'. His subject was capital, which stands over us all as an omnipotent, inhuman social power, but which is the falsified form of truly human social relations. It determines the way that humans treat each other, and themselves, not as free ends in themselves, but as mere means, as things. Conversely, things - for example money or machines - take on the character of subjects, dominating individual human lives. The life-activities of individuals, their human creative potentials, are subsumed under these inhuman powers, and are turned into enemies of their own humanity. In Chapter 1 of **Capital**, Marx describes this as 'insane' [*verrückte*].

Implied in every part of Marx's study of capital is the possibility of our emancipation from it, and this went far beyond the many schemes and Utopias which went under the names 'socialism' and 'communism' long before Marx came on the scene. Rather, his work is directed to clearing a way through the ideological rubble which blocks the path of human liberation. The producers of wealth, those engaged in human creative life-

activities, can take conscious control over their productive powers. Then, the free development of each individual will become the condition for the free development of all.
[2]

At the end of the twentieth century, in some ways for the first time, we can see the possibility for these fundamental notions of Marx to be realised, not just in our heads, but within the horrors of global capital itself. The scale, global scope and speed of technological advance have brought misery to millions and increased the dangers for the survival of human life posed by the continued power of capital. But they have also given us the material potential to answer many of our traditional difficulties. If we search for universal human emancipation from private property we will begin to find the potential for freedom within the forms of the globalised world order. Theorists in the 'post-modern' fashion insist that the many separate forms of resistance to 'neo-liberal' economic policies and their attacks on human values can never amount to a wholesale re-creation of truly human life, and they point with delight to the collapse of the old 'Marxist' dogmas. On the contrary, this collapse gives us the chance to 'strip off the mystical veil' which hides the reality of these struggles, and to reveal their meaning. Contained implicitly in each of them is the striving for 'universal human emancipation' against the inhuman shell in which it is imprisoned.

But we can never become conscious of this meaning so long as we try to impose some external shape on reality. 'Marxism' kept revolution and emancipation rigidly separate. Convinced that it was the sole proprietor of 'socialist consciousness', and vigorously combating all competition, it tried to keep each struggle for freedom under tight control. It failed. Clinging to the old ideas of revolution makes it impossible to grasp any 'prospect for socialism', even when it is right under your nose. And the social, political and economic forms in which the new world makes its appearance cannot be predicted, for they can only emerge from the free creative activity of masses of people.

Some readers might be upset by the cavalier way that I dismiss or ignore the contributions of many authoritative writers who have discussed the work of Marx. Dozens of 'interpretations' of his ideas are to be found on the library shelves, and some of them have undoubtedly been of great value, helping to keep Marx's writings in print and throwing light on his works. But, whether they were revolutionaries or academic 'Marxologues', I am convinced that these writers are separated from Marx himself by a huge gulf. My aim in this book is not to add yet one more 'interpretation' to this list, but to look at the inhumanity of the way the world lives and to see what light Marx's ideas throw on the struggle for humanity. (By the way, if anyone thinks the way the world lives is more or less OK, this book is not for them, and there is not the slightest chance of them understanding anything that Marx wrote. Sorry about that.)

The ideas of Karl Marx, declared dead by large numbers of 'official' commentators, are only now coming into their own. Of course Marx can't answer the problems of the coming century. His task is rather to make it possible for those engaged in the coming struggles to comprehend the real significance of their own actions. The world does not

need some new 'programme', to be realised by a historical computer. Instead, as the contradictions between humanity and inhumanity thrust millions of people forward to fight for control over their own lives, we have to re-develop the ability to grasp the new world within these struggles. Whatever their immediate aims, they are actually struggles for humanity against the inhuman power of capital.

But for that, a lot of thinking is necessary. Two opposite tendencies must be avoided. On the one hand, those who try to talk in the language of the old 'Marxist' tradition are walling themselves off from seeing the significance of the newer forms of struggle. On the other, those well-meaning activists, who imagine that their devotion makes it unnecessary to do more than adopt some clever slogans will end up adapting them to the existing social order.

Marx's ideas are totally foreign to every kind of dogmatism. He grasps his own work as the conscious expression of the battle for universal human emancipation. At bottom, the old order of oppression and exploitation is held in place by ideological and spiritual forces which make brutality look 'natural'. The drive to be human has to break through the categories which form the framework of this prison of lies. That is why the battle for freedom cannot get to the heart of this monster without the deepest and most radical critique of the entire tradition of thought in which the history of class society found its expression.

If those of us who have survived from the 'old' socialist movement can listen to Marx critically, he might yet help a new generation to go beyond him and to break through the 'mind-forged manacles' which have bound us all for too long.

Notes

[1] In **Marx at the Millennium** (Pluto, London, 1996) I tried to show how Marx's revolutionary humanism had been completely lost in the Marxist tradition, even while Marx was still alive, and how relevant it was to the problems of our time. See also my paper in **Capital and Class**, 62, June 1997, 'Friedrich Engels and Marx's Critique of Political Economy'.

[2] To get back to Marx's conception of what a human relation between individuals and social relation would be like, his continuity/discontinuity with Hegel is very important. 'Marxism' got this completely wrong. For some ideas about this, see my contribution 'Hegel, Economics and Marx's Capital', in **History, Economic History and the Future of Marxism: Essays in Memory of Tom Kemp**, Porcupine, 1996.