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Liner Notes to Das Kapital: Marx and Engels Comment

By Thomas Riggins

Anyone who reads Marx's great work Capital today, and the number of new readers is growing, will find, before they hit the first chapter, six prefaces (four to German editions and one each to the French and English editions) and two afterwords (to the French and to the second German editions). Some readers just skip over these preliminary writings and jump into the text, which is fine. This is a good way to get right into the heart of what Marx has to say. But after the first chapter or so it's a good idea to go back and read what you have skipped over.

There are some interesting remarks and comments from both Marx and Engels to be found there that, if kept in mind, will really help in understanding what Marxism is all about. My purpose here is to highlight some of these remarks that I think are particularly important and to comment on them. I invite readers to comment on this article if they think I have left out anything that should have been highlighted or have misinterpreted a passage. I am not going to go over all the prefaces and afterwords, just the ones I think are the most important.

Marx: Preface to the First German Edition, 1867

Here we learn that the first volume of Capital is a continuation of Marx's 1859 work A Contribution to the Criticism of Political Economy, and that, in fact, the first three chapters of Capital constitute a summary of that earlier work. Marx also tells us that "every beginning is difficult" in science and that, therefore, the first chapter of Capital will be the most difficult. The chapters after it will be easier and more straightforward. Since many people bog down in Chapter 1 and abandon the reading of Capital it is encouraging to note you just have to stick it out with this chapter and the rest of Capital will be easy going.

In this preface we also learn that the laws of capitalist development appear to be universal. Marx has studied its development in England because that country was the most advanced capitalist country. We are told that what is at issue, however, is not how capitalism may develop in this or that country but the laws of capitalism themselves.

The Chinese or Russians, for example, may think they are, or could be

immune to the worst features and abuses of American capitalism, and maybe they could be today – but the Marx of 1867 would not have agreed. He wrote, "it is not a question of the higher or lower degree of development of the social antagonisms that result from the NATURAL LAWS of capitalist production. It is a question of these laws themselves, of these TENDENCIES working with IRON NECESSITY towards INEVITABLE RESULTS. [Throughout I have used CAPITALS to emphasize words I think important].

There may be some confusion between "iron laws" and "tendencies" so let me just say that in Marx's model of capitalism the "iron laws" are really what we would call the logical consequences that result from the premises Marx derives for his model based on an empirical investigation of English capitalism. The real world is vastly more complicated than the model which serves as a guide to its understanding. The "laws" of the model become "tendencies" when they are applied to the understanding of actually existing capitalist systems.

Once we understand the English model, Marx would have us believe that "The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future." How to make sense of this? Will third world countries all develop along the path that led to US and European capitalism? Well, Japan did. But Russia industrialized under socialist motivated five year plans and the Chinese and Vietnamese are controlling capitalist development by state supervision, and by a state that is not in the control of the bourgeoisie. So things have become more complicated since 1867.

Why were the Russian and Chinese Revolutions, just to mention two, accompanied with excessive violence (or so it seems to many)? Marx said that the American War of Independence (he does not here call it the American Revolution) was the "tocsin" for the bourgeois revolutions in Europe that followed it. He thought (too optimistically) that the American Civil War was the "tocsin" that would proclaim the coming proletarian revolutions in Europe. He thought "social disintegration" was far advanced in England and would spread to the rest of Europe.

The rising of the working class, Marx said would be either HUMANE or BRUTAL "according to the degree of development of the working class itself." If Stalin or Mao appear to have been far too brutal we must remind ourselves that the development of the working class in their countries was at a very low level and that Marx had hoped that an advanced humane working class consciousness would have been possible to develop. It didn't work out that way in those countries.

Marx thought it would be to the "advantage" of the capitalist class to help the working class develop itself! Here is what he says: "Apart from higher motives, therefore, their own most important interests dictate to the classes that are for the nonce the ruling ones, the removal of all legally removable hindrances to the free development of the working class." So it is the capitalists who should be supporting Employee Free Choice Act along with the unions! Why is this so? Because a repressed and resentful working class will be a violent and brutal class when it seizes power from the capitalists and you will get Gulags. The capitalists are playing with

dynamite when they try to repress the working people.

As for skipping stages of economic development and great leaps forward, Marx had something to say about this as well. It is Marx's aim to discover and explain "the law of motion" of capitalist society. Even when that is done and we understand where capitalism is leading and that socialism will eventually be the outcome we can "neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments, the obstacles offered by the successive phases of [capitalism's] normal development." The best we can do is "shorten and lessen the birth-pangs." Not knowing the difference between these two approaches is responsible for all the failures of socialist states, just as correct application of these distinctions are responsible for their successes.

Marx also wants to stress the scientific qualities of his work. Too often his followers dwell on the moral shortcomings of the ruling class. Such and such an one is evil, or driven by greed and they are attacked personally and held responsible for layoffs, factory closings or economic down turns ("greedy bankers", etc.). But Marx says, that the "standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBLE for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them."

Marx foresees his views will be violently attacked irrespective of their scientific correctness since they will go against "the Furies of private interest" which are "the most violent, mean and malignant passions of the human breast."

As I said before, Marx was too optimistic with regard to the coming end of capitalism which he thought was right around the corner. It was even evident to him that the US was going to be involved in radical change. He says "Mr. Wade, vice-president of the United States, declared in public meetings that, after the abolition of slavery, a radical change of the relations of capital and of property in land is next upon the order of the day." That would have been the success, perhaps of radical reconstruction. President Andrew Johnson refused to back reconstruction and subsequent Republican presidents traded its program away to keep a hold on power. Thus, it ultimately failed. Mr. Wade was not the vice-president, there was no vice-president in 1867 when Marx wrote his preface. Benjamin Franklin Wade was president pro tempore of the Senate and next in line to be president if Johnson had been removed from office as a result of his impeachment. Had he become president reconstruction might have taken a different turn. Well, so much for the preface to the first German edition.

Let's jump ahead six years.

Marx: Afterword to the Second German Edition, 1873

In this afterword Marx explains why economics (political economy) can no longer be studied scientifically outside of the socialist movement, or only so studied under certain limitations.

The reason is that capitalism, as all other social formations, is the result of historical developments and has evolved certain characteristics that are historically conditioned and transient. The "laws" of physics may be eternal (e.g., the speed of light) but the "laws"

of capitalist production are not. Thus if "the capitalist regime is looked upon as the absolutely final form of social production, instead of as a passing historic phase of its evolution, political economy can remain a science only so long as the class struggle is latent or manifests itself only in isolated and sporadic phenomena."

The class struggle is in full swing today, and we cannot expect bourgeois social "scientists" to be anything other than apologists for the capitalist system. The editorial writers for the Wall Street Journal, for example, cannot dispassionately write about health reform, bank regulation, workers rights, etc., in any scientific way involving a non partisan "search for truth."

In England, Marx says, the last person to treat economic problems in an objective manner was David Ricardo (1772-1823) who wrote when "the class struggle was as yet undeveloped." He is still innocent of the historical nature of the antagonistic contradictions between the classes over wages and profits, profits and rent as sees them as an eternal "social law of nature." Capitalism and its contradictions would always be there just as the sun in the sky – TINA as former British Prime Minister Thatcher would say ("There is no alternative.") How far will our bourgeois economists today go out of their way to deny these contradictions and sing the praises of an harmonious society? Regardless of the evidence we are told how business and labor have to work together to make the "system" better as it is the only "system" that really works.

Adam Smith and Ricardo lived in the infancy of the modern industrial world. The struggle between capital and labor then took a back seat to the struggle of the bourgeoisie and the

feudal land owners. The first big cyclical crisis of capitalism was the crisis of 1825 – the direct ancestor of the present economic meltdown, and the working class makes its debut as a force that actually could threaten bourgeoisdom in 1830 (cf. Victor Hugo's Les Miserables, the book, not the Broadway musical!) The workers, however, won't realize their potential until 1848.

After 1830, in Western Europe at any rate, the bourgeoisie was firmly in the saddle and the class struggle was underway in earnest. Marx said this "sounded the knell of scientific bourgeois economy." Now truth took a back seat to those Furies of private interest mentioned above. Truth became a question what "was useful to capital or harmful, expedient or inexpedient, politically dangerous or not."

This been the case ever since – from Ivy League economic departments to Fox News by and large even, or more especially. Today we have in "place of disinterested inquirers" only "hired prize-fighters; in place of genuine scientific research, the bad conscience and evil intent of apologetic." And, we must admit, our Soviet and Chinese comrades were not above apologetics since once in power they were no longer "disinterested inquirers." It will be a big challenge for Marxist leaders, in and out of power, to establish truly disinterested centers of inquiry because only by a true understanding of reality can they hope to be successful and not repeat the tragic errors of the 1930s and 1980s.

After 1848 there were a few bourgeois thinkers that recognized the legitimate claims of the workers and tried to "harmonize" them with the interests of capital. One of best advocates of this harmonious society approach, Marx says, was John Stuart

Mill: yet he only produced "a shallow syncretism." Marx then recommends a book about Mill ("Outlines of Political Economy according to Mill") by N. Tschernyschewsky ("the great Russian scholar and critic.") Don't bother trying to look this critic up under this name – it is a terrible Cyrillic transliteration of the name of the Russian radical materialist proto-Marxist N.G. Chernyshevsky (1828-1889) the title of whose novel "What Is To Be Done" was used by Lenin for his work of the same name.

Now, a few remarks by Marx on his method and his relation to Hegel. Some writers, who should know better, have criticized Marx for the use Hegelian "jargon" and the Hegelian dialectic in writing Capital. But Marx is quite clear in the afterword to the 2nd edition that his dialectical method is the "direct opposite" of that of Hegel. Hegel thinks in the language of German Idealism and tries to construct his dialectic around the concept of the "Idea" as the basis of reality. Marx says that he himself studies external reality to see how we come to get the concepts and ideas (including that of the "Idea) in the first place. Completely unlike Hegel, Marx sees "the ideal" as nothing more than "the material world reflected by the human mind...."

With respect to Hegelian "jargon," Marx says he "coquetted" with Hegelian expressions a little in the chapter on value in order to avow himself as "the pupil of that mighty thinker" in response to the "peevisish, arrogant, mediocre" critics of the philosopher who had raised their heads in Germany. Despite Hegel's mystifications, he was still the first work out the form of a dialectical logic "in a comprehensive and conscious manner." With Hegel, Marx says, the dialectical

method "is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell." I should also remark that while Marx says his method is the DIRECT OPPOSITE of Hegel's, he and Hegel both believed in the dialectical principle of THE UNITY OF OPPOSITES. This is why Hegel is still read today but from a materialist perspective, and idealists can learn much from Marx.

Finally, it should be noted that even now, in the beginning of the 21st century, Marx and his dialectical method are too hot to handle in most economic departments and business schools in the capitalist world. The dialectic is, Marx says, "a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors" because it does not recognize the reality of TINA (there is no alternative to capitalism). The dialectic "includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up; because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary."

And, so now we move to 13 years later with the 1886 English edition.

Engels: Preface to the English Edition, 1886

One of the things Engels wants to do in this preface is to comment on Marx's use of certain traditional terms in political economy such as "rent," "profit," "commodity,"

"surplus," etc., which Marx has been accused of using in an idiosyncratic way. Engels agrees that Marx uses some of these terms slightly differently than they were used by his predecessors, but that he is clear about when he does so and the reasons for doing so. "It is," Engels says, "however, self-evident that a theory which views modern capitalist production as a mere passing stage in the economic history of mankind, must make use of terms different from those habitual to writers who look upon that form of production as imperishable and final."

Engels probably thought the revolution to replace capitalism was right around the corner. He says the boom and bust cycle of capitalism between 1825 to 1867 "seems" to be over and we are in "the slough of despond of a permanent chronic depression" and that a future "period of prosperity will not come." Well, he missed out on recognizing the tenacity of the capitalist system. We are now in another "slough of despond," but if it is permanent or not I will not venture to guess. We still have not really answered the great question that Engels says faces the capitalists in every depression: "what to do with the unemployed."

He thinks the unemployed might take matters into their own hands for he says "we can almost calculate when the unemployed losing patience will take their own fate into their own hands." I am afraid we can't calculate that either. But one thing is sure. Engels says Marx's *Capital* is often referred to as "the Bible of the working class." If the workers of the world want to come out of the current crisis on top of the situation they had better start reading their Bible.

Engels in fact makes that exact recommendation in this 1886 preface.

The workers might very well be able to come to power in a legal and peaceful way in advanced capitalist countries. In the 1880s England was the most developed country by far and Marx thought that in England the social revolution "might be effected entirely by peaceful and legal means." That is what advanced democratic working people should aim for wherever democracy is advanced enough to allow for it. Marx did add that even if the workers achieved victory democratically he expected the ruling class not to submit and to wage a "pro-slavery rebellion" (a reference to the US Civil War).

The challenge facing us now is see how we can deal with the present world economic crisis on the basis of a modern understanding of Marx's great book.

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