

What to Do After Reading Marx

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IN HIS laudable exercise in “Reading Marx Creatively” (*What Next?* No.25) Andrew Robinson has raised a number of interesting points.

I sympathise with his difficulty in defining exactly what is “Marxism”. It is almost as difficult as defining “Christianity”. Which interpretation is the true creed? My short answer is, first, that Marx’s views themselves developed over time and contain different and often contradictory, or seemingly contradictory, strands. In other words there are different “Marxs” – the younger and the older. There is nothing surprising in this. It is inevitable that further thought – and, more importantly, further experiences – will lead anyone who is not brain-dead to modify his views, to drop or modify certain ideas and adopt new ones. And secondly, that over the years “Marxism”, just like Christianity, or Islam, has developed different currents, each claiming for itself the status of the TRUE faith.

So my answer to the question Robinson poses is that there are, and have historically been, many “Marxisms”: the “Marxism” of pre-1914 social democracy, the “Marxism” of the Bolsheviks and the early Third International, the “Marxist-Leninism” of the Stalinists, Trotskyism, Luxemburg’s version, the “Marxism” of the New Left. And Andrew Robinson’s “Marxism”. To try to establish which is the true version by reference to the original writings of Marx and Engels is a pointless exercise. What we should be doing is to judge the original writings and all the subsequent “Marxisms” critically – asking the following questions. Were they correct in their historical settings, i.e. did they provide a correct analysis at the time and did they provide a useful guide to action; is there anything in any of these versions that we can use today to better understand the world and guide our actions? In doing so we shall find that we have to reject certain concepts as mistaken, find others applicable unmodified, and others useful if incorporated with insights from other philosophies and disciplines.

Whether we call the resulting world-view “Marxist” or something else is of minor importance. If this is what Robinson calls “reading Marx

creatively” – and I think it is – then I agree fully with him. Nor should we be frightened of being labelled “revisionists”. I, personally, take the description “revisionist” as praise rather than insult.

In his article Robinson takes up a string of issues in Marxism, posing them in terms of alternative readings. Among other things he criticises is the fixed and teleological way Marxists usually conceive of social groups. “Classes” are often treated as if they are fixed entities which have a definite essential identity. He writes: “it is implicitly assumed that this identity will evolve in a particular way over time – for instance, that the labour movement will progress rather than move backward. There is very little basis for such claims.... Struggles of the oppressed do not necessarily fall into neat class categories.... Sometimes workers are at the forefront of revolutionary struggles. Sometimes they are not. Sometimes they are involved, but not in their capacity as ‘workers’; and why, in these cases, is it important whether they identify as such?” I agree wholeheartedly.

In fact I would go further. As I have argued (see my articles in *Is There a Future for Socialism?* on the *What Next?* website; particularly “Class, Party, Ideology and State”) classes do not “take power” as such, as unitary and organic entities. It is parties, military juntas, organised groups that are the actors on the political stage, that “take power”; it is states and parties that then exercise power. It is true that these parties and states have to draw their support from social forces but these do not have to be whole classes. In reality they draw their support from fractions of classes and combinations of fractions of classes.

For example the “working class” did not “take power” in Russia in October 1917. It was the Bolshevik Party which took power with the active support of a large number of workers and soldiers in Petrograd and the benevolent neutrality if not support of the peasantry, and thanks to the complete breakdown of the state apparatus. If, for the sake of argument we agree that nevertheless it was the “working class” that took power, albeit through the agency of the Soviet of Workers’

and Soldiers' Deputies under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, we then have to ask whether the working class still held power in, say, 1919, when the soviets had been reduced to docile instruments of the Party, workers were being imprisoned for striking, workers' control in the factories was replaced by one-man management and peasant rebellions had flared up all over the country. The answer is that the Bolshevik Party had by then lost the support of workers and peasants and ruled by terror, representing no one but themselves.

Orthodox Leninist/Trotskyists will answer that nevertheless the Bolsheviks "represented the historical interests" of the future working class, even if temporarily they had to suppress the present working class.

But what are the grounds for this claim?

The Bolsheviks originated as a small group of Russian intellectuals who adopted an ideology developed by a German middle class intellectual and journalist with the aid of a German capitalist. Because this ideology identified the working class as THE progressive class and agency for overthrowing capitalism and replacing it with communism, these intellectuals naturally sought to inject their ideology into the working class – with some success. But this did not make the coming to power of the Bolsheviks synonymous with "the working class taking power". Nor did it necessarily make Marxism the ideology of the proletariat.

I think this partly answers Robinson's question as to whether Marxism is "an expression of the existing working class, coextensive with the 'common sense' of ordinary workers", or whether it is "an alternative perspective which, precisely because it values the transformative potential of ordinary workers, campaigns to overcome this 'common sense' and replace it with a new conception of the world". It is certainly not the first. The "common sense" of most ordinary workers, at least today and in our part of the world, is, unfortunately, that there is no feasible or likely alternative to capitalism in the short or medium term and that all one can do is improve or maintain one's condition by collective or individual effort. Even in periods and countries where the influence of Marxist and socialist ideas was at its peak, large sections of the working class were still unable to shake off the influence of the ideology of the ruling class and of religion. In fact many Marxists have argued that the working class cannot achieve a revolutionary consciousness BEFORE the revolution.

It is from this belief that the concept of "transitional demands" arises. It is argued that since the working class cannot achieve socialist consciousness under capitalism it can only be mobilised to fight for immediate demands, sliding scales of wages and hours to combat inflation and unemployment, as well better pensions etc. It is

assumed that because of capitalism's "terminal crisis" these demands cannot be won (another illusion) and that therefore in the process of fighting for these unachievable-under-capitalism demands the working class will be forced to support the revolutionary party in its bid for power.

During the period of rising industrial militancy in the sixties and seventies it was believed by Trotskyists that this industrial militancy would develop into political and revolutionary consciousness because, according to Marxist orthodoxy, reformism was impossible in a period of declining capitalism. The reality was that the industrial militancy of that period never went beyond successful reformism because the workers won increases in real wages. (At the national aggregate level, real wage rates showed a general upward movement of some 30 per cent in the years 1964-78 in Britain: *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics*, by John McIlroy, Nina Fishman, Alan Campbell, Vol.2, Ashgate 1999, p.113.)

Today only a small minority think that socialism is feasible or even desirable. So, yes, Robinson is right. Marxism is "an alternative perspective" which has to overcome this "common sense". But it will only do so if Marxists shed the conceptions shown to be falsified by history, accept what is still valid, and take on board valid insights from other ideological currents. And whether they call themselves Marxists or by any other name is of minor importance. I have never understood what "post-modernism" is; but maybe "post-Marxism" might be the name given to an up-to-date world view that incorporates what is still valid in Marxism with new insights.

Although capitalism has, so far, and contrary to the expectations of most Marxists, survived into the 21st century, it continues to generate wars and crises and, inevitably, discontent and rebellion. At the moment the failure of any Marxist or even socialist ideology to provide a feasible alternative creates a vacuum filled by religious fundamentalism on the one hand and retreat to drug taking, apathy and cynicism and the search for individual solutions on the other. But not all is gloom. The growing anti-globalisation movement shows that somewhere or other people will continue to fight the effects of global capitalism. At the moment it seems these movements are confused and fragmented. However, what is promising is that all over the world intense discussions are taking place at all levels on the way forward.

Those who claim to be Marxists can make a useful contribution to this process. But only if they can overcome the ingrained sectarianism that has bedevilled the far left and engage in comradely and objective discussion. This entails doing what Robinson calls "reading Marx – and others – creatively". ■