

# Marxism is Dead!

## Long Live Marxism!

**Mike Rooke**

“The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’.”  
Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol.1, 1867.

“The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles.”  
Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967.

THE OPENING line of Guy Debord’s book was an obvious play on the opening line of Marx’s *Capital*. Whatever its limitations, the concept of “the spectacle”, central to Debord’s entire oeuvre, and his one original contribution to the development of revolutionary theory, registered the profound changes that were underway in the post-war capitalist democracies: the importance that mass consumption now had for the reproduction of capital, and the “spectacular” mode of its representation. Absolute poverty for the metropolitan proletariat was no longer the issue, nor was its exclusion from bourgeois society. But the autonomy of the commodity producing spectacle from human control, was! It was the virtue of Debord not only to depict this in his own inimitable, “spectacular” fashion, but to assert the significance of this for revolutionary theory. His uncompromising assessment of the existing orthodox Marxist tradition was that it had become an ideology opposed to revolutionary practice.

Orthodox Marxism rested on and grew out of the European working class movement that emerged in the final quarter of the 19th century and continued in that form until the middle years of the twentieth century. Its two institutional expressions were the 2nd and 3rd Internationals, which despite the great schism in 1919, were marked by a shared conception of capital and labour. Their fortunes therefore rose and fell together. Trotskyism and Left communism were equally orthodox in their thinking and approach, and therefore must be considered left-variants of this tradition. By the mid 20th century the class

basis of this orthodox tradition and the character of capitalism were undergoing changes (the democratic counterrevolution and the rise of mass consumption) that would render the orthodox conceptions increasingly outmoded. By the 1950s Social Democracy was exhausted, its historical mission of inclusion of the working class into the bourgeois order, largely achieved. Stalinism had likewise achieved its historical mission of modernisation through industrialisation. Together, these two wings of orthodoxy had largely played out their historic roles in the completion of the bourgeois revolution.

The orthodox Marxism of the 2nd/3rd Internationals (and this included the Trotskyist 4th) represented an interpretation and application of Marx’s ideas based on the struggles and aspirations of the working class movement in the period 1870-1950.<sup>1</sup> This period saw the emergence of what Marx referred to as the first real working class organisations. Its social base consisted largely of skilled workers and artisans, and its pre-occupation was achieving a just reward for and recognition of the importance of productive labour. It sought inclusion of the labouring class (or privileged sections of it) as a class in the bourgeois order. The lifespan of orthodox Marxism mirrored the rise of this industrial working class in Europe and North America. The critique of the bourgeois order produced by this class reflected its exclusion from bourgeois politics, the parasitism of unproductive capital, and the erosion of its position in the work process. It was a claim for inclusive status on behalf of industrial labour as industrial labour, but not a critique of capital, as the value form of this industrial labour. The Marxism that rested on and drew sustenance from this new industrial working class and its struggle, was a critique of capital, but from the standpoint of a class protective of its status as a class. The spontaneous socialism of the working class movement produced a Marxism limited to the sovereignty of industrial labour in the bourgeois order.

The critique to be found in the late works of Marx (*Grundrisse* (1857-8), *Theories of Surplus Value*

(1862-3), *Das Kapital* (1864-1867)) was a critique that was never consistently taken up by the leading theoreticians of the 2nd and 3rd Internationals. This was Marx's critique of capital as a critique of the value form of labour. It was a critique of the very form taken by labour in the capitalist mode of production – abstract labour as the source of value, and constitutive of the form of social domination characteristic of this mode.<sup>2</sup> It was therefore a critique pointing to the necessity of the abolition of value producing labour as such.<sup>3</sup> This critique was unappreciated not because of the personal failings of the leading Marxists of this tradition. In the attempt to establish Marxism as a source of authority for working class struggles, those very struggles, rooted as they were in a specific stage of development of industrial capital, and generative of specific forms of social consciousness, militated against a full grasp of Marx's mature critique. In the context of the period in which it was written, Marx's critique of the value form was ahead of its time, pointing as it did to a development of abstract labour and value that lay only in the future.

The strategic vision of Classical Social Democracy and its Bolshevik variant, despite their differences over the state, parliamentary democracy, and war, was of a socialist mode of production as the highest form of industrial (i.e. wage) labour. This was the essential content of the work of the dominant voices of orthodox Marxism – Bernstein, Kautsky, Plekhanov, Lenin, Bukharin, and Trotsky. Syndicalism and council communism were merely the more consistent advocates of the sovereignty of industrial labour and the autonomy of workers' struggles. Although the architecture of the value form was explored in the 1920s by I.I. Rubin and Georg Lukács, these works remained marginal (partly because they were declared heresy by the leadership of the 3rd International) to the Marxist mainstream until recovered by a later generation of Marxists.

It was Marx's claim in *Das Kapital* (Marx 1976, p.132) to have been the first to point out that the commodity has a dual character, possessing both use-value (its natural form) and exchange value (its value form). This duality derived from the two-fold nature of the labour expended in its production – concrete and abstract labour respectively. As values, commodities were the objective expressions of homogeneous or abstract labour – that is labour abstracted from any aspect of use or skill. Commodities as exchange values were thus “congealed quantities of homogeneous human labour” (ibid., p.128).

Exchange value is for Marx the necessary mode of expression, or form of appearance, of value. It is not intrinsic to, or inherent in, the commodity, but is as he puts it, the form of appearance of a content distinguishable from it (ibid., p.127). The substance of value is therefore labour, but a form

of human labour expended in a definite social relation of production (i.e. wage labour). The forms of value – commodity, money, capital, are merely different, but necessary forms of appearance of this value, for value can only exist in such empirical forms (value as such has no empirical reality). Value therefore, is not invoked as a thing standing outside of, external to the labour power of the producers, but is rather the necessary expression of a historically specific form of its expenditure.

The story of capital is the itinerary of value becoming a “subject” that valorizes itself independently of the will of the real, producing individuals engaged in capitalist work. Taking on a life of its own, it “moves” and provides the movement of society (the society of value is first and foremost a “dynamic” spectacle) behind the backs of the producers. Despite being an “abstract subject”, value has very real, concrete, effects, dependent as it is, because premised on, the loss of subjectivity of the labourers – their loss of control over the labour power they expend and the products they produce.

Marx's mature critique was therefore a critique of value – as the constitutive force of society and its form of social domination – which was at the same time a critique of the “social substance” (abstract labour) that gives rise to it. By contrast, Orthodox Marxism saw the rule of capitalism as the domination of a class in possession of capital, the secret of which was the extraction of surplus value from wage labour. Class struggle was the resulting conflict between a possessing class and a proletariat without capital. Although this optic was based textually on the writings of Marx, and endorsed by Engels, its chosen emphases owed much to the experiences and perceptions of the nascent working class movement in the latter quarter of the 19th century.

Capital was conceptualised by Orthodox Marxism as a thing separate from and opposed to labour. Capital and labour were thus polarities, discreet opposites, each standing in an external relation to the other. Labour was an entity whose essence was denied by the existence of capital – the source of its oppression understood as something outside it. This dualist conceptualisation is to a large extent explicable if it is remembered that the parties of the 2nd International were an organic part of the first real working class movements. These movements were struggling to assert the integrity and dignity of industrial labour as a legitimate producer of wealth. While Social Democracy articulated this sentiment in the form of a collectivist state socialism, syndicalism offered a purely corporatist version, and Bolshevism a modernising variant in the circumstances of backwardness. But all were in the last analysis variants of a class representation of labour as wage labour.

By contrast, Marx's critique of capital was as a form of appearance of value, the substance of which

was alienated (abstract) labour. The critique and negation of capital was at the same time the critique and negation of abstract labour – the abolition of the proletariat as a class. The implication of Marx's critique is that the expression of the domination of capital through the medium of a class of capitalists is secondary; while the exercise of domination through the value form (the rule of an abstraction which presents itself as natural necessity) is primary. Insofar as the critique of capital by Orthodox Marxism equated the abolition of capital with the abolition of the capitalist class (a change of property relations), it had no critique of labour as wage labour.

Understanding capital as a thing, a self-contained entity, meant understanding labour as an equally self-contained entity. In such an understanding the source of change for capital or labour derived not from the internal contradictions of the capital-wage labour relation, but from forces external to either side of the polarity. It followed from this that Orthodox Marxism had no understanding of the dialectic of the social relation of capital – of the necessary development and dissolution of this relation. Without an understanding of the self-movement, the self-development of this relation, the strategic aim of Orthodox Marxism, in all its variants, was to represent the proletariat in its finished, capitalist form, as wage labour.

The age of mass workers' parties (Socialist and Communist Parties) spanned the period from 1870 to 1950. While the strategic goal of these parties was a socialist commonwealth or workers' state, the content was the sovereignty of industrial labour in a collectivist, planned economy. Earlier attempts at cooperative self-help created organisations that ran parallel to bourgeois society while remaining subordinate to it. The Social Democratic struggle for inclusion in effect sought due recognition of the central importance of productive labour brought into being by the capitalist mode of production. In a real sense it was the demand that this new productive force should be utilised more rationally and more justly than was possible in the existing political economy.

Inclusion was won/conceded in the capitalist heartlands by the middle of the 20th century. The significance of the Keynesian approach to the crisis of capital, was that, on the one hand, it understood the importance of wages for profitability, and therefore stability of accumulation, and at the same time understood this as a means of incorporating the proletariat into the capitalist political economy. Keynesian state socialism offered a solution to the underconsumption aspect of the crisis of accumulation, and neatly complemented the commercial strategy of mass marketing/advertising (pioneered in the US in the twenties) that would create the citizen-consumer. Fordist mass consumption thus provided a neutralising of the class struggle over

distribution and a hoped for stimulus to economic growth (through the avoidance of chronic depression).

Bourgeois citizenship as consumption became central to the Social Democratic strategy of achieving the inclusion of the working class in bourgeois society, and thereby "civilizing" capitalism: providing due recognition of the claims of labour and stabilising capital's circuit of reproduction. Inclusion for the majority of the working class, which was achieved in the capitalist heartlands by the 1960s, thus completed the historic task of Classical Social Democracy. This explains why Social Democracy has eventually had to transmute into a managerialist version of economic liberalism. This latest explicit embrace of the market should not be seen as a betrayal of its earlier principles, but a natural terminus for them. It is merely the logical extension of a strategy of securing for the "included" masses their individual rights as citizen-consumers (i.e. as full participants in the valorisation of capital).

The growth of the factory regime in the late 19th century, with its deepening of the division of labour (large scale production and mechanisation) produced proletarian resistance in the form of a struggle for the right to free association and self-organisation. Such working class autonomy centred on the preservation and protection of traditional job skills and craft status (much of the support for early Social Democracy came from skilled, craft workers, and much of the militancy of the years 1914-1920 stemmed from the resistance on the part of engineers and metal workers to an erosion of their job control and status). It was a work-based militancy of rank and file workers that was at once radical (by-passing as it often did, the official trades union structures), and conservative (seeking the preservation of the privileged position of skilled workers vis-à-vis unskilled workers). But even in its most radical manifestations (mass strikes, factory occupations and workers' councils/soviets that made it the high point of proletarian insurgency in the twentieth century) it was not necessarily incompatible with the objective of inclusion in the bourgeois order – in particular the "reformist" aspiration to pressure the existing bourgeois state to act in the interests of the working class (or even to use it as a direct agency of working class interests). While springing from a view of the worker as master of the production process, it was nevertheless a struggle for the autonomy of work based on work as wage-labour. Revolutionary syndicalism and council communism, despite their championing of direct, mass action, and their criticisms of the reformist tactics of the mainstream of Social Democracy, reproduced this weakness in their critique of capital.

The history of the capitalist mode of production in the second half of the twentieth century is the history of the developing hegemony of the value

form as the regulator of social life. The basis of the capital relation, which was its origin, and remains its essential underpinning, is the separation of the direct producers from the means of production, a separation ensuring the selling of labour power, which as abstract labour (labour abstracted from any aspect of use or skill), constitutes the substance of value. This mode of production demands the perpetual revolutionising of the means of production (division of labour/mechanisation) to produce commodities in the shortest possible time (highest possible labour productivity). Such revolutionizing drives the homogenisation of work (i.e. skills become more perfectly interchangeable, and the identification of workers with particular kinds of useful work is eroded). A mode of production resting on abstract labour thereby inevitably produces a homogenisation of the work process.

This development was not of course the smooth unfolding of a pre-established trajectory. It was at every juncture the outcome of class struggles generated by the wage-labour/capital relation. The struggles of the period 1875-1950, for inclusion and for the autonomy of work, eventually resolved into a reconfiguration of the terms of engagement of wage-labour and capital. As the challenge to the right of the bosses to manage was defeated, the workers' movement was gradually reconstituted around a different perspective. In the context of the democratic counterrevolution after the Second World War, the struggle to establish juridical rights for all workers regardless of skill or job performance – over unemployment, guaranteed pay (a living wage), conditions of work, pensions – displaced the struggle for the autonomy of work; the new emphasis on the statutory paralleled the homogenisation of work. Not surprisingly this trend spelled the demise of craft based trades unionism and the diminishing resonance in the social consciousness of class distinctions based on occupational categories.

The birth of Orthodox Marxism (the first post-Marx Marxism) coincided with a working class experiencing the erosion of predominantly pre-capitalist social relations by capitalist commodity production. Its most class-conscious elements aspired to the sovereignty of industrial labour whilst preserving the community and solidarity of established craft traditions. The working class being formed was in effect straddling two modes of production – it was already experiencing the formal subsumption of labour, but not yet the real subsumption of labour (Marx 1976, pp.1019-1038). For semi-capitalist labour in transition to fully capitalist labour, oppression and exploitation was seen to lie outside the act of labour itself (in a class of landlords and employers). The Marxism that was built on, and drew sustenance from this class experience relied on the categories of base and superstructure, forces and relations of production, and economic determinism, but not those of value

and abstract labour. By contrast, in the fully developed capitalist labour anticipated by Marx (the product of real subsumption), social domination was intrinsic (internal) to labour itself; it lay in the very act of value producing labour. But the new industrial proletariat, and the Marxists who championed its cause, would not fully grasp the nature of a value form that was then still in the early stages of its development.

Today, the proletariat is incorporated more firmly into the circuit of the production and realisation of value via mass consumption, is more indifferent to the content of work, and thus more conditioned to the value imperative that flows from abstract labour. This means that the proletariat will in the future be less and less able to confront capital as a force external to itself, and more and more must experience capital (value) as internal to its activity, the very form of its (waged and thus alienated) labour. The value imperative, as a form of domination experienced as natural necessity, must be seen by the proletariat as a force that lies within itself as wage-labour. Marxists can no longer retail the orthodox view of class struggle as the struggle against capital as object, external to the proletariat as subject; the proletarian struggle must henceforth be seen as a struggle to abolish itself as labour. This is the theoretical truth posed by the development of the value form.

Debord's achievement did not lie in a detailed exegesis of Marx's critique of the value form, or in providing a contemporary critique. Rather he evoked the hegemony of the value form indirectly through his concept of the spectacle, and the necessity of a total revolution against it.<sup>4</sup> The spectacle was a manifestation and a measure of the disenfranchisement of the self through the commodification, not only of work, but of "free" time. The gesture of total refusal expressed an awareness of the need only to make conscious what people already knew ("all you lack is the consciousness of what you know"), and it was this "knowledge" that the notion of the spectacle so brilliantly encapsulated. It was exactly this that all the wings of orthodox Marxism were unaware of, and therefore could not speak to. The revolutionary orthodoxy had become part of the world of separation, and therefore a barrier to revolution. An important strength of the Situationist critique (usually taken only to be its weakness) lay precisely in the vantage point afforded by its lack of roots in the workers' movement.

In contradistinction to the ossification of orthodox Marxism, Debord and the SI uniquely captured the alienation of the times in the notion of the "spectacle", and insisted that revolution must be about taking back the totality of life. This was its "good" side. But its weakness (its "bad" side) lay in an inability to show how the negation of the society of capital (not just the "spectacle", which always threatened to become detached) was

rooted in the development of the value form – the process whereby alienated labour becomes the substance of value – and a related inability to articulate how the antagonistic relation of value generates the possibility of its transcendence (the abolition of wage-labour). This is directly evident in the way that Debord falls back uncritically on the experience of the workers' councils as the discovered form of the economic emancipation of labour, without appreciating the limitation of this form of struggle and organisation to a specific historical conjuncture. Debord, for all his imaginative audacity and intransigence (which, it must be insisted, proved to be a historically progressive catalyst in the rethinking of revolutionary theory), could only provide a utopian “solution” to the crisis of Marxism. In the last analysis, both Situationism and Orthodox Marxism failed to theorise (in the case of Debord we may add, adequately) value as a social relation, and as a result did not apprehend class antagonism and revolutionary rupture as immanent to that relation.

What of the tendencies that have usually been identified as providing radical alternatives to the mainstream orthodox tradition?

The starting point for Trotskyism was always the need to preserve what it saw as the essence of Bolshevism in the face of its betrayal by the Stalinist bureaucracy. The differentiating feature of Trotskyism was its analysis of the degeneration of the Soviet Union under Stalin. The USSR according to Trotsky remained a workers' state because of its nationalised property relations. The Stalinist bureaucracy was not a class but a parasitic excrescence on these proletarian property relations. What was required was not a new social revolution, but a political revolution to inject democracy back into the structures of the state (soviets). Nationalised property relations were chosen as the category that defined the class (i.e. proletarian) content of the state. This category, together with the categories of the “productive forces” and the “economy”, functioned in the Trotskyist version of Marxism as bourgeois categories of political economy, standing over and above the social forces that were the real content of the class struggle; categories that in effect kept the working class fixed in its position as object of production. Socialism was the collectivist state (i.e. bourgeois) socialism of the orthodox tradition: the replacement of the anarchy of the capitalist market by the rational planning of production and distribution. The Trotskyist mentality was summed up perfectly by Anton Ciliga in his 1938 book *The Russian Enigma*. Referring to the 1923 Trotskyist Opposition, Ciliga observed:

“Trotsky never spoke of organizing strikes, of inciting the workers to a fight against bureaucracy in favour of the Trotskyist economic programme. His criticisms, his arguments and his advice seemed

all addressed to the Central Committee, to the Party apparatus. Mentioning the fall in the standard of living of the workers, Trotsky concluded in the tone of a good employer giving advice to the workshop, ‘What are you doing? You waste our most precious capital, the force of labour.’ The active body to Trotsky still remained ‘the Party’ with its Politbureau or its Central Committee; the proletariat was but ‘the object’” (p.231).

The legacy of Trotskyism was twofold. Its conflation of class with property relations (nationalised property = proletarian class content) encouraged a view of Stalinist bureaucracies and parties as potentially reformable, and thereby potentially revolutionary. Hence the venerable tradition of the 4th International in seeing Stalinist and Nationalist parties (representing the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry) as indirect vehicles of proletarian revolution. Secondly, a congenital reluctance to distance itself from the mainstream of the Social Democratic and Stalinist parties in order to stay with the working class, an orientation codified in the tactics of “entryism” and the “united front”. Not surprisingly, the fate of Trotskyism has been bound up with the fate of its parent tradition: the implosion of Stalinism and the death of Social Democracy has deprived it of the coordinates for positioning itself in the world.

Bordigist left-communism originated in the ranks of Social Democracy prior to the Russian revolution. Its claim to communist purity rested on its intransigence towards the tactical compromises of reformism (in both Socialist and Communist Parties) and its view of the absolutely exclusive and leading role of the party in relation to the organisations of the proletariat (soviets). But underpinning this doctrinaire leftism lay an assertion of proletarian separateness premised on its preservation as a class, rather than its self-abolition. In this it shares with Trotskyism a reliance on reified categories that fix the proletariat in its role as wage-labour, albeit the object of state collectivist rather than market direction.

Council communism (Roland-Holst, Pannekoek, Gorter, Rühle, Mattick) originated as the radical left wing of the 2nd International.<sup>5</sup> In its advocacy of the mass strike and independent proletarian organisation, it acted as the conscience of working class struggle constrained by party control. The fate of council communism as a distinct political tendency mirrored the rise and fall of the workers' councils in Europe in the years 1917-1923. The councils, despite a struggle (for immediate economic demands and democratic reforms) that by-passed the official party and trades union structures, never transcended the general aspiration of workers for inclusion in the bourgeois order and a recognition of the sovereignty of industrial labour. To hold, as the Council communists did, that independent expressions of proletarian power would be necessary in any transition to socialism,

did not warrant the assumption that the workers' councils were, in the period 1917-23, automatically revolutionary, or that the pre-requisites (the configuration of capital, class and consciousness) for communism were present.

The difference between syndicalism and council communism was that while both were an expression (the most radical expression) of the ascendancy of the industrial working class movement, the syndicalist project was in essence the consummation of industrial capitalism (based on industrial syndicates) without its state. Council communism, although rooted in the same struggles that gave rise to syndicalism, and therefore limited by them, did grasp important aspects of the qualitative break with capital necessary for the transition to communism. It represented the best aspects of the Orthodox Marxist tradition insofar as it expressed the most radical content of the workers' struggles of the period (the proletariat as a self-developing revolutionary subject). But it was inevitable that, as the working class movement and Orthodox Marxism went into decline, it too became marginalized.

Today the social totality is no longer constituted by politically constructed divinities. The invisible leviathan that rules is the value imperative: when value based on abstract labour is not only the undisputed regulator of production and consumption, but when this imperative has hegemonised social consciousness, when as Marx puts it: "individuals are now ruled by abstractions" (Marx 1973, p.164). Only Marxism as a critique of the value form will be adequate to the global proletariat now taking shape (of which the anti-globalisation movement is an expression). On the basis of the most advanced division of labour (itself driven by the most advanced mobility of labour power and value), this collective intelligence will more and more countenance its own activity as abstract labour (the substance of value): the limits of value (experienced as the many irrationalities of the world market) are the limits of itself as alienated

labour, and will increasingly be seen as such. Marx's critique of value will finally come into its own as the results of human practice catch up with theory.

#### Notes

1. By orthodox Marxism I mean a Marxism which in mechanically substituting the "material" for the "ideal" in Hegel, ended up with a dialectic of reified structures, discoverable and expressible through a positivist science. In this dialectic the proletariat was a finished, fixed social category rather than a self-developing, self-transforming revolutionary subject.
2. See Postone 1996 for the notion of social labour as the form of social domination peculiar to capitalism.
3. A useful commentary on the notion of the "abolition of labour" in Marx can be found in Silbersheid 2004.
4. A measured and balanced assessment of Debord's contribution to revolutionary theory can be found in Jappe 1999.
5. The case for including Rosa Luxemburg as part of this "councilist" tradition rests on the view of proletarian emancipation she shared with the Dutch "left radicals".

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