

# Marxism - Ten aspects concerning socialism in the next century

Sunday 9 February 2020, by [PARKER Ian](#) (Date first published: 20 December 2019).

**Ten aspects of Marxism are highlighted in this paper by Ian Parker on what we could or should expect socialism to look like.**

**Paper presented 'The 46<sup>th</sup> Discipline Forum of the National College of Marxist Theory Discipline' (Guangxi University for Nationalities)- 'New Development of Socialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and Progress of Human Civilization'.**

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What can we hope for and strive for in a world in which globalised capitalism is rampant and is driving us all to destruction? We have a responsibility to link theory and practice in order to put an end to capitalism once and for all. The century of revolutions, from 1917 to 2017, has provided progressive political narratives and conceptual tools which deepen and extend revolutionary Marxism, and we need to draw on those conceptual tools to bring the Marxist tradition to life again, acting alongside other progressive forces. Now, in this century, Marxism is a theory and practice of emancipatory politics, providing a revolutionary praxis for liberation movements, and our task is to make socialism visible as an alternative, in our forms of struggle and in our vision of another world beyond capital. We can begin to imagine what a future socialist society might look like, albeit with a status of little more than fiction for us now. We need to start here, with where we are and with what we have as existing conditions of life and resources for struggle. I focus on ten aspects of Marxism, showing what it pits itself against and suggesting what kind of world it makes possible for us.

## 1.

Marxism is historically constituted, invented in the nineteenth century in order to address and solve a particular problem, the historically-specific and limited nature of capitalism. Marxism is not a worldview, but a weapon in the hands of working people to overthrow a particular economic system predicated on exploitation and oppression. Just as it came into being at a certain point in history, so Marxism will disappear when its work is done, unnecessary and anachronistic in a genuinely socialist society. This means that 'socialism' and 'communism' – the blueprint for which Marx refused to draw up – cannot correspond to the forms of life we endure or imagine today, and it should not be modelled on those restricted forms of life. To begin to lay the foundations of communism is to leap into the unknown, with historically-unparalleled freedom being the prerequisite, and a flourishing of diverse hitherto-unimagined competing worldviews fruitful for new forms of progress in a kaleidoscopically contradictory future civilization.

## 2.

Marxism is reflexive, which means that it not only transforms its object of study, capitalism,

challenging it and facilitating the overthrow of the political-economic system it analyses, but that it also transforms itself, accumulating in the body of its work the historical memory of past failures to end capitalism. Marxism is not a neutral 'objective' system of knowledge modelled on bourgeois science, but it contributes to scientific inquiry while questioning the academic distanced character of ultimately destructive technological reason. Science does provide a worldview, for that is necessary and progressive to interpret the world, but Marxism connects with and speaks for forms of subjectivity that break from the ideological role of science under capitalism enabling us to change the world, and us as well in that process. Marxism that is self-critical, as it should be, opens space for other humanistic and quasi-spiritual domains of existence, for a socialist future as a constellation of standpoints that examine and unravel power.

### 3.

Marxism is unfinished, an incomplete and partial partisan project begun by the first pioneer activist researchers over a century and a half ago. They lay the groundwork for an analysis of capitalist production and the extraction of surplus value and, crucially, elaborated a method of analysis through which an accumulating self-correcting tradition of work could be debated and tested. This work began when capitalism as a global system was in its infancy, and that system has repeatedly adapted itself and mutated to suppress political rebellion against it, posing new questions for Marxism itself. Marxism is not a static theoretical system, susceptible to proof or disproof of separate discrete hypotheses, but it is a flexible multivalent tradition of political resistance to capitalism, speaking for the exploited and oppressed. Communism will not, therefore, entail the final totalisation of Marxism as testament to its success, but will entail the eventual failure and fragmentation of the different elements of Marxism when that political-theoretical framework has succeeded in rendering itself unnecessary.

### 4.

Marxism is plural, continually encountering traditions of work that are other to it, while learning that these other traditions are often no less Marxist for that. It is not and never can be unitary. An attention to the historical context for the development of socialist theory and practice, and examples of self-organisation that anticipate communist forms of life outside or beyond capitalism, is thus complemented by cultural context through which anti-colonial and postcolonial interventions emerge dialectically against and alongside forms of Marxism developed within the imperial centres of power. This dialectical movement is not susceptible to 'synthesis', except at a local tactical level in order to grasp specific political formations, and combat them. Provisional specific syntheses of theory and practice are each grounded in material reality, and so they are neither completely relativist nor omnipotently correct. Neither does Marxism aim to construct a final synthetic picture of the world, envisaging instead a future socialist society in which hitherto marginalised indigenous interpretations of political-economic organisation are valued. The power relations between centre and periphery, and between dominant and subaltern, are thus dialectically reversed in the process of struggle in order that they could be abolished.

### 5.

Marxism is intersectional, something it has learned from other liberation movements with which it has necessarily allied itself in order to grasp the interlinking of exploitation and oppression. The incomplete attempts to grasp the interrelationship between dimensions of class, culture, 'race', sex and sexuality, as well as other axes of power and resistance, have provided different ways for Marxism to decouple itself from dominant White Western and stereotypically masculine ways of understanding and governing the world. Marxism thus actively configures itself as the standpoint of all of the exploited and oppressed, with no interest other than the combined and various interests of

those who labour, whether that is in the factory, in the fields or in the home. Marxism thus prepares itself, as form of 'prefigurative politics' – that is, politics in which the forms of organisation developed to combat capitalism also thereby anticipate the forms of organisation that we want to replace it – Marxism prepares itself for its own eventual dissolution. This intersectional prefigurative politics is designed to end capitalist class rule and to transform Marxist method under socialism into one of a number of different competing analyses and drivers for the self-reflexive transformation of social relationships.

## 6.

Marxism is relational, its analytic categories deployed not to name independently-existing entities which must then be crystallised into forms of permanent identity, but in order to grasp the particular nature of political-economic class formations; principally capitalism as an exploitative class relation in which surplus value is extracted during the labour process. This pits Marxism against 'essentialist' accounts which fail to grasp how a system of exchange values – the circulation of commodities under capitalism – then constitute an apparently hidden and so idealised realm of 'use values' of products which people are then induced to yearn for and imagine they can return to. A directly political expression of this relational aspect of Marxism is realised in its refusal of conspiracy-theoretic explanations of society, explanations that are therefore viewed as toxic ideological phenomena. The task of a socialist society is thus to create non-exploitative and non-oppressive forms of relationship, not to simply give expression to hitherto latent ones.

## 7.

Marxism is international, which is why its political-organisational forms – the 'Internationals' – have always, from the earliest days, represented an authentic universal response to the destructive globalising impulse of colonialism, capitalism and then imperialism. Marxism speaks for the singularity of experience, of local and indigenous responses to globalisation, at the same time as it refuses and transcends the particularity of ethno-nationalist reaction. It is particularly critical of centralised great power chauvinism, valuing the right to self-determination, viewing such autonomous self-organisation as itself an expression of what is genuinely universal, self-consciously struggling for progressive global politics in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. There can be no socialism in one country, and defence of any existing partial gains for revolutionary forces requires a dialectical interplay of respect and critique, always enabling the internationalist aspect of liberation to be present so that it may eventually prevail. Our internationalism will be rooted in the local realities of disparate communal life-worlds.

## 8.

Marxism is democratic, challenging and exposing the false claims made by regimes intent on protecting grotesquely unequal property rights in order to then supposedly 'represent' the interests both of those who labour and those who live on the labour of the mass of the population. That ostensible balancing of the interests of different classes configures the bourgeois state as an institutional apparatus for managing and maintaining in their place those who produce surplus value, workers. It is by way of this state apparatus that the ruling ideas express those of the ruling class. In this way the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie is cloaked in ideology, that of the lie of meritocracy and the myth of wealth trickling down to benefit everyone, ideology condensed at times of crisis in nationalist reaction designed to strengthen the state, to divide and rule. What is potentially true about the promise of bourgeois democratic rights – including the right to assembly, collective self-organisation, access to media and transparent legal due process – must be made real inside the internal structures of workers' and other liberation movement organisations and through open debate between different such organisations.

9.

Marxism is liberatory, connecting the organisational and collective realm of the political with the realm of personal experience, connecting the personal and the political in the multi-faceted aspects of the revolutionary process. It is in the course of this process that so-called 'false consciousness' under capitalism, the kind of consciousness that is necessary for the many existing ideological justifications for exploitation to thrive, is thereby unravelled and transcended. Socialism as the combined free associations of the producers of wealth functioning at a local, regional, national and international level, with free and unconditional provision of health and welfare for all, is thus given experiential depth as alienation is also dissolved in practice. Socialism lays the ground for the unending reflexive dissolving of the four key facets of alienation under capitalism identified by Marx; enabling new connections to be forged between individuals no longer positioned as competitors, between creative labour and collective decision-making, between conscious awareness of this creative labour process and the bodies of those who labour, and between culture and nature as such.

10.

Marxism is ecological, pitting itself against a ruinous political-economic system that ties ostensibly linear technological 'development' to the drive for profit. Capitalism turns nature, our ecological species being, into an 'environment' separate from us, from which we are thereby alienated, and it turns nature into a mere resource to be plundered and commodified. Marxist politics entails a revolutionary ecosocialist break from 'environmental' state politics that uses the rhetoric of 'sustainability' to sustain capital accumulation. The extraction of surplus value is, viewed ecologically, extraction of value from nature, from our nature as productive labouring beings. Something is thereby added during the production process by virtue of human labour power so that this creative labour, turned into commodities, can be bought and sold. Under capitalism something is also taken from nature, used up, destroyed, and so we are driven by the profit motive to destroy the planet. Socialism entails the socialising of the means of production in such a way as to also socialise nature or, better put, and as the dialectical complement of such socialisation, to render human political organisation as authentically ecological.

These ten aspects of Marxism – viewing it as historically constituted, reflexive, unfinished, plural, intersectional, relational, international, democratic, liberatory and ecological – retrieve from the past century of struggle the hopes and promise for a socialist future. In some respects they are not new, and not, as institutionalised bureaucratic 'orthodox' Marxists might claim, 'revisions'; rather, they return us to Marxism as such, bringing it alive for our times. I have had to be brief here, sometimes cryptic. I have drawn on anti-colonial and anti-racist feminist politics in this account that are embodied in keywords for struggle, among which I have mentioned 'intersectionality', 'prefiguration' and 'standpoint'; these are concepts that enrich Marxism, and which enable us to grasp the nature of so-called 'immaterial' labour in new virtual worlds created by us and harnessed to the needs of capital. These are the dry bare bones of the argument which we now need together to flesh out with examples of revolutionary Marxist praxis.

Marxism shows us in its analysis of capitalism how we live under this wretched political-economic system, and how we die. We for sure will all die as a result of the catastrophic drive to profit that is burning up the planet if we do not act fast, taking from Marxism lessons as to how to struggle and as to how we may live better. The name we give to that future world is 'socialism', a progressive leap into a civilization beyond the ravages of capital, with an ideal that pulls us being 'communism', the possibility that we may construct a communist society in which real limits on human freedom are realistically and collectively appreciated rather than brutally and cynically imposed upon us. It is only then that those limits can be reconfigured by and for us as the truth of what it is to be in the world rather than as a contradictory system of lies, poisonous ideological nostrums that function to

preserve the privileges of the corrupt few who govern us today. This truth of what it is to be in the world has to be reinvented by us in forms of political narrative and creative fiction if we are to build socialism in the next century.

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