

Keep to your course!

Alan Johnson reviews *The Place of Marxism in History*, by Ernest Mandel. Humanities Press

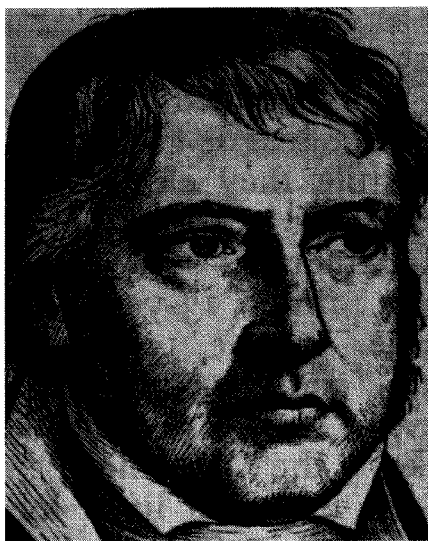
'He who cannot draw on three thousand years is living from hand to mouth', Goethe. DOES Marxism have a future? One way to answer this question is, paradoxically, to look to its past. In this excellent little book, Ernest Mandel's aim was to "apply the materialist interpretation of history to Marxism itself: not consider its appearance as a matter of course, but understand that it requires an explanation, and to provide one". It is a very useful book for young comrades eager to discover the origins and development of Marxism from its inception in the 1840s to its diffusion in the 1870s and 1880s.

Marxism was "the product of the appearance of the capitalist mode of production" in 16th century Europe. It was the product of the intellectual effort — developed in close relation to the emerging workers movement — to understand the dynamics, or 'laws of motion', of this revolutionary new society, its place in history and its future prospects. Marxism did not appear fully formed from the heads of Marx and Engels as a series of revealed truths but matured via a process of critique, involving, as Mandel puts it, the "critical appropriation of the data produced by the most advanced academic and scientific research combined with a critical analysis of the emancipation movement, including its various attempts to build revolutionary organisations, its various attempted solutions of the 'social question', and the elementary self-emancipation efforts of the working class."

Mandel organises his book around this idea. He sets out each critical appropriation and transformation, whether of pre-existing social science or of the political practice of the workers movement, until what we call Marxism emerges clearly as the end product of this process of critique. It builds creatively upon all previous theories and all previous emancipation movements:

The transformation of German idealist philosophy

Hegel, was the most advanced thinker of the bourgeois epoch, who produced dialectical materialism. Marx appropriated Hegel's conceptions of social reality as being in continual change, as a totality, possessed of laws of development, and driven on by internal contradictions. But Marx also transformed Hegel's dialectic, "setting it back on its feet" by insisting on the existence of a knowable objective reality and by finding the source of change in real people and their material existence and struggles, not in the metaphysical movement of ideas.



Hegel

The transformation of French sociological historiography

This had, in analysing the great bourgeois revolutions of the 16th and 17th centuries, developed the concepts of *class and class struggle*. Mandel argues this was a "genuine revolution in the social sciences" and as influential on Marx as the philosophy of Hegel. Marx linked the concepts of class and class struggle to the concepts of social labour and social product.

The result was the broad theory of history and social change called "historical materialism" which stressed:

a) The primacy of production: tracing the roots of social classes and social conflict to the realm of production, arguing that the extent of material production and the character of the social labour which guarantees it has primacy in understanding any society. The concepts of productive forces, relations of production and modes of production were developed by Marx to reveal classes not as eternal and natural but as rooted in the development of production and as historically transient phenomena, capable of supercession altogether.

b) Base and superstructure: showing that a society's 'base' — that is its capacity to produce ('productive forces') combined with the way it has organised itself to produce ('relations of production') — broadly conditions social consciousness (ideas and conceptions of the world) politics and the state. The capitalist class's ownership and control of the productive potential of the society gives it dominance (always contested but never overcome short of social revolution) in both realms.

c) Structure and agency. "Human beings make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing" said Marx. In other words history is not pre-ordained, but is made by real men and women as they struggle. But this struggle takes place in a particular time and place, and the constraining structures of the forces and relations of production

limit what that struggle can achieve. Socialism was not possible before capitalism created the possibility of material abundance and a social class with the interest and capacity to create a classless society. But equally, this classless society will not fall from the sky just because it is now possible. It will be created, in the teeth of opposition from the capitalists, by the self activity of the vast majority or it will not be. There are no historical guarantees.

The transformation of English political economy

Once social class was traced to production then the precise character of economic life in capitalism — the "laws of motion" of capitalist production — becomes the heart of the matter. This preoccupied Marx for the rest of his life and culminated in the three volumes of *Capital*. Adam Smith and David Ricardo had argued that goods exchange on the basis of the quantities of labour they contain: the labour theory of value. Marx agreed but noticed that Smith and Ricardo could not explain the value of labour itself, and that they defended capitalism as natural. Marx established that labour was not just the measure of value, but that it *was* value or "more precisely a fraction of the labour potential (the total mass of workdays or work hours) available in a given society during a given period".

Moreover, Marx established that in capitalist society labour is itself a commodity, bought and sold in the market place. But it is a unique commodity because it produced added or 'surplus value' for the capitalist. For Mandel, "the discovery of surplus value as a fundamental category of bourgeois society and its mode of production, along with the explanation of its nature (a result of surplus labour, of the unpaid, unremunerated labor supplied by the wage-earner) and of its origins (the economic compulsion forcing the proletariat to sell her or his labour power to the capitalist as a commodity) represents Marx's main contribution to economics and social science in general".

With this concept Marx traced social conflict to the exploitation rooted not in the circulation of goods as Ricardo thought, but in production itself, the heart of the system. In other words conflict is systemic or 'built-in'. There is a perennial clash between the diametrically opposed interests of labour and capital.

The transformation of utopian socialism

One of the great strengths of Mandel's book is his approach to utopian socialist thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries who reject capitalism but can see no future role for the working class in rebuilding society. Mandel refuses to sneer at the dreams of figures such as Robert Owen (1771-1858) and Flora Tristan (1803-1844) but argues that, "they were lucid critics of bourgeois society who grasped the main features of its long term evolution and contradictions, and were far sighted anticipators of the transformations that would be required to establish a classless society. Marx and Engels... learned much from them". ♦

And yet Marxism might be summed up as the movement from utopian to scientific socialism. Marx located the very possibility of socialism in the maturing social relations and productive capacity of the present, rather than in a moral rejection of that present. For Marx and Engels this meant:

1. Capitalism is the source of both the productive capacity ('abundance') and the social agency (the working class) which alone make socialism a realistic hope. Capitalism cannot be bypassed.

2. Capitalism cannot be gradually superseded by one incursion of the utopian future after another. Utopian experiments such as model factories, communes etc. were doomed to failure because they were isolated in a hostile capitalist environment. As Rosa Luxemburg said, it is impossible to make the sea sweet by pouring into it thimblefuls of lemonade. But Mandel also notes that Marx and Engels saw great "demonstrative value" in these experiments, giving them support without forgetting the impossibility of their permanent success. Such a stance is relevant to some of today's experiments in "popular economy" such as LETS schemes.

3. The driving force for socialism will not be the gradual spread of sweet reason (socialism-as-good-idea) as the utopians hoped, but reason allied to the material interests of the working class, *the first class in history* which because it needs neither a class above it to rule over it, nor a class below it to be the basic productive class has the capacity and the interest to create a society without any classes.

4. Most importantly, the utopian socialists saw socialism as being delivered from above by experts, even dictators. The most authoritarian methods were often envisaged as the means to deliver and sustain the utopian society. Here lies the most important and defining break Marxism made with all previous socialist thought. As Mandel puts it:

"Marx and Engels to the contrary, conceived the advent of classless society as the result of the real movement of self-organisation and self-emancipation of the great masses... This concept, in a nutshell, was what was newest and most revolutionary in Marxism's contribution to human thought and history; it represented the most radical break with all other doctrines."

The fusion of the workers movement and scientific socialism

The three key figures in the transition from 'pre-proletarian philanthropy and propaganda to proletarian action properly speaking' were Wilhelm Weitling (1808-1871) in Germany, and Proudhon (1809-1865) and Blanqui (1805-1881) in France. Each, according to Mandel, realised two things the earlier utopians had not: the need for political action 'of a new proletarian revolutionary type' and for a 'revolutionary vanguard organisation'.

The failings, however, were equally significant. Their ideas were putschist, elitist, harbouring authoritarian conceptions of the post-revolutionary state, and so vague on economics they represented a regression from the earlier utopian socialists. Political they may have been, but they remained locked into the assumptions of "socialism from above". Marx

and Engels drew a line underneath all these conspiracies. Engels, in terms which speak powerfully to British revolutionary socialists today, saw the relation between socialists and the working class thus:

"The masses must have time and opportunity to develop, and they can have the opportunity only when they have a movement of their own — no matter in what form so long as it is their movement — in which they are driven further by their mistakes and learn to profit by them... [What the Marxists ought to do is] go in for any real general working class movement, accept its actual starting point as such, and work it gradually up to the theoretical level by pointing out how every mistake made, every reverse suffered, was a necessary consequence of mistaken theoretical views in the original programme'.

The understanding of political action developed by Marx and Engels was built around these pillars: the fight for power was to be the product of the broad mass of wage earners not a few conspirators, legal organisation as a political party was essential, the priority was the self-organisation of the working class, and political emancipation was inseparable to economic and social emancipation. On this basis Marx and Engels fought to reorientate the fledgling European workers movements and were partially successful.

However Marxism was often received and diffused in Europe in a crude form. The popularisations of followers such as Bebel in Germany, De Leon in America, Labriola in Italy and so on, were "far more widely read than were the works of Marx and Engels themselves". The ostensibly 'Marxist' mass social-democratic parties imbibed what Mandel delicately calls "a rather summary version of Marxism boiled down to a few central ideas" the main weakness of which was a "narrow determinism, verging on fatalism that saw the supersession of capitalism by socialism in a more or less inevitable fashion... downplaying, or even disparaging, direct mass action".

It was not until Luxemburg, Lenin and the Bolsheviks after the 1905 revolution rediscovered the revolutionary edge of Marxism and its stress on self-emancipation as the essence of socialism that "the Marxist tradition of direct mass action" was reclaimed within social democracy. After the Russian Revolution of 1917 this tradition was briefly embodied in the Third Communist International before being transformed by the Stalinist counter-revolution inside the Soviet Union into an ideology to legitimise the bureaucratic power of the new ruling class. Social-democracy shed its Marxist past and embraced reformism in theory as well as practice. A small minority, foremost the Trotskyists, but also other dissident Communists, preserved the tradition of revolutionary socialism from below, but, again often in a "summary form, boiled down to a few central ideas".

If Marxism does have a future it will be as a moral realism: at once an ethical theory and a materialist science. This Marxism will be developed by those in intimate contact with the real movements of resistance, who see in those struggles the agency of socialism, and who are able — really able — to learn from as well as offer leadership to those struggles, in the

spirit and method of critique developed by Marx and Engels. In their lives they embodied this combination of ethical commitment and scientific analysis, while refusing both facile anti-intellectualism and armchair detachment. Mandel again:

"Not only their scientific but also their moral motivation sprang precisely from such encounters with social situations — with workers' poverty, workers' revolts, political struggles — that occurred before their very eyes and influenced them profoundly.... Marx and Engels quickly decided to act, to bring their activity in line with their beliefs, to tend toward that unity of theory and practice that became at once an epistemological criterion (in the last analysis, only practice can verify the truthfulness of a theory) and a moral obligation. In fact their commitment to and involvement in the labour movement became the precondition for their ability to complete their most important contribution to history: the progressive fusion of the real emancipation movement of the workers with the main advances of scientific socialism". (p64)

More than ever the Marxist must understand the origins and character of her tradition to survive. Marxism was turned into an ideology of repression by the ruling classes of the former Stalinist states, while, in the West, it exists today mainly as an unintelligible scholasticism in academia. Its influence in the workers movement is negligible. To stand out 'against the stream' of bourgeois public opinion and labour movement hostility for the ideas of Marxism, if that commitment is to outlast the first flush of activism, requires both a moral commitment to social justice and a deepgoing understanding of Marx's critique of capitalism and his theory of socialism as the self-emancipation of the working class.

Only on the basis of these twin foundations can today's Marxist reasonably argue that Stalinism was not the product of Marxism but of the defeat of Marxism by a counter-revolution inside the Soviet Union, forge connections to other perspectives such as feminism without losing all that is specific to Marxism itself, and on that basis seek to develop Marxism as a democratic revolutionary socialism, a tradition of critical social analysis and a guide to political action in today's very different conditions. Without such an intellectual and ethical bedrock for their activity many thousands of socialists frequently do not last beyond the first depressing realisation that the revolution is not round the next or any other corner. Armed with such an understanding of "the place of Marxism in history" however, one's perspective on the current isolation of Marxism is very different. In the words of the Communist poet Randall Swingler: ■

Those who come after,

Who are riding the wave when it breaks at last
and the foam
Dazzles with rainbow colours of the days of
hope,
They will not remember who you were, far
back
In the broil of ocean and out of sight of the
shore
Who kept your course though the tide ran
against you.