

This article was downloaded by: [Universiteit Twente]

On: 30 November 2014, At: 04:54

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Socialism and Democracy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csad20>

### The Increasing Relevance of Marxism

Michael Parenti

Published online: 13 Dec 2007.

To cite this article: Michael Parenti (1998) The Increasing Relevance of Marxism, *Socialism and Democracy*, 12:1, 115-121, DOI: [10.1080/08954309808428215](https://doi.org/10.1080/08954309808428215)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08954309808428215>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

# *The Increasing Relevance of Marxism*

*Michael Parenti*

Some people say Marxism is a science and others call it a dogma. I would suggest that Marxism is not a science in the positivist sense, formulating hypotheses and testing for predictability, but more accurately a social science, one that shows us how to conceptualize systematically and systemically, moving from surface appearances to deeper features, so better to understand both the specific and the general, and the relationship between the two. Marxism has an explanatory power that is superior to mainstream bourgeois social science because it deals with the imperatives of class power and political economy, the motor forces of society and history.

In 1915, Lenin wrote that “[bourgeois] science will not even hear of Marxism, declaring that it has been refuted and annihilated. Marx is attacked with equal zest by young scholars who are making a career by refuting socialism, and by decrepit elders who are preserving the tradition of all kinds of outworn systems.” Eighty-five years later, the careerist scholars are still declaring Marxism to have been proven wrong once and for all. And with the overthrow of communist governments in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, announcements about the moribund nature of “Marxist dogma” have poured forth with renewed vigor.

The end of the Cold War supposedly brought with it the end of Marxism (and of history itself). In fact, the Cold War is not over. Bourgeois media and social scientists continue to churn out an endless stream of documentaries and publications that rehearse old Cold War scenarios, along with new sensational revelations supposedly drawn from secret Soviet archives that conveniently confirm all the past stories.

Marx’s major work was *Capital*, a study not of socialism—which did not exist in his day—but of capitalism, a subject that remains terribly relevant to our lives. It would make

more sense to declare Marxism obsolete if and when *capitalism* is abolished, rather than socialism. I wish to argue not merely that Marx is still relevant but that he is more relevant today than he was in the nineteenth century, that the forces of capitalist motion and development are operating with greater scope than when he first studied them. Having first made this point in 1994, I'm glad to see articles in the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* that have since said the same thing, specifically that Marx seems to have been right about capitalism.

This is not to say that everything Marx and Engels anticipated has come true. Their work was not a perfect prophecy but an imperfect, incomplete science (like all sciences). We should distinguish between Marx the chiliastic thinker, who made grandly optimistic predictions about the flowering of the human condition, and Marx the economist, historian, and social scientist, who provided us with fundamental insights into class society that have held true to this day. The latter Marx has been regularly misrepresented by anti-Marxist writers. Consider the following:

I. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels anticipated the phenomenon of globalization at a time when production was mostly local or at best regional and most observers had hardly a clue about the global expansionism of capitalism. Marx and Engels refer to capitalism's implacable drive to settle "over the whole surface of the globe," creating "a world after its own image." They saw that no system in history would be more relentless in battering down ancient and fragile cultures, devouring the resources of entire regions, standardizing the varieties of human experience, and disempowering whole populations—a process that has actually accelerated dramatically in our own day with the IMF and the introduction of NAFTA, GATT, and, soon to come, MAI.

II. Marx noted that since workers are not paid enough to buy back the goods and services they produce, there always exists a potential disparity between mass production and aggregate demand. He foresaw a tendency for protracted recessions and chronic economic instability. As Robert Heilbroner noted, this was an extraordinary prediction, for in Marx's day economists did not recognize boom-and-bust business cycles as an inherent tendency. But today we know that recessions are a chronic condition and have become international in scope—as Marx also predicted.

III. When the *Communist Manifesto* first appeared in 1848, bigness was the exception rather than the norm. Yet Marx predicted

that large firms would force out or buy up smaller adversaries and increasingly dominate the business world, and capital would become more and more concentrated. This was not the accepted wisdom of that day and must have sounded improbable to those who gave it any thought. But it has come to pass. Indeed, the rate of mergers and acquisitions has been higher in the 1980s and 1990s than at any other time in the history of capitalism.

IV. As wealth concentrates so poverty increases. The accumulation of wealth is at a record level, and so is the spread of poverty. The number of people living in poverty is growing at a faster rate than the world's population. Having heard so much about the community of interest between employer and employee, we forget that wealth exists on the back of poverty. It is only by getting the slave or serf or worker to toil hard for little that others can accumulate and live in the style to which they are accustomed.

During the Reagan-Bush-Clinton era, from 1981 to 1996, the share of the national income that went to those who work for a living shrank by over 12 percent. The share that went to those who live off investments increased almost 35 percent. Less than 1 percent of the population owns almost 80 percent of the nation's wealth. In the last decade, the top 1 percent saw their earnings grow by over 100 percent, while the three lowest quintiles averaged a 3 to 10 percent drop in real income.

In addition, there has been a general downgrading of the workforce, with longer work hours, lost benefits, and an increase in speedups, injuries, and other workplace abuses. The number living below the poverty level in the United States climbed from 24 million in 1977 to over 35 million by 1995. And various diseases normally associated with Third World poverty have been on the rise in the United States.

In the former communist countries, free-market "reforms" have brought a dramatic increase in hunger, ill-health, and crime, along with the growth of large fortunes for some few opportunists and plunderers. In countries like Argentina, Venezuela, and Peru, per capita income was lower in 1990 than it had been twenty years earlier. In Mexico, workers earned 50 percent less in 1995 than in 1980. One-third of Latin America's population live in what is called "utter destitution," while tens of millions more barely manage. In Brazil, the purchasing power of the lower-income brackets declined by 50 percent between 1940 and 1990 and at least half the population suffered varying degrees of malnutrition.

In much of Africa, as foreign investments have increased, misery and hunger have assumed horrendous proportions. In Zaire, 80 percent of the people live in absolute penury. More than 40 percent of the populations of Asia and Africa linger at the starvation level. So, as Marx predicted, throughout the world an expanding capitalism is bringing greater wealth for the few and growing misery for the many.

V. Another of Marx's observations is that the proletariat (workers who have no tools of their own and must work for wages or salaries, selling their labor to someone else) would become an ever greater percentage of the work force. In 1820 about 75 percent of Americans worked for themselves on farms or in small businesses and artisan crafts. By 1940 that number had dropped to 21.6 percent. Today, less than 10 percent of the labor force is self-employed.

Likewise, from 1970 to 1980, the number of wage workers in Asia and Africa increased by almost two-thirds, from 72 million to 120 million, and today is now closer to 200 million. As Marx predicted, this is happening in every land upon which capitalism descends.

VI. With the growing misery and polarization, the masses would eventually rise up and overthrow the bourgeoisie and put the means of production under public ownership for the benefit of all, Marx predicted. The insurgency would come in the more industrialized capitalist countries that had large, developed working classes. For the first time, history would be made by the masses in a conscious way, a class for itself. Sporadic rebellion would be replaced by class-conscious revolution. As Marx wrote in *The German Ideology*: "A revolution is necessary" for it is the only way "of establishing society anew."

Certainly Marx's predictions about revolution have not materialized. He failed to distinguish between a revolution that is "necessary" and a revolution that is *possible*—a point that still eludes some present-day Marxist theorists. Oppressive social conditions may cry out for rebellion, but that does not mean a successful revolution (or any rebellion) is forthcoming. There has been no successful proletarian revolution in an advanced capitalist society. As the working class developed so did the capitalist state and culture, whose function has been to maintain capitalist hegemony. The prevailing force has not been revolution but counterrevolution, the devilish destruction wrought by capitalist

states upon popular struggles around the world, at a cost of millions of lives.

Although Marx's predictions about revolution have not materialized as he envisioned, in recent years there have been impressive instances of working-class militancy in South Korea, South Africa, Argentina, Italy, France, Germany, Great Britain, Puerto Rico, and dozens of other countries, including even the United States. These kinds of mass struggle usually go unreported in the U.S. corporate media. In Nicaragua, a mass armed uprising brought down the hated Somoza dictatorship. In Brazil, in 1980-83, as Peter Worsley observes, "the Brazilian working class ... has played precisely the role assigned to it in 19th-century Marxist theory, paralyzing Sao Paulo in a succession of enormous mass strikes that began over bread-and-butter issues but which in the end forced the military to make major political concessions, notably the restoration of a measure of authentic party-political life." Revolutions are relatively rare occurrences but popular class struggle remains a widespread phenomenon.

Marx's predictions aside, we need to consider how Marxism informs our understanding of present society. Repeatedly dismissed as an obsolete "doctrine," Marxism retains a compelling contemporary quality, for it is less a body of fixed dicta and more a method of looking beyond immediate appearances to see the inner qualities and moving forces that shape social relations and much of history itself. As Marx noted: "All science would be superfluous if outward appearances and the essence of things directly coincided." Indeed, perhaps the reason so much of modern social science seems superfluous is because it settles for the tedious tracing of outward appearances.

If conventional social science has any one dedication, it is to ignore the linkages between social action and the systemic demands of capitalism, avoiding any view of power in its class dimensions, and any view of class as a power relationship. For conventional researchers, power is seen as fragmented and fluid, and class is nothing more than an occupational or income category to be correlated with voting habits, consumer styles or whatever, and not as a relationship between those who own and those who labor for those who own.

In the Marxist view there can be no such thing as a class as such, a social entity unto itself. There can be no lords without serfs, no masters without slaves, no capitalists without workers: More than just a sociological category, class is a relationship to the means

of production and to social and state power. This idea, so fundamental to an understanding of public policy, is avoided by conventional social scientists who prefer to concentrate on everything else but class power realities.

By ignoring the dominant class conditions that exercise such an influence over social behavior, conventional social science can settle on surface factualness, trying to explain immediate actions in exclusively immediate terms. Such an approach places a high priority on epiphenomenal and idiosyncratic explanations, the peculiarities of specific personalities and situations. What is habitually overlooked in such research (and in our news reports, our daily observations, and sometimes even our political struggles) is the way seemingly remote forces may prefigure our experiences.

Mainstream social science and media commentary rarely if ever have anything to say about how the social order is organized and whose interests prevail. Devoid of a framework that explains why things happen, we are left to see the world as do media pundits: as a flow of events, a scatter of particular developments and personalities unrelated to a larger set of social relations—propelled by happenstance, circumstance, confused intentions, and individual ambition, never by powerful class interests—yet producing effects that serve such interests with impressive regularity. Thus we fail to associate social problems with the socio-economic forces that create them and we learn to truncate our own critical thinking.

A common method of devaluing Marxism is to misrepresent what it actually says and then attack the misrepresentation. This happens easily enough since most of the anti-Marxist critics and their audiences have only a passing familiarity with Marxist literature and rely instead on their own caricatured notions. Thus, a common misrepresentation is that Marxism claims to have the solution to all human suffering. But who besides a few airy theorists makes such a claim? Most Marxists are neither chiliastic nor utopian. They dream not of a perfect society but of a better, more just life. They make no claim to eliminating all suffering, and recognize that even in the best of societies there are the inevitable assaults of misfortune, mortality, and other vulnerabilities of life. And certainly in any society there may be some people who, for whatever reason, are given to wrongful deeds and self-serving corruptions. The highly imperfect nature of human beings should make us all the more determined not to see power and wealth

accumulating in the hands of an unaccountable few, which is the central dedication of capitalism.

A Marxist approach helps us to see connections to which we were previously blind, to relate effects to causes, and to replace the arbitrary and the mysterious with the regular and the necessary. A Marxist perspective helps us to see injustice as rooted in systemic causes that go beyond individual choice, to view crucial developments not as neutral happenings but as the intended consequences of class power and interest. Marxism also shows how even *unintended* consequences can be utilized by those with superior resources to service their interests.

Some Marxist theorists have so ascended into the numbing altitudes of abstract cogitation that they seldom touch political realities here on earth. They spend their time talking to each other in self-referential code, a scholasticist ritual that Doug Dowd described as "How many Marxists can dance on the head of a surplus value." Fortunately there are others who not only *tell* us about Marxist theory but *demonstrate* its utility by applying it to political actualities. They know how to draw connections between immediate experience and the larger structural forces that shape that experience. They cross the forbidden line and talk about class power.

This is why, for all the misrepresentation and suppression, Marxist scholarship survives. While not having all the answers, it does have a superior explanatory power, telling us something about the human condition that bourgeois scholarship consistently evades. Marxism offers the kind of subversive truth that causes fear and trembling among the high and mighty, those who live atop a mountain of lies.