

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE WORKING CLASS? ERRORS OF AN UNREPENTANT MARXIST

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In a 1990 article, "Marxism is Dead, Long Live Marxism," I claimed that working class movements against state socialism – from Berlin in 1953 to Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, Poland in 1980 and finally to the Soviet Union in 1989 – had laid the basis for powerful challenges to the emerging capitalist economies of the region.

The Soviet democratic revolution has already unchained national struggles on the periphery of the Soviet Empire. But even if these republics were to secede there still remains the heartland of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation with 50% of the population, 76% of the land area, 70% of the national production and the bulk of the natural resources. Here class struggle could still advance toward the renewal of socialism, much as Solidarity was advancing in 1981. Here the collapse of the party state and the construction of political pluralism could engender a democratic socialism.

There was after all a revolution in Russia. Its nationalism may not be closely tied to the fate of the party but it is still tied to the future of socialism. What such a democratic socialism might look like is unclear but it is likely to be more attractive than a peripheral, clientelistic, booty capitalism (Burawoy, 1990, pp. 18–19).

I was more or less on the mark in my diagnosis of the emerging peripheral capitalism but I could not have been further from the mark in expecting a resurgence of working class mobilization. Notwithstanding the restoration of

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factory councils in Hungary, across the swath of disintegrating Central European socialisms the working class slumbered. By 1989 Polish Solidarity had dissolved its militant past and resurfaced to embrace what many of its leaders hoped would be the quickest and most radical transition to capitalism. Workers bore their degradation, marginalization and destitution for the most part in silence.

This was not the first time that workers had failed the predictions of intellectuals, especially those who have endowed workers with some historic mission. There is a long pedigree of working classes giving lie to revolutionary optimism! Indeed, the pedigree goes back to Marx and Engels who complained that the English working class had let them down after being enfranchised in the election of 1867. Engels wrote to Marx: "What do you say to the elections in the factory districts? Once again the proletariat has discredited itself terribly . . . It cannot be denied that the increase of working class has brought the Tories more than their simple percentage increase; it has improved their relative position" (cited in McKenzie & Silver, 1968, p. 14). In my own prognostication of working class mobilization against capitalism and for a democratic socialism was I simply another deluded intellectual, one in a long line, who could not learn from history?

What does history tell us about the working class? To be sure the working class never achieved that messianic character anticipated by the young Lukács – that universal subject-object of history. That is not to say, however, that it has never been a major protagonist in social transformation. Under early European capitalism, the working class demonstrated its radical potential first in England around the middle of the 19th. century, then in France towards the end of the 19th. century, in Germany in the early years of the twentieth century, and in Russia and Italy during and after World War I. In advanced capitalism, similarly, we see how significant working class mobilization was in the United States in the 1930s and subsequently in Europe during the 1960s, especially in France and Italy. Finally, the working class has been a leading force for change in the industrializing semi-periphery, in such countries as South Africa, Brazil and Korea. Thus, it was not so unreasonable to anticipate that the working class would extend its covert struggles into an open movement against the primitive capitalism that followed in the wake of state socialism. Still I was wrong, but why was I wrong?

Social science does not advance by making correct predictions but by making plausible mistakes.¹ So what was the "plausibility" of my argument? The argument began from two premises,² that workers revolt if: (a) they see it to be in their interests; and (b) they have the collective capacity to undertake such a project. Let us start with "interests," and the theory expounded by

Konrád and Szelényi in *Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*. They argue that under state socialism there is a transparent and central appropriation of surplus by, what they call, rational or teleological redistributors. This rational redistribution calls forth the need for legitimation,³ characteristically performed by intellectuals who represent their own interests as the interests of all. In other words, the inner dynamics of state socialism leads intellectuals to class power. Leaving aside the many debates and issues raised by this classic treatise, for my purposes it posed a clear antagonism between working class who had an interest in controlling the product of their labor and the teleological redistributors – planners, bureaucrats, apparatchiki – who had interests in appropriating that surplus and who did so in the name of collectively defined needs for justice, equality and efficiency.

Based on many stints as a worker in Hungarian enterprises – champagne factory, machine shop, steel mill – I argued that socialist workers turned socialist ideology against the ruling classes, exclaiming the latter's failure to live up to their ideological pretensions, their socialist promises. Compulsory participation in socialist rituals had led them to imminent critique, had led them to embrace socialism – justice, equality and efficiency – but *against* the workers' state. It was here that I made my first mistake. I underestimated the degree to which workers had withdrawn from any serious engagement with socialism.⁴ When they showed disgust with existing socialism they were not striving for some better, superior socialism but were cynically dismissing socialism tout court. Perhaps in the 1950s in Hungary, workers may have held out hope for upgrading socialism. Indeed, successive reforms did bring improvements although not necessarily the improvements for which they had hoped and which they had been promised. Socialism manufactured dissent but not in the name of some higher socialism but for some unarticulated alternative to socialism. As market reforms allowed socialism to work better, so workers began to embrace these alternatives that they had constituted from below. Inasmuch as they partook of the second economy – the celebrated inside contracting systems, the cooperatives outside employment – so they were preparing themselves, willy nilly, for an alternative order. Positive experience with markets under socialism made capitalism an attractive prospect.⁵

Interests were not generally aligned with some future socialism but even where they were there was still the question of class capacity. Here I had begun with János Kornai's classic treatise, *The Economics of Shortage* and argued that state socialist economies systematically generated shortages which appeared on the shop floor as unreliable machinery, unpredictable and scarcity of materials, and even inadequate labor supplies. Production, therefore, could work only if workers were given the autonomy to improvise. There was, in other words, a

tendency toward a spontaneous self-organization on the shop floor. Of course, I had found such informal organization in capitalist workplaces but it was not as fundamental and structurally central to production as it proved to be in state socialism. In capitalism constraints are from the side of demand and these fluctuations can be more easily accommodated within a Taylorized work process. In state socialism, supply side constraints called for flexible specialization, thereby giving workers the resources for collective organization. To be sure, I argued, this could only be realized if, beyond the workplace, there was space to organize. This was the case in both Hungary and Poland but with one major difference: in Hungary the second economy channeled worker dissent in individualist directions, whereas in Poland without such an atomizing second economy, the organization of the Church was an umbrella for expanding labor organizations. Still, persuasive though it might have been, the argument was flawed by its insufficient attention to the absence of well established oppositional organizations such as trade unions or parties. Autonomous work organization and a relatively open (if empty) civil society do not provide the basis for an enduring working class movement.

If the pre-existing conditions for working class mobilization were not as favorable as I anticipated, still there was an eeriness to the silence with which workers embraced their own demise once the market blossomed forth. There is, after all, ample evidence that workers spontaneously contest market society, especially when they are offered no protections against its depredations. Karl Polanyi (1944), for example, argues that once released from the reactionary paternalism of the hated Speenhamland welfare system and the abolition of outdoor poor relief, workers in 19th century England were both free and motivated to spontaneously organize in their self defense against the unrestrained market. They were able to organize a factory movement, co-operatives and even stage demands to extend their political participation. Why not against the capitalism that followed state socialism? Again we must deal with both interests and capacities.

Workers could have drawn on the more favorable conditions of the past – the multiple material and welfare guarantees of socialism. In contesting capitalism they could have appealed to the egalitarian ideology of socialism.⁶ But the rhetoric of socialism had been so abused by the communists that it was inaccessible to the working class. Because socialism had discredited any alternative to capitalism, the working class was ideologically disarmed, bereft of any vision of the future. The past was not only ideologically discredited but its material foundations were rapidly eroding. With the market, came the inevitable plant closures and the bases for working class organization

collapsed. In terms of both ideology and capacity the working class was ill-equipped to contest the capitalist offensive.

In Russia the destruction of the means of production has been most dramatic and continuous, and there the retreat of the working class most far reaching – a retreat into petty commodity production, self-provisioning, subsistence and the reciprocity of kin networks, you might say a retreat to Polanyi's premarket society based on the household, reciprocity and redistribution. But this retreat to premodernity was also accompanied by a hypermodernity that linked Russia into global circuits of finance, natural resources, information and so forth. A merchant or rentier capitalism emerged on the basis of Russia's enormous natural resources. The realm of exchange profited at the expense of the realm of production upon which it preyed. The new Russian ruling class, the so-called oligarchs who run financial-industrial cartels, had no need for a working class which thereby lost the leverage it used to wield. Class struggle has turned through 180 degrees, from a struggle between the bureaucratic and working classes to one between bureaucratic and rentier classes, between the old and the new Russian dominant classes.

This is so different from Polanyi's 19th. century England where a manufacturing bourgeoisie rose to economic domination in *collaboration* with the ruling landed classes. In the English case the bourgeoisie depended upon the working class for its very existence. The working class could, therefore, more easily organize the defense of vibrant craft and cultural traditions. Equally important the English working class could organize from strength in an economy that was expanding. To be sure there was proletarianization and deskilling, but that was not as demobilizing as deproletarianization and reskilling for Russia's premodern economy. Russian primitive disaccumulation poses almost insuperable obstacles to class organization.

If the circumstances of the Russian working class are so bleak perhaps the diametrically opposed situation in China are more propitious for working class mobilization. This is precisely the argument of Ching Kwan Lee (forthcoming) – that China may yet prove to be the exception to the passivity of "post-socialist" labor. There the market transition has not made a sharp break with the past. There the state continues to regulate and incubate the market economy. There the market has not been the effective instrument for working class advance as it was for Hungarian workers in the 1980s, so much as a vehicle for state imposed degradation. It is still possible, therefore, for Chinese workers to appeal to the state and the continuing socialist ideology in order to make claims against the market. And in China the economy continues to expand so that there is a firmer ground from which at least certain sections of the working class can

organize itself. There the working class has retained what it lost in Russia: both the power of leverage and the legitimacy of critique.

Wrong or right, whether the working class mobilizes against capitalism or not should not decide whether it enters sociological analysis. To abandon the working class for a study of elites because they are the ones who appear to be taking initiatives is poor sociology.⁷ In forging the transition to a market economy those initiatives of the dominant classes are formulated and adopted in the light of constraints posed by subaltern classes – different constraints in different countries. Constraints from below are as significant in establishing trajectories as the various resources wielded by dominant classes. Moreover, one key to the character of the new postsocialist order lies in the experience of class exploitation and oppression. It is an old Hegelian truism that the greatest insight into social orders are gleaned from below, looking up.

If abandoning the working class for a study of elites is poor sociology, it is equally poor Marxism! Marxists may throw up their hands in despair when workers fail to contest capitalism's assault on the human condition. The working class may betray the intellectuals' hopes and aspirations for emancipation, but this is no reason for intellectuals as a group to then return the favor by betraying the working class, that is by abandoning the working class for some other class upon which it can ride to power. To turn from the working class to the study of elites and policies because they appear to be forging history is to abandon the critical perspective of the subaltern. To continue to study the working class in times of retreat entails recovering past visions to which it was attached but it never had the power to realize, the visions of the Solidarity movement in Poland, the visions of the militant and radical miners of Russia, even the novel institutions created by Hungarian workers within the interstices of socialism. To continue to study the plight of the working class is to offer a continuing critique of a peripheral, derivative, imitative bourgeoisie that falsely dresses itself up in the garb of the general interest.

NOTES

1. Of course, a more practical, social engineering science cannot afford the luxury of being wrong which is often why it is so intellectually boring and conservative.

2. The argument was presented most comprehensively in Burawoy and Lukács (1992).

3. Capitalism by contrast does not need the same legitimization as capitalist relations of production tends to reproduce themselves of themselves and exploitation (the appropriation of surplus) is invisible. In capitalism, I argued, the problem is more consent than legitimacy.

4. Linda Fuller (1999) has a much more adequate explanation of working class passivity in Eastern Europe. Based on her study of GDR she argues that the

inefficiencies and injustices of the workplace, the weakness of trade unions and the hostility to intellectuals led to most (but not all) passivity and cynical withdrawal in the face of the 1989 turbulence of civil society.

5. Zbierski-Salameh (1999) makes a similar point with respect to the appeal of agrarian reforms to the Polish peasantry. The benefits of market concessions under state socialism made a market economy appealing from within state socialism, but it actually turned into a "bitter harvest" when market forces were unleashed by the Solidarity government. Róna-Tas (1997) goes even further in arguing that the expansion of market reforms was not only popular among large sections of the Hungarian population but eroded the very basis of state socialism. In the case of Russia, Crowley (1997) argues that the militant miners were also attracted by market ideology which they grafted onto their critique of communism. They were the dynamite that brought down the Soviet order but also among its first victims. Embracing market ideology ill-equipped them to deal with mine closures, non-payment of wages, and the degradation of working and living conditions.

6. Indeed, Lynne Haney (1999) argues this is precisely what Hungarian women did when the postsocialist government threatened to end their welfare benefits.

7. I'm thinking here, for example, of Eyal et al. (1998) and Stark and Bruszt (1998). See Burawoy (2001) for a critique of these books for their abandonment of class analysis.

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**PART II:
INSIGHTS INTO THE
TRANSFORMATION OF
ORGANIZATIONS AND MARKET
INSTITUTIONS**