

DEBATE

Defending Marxist Hegelianism against a Marxist critique

Chris Cutrone of the US Platypus group takes issue with Mike Macnair

I am writing in response to Mike Macnair's 2003 critical review of books by John Rees and David Renton,¹ cited in Macnair's critique of Platypus ('No need for party?' *Weekly Worker* May 12 2011).² I wish to refer also to my three letters and article in response.³

I find Macnair's analysis and critique of the political motivations and potential consequences of Rees's affirmative account of Marxist Hegelianism compelling and good. I agree with Macnair's conclusion that, despite Rees's former SWP/UK leader Alex Callinicos's anti-Hegelian Althusserianism, Rees considering "historical experience summed up in theory" was intrinsically connected to the SWP's concept of the party as one which "centralises experience", with all the problems such a conception entails.

I wish to offer a rejoinder to Macnair's idea that such problematic conceptions of theory and political practice have roots in Lenin, Luxemburg and Lukács, Macnair's analysis of whom I find to be false. Also, I do not think that Macnair quite gets Hegel, although I agree with his characterisation that "philosophy - as such - is *inherently* only a way of interpreting the world", and so limits Hegel's work for the political purposes under consideration.⁴ Furthermore, I agree with Macnair's interpretation of Lenin with respect to the purposes of his polemical defence of Marxist approaches to philosophy in *Materialism and empirio-criticism* (1908). Moreover, I agree with his central point that philosophical agreement cannot be the basis of agreement on political action.

However, as Nicholas Brown responded to comrade Macnair's question at the opening plenary on 'The politics of critical theory' of the Platypus convention in Chicago on April 29, it is not possible to 'Hegelianise' Marx, because Marx was more Hegelian than Hegel himself.⁵ That is, Marx tried to achieve the 'Hegelian' self-consciousness of his own historical moment. The question is, what relevance has Marx's Hegelianism today, and what is the relevance of taking such a Hegelian approach to the history of Marxism subsequent to Marx?

Lukács, Lenin, Luxemburg

I disagree that Lukács's "subject" of history is the point of view or relative perspective of the proletariat as the revolutionary agent that must assert its "will". Rather, I take Lukács to be following Lenin and Luxemburg (and Marx) quite differently than Macnair seems to think, in that the workers' movement for socialism is the necessary mediation for grasping the problem of capital in its "totality", that the workers must not remake the world in their image, but rather lead society more generally beyond capital. Hence, as Macnair characterises the approach of the Kautskyan "centre" of the Second International, the socialist workers' movement must be a leading, practical force in democratic struggles beyond the workers' own (sectional) interests in the transformation of society as a whole.

I disagree that Lenin made a virtue of necessity in the Russian Revolution after October 1917 and adopted a



Dialectical spiral

voluntarist (and substitutionist) conception of the working class and the political party of communism. Rather, Lenin consistently criticised and politically fought against those tendencies of Bolshevism and in the early Third International. I do not think that Lenin's newly found 'Hegelianism' after 1914 was the means by which he achieved (mistaken) rapprochement with the 'left'.

The key is Luxemburg. I do not think she was a semi-syndicalist spontaneist/voluntarist, or that she neglected issues of political mediation: she was not an 'ultra-left'. I take her pamphlet, *The mass strike, the political party, and the trade unions* (1906), to have an entirely different political purpose and conclusion. It was not an argument in

favour of the mass strike as a tactic, let alone strategy, but rather an analysis of the significance of the mass strike in the 1905 Russian Revolution as a historical phenomenon, inextricably bound up in the development of capital at a global scale, and how this tasked and challenged the social democratic workers' movement (the Second International and the SPD in particular) to reformulate its approach and transform itself under such changed historical conditions, specifically with regard to the relation of the party to the unions.

Luxemburg's perspective was neither anarcho-syndicalist/spontaneist nor vanguardist, but rather *dialectical*. The mass strike was not a timeless principle. For Luxemburg, 1905

showed that the world had moved into an era of revolutionary struggle that demanded changes in the workers' movement for socialism. A contradiction had developed between the social democratic party and (its own associated) labour unions, or 'social democracy' had become a self-contradictory phenomenon in need of transformation.

Furthermore, I take Lenin's critiques of Kautsky for being "non-dialectical" to be very specific. This is not a critique of Kautsky 'philosophically' (although it does speak to his bad practices as a theorist), but *politically*. It is about Kautsky's non-dialectical approach to politics: that is, the relation of theory and practice, or of social being and consciousness, in and through the

concrete mediations of the historically constituted workers' movement. Kautsky failed in this. Lenin agreed with Luxemburg in her *Junius pamphlet* (1915) that the problem was Kautsky thinking that the SPD's Marxism (that is, what became Kautsky's USPD) could "hide like a rabbit" during World War I and resume the struggle for socialism afterward. Or, as Lenin put it in his *Imperialism: the highest stage of capitalism* (1916) and *Socialism and war* (1915), *contra* Kautsky's theory of 'ultra-imperialism', the world war must be seen as a necessary and not accidental outcome of the historical development of capitalism, and so a crisis that was an opportunity for revolutionary transformation, and not merely, as Kautsky thought, a derailment into barbarism to be resisted. This was the essential basis for agreement between Luxemburg and Lenin 1914-19.

I do not think the separation of the pre-World War I Lenin from Luxemburg is warranted, especially considering their close collaboration, both in the politics of the Russian movement and in the Second International more generally, throughout the period 1905-12 and again 1914-19. Throughout their careers, Lenin and Luxemburg (and Trotsky) were exemplars of the Second International left, or 'radicals' in the movement. They all more or less mistook Kautsky to be one of their own before August 1914. Also, Kautsky himself changed, at various points and times - which is not to say that Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky never changed.

But the question is the nature and character of such change, and how these figures allow us to grasp the history of Marxism. It is not about learning from their trials and errors, I think, but rather from the example of their 'consciousness', not merely theoretically, but practically. Moreover, the history of Marxism must be approached as part and parcel, and the highest expression, of the history of post-1848 capital.

Hegelianism

Lukács's 'Hegelian' point was that "subjective" struggles for transformation take place in and through "necessary forms of appearance" that misrecognise their "objective" social realities, not in terms of imperfect approximations or more or less true generalised abstractions, but specifically as a function of the "alienated" and "reified" social and political dynamics of capital. Capital is "objective" in a specific way, and so poses historically specific problems for subjectivity.

The reason for Marxists distinguishing their approach from Hegel is precisely historical: that a change in society took place between Hegel's and Marx's time that causes Hegelian categories, as those of an earlier, pre-Industrial Revolution era of bourgeois society, to become inverted in truth, or reversed in intention. Marx's idea was that the "contradiction" of bourgeois society had changed. Thus the dialectical "law of motion" was specific to the problem of capital and not a transhistorical principle of (social) action and thought. Marx's society was not Hegel's. The meaning of Hegel had changed, just as the meaning of the categories of bourgeois society had

changed. Labour-time as value had become not productive (if not unproblematically) - as in Hegel's and Adam Smith's time, the era of 'manufacture' - but destructive of society; as a form of social mediation, wage-labour had become self-contradictory and self-undermining in the Industrial Revolution, hence the 'crisis of capital'.

One fundamental disagreement I have with Macnair's approach, in which I think I follow Lenin, Luxemburg, Lukács and Marx, is with the idea that the potential transformation of capitalist society involves the confrontation of two antithetical social principles, of the workers (collectivism) vs the capitalists (individual private property). Capital, as Marx understood it, is not based on the mode of existence of the capitalists, falsely generalised to society as a whole, but rather that of the workers. This is not a top-down, but a bottom-up, view - shared by Smith, for example. As Lukács put it, the fate of the worker becomes that of "society as a whole".⁶ The contradiction of capital is the contradiction of the workers' - not the capitalists' - existence in society. For Marx, capital is a social mode of production and not merely a relation of production. As a mode of production, capital has become increasingly self-contradictory. As a function of capital's historical development, through the Industrial Revolution, in which the workers' own increasing demands for bourgeois rights, to realise the value of their labour, and not merely capitalist competition, played a key, indispensable role, bourgeois society became self-contradictory and self-undermining. That is, the workers centrally or at base constituted the self-destructive, social-historical dynamic of capital through their labouring and political activity. This development culminated in the crisis of world war and revolution 1914-19.

As Lenin put it in *The state and revolution*, the social relations of bourgeois society - namely, the mutual exchange of labour as the form of social solidarity in capital - could only be transformed gradually and thus "wither away," and not be abolished and replaced at a stroke.⁷ The proletarian

socialist revolution was supposed to open the door to this transformation. The potential for emancipated humanity expressed in communism that Marx recognised in the modern history of capital is not assimilable without remainder to pre- or non-Marxian socialism.

As Marx put it, "*Communism is the necessary form and the dynamic principle of the immediate future, but communism as such is not the goal of human development, the form of human society.*"⁸ This was because, according to Marx, "Communism is a dogmatic abstraction and ... only a particular manifestation of the humanistic principle and is infected by its opposite, private property."⁹ Marx was not the pre-eminent communist of his time, but rather its *critic*, seeking to push it further. Marxism was the attempted Hegelian self-consciousness of proletarian socialism as the subject-object of capital.

As Lukács's contemporary, Karl Korsch, pointed out in 'Marxism and philosophy' (1923), by the late 19th century historians such as Dilthey had observed that "ideas contained in a philosophy can live on not only in philosophies, but equally well in positive sciences and social practice, and that this process precisely began on a large scale with Hegel's philosophy."¹⁰ For Korsch, this meant that 'philosophical' problems in the Hegelian sense were not matters of theory, but practice. From a Marxian perspective, however, it is precisely the problem of capitalist society that is posed at the level of practice.

Korsch went on to argue that "what appears as the purely 'ideal' development of philosophy in the 19th century can in fact only be fully and essentially grasped by relating it to the concrete historical development of bourgeois society as a whole".¹¹ Korsch's great insight, shared by Lukács, took this perspective from Luxemburg and Lenin, who grasped how the history of the socialist workers' movement and Marxism was a key part - indeed the crucial aspect - of this development, in the first two decades of the 20th century.

The problem we have faced since then is that the defeat of the workers' movement for socialism has not meant the stabilisation, but rather the degeneration, disintegration and decomposition, of bourgeois society - without the concomitant increase, but rather the regression, of possibilities for moving beyond it. This shows that the crisis of Marxism was a crisis of bourgeois society, or the highest and most acute aspect of the crisis of capital: bourgeois society has suffered since then from the failure of Marxism.

Crisis of Marxism

The 'crisis of Marxism', in which Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky took part (especially in 1914-19, but also in the period leading up to this, most significantly from 1905 on), and Lukács tried to address 'theoretically' in *History and class consciousness* and related writings of the early 1920s, was (the highest practical expression of) the crisis of bourgeois society.

This crisis demanded a Marxist critique of Marxism, or a 'dialectical' approach to Marxism itself: that is, a recognition of Marxism, politically, as being a self-contradictory and so potentially self-undermining historical phenomenon (a phenomenon of *history* - hence the title of Lukács's book, *History and class consciousness*), itself subject to necessary "reification" and "misrecognition" that could only be worked through "immanently". This meant regaining the "Hegelian" dimension, or the "self-consciousness" of Marxism. This is because Marxism, as an expression of the workers' "class-consciousness", was - and remains - entirely "bourgeois", if *in extremis*. While self-contradictory in its development, the socialist workers' movement, including its Marxist self-consciousness, pointed beyond itself, 'dialectically' - as consciousness of the bourgeois epoch as a whole does.

I follow Adorno's characterisation of the problem of workers' consciousness and the necessary role of intellectuals, which he took from Lenin, in his letter to Walter Benjamin of March 18 1936: "The proletariat ... is itself a product of bourgeois society ... the actual consciousness of actual workers ... [has] absolutely no advantage over the bourgeois except ... interest in the revolution, but otherwise bear[s] all the marks of mutilation of the typical bourgeois character. This prescribes our function for us clearly enough - which I certainly do not mean in the sense of an activist conception of 'intellectuals' ... It is not bourgeois idealism if, in full knowledge and without mental prohibitions, we maintain our solidarity with the proletariat instead of making of our own necessity a virtue of the proletariat, as we are always tempted to do - the proletariat which itself experiences the same necessity and needs us for knowledge as much as we need the proletariat to make the revolution."¹²

The problem we face today, I think, is the opacity of the present, due to our lack of a comparably acute, self-contradictory and dialectical expression of the crisis of capital that Marxism's historical self-consciousness, in theory and practice, once provided ●

Notes

1. "Classical Marxism" and grasping the dialectic' *Weekly Worker* September 11 2003.
2. See also Mike Macnair's "Theoretical dead end", May 19; 'The study of history and the left's decline', June 2; and 'Divided by a common language?' June 30.
3. See Letters May 19, May 26 and July 7; and my article, 'The philosophy of history', June 9.
4. 'Against philosopher kings', December 11 2008.
5. 'The politics of critical theory' *Platypus Review* No37, July 2011: <http://platypus1917.org/2011/07/09/the-politics-of-critical-theory/#q+a>.
6. G Lukács *Reification and the consciousness of the proletariat* (1922) part 1, 'The phenomenon of reification' in *History and class consciousness: studies in Marxist dialectics* Cambridge MA 1971, p91: www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/hcc05.htm.
7. See VI Lenin *The state and revolution* chapter 5, 'The economic basis of the withering away of the state', part 3, 'The first phase of communist society': www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterew/ch05.htm#s3.
8. K Marx *Economic and philosophic manuscripts* (1844), manuscript 3, section 2, 'Private property and communism': www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm.
9. K Marx, letter to Arnold Ruge, September 1843, 'Ruthless criticism': www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09.htm.
10. K Korsch, 'Marxism and philosophy' (1923), in *Marxism and philosophy* New York 2008, p39.
11. *Ibid* p40.
12. TW Adorno, 'Correspondence with Benjamin' *New Left Review* September-October 1973, pp66-67.

What we fight for

■ **Our central aim is the organisation of communists, revolutionary socialists and all politically advanced workers into a Communist Party. Without organisation the working class is nothing; with the highest form of organisation it is everything.**

■ **The Provisional Central Committee organises members of the Communist Party, but there exists no real Communist Party today. There are many so-called 'parties' on the left. In reality they are confessional sects. Members who disagree with the prescribed 'line' are expected to gag themselves in public. Either that or face expulsion.**

■ **Communists operate according to the principles of democratic centralism. Through ongoing debate we seek to achieve unity in action and a common world outlook. As long as they support agreed actions, members have the right to speak openly and form temporary or permanent factions.**

■ **Communists oppose all imperialist wars and occupations but constantly strive to bring to the fore the fundamental question - ending war is bound up with ending capitalism.**

■ **Communists are internationalists. Everywhere we strive for the closest unity and agreement of working class and progressive parties of all countries. We oppose every manifestation of national sectionalism. It is an internationalist duty to uphold the principle, 'One state, one party'. To the extent that the European Union becomes a state then that necessitates EU-wide trade unions and a Communist Party of the EU.**

■ **The working class must be organised globally. Without a global Communist Party, a Communist International, the struggle against capital is weakened and lacks coordination.**

■ **Communists have no interest apart from the working class as a whole. They differ only in recognising the importance of Marxism as a guide to practice. That theory is no dogma, but must be constantly added to and enriched.**

■ **Capitalism in its ceaseless search for profit puts the future of humanity at risk. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, exploitation and crisis. As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally. All forms of nationalist socialism are reactionary and anti-working class.**

■ **The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote. They will resist using every means at their disposal. Communists favour using parliament and winning the biggest possible working class representation. But workers must be ready to make revolution - peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must.**

■ **Communists fight for extreme democracy in all spheres of society. Democracy must be given a social content.**

■ **We will use the most militant methods objective circumstances allow to achieve a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales, a united, federal Ireland and a United States of Europe.**

■ **Communists favour industrial unions. Bureaucracy and class compromise must be fought and the trade unions transformed into schools for communism.**

■ **Communists are champions of the oppressed. Women's oppression, combating racism and chauvinism, and the struggle for peace and ecological sustainability are just as much working class questions as pay, trade union rights and demands for high-quality health, housing and education.**

■ **Socialism represents victory in the battle for democracy. It is the rule of the working class. Socialism is either democratic or, as with Stalin's Soviet Union, it turns into its opposite.**

■ **Socialism is the first stage of the worldwide transition to communism - a system which knows neither wars, exploitation, money, classes, states nor nations. Communism is general freedom and the real beginning of human history.**

■ **All who accept these principles are urged to join the Communist Party.**

Summer Offensive

Set to hit target

This bumper issue of our paper is the last to appear before our annual school, Communist University, and the last before our two-week summer break (*Weekly Worker* 879 will appear on Thursday September 1). It is also the last before the end of our intensive fundraising campaign, the Summer Offensive.

The SO actually ends in just over a week's time, when the final total will be declared at our celebratory meal. And we are looking set to surpass our £25,000 target, with £17,593 already in the kitty. True, seven and a half grand is a lot to raise in the last week, but we know from experience that large amounts will come in during Communist University itself. Many comrades - especially those from outside London - will come armed with their cheque books or cash. They will hand over their donations, buy food and drink, and snap up CPGB merchandise. All the profits count towards the total.

Among the goods they will be able to buy this year are two new publications: first, Ben Lewis's and Lars T Lih's eagerly awaited *Zinoviev and Martov: head to head in Halle*, which describes the historic confrontation in October 1920 between leaders of the two wings of the Russian workers' movement; and the CPGB's *Draft programme*, as revised at our January conference.

Also available will be all kinds of literature, badges and T-shirts. Speaking of which, comrade AG has added to his own SO target thanks to the £189 already raised through the sale of

T-shirts he designed - including one featuring our CU logo, which is being raffled at Communist University.

That £189 was part of the £1,522 that we received over the last seven days, which also included a handsome £550 contribution from comrade TM. Then there were a number of donations made via our website (we had 14,852 visitors last week, by the way), not to mention the regular gifts to the *Weekly Worker* that landed in the *WW* bank account. As I say, it all counts.

A central part of this year's SO has been the drive to win new or increased standing orders for our paper. We set ourselves the aim of raising an extra £300 a month in regular donations. And we are very near that target now, following new monthly pledges from SP (£15 on top of his existing £5), LC (a new standing order of £12), AD and DO (£5 more each) FC (£2) and JB (£1). The extra monthly income for the paper now stands at an impressive £263 - we are almost there (although it has to be said that we still need to ensure that all of those pledges are translated into hard cash).

Now we are on the last leg we have to ensure that we complete the course - another £750 right now, plus an extra £40 per month for the *Weekly Worker*. And, of course, come along to CU yourself. Not only can we promise stimulating and controversial debate, but an opportunity to relax among comrades ... and help us meet those targets ●

Mark Fischer

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