

DEBATE

The philosophy of history

Chris Cutrone responds to Mike Macnair

Mike Macnair's critique of Platypus takes issue on the philosophy of history of Marxism ('The study of history and the left's decline', June 2). I would like to clarify this, and the senses in which I used the terms 'authoritarianism' and 'imperialism' in my letters of May 19 and May 26, in response to Macnair's two articles written after his attendance at the Platypus 2011 convention in Chicago.¹

Historiography of Marxism

First, however, I would like to address the issue of historiography with respect to the German Social Democratic Party in the 2nd International era. Carl E Schorske² and James Joll³ are, among others, important historical sources for my and other Platypus members' views. But I do not think that what Macnair calls a "source-critical" approach to history should be attempted with reference to historians' biographies, which does not clarify but potentially compounds the problem of philosophy of history.

On JP Nettl, I would point to his substantial essay on 'Ideas, intellectuals, and structures of dissent'.⁴ I dispute Macnair's characterisation of Nettl's concerns. I think Nettl's biography of Luxemburg was his life-work and not ancillary. Nettl was a liberal/non-Marxist, so there are perhaps some issues to be taken with his work on Luxemburg, but Nettl's views as a political scientist were drawn from his long and close study of Luxemburg and her relation to Marxism, not applied by Nettl to Luxemburg from elsewhere. For him, the history of Marxism raised questions about the possibilities of politics *per se*. Hence, the importance of Nettl's argument.

Thus, his article on 'The German Social Democratic Party 1890-1914 as political model'⁵ argued that Luxemburg's views, as expressed in

Reform or revolution? and *The mass strike*, among other writings, were not actionist, but concerned with the transformation of the SPD, in which the Marxist left had a stake. Luxemburg and Lenin were not opposed to the formation of workers' political parties as necessary instruments of emancipation, but they were aware of the dangers inherent in this, from a Marxist perspective on the historical development of capital, in which such workers' organisations (including labour unions) were inevitably bound up. In other words, how, for example, the SPD was a phenomenon of the history of capital, or, more precisely, how the workers' movement for socialism was part of the historical development of capital, and did not somehow oppose it from outside.

In this sense, there was an affinity of Eduard Bernstein's views on 'evolutionary socialism' with Luxemburg's, but they drew the opposite political conclusions: where Bernstein found the transformation of capital through reforms to be ameliorative, Luxemburg found a deepening crisis. This was Luxemburg's thesis in *Reform or revolution?* - only reformists separated social reform from political revolution, because Marxism recognised that reforms deepened the crisis of capital and made revolution not less, but more necessary.

Benjamin and Adorno

I dispute Macnair's characterisation of Benjamin's and Adorno's philosophy of history as attempting to generate "useful myths".⁶ Rhetorical and literary style aside, Benjamin and especially Adorno were rigorous Marxists and Hegelians who engaged the issues of 'historical materialism', as manifested after the failure of Marxism. Benjamin and Adorno were not postmodernists *avant la lettre*, despite their spurious late pomo popularity. Rather, Benjamin and Adorno, like Lukács and Korsch (from whom they took direct inspiration), followed Luxemburg's and Lenin's judgments about the crisis of Marxism as the crisis of bourgeois society that Marxism itself, as part of the ideology and practical political leadership of the international social democratic workers' movement, had brought about.

Benjamin and Adorno challenged the linear-progressive conception of history, recovering from the history of Marxism what might appear to be an obscure point, but one addressed, for example, by Plekhanov as history moving in a "knotted line," and by Lenin as history moving in "spirals" of repetition and crisis.⁷ This Hegelian-Marxist approach to the dialectics of history was digested usefully by Lukács, as a discussion of historical "moment" and "process" in 'Tailism and the dialectic' (Lukács's unpublished 1925 defence of *History and class consciousness*).

Hegel and Kant

The Hegelian - and Kantian - point is that the relation between theory and practice is not one of empirical deduction from trial and error, in which an always imperfect theory is corrected, but 'inductive', in that the concrete 'material' object of practice is the concretisation of abstractions, and, furthermore, the object of practice is

indeed first and foremost the human subject: ie, the 'subject-object' of transformation.

The question is the adequacy of the relation of theory and practice. Metaphysical ('theoretical') categories refer not to a world extrinsic to human subjectivity, but to the world constituted socially in and through such categories, which are always eminently practical as well as theoretical. So, in the most pertinent example, the 'commodity form' is, for Marxists, a category of social relations, which gives it an effective *social* reality, different from physical nature. Macnair seems not to have attended to the Kantian revolution in philosophy, from which Hegel, Marx, Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno followed.

How this matters for the philosophy of history is that history is not a compendium of past facts, but a *social relation* of the 'present' with itself. The past is not 'past' but present, and present 'historically'. So, for Benjamin and Adorno (following Lukács and Korsch, who, in turn, followed Lenin, Luxemburg, and Marx and Engels on this point), the question was how to reckon the history of Marxism and the greater socialist workers' movement as *symptomatic expression* of the history of capital, or how the 'proletariat' was and could become the transformed 'subject-object of history'. Lukács's term for the self-alienated character of this 'subject-object' condition of the working class in capital was 'reification'. 'Reification' referred not to the workers' quotidian consciousness in capitalism, but to the 'class consciousness' of the workers, as expressed by social democracy (and 'Marxism') at its height. For Lukács and those who followed, 'reification' meant Kautsky.

Abuse of theory

Nettl has a great line about how Kautsky attempted to "invest certain observed phenomena with the normative sanction of Marxist theory". Nettl cited Parvus against Kautsky: "All the guts knocked out of [Marxism]. Out of Marx's good raw dough Kautsky made *Matzes*".⁸ Kautsky abused theory, making it serve as justification or rationalisation - as most 'Marxists' do - rather than as a provocation to the self-reflection of consciousness, in the Hegelian sense.

While it may be tempting to oppose such apparent static/immobilised (or 'contemplative') consciousness with action(ism), Lukács knew well that the opposition of static and dynamic was an antinomy of capital itself, that capital moved through a dialectic of the antinomy of the dynamic and the static in history. This is where the recovery of the Hegelian dimension of Marxism was critical: Marxism itself had become 'vulgarised' in its self-understanding, and had failed in taking a dialectical approach to itself as a historical phenomenon, as a symptom of the history of capital. Marxism had succumbed to the 'bourgeois' (pre-Kantian) view of (linear) progress through trial and error, the asymptotic view of knowledge, in which, as Benjamin put it, mordantly citing, in his 'Theses on the philosophy of history', Dietzgen as pathological example of social democratic progressivism, "Every day our cause becomes clearer and people get smarter." History has proved otherwise.

Philosophy

Benjamin's and Adorno's challenge to such a 'progressive' view of history, which they thought was ideologically

blinding, was not irrationalism any more than Hegel was. It does not call for "myth", but a different philosophy of history than the empiricist-deductive one. Dialectics is not a matter of estimating probability, but grasping inherent possibility in history.

As Adorno put it, in his 1942 essay 'Reflections on class theory', in response to both Benjamin's 'Theses' and Marx's and Engels' *Communist manifesto*, "According to [Marxian] theory, history is the history of class struggles. But the concept of class is bound up with the emergence of the proletariat ... By exposing the historical necessity that had brought capitalism into being, political economy became the critique of history as a whole ... All history is the history of class struggles because it was always the same thing: namely, prehistory. This gives us a pointer to what history is. From the most recent form of injustice, a steady light reflects back on history as a whole. Only in this way can theory enable us to use the full weight of history to gain an insight into the present without succumbing in resignation to the burden of the past. [Marxism has been praised] on account of its dynamism ... Dynamism is merely one side of dialectic: it is the side preferred by the belief in practicality ... The other, less popular aspect of dialectic is its static side ... The law that, according to the Hegelian dialectic, governs the restlessly destructive unfolding of the ever-new consists in the fact that at every moment the ever-new is also the old lying close at hand. The new does not add itself to the old, but is the old in distress."⁹

Authoritarianism

This brings me around to the issues of authoritarianism and imperialism, which have different usage for me than the colloquial ones. Adorno co-authored the famous study on *The authoritarian personality*. This followed from the earlier Frankfurt School *Studies on authority and the family*.

A commonplace misunderstanding of Frankfurt School critical theory is that it attempted to synthesise Marxist and Freudian psychoanalytic approaches, but this view is mistaken. Rather, Freudian psychoanalysis was itself taken by Adorno *et al* to be a symptom of the historical development of capital. Freud's categories were taken to be descriptive and then resituated, critically, in a Marxian view of historical development of society. In this view, Marx was not ignorant of Freudian insights, but rather it was only as a function of the later social-historical development of capital that human 'psychology' appeared as it did to Freud.

A contemporary of Benjamin and Adorno, Wilhelm Reich, in his early work on 'Ideology as a material force', published later in his book *The mass psychology of fascism* (1933), pointed to how Marxism had failed to apprehend the 'progressive' character of fascism; in other words, how fascism had expressed, however pathologically, the social-historical transformation of capital in the early 20th century better than 'vulgar', economic-determinist Marxism had been able to do. Hence, fascism's ideological and political victory over Marxism. For Reich, (the failure of) Marxism was responsible for fascism. Fascism expressed the workers' 'fear of freedom', which Marxism, in its false rationalism of

'economic interest', had failed to overcome. Workers had a subjective, 'psychological' interest in unfreedom that Marxism needed to address.

What this meant to Benjamin and Adorno, following Lukács's view on reification, was that Marxism had failed to address authoritarianism dialectically, as a function of the transformation of capital. In the Marxian view, the workers' movement for socialism is itself the most important 'self-contradictory' and self-alienated phenomenon of the history of capital. This is why Marx began with the critique of socialism, or, why the 'critique of political economy' is the critique of the necessary and symptomatic consciousness of the socialist workers' movement.

Imperialism

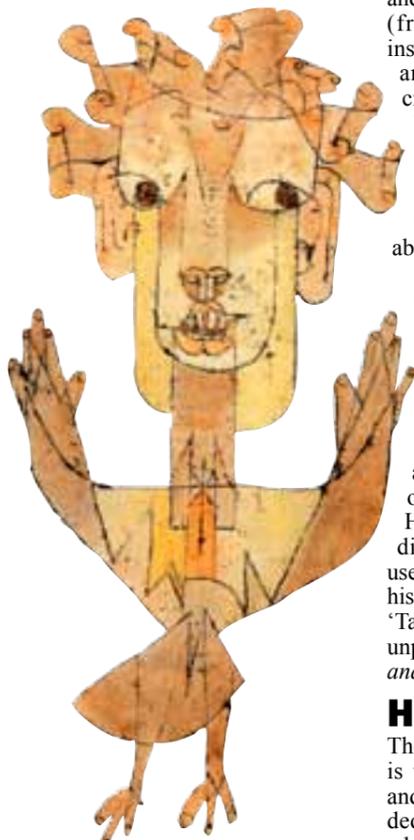
What I raised in my May 26 letter concerning the changed organic composition of capital is this: that the 'mass' proletarianisation of the core capitalist countries was the result, as Marx discussed in *Capital* Vol 1 on 'the working day', of politically variable social conditions of wage labour that, with increased worker empowerment, cause a shift from variable to constant capital, or from labour-time-intensive sweatshop to automated machine production, requiring ever less labour input and resulting in ever greater value-crises.

This, in turn, affected the conditions of colonialism. Whereas colonies in the classical bourgeois era of the emergence of modern capital were sites of market expansion, in the late era of 'imperialism' or 'monopoly capital', colonies become raw material resource-extraction zones feeding metropolitan industry. The humanity of not only those who were thus colonised, but also of the metropolitan proletariat hence became superfluous - not even a 'reserve army of unemployed', but a fascist rabble, subject to more or less desperate authoritarian politics. This was already true of the post-1848 world Marx addressed in Bonapartism (also evinced contemporaneously by Bismarck and Disraeli), but became even more so subsequently. The question is why the workers supported authoritarian politics, and how the workers' movement for socialism was not free of this effect. (In this sense, Hayek's critique of socialism in *The road to serfdom* is apposite.¹⁰)

This is the world in which we continue to live today, but without the proximal history of the late 19th-early 20th century social democratic workers' movement and its Marxist political leadership that, in a 'dialectical' (self-contradictory) way, participated in the history that brought these conditions into being - producing the need for world revolution that is Marxism's legacy ●

Notes

1. M Macnair, 'No need for party?' *Weekly Worker* May 12; and 'Theoretical dead end', May 19.
2. C E Schorske *German Social Democracy 1905-17: the development of the great schism* Harvard 1955.
3. J Joll *The Second International 1889-1914* London 1974.
4. Collected in P Rieff (ed) *On intellectuals: theoretical studies, case studies* New York 1969.
5. *Past and Present* No30, April 1965.
6. M Macnair, 'The study of history and the left's decline', June 2.
7. See Lenin's 1915 *Granat Encyclopaedia* entry on Karl Marx.
8. P Nettl, 'The German Social Democratic Party 1890-1914 as political model' *Past and Present* No30, April 1965.
9. T Adorno *Can one live after Auschwitz? A philosophical reader* Stanford 2003, pp93-95.
10. F Hayek *The road to serfdom* Chicago 1944.



Paul Klee's *Angelus novus*: according to Benjamin, looking upon the unfolding catastrophe with horror