

MARX'S CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL THEORY
by J.M. Barbalet. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1983, 228 pages, hardback, \$25.90.

**Reviewed by
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SO WHAT IS MARXISM?

A persistent myth about Marx and marxism currently in vogue again, is that Marx's theory is in some, usually unspecified fashion, "rigid", "fixed", and unnecessarily constraining on those who seek to use it. One of the major accomplishments of *Marx's Construction of Social Theory*, is that Barbalet shows how Marx himself continually modifies the theoretical building blocks that he uses, and that at various times theoretical construction involved Marx in the task of dismantling and reorganising the theoretical structure itself. At the same time, Barbalet demonstrates that there is significant continuity of interests in Marx's writings, a unity of purpose in his thought, which suggests that he was more interested in attempting to develop an adequate account of social reality than he was in remaining consistent with a position stated early on.

This is scarcely surprising, given Marx's lifelong commitment to the dictum "Omnibus dubitandum" — Doubt Everything. Marx's healthy scepticism and insatiable curiosity are apparent even in his epistemology, that is, in the way that he suggested that the world can be known. In both his youthful and his mature writings, Marx draws distinctions between the appearance of a thing or a process and its reality. Marx begins from the basis that real understanding and knowledge is possible only after surface or superficial phenomena have been penetrated or bypassed. This is not to claim that appearances are necessarily false, but rather that they are partial, that under capitalist

relations of production the categories of thought that arise in practical activity will not reveal the reality of which phenomena are but a part.

For example, at the level of commonsense or appearance, profits are made in the marketplace through the activity of the "laws" of supply and demand. It is a central task of *Capital* to illustrate how this is indeed a partial view, and that profit is created at the point of production, and realised in the marketplace. Thus, the market is indeed real, and does exist, but it does not explain the source of profit. Orthodox economists are not "wrong" to insist on the saliency of the marketplace, but they are "wrong" in suggesting that it can explain more it is able to, in presenting a part for the whole.

We are all familiar with the origin and nature of profit Marx develops from the labour theory of value and the concomitant theory of surplus value. In summary, these claim firstly, that the value of all commodities, including labour power, is determined by the socially necessary labour time required for their production; secondly, that the worker is paid the full value of her/his labour power when it is sold to the capitalist; and thirdly, when the purchased labour power is consumed in production by the capitalist it creates, in addition to its own value, a surplus value which constitutes a nett gain to the capitalist.

In exposing the inner workings of the capitalist system, Marx shows us that it is only by serious study that the "mist through which we perceive the world can be dissipated", and that serious study is a prerequisite of action



Tribune

The marketplace does not explain the source of profit — profit is created at the point of production and realised in the marketplace.

These social relations, however, take certain forms depending upon the nature of the society in which they appear. Individual social relations are dependent upon the structure of social production and thus the atomised, isolated individual of capitalist society is a social being, the expression of whose human-ness is dramatically shaped by the world around. We are human in ways that are given by the nature of the society we inhabit. In seeking to transform that society, we also change what we are, and how we are, what we are. Thus, as Ehrenreich and English² so cogently argue, the sexual marketplace which has come to be such a dominant feature of human sexuality in our times, does not exist because women or (even) men are essentially depraved, but is rather the effect of the commodification of human relations as the marketplace encroaches more and more on our lives, giving even our most intimate relationships the appearance of supply and demand, marketability and obsolescence. It is a liberating insight of marxism that such social relations are not the product of a fixed and immutable human nature and that our biology is not our destiny.

Another strangely prevalent, but once again hard to pin down, viewpoint is that Marx's work is not relevant because he didn't

discuss v.d.u.'s and microchips. As Barbalet indicates, though, technology and its changes was a central theme of Marx's studies. In *Capital*, Marx characterises developed industrial capitalism as essentially concerned with the measurement of productiveness by the human labour power it replaces. That is to say, as labour becomes more and more productive, it produces more and more of its own opposite. As less and less people are forced to produce more and more, more and more people are forced to produce less and less.

Under capitalism, advances in computer and electronic engineering cause economic dislocation, unemployment and the degradation of work, whereas under different social relations the same forces of production could be used to bring about a socially useful and individually beneficial realignment of labour, learning and leisure. At the very time when the appearances are (perhaps momentarily) becoming quite transparent (BHP at Port Kembla produces the same amount of steel with 10,000 fewer workers whose hours are still the same and whose pay packet is not growing), some on the left say that the very set of theories that marxism is, is no longer useful. And yet the irrationality of the existing use of technological marvels is increasingly obvious, as is a growing understanding that if we don't change the social relations that determine the nature and direction of technological change, not only may we lose our right to work, to eat, to live decently, but we may lose life itself.

to change the world. On the other hand, while action without study is foolish, study by itself is insufficient, for uncovering the truth changes nothing "just as after the discovery by science of the component gases of air, the atmosphere itself remained unaltered".

Another myth much favoured by those who have "outgrown" marxism is that Marx's writings have nothing much to say about individual human beings. Ann Curthoys¹ forcefully demonstrates in her discussion of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (ALR 84), that Marx realised very well that to understand history it is necessary to come to terms with individuals in all their complexity and in their location within wider social forces. It is also fairly widely known that Marx spilt considerable ink on the matter in his early writings, most notably in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, in which he even (rather badly) discussed love.

In Marx's more considered writings, it is not at all the case that individual human beings are absent. To insist that society cannot be reduced to its individual members and that the web of social relationships is greater than the market relationships between individuals, is not to ignore people. Rather does it emphasise that society is both the creation and the community of humans. All relations between individuals which affect a shared end are social relations. The relationships between individuals attempting to satisfy their individual interests and needs are social relations, the stuff of which society is made.



Dole queue, Sydney, 1932. The state's actions transcend the narrow interests of particular capitalists but benefit the general interests of capital.

The longest chapter in *Marx's Construction of Social Theory* is simply entitled "Politics" and, in it, Barbalet devotes considerable space to Marx's understanding of the state, timely exigesis, given another current Marx didn't have much to say about the state or that, if he did, it wasn't particularly useful. The reverse, of course, is the case. In the first instance, Marx writes about the state in his mature works as an institutional form which is quite separate and distinct from economic and social relations, that is as a purely political and national apparatus. In doing this, he is not providing an account which is alternative to his view of the state as a set of institutions which function to safeguard the common and general interests of the economically dominant class in society. To acknowledge that the state is a political reality, separate and distinct from other aspects of the social structure, is not to deny the class function of the state.

In describing the function of the state, Marx is careful to distinguish between the interests of individual capitalists and the general interest of the capitalist class. In the discussion in *Capital* of the Factory Acts, Marx shows that while, in general terms, the capitalists have good reason to ensure

the protection of the working class provided by the legislation limiting the working day, their narrow economic interest compelled them to oppose such legislation. Thus, while the general class interest of industrial capitalists would lead the class as a whole to support the legislation, individual factory owners were opposed to it; in order that capital's general interest be served, individual capitalists must be restrained. The general interest of the capitalist class requires that certain of its particular interests be denied. The state develops a perspective which both transcends the particular interests of capital and orchestrates its general interests.

But such is the sensitivity of Marx's use of historical materialism that he not only relates classes and individuals to the structure and functioning of the state, but he also describes the reverse effect, the determinations by the state on the formation of classes themselves. Marx does not suggest that the state is merely an instrument of class rule, for the relations between class and state are much more subtle.

Marx explains that the international trade and commerce of mercantilism, and the colonial system which it developed, involved the

emerging nations of Europe in trade wars. The contradictory consequence of this early phase of capitalism was that while the incipient national capitalist class, and through it, the nation, accumulated great wealth, the state, in prosecuting commercial war in defence of the national interest, became impoverished. The state could finance its navy and the advancement of the interests of the nation only by levying taxes and inaugurating a system of public credit or national debt. This need for state finance set in motion a complicated set of reactions which not only consolidated the capitalist mode of production, but undermined the absolute monarchy which had overseen the mercantile system, replacing it with a more directly capitalist state form. The problems of state finance, consequential upon the growing national wealth of the mercantile period, were resolved in a manner which not only produced the modern systems of taxation, fiscal policy and banking, but which further advanced the development of the capitalist class and enhanced its political power.

The capitalist class not only acquires the state, but is itself significantly restructured through the development of the state. The money lent to the state was converted into national bonds issued to the lender. These continued to circulate as negotiable notes and served the same function as cash in the economy. Thus, a state loan did not deprive the capitalist of spending power; it enriched his money wealth through the interest it earned and gave rise to associations of capitalist financiers who formed themselves into joint stock companies and forerunners of the modern banks. Thus, the national debt created a fraction of the capitalist class which was essential to the full development of capitalism itself.

During the period of the mercantile system, the production process could hardly be distinguished from that of the pre-capitalist era; it lacked the intense technical division of labour typical of capitalist production proper. The fully capitalist organisation of production requires a financial infrastructure, the appearance of which marks the consolidation of the capitalist mode of production. But this development, as we have seen, was not spontaneous, but was facilitated by an innovation in

...the finance. The enhancement of the capitalist interest and the capitalist economy was historically affected through the direct and indirect efforts of the state. The absolutist state directly defended national mercantile wealth and, indirectly, in floating public loans, enriched the extant wealth of the bourgeoisie and gave rise to the finance fraction of capital which further promoted the development of the capitalist class. These changes led the capitalist class to acquire political ambitions of its own against the monarchy, and provided it with the means of direct political power, through the banking and credit systems, with which it could realise those ambitions.

Not only does this analysis enrich our understanding of the historical origins and rise of capitalism, but it shows us the usefulness of marxist methodology, a

Barbalet's *Marx* knocks on the head, and that is the view that marxism is not useful as a guide to political action. To the contrary, Marx's primary concern was to elaborate a social and political theory integral to a political program of fundamental social change. It was this very commitment to social change that led him to constantly revise his interpretation of social reality.

Marxism analyses and interprets structures and relations and explains their historical development. In this way it is able to inform a political movement on the limitations of its means of action and the nature and weaknesses of the forces to which it is opposed. It also shows how the existing structure of relations can constrain the actions of individuals and groups. That is, marxism allows us to understand the limits to political action given by the "ground" on which that action happens. It enables us to



Right to Work March from Wollongong to Sydney in December 1982. BHP at Port Kembla in Wollongong produces the same amount of steel with 10,000 fewer workers whose hours are still the same and whose pay packet is not growing.

methodology which insists on the irreducible interdependence of institutions, activities and processes. Social processes and social change were not understood by Marx as the working through of some predetermined historical "hidden agenda", nor as the effect of economic monocausality. Historical materialism does not consider an individual, an institution, a class, a mode of production, or a social formation, as having a fixed nature or fixed properties. Rather, it is predicated on the understanding that social processes have many different and indeed contradictory aspects; exist in intimate relationship with other processes and not in isolation, and affect each other through ever-changing interrelations.

There is one final piece of fashionable commonsense that

appreciate the limits, the parameters which delineate the spaces in which we act. But, although structures constrain human action, they are not impervious to it. Human action can and does produce outcomes that otherwise would not occur. A sophisticated and careful understanding of capitalism is necessary precisely for those who wish to bring about (or prevent) change.

Marx's theory of capitalist society is an account of its contradictions which both develop out of a given situation and tend to undermine it. These contradictions are opportunities and resources for groups that Marx assumed would know how and when to act through an understanding of social processes. Actions which change the "laws" of capitalist society, are those which make use of the opportunities made available to them by the working of those laws.

So what is marxism? It is a set of ideas and understandings about the workings of capitalist society predicated on the view that there is more to the world around us than what is at the end of our noses. It insists that the contradictions which capitalism creates are the most sensible "handles" with which to attempt to grasp and control our own histories. It also suggests that capitalist social relations do not change quite as quickly as those who have moved "beyond marxism" change their theories and interpretations of those social relations. As Michele Barrett has pointed out, "Marxism provides an unrivalled explanation and analysis of the capitalist society in which we live". Barbalet's book is a scholarly (I am tempted to say profound) illustration of why that is the case.

It is difficult to appreciate the significance of Marx's contribution to our understanding of the world, to realise what Marx's method signifies by way of penetration and grasp, until we recall that virtually all his work was done when the workers' movement was less than embryonic in the world as a whole. Neither class wars aimed at the seizure of power, nor anti-colonial liberation struggles had yet occurred. If, despite the all-pervading gloom and apathy that surrounded him during most of his productive life, Marx was able correctly to assess and foresee in broad outline, the rising, coming revolutionary upheavals, then how can we who have 1917, 1949, 1959 and dozens of other risings behind us, who live in the middle of real, visible, obvious world-historical convulsions, possibly say that Marx and marxism have nothing to offer us?

1. Ann Curthoys, "Marxist History and Australian Political Movements", *Australian Left Review* 84, 1983, pp.23-29.
2. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of Experts' Advice to Women*. "From Masochistic Motherhood to the Sexual Marketplace", Pluto Press, 1979.
3. Michele Barrett, "Marxist-Feminism and the work of Karl Marx", 199-220 in Betty Mathews (ed.), *Marx 100 Years On*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1983.

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