Marx, Hegel and Dunayevskaya—Toward a Dialectic of Philosophy and Organization in the Context of Latin American Liberation

Chapter 4

Marx and the Present Moment in Latin America

Twenty-first century capitalism in Latin America is a dysfunctional monster. It despoils our land, pollutes our waters, and contaminates the very air we breathe. It exploits and degrades the lives of our people. If we are “lucky” enough to have a job, we are reduced to “abstract labor,” measured as “socially necessary labor time” wherein, “time is everything, man is nothing; he is, at the most, time’s carcass” (Marx). The opposite side of the same coin is capitalism’s inability to provide work. The informal economy is in fact the “real” economy for tens of millions who cannot find employment and who must scramble in thousands of different ways to survive. What Eduardo Galeano wrote of so profoundly four decades ago in Open Veins of Latin America (1997)—our “meshing... into the universal gearbox of capitalism,” (12)—has become further intensified in the twenty-first century. If speculative, financial capitalism brought forth the recent crisis in United States and Europe, extractive capitalism—pillaging our natural resources and prostituting our lands to raise crops for the international market—has been our Latin American fate. The extraction of value and surplus value from sweated labor in mine, field and factory, makes its appearance in the exchange value accumulated in the pockets of the bosses residing in Latin America, in the U.S. and in Europe. In our pockets a few crumbs, in our lives poverty and hunger. Marx, writing a century and a half ago, put his finger on the pulse of this central contradiction of capitalism:

In our days, everything seems pregnant with its contrary: Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labor, we behold starving and overworking it. The newfangled sources of wealth, by some strange weird spell, are turned into sources of want... At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance. All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force. This antagonism between modern industry and science on the one hand, modern misery and dissolution on the other hand; this antagonism
between the productive powers and the social relations of our epoch is a fact, palpable, overwhelming, and not to be controverted.

Speech at the anniversary of the People's Paper, April 19, 1856

At the same time, today there is something deeply stirring on our lands. In the Americas, south of the behemoth of the North, rage is brewing. At times it is present as a quiet dignity. But make no mistake. It can come forth as well in a deafening and earthshaking roar. What one perceives is the permanence of resistance and rebellion. How can our rage reach the form of uprooting social change, the fullness of revolution?

This, of course, rests in the hands of tens upon tens of millions, women and men, the wretched of the earth, the revolutionary subjects who proclaim “Ya bastar!,” and who move to carry out emancipatory social transformation with their force and reason, their muscle and mind. Each historic moment calls forth new human forces specific to their circumstances. Marx wrote of the new human force that arose with industrial capitalism: “We know that to work well the new-fangled forces of society, they only want to be mastered by newfangled men—and such are the working men. They are as much the invention of modern time as machinery itself” (People’s Party speech). In Capital he expressed this as “new forces and new passions [that] spring up in the bosom of society.” In recent decades, the bosom of Latin American has brought forth diverse “new forces and new passions”—Indigenous, women, campesinos, youth and others. Without negating the revolutionary subjectivity of the proletariat, these revolutionary subjects have become crucial strands in the struggle against the rule of capital in our lands.

Again, Galeano wrote of this: “It is a big load of rottenness that has to be sent to the bottom of the sea on the march to Latin America’s reconstruction. The task lies in the hands of the disposed, the humiliated, the accused. The Latin American cause is above all a social cause: the rebirth of Latin America must start with the overthrow of its masters, country by country. We are entering times of rebellion and change” (Open Veins).

In Mexico, Subcomandante Marcos singled out the Indigenous dimension in Chiapas: “How will this new voice make itself heard in these lands and across the country?... This wind will come from the mountains. It is already being born under the trees and is conspiring for a new world, so new that it is barely an intuition in the collective heart that inspires it.” The two decades since the 1994 rebellion have manifested the concrete presence of this collective heart in the Indigenous Zapatista communities in resistance. Twenty-first century capitalism has indeed brought forth its own many gravediggers. As we have examined in this study, we have no lack of revolutionary subjectivity in the Latin America world.