CHAPTER 13

The Ethical Implications of Marx’s Concept of a Post-capitalist Society

Peter Hudis

The emergence of new social movements in the past decade, from the Arab Spring and Occupy Movement to ongoing protests against economic austerity and ecological destruction, have provided a much-needed opportunity to re-examine Marx's philosophical contribution. This is especially important because they are occurring at the same time as the first complete edition of Marx’s works is finally appearing, the Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe (MEGA2).1

In recent years a number of new studies have appeared that make use of here-tofore unavailable writings in the MEGA2, such as Marx’s work on natural science,2 non-western societies,3 and gender,4 while others have re-examined his contribution to dialectical thought.5 What may prove no less important is the growth of interest in what, if anything, Marx wrote about the alternative to capitalism. Is it really the case—as generations of Marx commentators have assumed—that he had little or nothing to say about a post-capitalist society? Did his objections to utopian speculation about the future really mean he has nothing to teach us about what kind of social formations are needed to overcome the all-dominating power of capital? If that is the case, then how can his legacy truly speak to the realities of our time, when the failure of the societies

1 The first Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe was issued in 12 volumes from 1927–35. The new Gesamtausgabe, or mega2, began appearing in East Germany in 1972 and has been issued since 1990 by an international group of scholars. It will eventually include everything Marx ever wrote, including his voluminous excerpt notebooks, most of which were unknown until recently.

2 See Karl Marx—Zwischen Philosophie und Naturwissenschaften, Anneliese Griese and Hans Jörg Sandkühle (eds.), Philosophie und Geschichte der Wissenscaften, Studien und Quellen, Band 35 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997).

3 See Kevin Anderson, Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).


that called themselves “Marxist” and the widespread claim that “there is no alternative to capitalism” has led to a crisis of the imagination of unparalleled proportions? Might there not be important theoretical sources within Marx’s body of work that can aid the effort to address the most difficult question facing today’s social movements—what is a genuine alternative that transcends the limits of both “free market” capitalism and the “socialist” experiments that claimed to rule in Marx’s name?

In this paper I will seek to argue, taking off from the fuller discussion in my Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism, that Marx had much more to say about a post-capitalist society than has generally been assumed. I further wish to argue that his conception of a post-capitalist society was grounded in normative principles that are no less important for our time than his. By exploring the ethical implications of Marx’s vision of a new society, we may be in a better position to contribute to the effort to work out a comprehensive liberatory alternative to both statist and “free market” variants of capitalism today.

I Marx’s Approach to the Problem of a Post-capitalist Society

There is no question that Marx’s comments about a post-capitalist society are few and far between. He never devoted a full-length work to the subject, nor did he see it as his job to do so. His work instead consists of a detailed, comprehensive, and complex analysis the central social relation of capitalism—capital. If capital were a simple or self-evident formation, he would not have needed to devote almost 40 years of his life to its analysis. Capital is indeed a most contradictory phenomenon, since it is at one and the same time product and producer, result and cause, concrete and abstract. It is an internally differentiated, mystifying phenomenon.

What makes capital so mystifying is that it is not just a thing but a social relation mediated by the instrumentality of things. Capital is not simply congealed labor; if that were so there would be nothing mysterious about it at all. Capital is instead congealed abstract labor. It is the congelation of a most peculiar kind of labor—abstract, homogeneous, undifferentiated labor. Abstract labor, according to Marx, is the substance of value, and capital is self-expanding value.

6 I especially have in mind the widely discussed refrain that it has become easier to envision the end of human existence than to imagine the abolition of capitalism. For more on this, see Slavoj Zizek, The Year of Dreaming Dangerously (London: Verso, 2012).

7 See Peter Hudis, Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013).