Classical Marxism and Its Social Science: An Introduction

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The Marxism of Marx and Engels both attempted to explain and to condemn the workings of industrial capitalism and to explain and to advocate the rise of industrial labor to power.

In the course of the twentieth century, as Marxist thought travelled to areas with little or no industry, its explanatory element gradually disappeared as irrelevant, since there was no industrial capitalism or labor to explain. The Marxian vocabulary has often been retained, but its meaning has necessarily changed. Capitalism came to be associated with imperialism, a foreign force to be condemned, and the revolution that is advocated and then justified is no longer one of industrial workers but one of intellectuals sometimes mobilizing peasant support.

A Lenin and a Trotsky and even a Stalin and a Mao still wrote works containing some explanatory and analytical elements, though their successes and their reputation did not rest on their scholarship. It is difficult, however, to imagine either the post-revolutionary bureaucrats and technocrats who inherited the results of “Marxist” revolutions or the revolutionary “Marxist” leaders of some of the industrially most backward countries, such as Afghanistan and Cambodia, Angola and Ethiopia, Nicaragua and Surinam, writing books similar in subject matter and approach to either Marx’s Capital or Engels’ Anti-Dühring.

In the industrial West, technology, corporate capitalism, and the welfare state have developed to an extent unimaginable to Marx and Engels; and the industrial working class, declining in numerical strength, unity, and class consciousness, has proved to be anything but revolutionary and has no prospects of coming to power as a class. Here, too, Marx’s explanations and predictions have come to seem irrelevant, and most labor movements and the socialist parties historically associated with them no longer invoke the name of Marx.

On the other hand, movements with no affinity to labor and with causes quite unfamiliar to Marx, such as the environmentalist, anti-nuclear, and feminist ones, or those championing the rights of ethnic and other minorities now sometimes regard themselves or are, perhaps mostly by their opponents,
regarded as somehow Marxist. Also, some Western intellectuals, finding Marx's values and vocabulary attractive but his explanations inadequate to their analytical and normative needs, have sought to marry Marxism to philosophies or schools of thought whose central ideas are often quite different from, and sometimes indeed seem incompatible with, Marx's own, such as existentialism and phenomenology, psychoanalysis and rational choice theory.

As a result of all these developments, the word "Marxism", as it is employed not only by politicians and the press but also in much scholarly writing in the West, has lost all precise meaning. Popularly it seems to be mostly associated with the advocacy or justification of radical and mostly violent political and social change, e.g., by means of terrorism or guerrilla warfare. Except in the work of a relatively few social scientists and historians who are influenced by Karl Marx's thought, but occupy no leading positions in major political movements, Marxism no longer functions nor is it widely regarded as an explanatory theory.

The developments that have had these results have become powerfully manifest in the twentieth century, mostly after World War I and especially after World War II. Earlier, roughly in the third of a century between Marx' death and World War I and the Russian Revolution, however, the growth by leaps and bounds of labor movements and socialist parties throughout Western Europe, and perhaps most notably in Germany, seemed in accord with Marx's predictions; and Marx's concepts and analytical categories, such as capitalism and proletariat, class struggle and class consciousness, were not merely useful propaganda slogans—though they certainly were that, too—but could be fruitfully employed in serious explanatory and analytical social science work.

As a result, a number of leading Marxist thinkers, ranging from Engels (1820-95), who survived Marx by twelve years, to the Austro-Marxists, who were still active in the first Austrian Republic (and, notably in the case of Rudolf Hilferding, in the Weimar Republic) in the 1920s and 30s, proved capable of making interesting contributions to social science, especially in the area of comparative historical sociology broadly defined.

It is the purpose of this collection of articles to recall some of these thinkers, not to see them as politicians and ideologues, but to describe, explain, and retrospectively to evaluate some of their social scientific contributions, which have often been neglected, in part precisely because their authors were also politically prominent. The following articles thus remind us of what Marxism once was, as its teachings were interpreted and creatively applied by some intellectuals who were still close to Marx chronologically and responded to and analysed social conditions more similar to those known to Marx than are ours. In view of the far-reaching and varied permutations and reinterpretations Marxism has undergone since their time, such a reminder may be useful to the modern reader who must be struck by how different their Marxist thought was, with respect both to substance and approach, from what is nowadays vaguely regarded as Marxism. Indeed, he or she may not recognize their thought as Marxism at all, and yet the thinkers represented here were in their