

Encountering the Authentic Marx

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All I demand of the reader, James Joyce is supposed to have remarked of *Finnegans Wake*, is his lifetime. Fortunately and unfortunately, Karl Marx makes the same claim. Fortunately, because his work is so vast and rich that you can profitably spend a lifetime assimilating both its specific insights and a methodology that enables you to confront new and unprecedented realities. Unfortunately, because it is impossible to dabble in Marx. Such otherwise brilliant scholars as Karl Popper and Paul Samuelson have often written downright silly things about Marxism after acquiring a tourist's knowledge of it. There is probably a larger library of worthless writings on Marx than on any other major thinker in Western culture.

This is not, a Marxist might comment, an accident. The thought of a Thomas Aquinas or a Descartes is sufficiently intricate to have given rise to spectacularly simplified and erroneous readings. But Aquinas, Descartes, and other intellectual giants were not profoundly subversive both of the political and social order of their own time and of the present as well. Marx was and is. Misunderstanding him, therefore, has an important political function. So it was, for example, that the East German edition of the Marx-Engels *Werke* did not publish the economic-philosophic manuscripts of 1844 until everything else had already appeared. Then Marx's thoughts on alienation and "raw" communism were finally allowed to come out in a supplementary—almost shamefaced—volume. Too many Marxist dissidents in Eastern Europe had made brilliant use of them.

I begin with these reflections in order to emphasize the importance of two new books. Both Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (Monthly Review Press; 465 pp.; \$12.50) and Alvin W. Gouldner's *For Sociology* (Basic Books; 465 pp.; \$10.95) deal with Marx in a serious and rewarding way. I have some criticisms of both volumes, but they

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are examples of what is almost an underground literature: enriching encounters with, and in, authentic Marxism.

Marx himself put his readers on notice with regard to the decisive importance of Braverman's subject matter. The twofold character of work in capitalist society is, he wrote in Chapter I of *Das Kapital*, "the turning point on which the understanding of political economy depends," that is, work is concrete, specific, use-producing labor on the one hand, and "abstract," exchange-value generating labor on the other. Yet, as Braverman notes, this clear and unmistakable emphasis has been ignored by Marxists as well as anti-Marxists. One reason is the sloppiness of most interpretations of *Capital*; another is that Marx's analysis of the labor process in his masterpiece is so profound that it anticipated, and perhaps preempted the discussion of, developments that took place long after his death.

Be that as it may, there is no justification, particularly for Marxists, in ignoring this critical area of research. After all, Marx emphasizes in that brilliant analysis in *Capital* that the capitalist revolution itself was not, for the first century or so, technological in character. It took over, more or less intact, the tools and techniques of late feudalism, and it was not until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that it got around to what Engels was to dub "the industrial revolution." In its formative stage, Marx argues, what characterized capitalism was its new mode of organizing work, not its new technology.

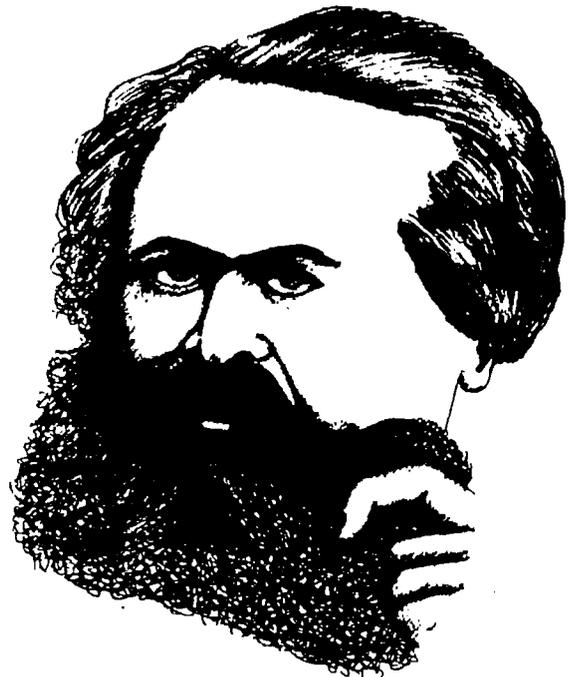
Indeed, the concept of work is central to Marx's vision of human nature itself. As Braverman puts it: "Freed from the rigid paths dictated in animals by instinct, human labor becomes indeterminate and its various determinate forms henceforth are the products not of biology but of the complex inter-action between tools and social relations, technology and society." Thus Marx early on includes the "mode of working together" in his basic notion of the means (the "forces") of production. As Braverman says: "Marx shows how the processes of production are, in capitalist society, incessantly transformed under the

impetus of the principal driving force of that society, the accumulation of capital.”

We have Marx's own words on how this took place up until the middle of the nineteenth century. At first, work was only “formally” subsumed under the control of the capitalist; the technology remained feudal, its organization became bourgeois. (Those who have read contemporary criticisms of Marx by writers like Raymond Aron and Daniel Bell might be surprised to learn that he does not deny, but rather insists upon, such a contrast.) Then gradually, Marx suggests, the worker was substantially subsumed under capital, i.e., his/her skills were destroyed and he/she became an appendage of a machine whose tool he/she was, rather than the other way around. It was in the course of this development that labor became “abstract” in the most obvious and superficial sense. It was divided and subdivided according to the needs of the machine, measured in time units, divorced from the totality of which it was a part. All kinds of people noticed this great transformation of human life. Poets saw the “dark Satanic mills” and what they were doing to people; Hegel, a thinker almost as systematically misunderstood as Marx, even defined the result as “abstract” labor. It was Marx's genius to demonstrate in *Capital* that this degradation of work was the necessary input and output of a mode of commodity production in which exchange-value dominated use-value in every department of social life. He did not, then, confine himself to denouncing, or describing, the outrage of abstract labor in the factory, but rather sought to lay bare its inherent relationship to the way in which production was organized under capitalism.

All of these things were incomparably described by Marx, and there is no need of a Braverman to recapitulate them (although, since most people refuse to read Marx, an accurate restatement of these truths is probably valuable). However, that is not what *Labor and Monopoly Capital* basically tries to do. Rather, Braverman takes the Marxist analysis and extends it from Marx's death in 1883 to the present. He is involved, then, in making a Marxist analysis of a reality Marx may have anticipated in this or that aspect, but which he never confronted as a fact. This, of course, is exactly what Marxists should be doing in every area of society, and Braverman on the whole succeeds in making a serious contribution, a deepening of Marxism beyond Marx. That is no small accomplishment.

For instance, there is a fascinating analysis of “Taylorism,” the theory of “scientific management” that made such an enormous impression in the years before World War I. One measure of Taylor's success can be found in the deference V.I. Lenin showed toward it. “The Taylor system,” Lenin wrote in 1918, “the last word of capitalism in this respect, is a combination of the refined brutality of bourgeois exploitation and a number of the greatest scientific achieve-



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ments in the field of analyzing mechanical motions during work, the elimination of superfluous and awkward motions, the elaboration of correct methods of work, the introduction of the best system of accounting and control, etc.... We must organize in Russia the study and teaching of the Taylor system and systematically try it out and adapt it to our own ends.”

Indeed, I would argue that the conservatism and the class antagonisms of bureaucratic collectivism in the Soviet Union are profoundly influenced by the fact that Lenin, and then Stalin, enthusiastically adopted the capitalist mode of organizing work. Their revolution thus left untouched the—for Marxists at least—most basic of human experiences and relationships. Braverman concentrates on Taylorism in the West and succeeds marvelously well in analyzing its theory and practice. This system sought to dissociate the labor process from the skill of the worker, to divorce the conception of a work task from its execution, and to program the direct producer. This was fairly obvious in the mass production plant, but it is just as much a factor in most clerical and service occupations today. Moreover, as Braverman points out, in the development of Taylorism, and through all of its subsequent refinements, there is a stunning confirmation of Marx's basic insight. Here, for example, is a theory of “motion study”: “This mechanical exercise of human faculties, according to motion types which are studied independent of the particular kind of work being done, brings to life the Marxist concept of ‘abstract labor.’”

According to many present-day sociological theorists, Braverman's application of Marxian concepts to time and motion study and the assembly line might be valuable with regard to capitalism prior to 1945. But at that point a new and somewhat contrary trend is supposed to have asserted

itself. "Industrial" or "postindustrial" society emerged, as characterized by an increase in skill and education, a shift from blue-collar manual work to white-collar service work and, ultimately, to the research institute. Braverman effectively questions this theory.

First of all, what about the increase of skill in American (or Western, capitalist) society? In considerable measure, he argues, this is a statistical artifact and/or a consequence of our "credentialism." In the 1930's, he shows, Dr. Alba Edwards at the Bureau of the Census invented the category of "semiskilled labor," and then projected it back into American work history. With a "mere stroke of the pen" there followed a remarkable upgrading of the "skill" level of the American labor force. In Edwards's distinction a machine tender was defined as semiskilled by virtue of his relationship to a productive machine. He was thus said to be a cut above the workman who simply exercised his muscular power. In fact, there was hardly any difference between the two workers. Most "semiskilled" jobs can be taught in a very short time, and, in terms of the exercise of thought on the job—of conceptualizing rather than merely executing a task—they are impossible to distinguish from unskilled work.

Second, and more important, there has indeed been a certain growth of technological skills, but the other side of that coin is that "the multiplication of technical specialities is the condition for dispossessing the mass of workers from the realms of science, knowledge and skill." Moreover, the increase in these specialities is overestimated in many of the theories about a "new class" in the United States. In this country engineers, chemists, scientists, architects, draftsmen and designers and technicians are no more than 3 per cent of the work force. In Europe, where some of the most interesting discussions of the "new class" or "new working class" originated, the situation is somewhat different. In the United States there are .62 technicians per scientist, in France and Germany 2.5, and in Britain 4.7. But in all cases the truly skilled stratum (or class) is relatively small and has further dispossessed the actual or potential skill of the great mass of working people.

In this part of his analysis Braverman usefully deals with the oversimplifications that sometimes abound in "new working-class" theories. But I think he does not give sufficient recognition to another, and related, phenomenon: the growth of public employment in the health, education, and social service sectors. That is, of course, one of the fastest growing categories of work in American society—or was until the current depression reversed the trend. Moreover, as the German sociologist (and Marxist) Claus Offe has pointed out, it means that abstract, commodity-producing labor, which privately produces goods to be sold on the market, is declining and that planned labor of human uses is on the increase. This does not signal the imminence of utopia, of course, but it is a major

tendency and one to which Marxists should give special attention. Braverman does not do so, and thereby misses a major increment in work that is, among other things, professional but not technological.

These developments, however, should not be allowed to fuel a common illusion: that the shift from "secondary" factory work to "tertiary" service work marks the rise of the new men of science. The growth of service employment has actually met the expansion of the lowest paid, and not highly skilled, sector of the economy. Craftsmen and foremen received \$167 in median full-time weekly earnings in 1971; operators and kindred workers (the "semiskilled"), \$120; non-farm laborers (the officially unskilled), \$117; clerical workers, \$115; and service workers (excluding private household workers, whose inclusion would drive the figure even lower), \$96. And, as Andrew Levison has most persuasively argued in his *The Working Class Majority*, the actual work performed in the expanding categories is just as routine and inherently unrewarding as the labor performed in a factory. Is the woman who punches the cash register at the check-out counter in the supermarket that different from her husband who toils on a shop floor?

So the basic "Taylorist" trends are still very much at work: The American economy tends to degrade the skills of the great mass even as it increases and rewards those of the technological élite. This analysis leads Braverman to one of the most fascinating sections of his book, the critique of various proposals for "workers' control." These ideas were very much in vogue a few years back when the HEW study of work in America appeared, and they have already had an impact in Europe, particularly in Scandinavia, where conceptions of democracy on the shop floor are actually being implemented. I think Braverman may go a bit too far in stating his negative assessment of such proposals—so long as they are not a euphemism for getting more production with fewer workers, they can have a very positive content—but his point deserves very careful attention. Braverman writes:

The conception of a democracy in the work place based simply upon the imposition of a formal structure of parliamentarism—elections of directors, the making of production and other decisions by ballot, etc.—upon the existing organization of production is delusory. Without the return of the requisite technical knowledge to the mass of workers and the reshaping of the organization of labor—without, in a word, a new and truly collective mode of production—balloting within factories and offices does not alter the fact that the workers remain as dependent as before upon "experts" and can only choose among them or vote for alternatives presented by them. Thus genuine workers' control has as its premise the demystifying of technology and the reorganization of the mode of production.

This is, I think, a profound, and profoundly Marxist, point. If we accept the subsuming of the worker under the machine, which is at the center (if not the origin) of the capitalist mode of production, and then expect to revolutionize human relationships by a more democratic organization of that antidemocratic technology, we are caught in destructive contradictions. I wish Braverman had been more explicit about the fact that this attitude toward work under socialism does not imply opposition to democratic reforms of the factory under capitalism. And I think he might have explored Marx's assertions in Volume III of *Das Kapital* that it is leisure time, i.e., freely chosen human activity, which is the characteristic form of work in the good society. But these are qualifications, not fundamental criticisms. It is to Braverman's great credit that he has revived, and applied, one of Marx's most brilliant insights. It is in keeping with the level of analysis in a book I highly recommend to any reader concerned with work in modern society and/or Marxism.

Alvin Gouldner's *For Sociology* is not as specifically Marxist, nor as precisely focused, as Braverman's book. It contains a series of essays published over the years. Some of them are responses to criticisms of Gouldner's brilliant and controversial volume, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*; an entire section is devoted to Marxism, and other matters are discussed. But there is a sense of commitment, of engagement, that permeates the whole, and this attitude, along with Gouldner's sympathetic preoccupation with Marx and the Marxists, leads me to bracket his work with Braverman's.

What is remarkable in Gouldner's book is that he recognizes the value hidden inside his opponent's error.

In conceiving itself as an *empirical* science devoid of metaphysical presuppositions, in this most dubious expression of sociology's false consciousness, there is nonetheless an important way in which sociology contributed to human emancipation and continues to have a liberative potential. For now, with the emphasis on the empirical, the self-understanding of all societies (including their élites) was in principle made problematic; it could not be subject to systematic questioning, to examination, and to a demand for self-justification.... To that extent, it discomfits the present: any "present," whether the "bourgeois" present that now exists or the "socialist" present that might exist at some future time.

That is a dialectical analysis in the best sense of the word: an insistence on discovering the truth within a falsehood.

Moreover, Gouldner is aware of the complexities within Marxism itself. The Marx against whom the academic sociologists polemicized, he notes, was the Engels-Kautsky-Plekhanov Marx, i.e., Marx as the

Darwin of the social world, as scientistic (seeing the method of the natural sciences as the only method), an inevitabilist, and so on. It was this official Marxism of the Second International prior to World War I that provoked the "Hegelian" Marxism of Lukacs, Korsch, and, most ambiguously, of Lenin. So Gouldner understands the complex Marx, who is anything but a mechanistic determinist and who gives proper weight and consideration to the interactions and relative autonomies of the economic, political, and cultural spheres. This is the only Marx worth discussing—and the Marx who is only rarely discussed.

If I criticize certain aspects of Gouldner's presentation of the "two Marxes," it is within the context of regarding his book as a major gain for the intelligent and creative discussion of Marxism. My disagreement has to do with Gouldner's tendency to equate the dialectical, Hegelian, and humanist Marx with the young Marx, and the more deterministic Marx with the thinker in his maturity. I don't think that is accurate. My point is not a mere scholarly argument over the exact interpretation of the turnings within Marx's intellectual life. If Marx's humanism and his economics are separated and even counterposed, his thought is deprived of its greatest accomplishment, which was to have synthesized these two domains. And it leads politically to a dangerous tendency to regard economics as the meat and potatoes and Marxian values as the dessert. That can lead to both flawed analyses and flawed politics.

In a 1972 essay Gouldner describes Louis Althusser, the fascinating, convoluted, and irritating French Communist philosopher, as the sponsor of a "structuralistic and bureaucratically congenial Marxism." But then, later on, in "The Two Marxisms," Gouldner essentially accepts Althusser's theory that the older Marx got over the humanism of the young Marx. "In the mature Marx," Gouldner argues, "there is a growing movement toward a 'sociologism' or 'economism' in which it is the *structures of society* and their contradictions that determine social outcomes." So there is a basic difference "between the young Marx, where 'men' in all their 'vulgar,' visible embodiment are manifestly the acting subjects who make history, and his *Capital*, where 'social formations' such as the mode and relations of production become the subjects of history, and where men's conformity to, or revolt against, the social system is essentially determined by its social structures and their contradictions."

In arguing against this dichotomy it is important to understand what Marx's *Capital* is. It is *not* a book about the capitalist "social formation," that complex and organic whole of reciprocally relating economic, political, and ideological substructures. Rather it is an analysis of that social formation from the vantage point of one of its basic relationships: the economic. This relationship is, to be sure, primordial, the *sine qua non*

of human existence and therefore a precondition of any politics or culture. But in considerable measure *Capital* abstracts from any systematic treatment of the latter, concentrating on the economic "factor." In Marx's political writings, for instance, he insists that the bourgeoisie only rarely functioned as the political ruling class of bourgeois society. For example, in England the capitalist revolution was led by Whig landowners, by feudalists. This kind of complication is simply not confronted in *Capital* (though there are hints of it in the discussion of the Ten Hours Law).

Therefore, it is true that *Capital* shows signs of a certain "economism"—but not because Marx's mature thought is "economistic." That tendency is, rather, a function of Marx's careful definition of his subject matter. We know this because his remarkably intricate, and anything but economistic, analyses of German, French, and English politics from the period in which he was writing *Capital* demonstrate it beyond any doubt. We also know it on the authority of the *Grundrisse*, which might be considered a first draft of *Capital*. In the introduction to that volume—which is certainly a work of Marx's maturity—one finds the most sustained discussion of methodology in all of his writing. It is the very opposite of simple determinism, of "sociologism," insisting over and over upon the complex, and anything but linear, relationship between ideas and society, emphasizing the paradox that Greek art remains an unsurpassed model even in the age of triumphant science, and so on.

Moreover, *Capital* itself, even though it necessarily stresses the economic, is very much of a piece with the introduction to the earlier *Grundrisse*. The discussion of the "fetishism of commodities"—of how capitalism inevitably reifies people and turns things, like the quotations of the stock market, into ghostly spirits with wills of their own—is a deepening of Marx's youthful concepts of alienation. And the comments on leisure time as defining the "kingdom of freedom" are as deeply humanistic as anything to be found in the economic-philosophic manuscripts. Marx grew and changed his mind, of course. But I see a fundamental continuity between the *Theses on Feuerbach* in 1844 and *Capital*, which dates (mainly) from the 1860's.

Gouldner's failure to understand this leads him, along with a remarkably large number of Western intellectuals, to a romantic overestimation of Mao. He writes:

The ultimate false consciousness of Marxism is that the historical role attributed by it to the proletariat was assigned by an invisible intelligentsia that never made an appearance in its own theory and whose existence and nature are therefore never systematically known even to itself. It is precisely because Maoism has seen through to this ultimately concealed level in Marxism that Maoism marks the

highest and final stage in the development of Marxism. It is precisely because of this that Maoism cannot allow itself to recognize what it gives every evidence of so clearly understanding, namely, that the way forward for the revolution requires an end to the contradictions of Marxism—which is to say, an end to "Marxism."

This is wrong on a number of counts. First, the problem of intellectuals and the working class made an appearance in Marxist theory long before Mao. It is indeed true that Marx did not confront the problem; this is one of the major flaws in his work. But Karl Kautsky had defined it by the turn of the century, and Lenin, who regarded himself as a follower of Kautsky on this point, wrote reams on the subject. So did Rosa Luxemburg and her school, and Robert Michel's classic study of the party bureaucracy long ago dealt with the issue in a wealth of empirical detail. The citations could be multiplied, but the basic reality is already clear enough: Mao's concern with the bureaucratization of the revolution does not mark an innovation in Marxist thought.

But why, then, Gouldner's extravagant praise for Mao? Here I take him as representative of all those Western intellectuals who see in the Chinese leader an authentic and creative Marxist. There are a number of reasons for this development. First, no one knows very much about Chinese society, which makes it easy to mythologize it. (I find it particularly appalling that many leftists who finally saw through their illusions about the Soviet Union have now transferred their uncritical loyalty to China. They apparently learned nothing from twenty or thirty years of delusion.) Second, we can therefore treat Mao ahistorically, in a totally un-Marxist fashion. His words on the spontaneous and autonomous action of the masses against the bureaucrats are taken at face value; the fact that the spontaneity is turned on, and off, by other bureaucrats is ignored. Third, evidence that contradicts the myth is simply not considered. Mao, for all his talk of the people against the bureaucrats, sponsors a cult of Joseph Stalin. Is this without political significance? What is needed, I would suggest, is not so much an "end" to Marxism as the use of a Marxist methodology to begin to understand the Chinese Revolution. Thus my criticisms of what is an extremely important book by a social scientist who thinks seriously in, and about, the Marxist tradition.

We are only eight years distant from the centenary of Marx's death. When that event is observed, there will be reams of print describing how Marxist ideas have spread over the entire world. Only in the process they were not merely simplified (which was inevitable), but twisted into their very opposite. With studies like Gouldner's and Braverman's there is, however, witness to the fact that these powerful ideas still live.