

MARXIST

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Editor's Note	3
PRABHAT PATNAIK Some Comments About Marx's Epistemology	7
RAGHU Defence Procurement Today: Threat to Self-Reliance and Strategic Autonomy	16
CC RESOLUTION (2010) On the Jammu & Kashmir Issue	57

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PRABHAT PATNAIK

Some Comments About Marx's Epistemology

I

Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach – “The philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it” – has been often taken to mean that interpreting the world and changing the world are two separate and disconnected activities. This, however, is not true. In my student days I remember being struck by a Left-wing philosopher's remark that “to interpret the world *is* to change it”. And it also stands to reason that one cannot change the world without interpreting it. The two activities, in short, are not disjointed; what did Marx mean then by the eleventh thesis?

In my view, in drawing this distinction, Marx was not referring to two separate activities, but to two separate ways of interpreting the world: one is interpreting the world *from the perspective of changing it*, which means interpreting the world from a point of view that entails the construction of the image of an alternative world different from it; and the other is interpreting the world from a point of view that does not do so, that continues to remain trapped within the vision of the world as it exists. The difference in short is not one between two different *activities* but between two different *epistemic positions*. I shall refer to these two positions as follows: a position of “epistemic exteriority” vis-à-vis the world

being interpreted, and a position of “epistemic interiority” vis-à-vis the world being interpreted.

An example will make clear what I have in mind. One can argue in the context of a slave society that it is in the interest of the slave to be obedient to his master, for otherwise the master will lose his temper and whip him; and one would not necessarily be wrong in arguing in this manner. On the other hand, one can say that a slave society is itself dehumanizing and must be replaced by a society of free men, and that it is in the interest of the slave to work for achieving such a society, even though he would inevitably incur the wrath of the master; and one would not certainly be wrong in saying so either.

The difference between the two positions really lies in the fact that the second position is from a perspective that transcends the slave society, i.e. from a perspective that is epistemically exterior to the slave society, while the first position is from a perspective that is epistemically interior to the slave society. In arguing for changing the world rather than merely interpreting it, Marx was really arguing for interpreting the world from a perspective that is epistemically exterior to it.

The importance of the difference between these two positions is particularly great today in the context of neoliberal capitalism. The argument which says that there should be “labour market flexibility”, that wages should be kept down, that trade union activities should be restricted, and that social wages should be cut, all in order to attract investment, so that the growth rate of output and employment in the economy could be increased, is exactly analogous to the argument that said that the slaves should remain meek before the masters for their own good. It represents an epistemically interior perspective, which is being assiduously promoted at present by much of “liberal opinion”. An epistemically exterior position in contrast will recognize the necessity for transcending neoliberal capitalism for human freedom.

II

When we see Marx's remark in this way, his criticism of Classical Political Economy also falls into place. Marx says *apropos* Classical Political Economy in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, that, according to it, "hitherto there has been history but not from now on"; this corresponds to the perception of Classical Political Economy that the bourgeois order is in conformity with the laws of nature. This is why the categories of bourgeois economy according to it are christened as "natural", such as the "natural price", the "natural rate of profit", the "natural rate of wages", and so on.

In saying this about Classical Political Economy, Marx was in effect asserting that Classical Political Economy which had taken a position of epistemic exteriority vis-à-vis all *preceding social formations* did not do so vis-à-vis *capitalism*. By contrast, the hallmark of Marx's own analysis of capitalism was that he adopted a position of epistemic exteriority vis-à-vis this system. This was how he could accord centrality to the phenomenon of exploitation and class struggle within capitalism, and thereby see the necessary incompatibility between capitalism and human freedom.

Because of this epistemic position, all the categories that Marx used for analysing capitalism, were, as Georg Lukacs had pointed out long ago, *class categories*, i.e. categories informed by a *class perspective*, in contrast to those of Classical Political Economy. Categories such as "surplus value", "rate of surplus value", "constant" and "variable capital" (in contrast to "fixed" and "circulating" capital of Classical Political Economy), are necessarily class categories. Marx's analysis of capitalism, in contrast to that of Classical Political Economy, was thus based on adopting a position of epistemic exteriority, which enabled it to see capitalism as an exploitative, antagonistic system, very much like the systems that had preceded it.

Marx's study of political economy began properly only after he had written the *Theses on Feuerbach* which had accompanied *The*

German Ideology of 1845. But if his critique of political economy is in sync with his theses on Feuerbach as I have suggested above, then it follows that there is a continuity in his thinking between his pre-political economy days and the days of his engagement with political economy. The distinction often drawn between an “early Marx” and a “late Marx”, with the dividing line between the two broadly coinciding with his turn to political economy, then becomes difficult to sustain. What happens over time in fact is a *development* of Marx’s thought, whereby Marx, through his study, fills the gaps in his knowledge which had existed earlier, but not a *break* in his thought as is often suggested.

In fact, what Marx attributed to “philosophers” in the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, on this view, is confined not just to philosophers but holds true for the “economists” as well; the idea of an end of history is common to both Classical German Philosophy and Classical Political Economy. Hence, Marx’s going beyond German Classical Philosophy and his going beyond English Classical Political Economy are not two separate instances of “going beyond” but are integrally connected; they constitute but two aspects of the same “going beyond”, and this “going beyond” is based on adopting a perspective of epistemic exteriority vis-à-vis the prevailing bourgeois order. Adopting such a perspective is in contrast to what both Classical German Philosophy and English Political Economy had done.

III

Some may argue against the above reading of the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach by saying that the thesis relates really to the primacy of praxis rather than to the epistemic distinction I have been drawing; they would see the entire set of eleven theses as underscoring the need for an epistemology derived from the actuality of *praxis*.

But this view is not in conflict with what I have been suggesting. Human praxis is necessarily built on an alternative vision. Marx’s

famous remark in *Capital*, Volume 1 may be recalled in this context. He had said: "A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality." Praxis which Marx is emphasizing in his theses on Feuerbach in other words requires epistemic exteriority. His emphasis on praxis is *ipso facto* an emphasis on epistemic exteriority. In stressing the latter one is simply following Marx, not making any departure from him.

Epistemic exteriority, however, also underlies praxis which is designed to bring about only reforms. Reforms too after all entail a going beyond what exists. The demand for reforms in a slave society to make it more humane also invokes the picture of a society which does not exist when the demand is made. But surely Marx in his theses on Feuerbach is talking of "revolutionary praxis". Interpreting him only as underscoring the need for epistemic exteriority would appear therefore as a toning down of Marx's revolutionary theory.

But this claim is based on a misunderstanding of the dialectics between reform and revolution. Reform and revolution are not two separate and disjointed activities; revolution is the outcome of an uncompromising commitment to reform, though the outcome necessarily has to go beyond the specific reform itself. The difference between a reformist and a revolutionary lies not in the fact that the former wants only reform while the latter wants much more than reforms, but in the fact that the former *does not consistently want reforms*, and is willing to compromise even on the agenda of reforms to which he or she had expressed a commitment to start with. The reforms that a reformist settles for, in short, remain confined only to what the system is willing to provide and do not constitute an *inviolable minimal agenda*.

IV

This dialectics is best understood if we go back to another strand of Marx's thought, which has generally received less attention than it deserves. This states that capitalism is not just an antagonistic, exploitative system, characterized by the systematic appropriation of surplus value from the producers; *it is also a "spontaneous" system that is driven by its own immanent tendencies.* The economic agents under capitalism who appear at first sight as "subjects" acting according to their own volition, actually do what they do only because of the coercion exerted by the system itself. Contrary to appearances they are not "subjects" but "objects", and this includes capitalists too.

Capitalists for instance accumulate not because they necessarily *wish* to, but because they are *compelled* to. Capitalists are caught in a Darwinian struggle where anyone who doesn't accumulate would eventually lose his or her place in the system. Since the minimum size of capital required to introduce technological progress typically keeps increasing over time, large capital is in a position to adopt more up-to-date technology than small capital, and hence have lower unit costs of production; it can therefore outcompete smaller capitals. This fact acts as an external coercive force on every unit of capital to make sure that it does not fall behind in the race to be large, i.e. as a force compelling it to expand itself through the accumulation of capital.

Marx in fact referred to the capitalist as "capital personified", through whose persona the behaviour of capital manifested itself. The system realizes its own immanent tendencies through the mediation of human agents who are compelled to act in particular ways by the logic of the system.

This perception of capitalism as a "spontaneous system" is a fundamental discovery of Marx. "Spontaneity" is a crucial source of alienation in the system, arising from the loss of subjecthood among human agents, who are caught in a web not of their own

making. But what is immediately pertinent here is this: since the immanent tendencies of the system also include the resistance of capital to any interference with these immanent tendencies themselves, and the reversing of any concessions that capital may have made in certain exceptional circumstances under duress, when for instance it was facing an existential crisis (as in the immediate post-Second World War period), this “spontaneity” is what makes the system in effect *non-malleable*. The system simply cannot, like plasticine, be moulded into any form; it resists any interference with its spontaneous nature. It follows, therefore, that even a systematic pursuit of reforms which violate the immanent tendencies of the system requires going beyond its boundaries.

Indeed, if the system *were* malleable and could accommodate within itself any changes for which pressure was mounted at a particular point of time, then there would never be any need for a revolution. But since the system constrains the possibility of reforms, going beyond the system becomes essential even for achieving reforms. It follows, therefore, that an uncompromising pursuit of reforms reaches its *denouement* in a revolution. (If the Kerensky government for instance could have provided “land, peace and bread” then there would have been no Bolshevik Revolution; but the revolution, in the process of providing these, went beyond, *and had to go beyond*, just providing these.)

V

Recognition of the “spontaneity” of the system is also the fundamental difference between Marxism and liberalism. Liberalism sees the individual human agents as subjects of the processes in which they are engaged, who retain their subjecthood all through, whence it follows that capitalism ensures the freedom of the individual. But if the individual is seen as being caught in an impersonal and “spontaneous” system, over which he or she has no control, not even through collective political influence

(such as can be exercised within an electoral democracy), then it follows that even *individual freedom* requires the overthrowing of capitalism. Even individual freedom requires a non-spontaneous system, which can be controlled by individuals, coming together, through collective political intervention. Democracy and even *individual freedom*, in short, become capable of realization only under socialism which is a non-spontaneous mode of production.

An example will make the point clear with regard to the distinction between Marxism and liberalism. Adam Smith saw the origin of commodity production in the “propensity to truck, barter and exchange” that existed among individuals as a psychological trait. Commodity production, in short, entailed, according to him, individuals coming together voluntarily to exchange their products; and it was beneficial for all of them, for if it was not then they would withdraw from commodity production.

The individual thus retained his or her subjecthood under commodity production, and by implication even under capitalism, and hence the individual also retained his or her individual freedom. But if commodity production is seen, as in Marx, as a historical development in which individuals get caught, and once caught cannot get out of, then the spontaneity of the system takes over, and individuals are forced to act in specific ways irrespective of their will, which negates individual freedom.

Liberalism sees the capitalist economic arrangement of society as being the outcome of voluntary decisions by individuals who are better off under such an arrangement than they were prior to its coming into being, or than they would be if they walked out of it (for this arrangement gives them the option of walking out of it if they so desire). Marxism on the contrary sees the capitalist economic arrangement not as resulting from voluntary contracts among individuals, but as emerging historically through the use *inter alia* of force, and working out its immanent tendencies through the mediation of individual economic agents coerced into acting in specific ways. (Workers forming “combinations” which

constitute in embryonic form the coming into being of a new “community” is the first breach in the spontaneity of the capitalist system.) It is noteworthy that liberals like Friedrich von Hayek see the constraints on individual freedom as arising from the actions of other individuals or of the State, but never from the spontaneous working of the economic arrangement.

VI

From the dialectics of reform and revolution that I have just discussed, it follows that the consistent pursuit of reforms would lead one to a revolutionary position. Even if one begins with an alternative picture of society, in contrast to what exists, that does not entail the complete transcendence of what exists, but only a partial modification of it, i.e. even if one begins as a reformist, if one is consistent about one's reform agenda, then one will be forced to substitute this alternative picture by a picture of a more thorough-going change.

Epistemic exteriority, in other words, must work upon itself to keep adjusting the vision of what lies “beyond”. It is not a question of some people wanting one particular picture of the alternative, and others wanting a different picture of the alternative, and so on. The picture of the alternative that must emerge, the conceptual site on the basis of which epistemic exteriority must be practised, must itself be subject to analysis and adjustment. It follows that the exercise of epistemic exteriority must be one that is self-reflecting, self-correcting and open-ended. But the need for epistemic exteriority is paramount.