

Money, the State and the Illusory Community

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The past decade has seen a world-wide growth of social movements which identify themselves socially not in terms of class but of cultural characteristics, whether religious, national, linguistic, or a particular life-style. In reaction to this growth, and the corresponding decline of class-based political mobilisation, many erstwhile socialists have argued that the concept of class is itself out-dated, that socialists have to come to terms with the new forms taken by popular aspirations, and to harness the progressive tendencies of these movements to counter the threat of a right-wing populism. Such arguments have been associated with a critique of the political form of the socialist party, arguing that the party should abandon its class base, to assume a liberal democratic and populist form.

While it is certainly important that socialists engage with the cultural forms within which the mass of the population articulate their experience of exploitation and oppression, I want to argue that such an engagement must be critical if socialists are to avoid the danger of a divisive and destructive political opportunism. A critical engagement requires socialists to analyse both the real foundations and the mystified form of such cultural movements. In this paper I want to make a few simple points which are by no means original, but which are still of fundamental importance.

The starting point of my argument is the observation that this phenomenon is by no means new. Indeed the self-conscious mobilisation of social forces on the basis of class identity has been historically the exception rather than the rule. Were this not the case capitalism would have been overthrown long ago. In particular the problem which confronts us today is precisely the problem that confronted Marx. The driving force behind Marx's work was precisely the need to develop a scientific analysis which could penetrate the mystified forms in which capitalist oppression and exploitation appeared in order to establish a rational foundation for socialist politics. The origins of this programme lay in Marx's encounter with Feurbach's critique of religious consciousness, but it was by no means an exclusive preoccupation of his youth. From the *German Ideology* to *Capital* and the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* Marx sought to develop and deploy a critique of the mystified forms of popular political consciousness in the name of scientific socialism.

The distinctiveness of Marx's critique, as against that of Feurbach, was that his theory of alienation was neither a philosophical nor a psychological theory, but rested on historical foundations. Ideologies are not pure fabrications, nor the mere projection of abstract ideas, but are the alienated forms of expression of historically developed social relations. Alienation reaches its highest development in a capitalist society, in which pre-existing personal and communal relationships have been dissolved under the impact of money, so that human social relations are mediated by the alienated social forms of money and the law. The dissolution of the human community implies that human beings have a dual existence. On the one hand, their personal existence as 'private' individuals. On the other hand, their social existence only appears in the alienated form of property ownership, through which their social identity as members of civil society is constituted. The social character of their relationships thus appears to human beings as an external force in their subjection to the social power of money and the political power of the state.

Individuals do not passively submit to the alienation of their humanity, but attempt to reconstitute their humanity ideologically and politically. The attempt to reappropriate their humanity draws individuals into the alienated forms of religious and political consciousness, in which the absence of real community is compensated by the construction of illusory spiritual and political communities, and the struggle to reappropriate their humanity appears in the alienated form of a struggle for political rights and for access to state power. However, while the state represents the most abstract expression of community, and to this extent transcends the narrow horizons of the

pre-capitalist community, it is nevertheless an 'illusory community', in which human social power appears in the alienated form of the political power of the state.

It is the critique of the alienated form of state power which defines the limits of the democratic struggle. The achievement of citizenship rights enables all members of society to participate in the democratic process, but it does nothing to overcome the alienated form of the state, in which the social character of human existence is appropriated by the state, and in which self-determination appears in the alienated form of the delegation of citizenship rights by the state. The struggle to restore humanity must be a struggle to overcome the alienated spiritual and political forms in which it appears, to develop new forms of social organisation and social consciousness through which humanity can bring its social powers under self-conscious control.

While the development of capitalism destroys the old forms of community, it also creates new forms which provide the foundations on which this struggle can develop, by developing new social forms of production, in which the working class is brought together in production, and in which the divisions within the working class are progressively broken down. The development of working class organisation in the face of capitalist exploitation provides the basis for new forms of community based on the self-organisation of the working class, which develop into a struggle to reappropriate the collective powers of labour and to bring social production under social control. It is only the self-organisation of the working class which can provide the means of overcoming the alienated forms of social existence, and so the alienated forms of religious and political consciousness, because this is the only basis on which humanity can reappropriate its social powers. This by no means implies that the collective organisation of the working class in itself overcomes social divisions and social conflicts. It does imply, however, that this is the only basis on which such divisions can be directly confronted and democratically resolved.

Marx's critique of religious and political consciousness relates not so much to the content of such consciousness as to its alienated forms. In the absence of a real community human spiritual aspirations can only be articulated in such alienated forms. Thus the struggle to transcend religious and political consciousness is a struggle to free their human content from the limits of their mystical forms. The religious struggles of the Reformation, and the political struggles of the democratic revolution are essential stages in the struggle to realise human aspirations, but it is the struggle of the organised working class which provides the only basis on which the aspirations expressed in these earlier struggles can be realised. The task of socialism is to extract the rational kernel from these mystified forms, to set the human struggle which they express on rational foundations. This was the basis of Marx's critique not only of Hegel's philosophy, but more importantly of the *German Ideology* to which it gave rise.

As we know Marx always retained the Enlightenment faith in progress and the advance of reason. He tended to anticipate an evolutionary progression from religious through political to social consciousness, corresponding to the separation of church from state, associated with the separation of the state from civil society, and then the development of an organised working class which would progressively challenge the alienated forms of capitalist social and political power. In this anticipation Marx considerably underestimated the power and resilience of religious and political consciousness, on the one hand, and the ability of the working class to develop new forms of self-conscious collective organisation on the other. Thus development of the social consciousness of the working class has often taken place within, if in tension with, forms of religious and political consciousness. Confessional, cultural and national divisions persist within the working class movement. Indeed such illusory forms of community frequently appear much more real to their members than the community of class which is supposed to dissipate them. But does this mean that Marx's analysis is wrong, that he underestimated the significance of such 'spiritual consciousness' in focussing on the material reality of class? The decline of class, in favour of religious, cultural and national solidarities, makes it appear that he was.

Before addressing this question, it is important to clarify what Marx was *not* arguing. Marx did not argue that the priority of class consciousness and class organisation was based on the priority of material over spiritual interests, but rather that the only social basis on which humanity could realise its aspirations, *both spiritual and material*, was that constituted by the socialisation of labour and the collective organisation of the working class, because this was the only basis on which humanity could advance beyond the alienated and illusory forms of political and religious community. Thus what is at issue is not Marx's *materialism*, which is by no means the same thing as *economism*, but rather his claim that the organised working class could provide the historical foundations for the realisation of human spiritual and material aspirations.

The question we have to address, therefore, is whether the failure of the organised working class movement to overcome the illusory forms of community is a necessary failure, the result of the necessary failure of socialism to respond to human aspirations, or whether it is a contingent failure, the result of the political setbacks suffered by socialism, on the one hand, and the degeneration of the socialist movement, on the other. Needless to say for socialists the latter is the only answer. The failure of the socialist movement to provide a framework within which human beings can aspire to realise their aspirations must be seen as the result of political failures on the part of the socialist movement, which has led the movement to distance itself from the working class, and so to fall back into merely another form of 'illusory', and increasingly implausible, community. In both East and West socialist and communist parties have weakened their roots in the self-organisation of the working class, orienting themselves instead to the conquest or exercise of state power instead of seeking to build a new form of society in which 'man' recognises and organises his own powers 'as social forces, and consequently no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of political power' (Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 3, p. 143). Thus the socialist movement has dissolved its own roots in the real community, to mimic the illusory community of the state. In such circumstances it is not surprising that the language of socialism has been widely discredited, and popular aspirations have sought alternative cultural and political outlets.

The implication of this argument is easy to draw, but difficult to implement. The response of socialists to the new social movements, to the resurgence of religious fundamentalism, and to a reborn nationalism must be critical. However such criticism has to be positive criticism in two senses. On the one hand, socialists have to recognise the authenticity of the aspirations which are expressed in such alienated forms, however mystified might be their expression. On the other hand, socialists have to work to rebuild a socialist movement through which such aspirations can be expressed, and within which the real conflicts to which they give rise can be articulated and democratically resolved. The issue of democracy, and above all of the internal democracy of the socialist movement, is central. But the issue is one of social democracy, not of formal democracy, of the resolution of conflicts, not of the suppression of minorities in the name of a mythical majority. The task is one of building democratic forms appropriate to the self-organisation and collective mobilisation of the working class as a whole.

This task has been postponed for far too long. The commitment of socialist and communist parties to liberalisation and democratisation has remained a paper commitment, reforms have been introduced only to the extent necessary to head off demands for a fundamental transformation. However the crisis of socialism is coming to a head, in both East and West. What is in question is the claim of the socialist movement, which has become increasingly rhetorical, to serve as the authentic expression of the self-organisation of the working class. Is the socialist movement going to abandon this claim, to dissolve itself as a distinctive political force, and to take on the form of a liberal democratic party in the face of money and the state as the alienated forms of social power? Or is it going to seek to renew itself, to give reality to its rhetoric by developing new forms of organisation as the framework for a real democratic participation?