What is Marxism? (Online Article)

Historical Note

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Content

What is Marxism?

Introduction

Marxism is most often viewed as a socioeconomic theory which privileges class relations and economic factors for understanding history and social reality. In other words, it is reduced to sociology. On the left, it is currently considered by most as bad sociology because it does not recognize the importance of social structures beyond economic ones in shaping the modern world. Its import is therefore further reduced to economics: Marxism is a theory which gives an adequate explanation of how the capitalist economic system works, and must be supplemented by other theories illuminating other aspects of the social fabric.

As it happens, Marxism is neither sociology nor economics (and capitalism is not an economic system). It is instead a *method*, a method for grasping social reality *in order to change it.* It is thus a revolutionary method, not a mere method of analysis and criticism. It is a method intended to act as a guide to action for a particular historical social group, the proletariat, being its class consciousness. It is, further, a historically-specific method, i.e. a method whose formulation and practice was made possible by specific historical circumstances and whose validity is limited to those circumstances. This method is the *immanent dialectical critique* of the phenomena of society, and it came to be called dialectical materialism.

1917 will run a series of articles that will draw on some of Marx's key writings to elucidate what immanent dialectical critique and dialectical materialism are, as well as address issues such as the centrality of capitalism and the proletariat in Marxism. In this way, we hope to clear a lot of misconceptions about what Marxism is, or was. The starting point and topic of the first article is Marx's famous letter to Ruge, which can be understood as his declaration of intent. The essential nature of Marxism as a revolutionary method is already formulated there. In the second article I examine the origins of Marx's dialectical method in Feuerbach and especially Hegel, arguing that in formulating this method Marx dialectically supersedes the thought of these two philosophers. In the 3rd article I set out the basic tenets of the method: qua materialist it asserts the primacy of social being over consciousness, and qua dialectical it grasps this social being as pointing beyond itself in self-contradiction. In the 4th, I focus on the early Marx's critique of political economy and proletarian labor, and in the 5th on the overcoming of this labor in communist freedom.

Articles:

1. Marx's Declaration of Intent
2. Origins of Marxism: The Critique of Feuerbach and Hegel

3. The Materialist Dialectic of History
4. The Critique of Proletarian Labor
5. Communism as Freedom
6. Conclusion

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