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BUILDING UPON DEFECTS: THESES ON THE MISINTERPRETATION OF MARX'S GOTHA CRITIQUE*

“Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby.” This well-known statement from Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme* has been repeated so often that it has become an article of faith. And the point of this repetition? Always the same. The purpose is to support the argument that it would be a grievous error to try to proceed toward building a society of equality and solidarity prematurely.

Idealism, utopianism, “petit-bourgeois egalitarianism” — here are the epithets directed at those who fail to grasp Marx’s point that we must first develop the productive forces if we are to advance to a better world and that the producer’s desire for an equivalent (*i.e.*, to receive in accordance with her work) is the route to that world.

Except that wasn’t Marx’s point at all! The *Critique of the Gotha Programme* makes it quite clear that the desire for an equivalent to the labor performed is a “defect,” an *inevitable* defect in a communist society which has just emerged from capitalism. *But where does it say that you build communism upon its own foundations by building upon defects?*

In fact, there has been a grievous misinterpretation of Marx’s Gotha Critique — one facilitated by looking at his comments there in isolation, detached from the body of his work. When you consider these brief notes, however, in the context of *Capital*, the *Grundrisse*, the earlier works and the

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dialectics of Hegel, it is clear that Marx understood that, rather than building upon defects, the point is to *struggle* against them. When you build upon the defects inherited from the old society, rather than building the new society, you are *strengthening* the elements of the old society.

Given the need to conserve time and space, I will present my argument in the form of 16 theses.

1. The distinction that Marx explored in the *Critique* between a communist society “as it *emerges* from capitalist society” and the communist society “as it has *developed* on its own foundations” is precisely the one he develops in the *Grundrisse* between the initial emergence of capitalism and capitalism as an organic system. Discussing capitalism as it developed upon its own foundations, Marx explained that “every economic relation presupposes every other in its bourgeois economic form, and everything posited is thus also a presupposition, this is the case with every organic system” (*Grundrisse*, Vintage ed., 1973, 278). As a “completed bourgeois system,” capitalism no longer rests upon premises it has inherited but “proceeds from itself to create the conditions of its maintenance and growth.”

2. Like every other organic system, capitalism necessarily begins with defects — premises and historical presuppositions it has not produced itself. How, then, does it complete itself? It does so by “subordinating all elements of society to itself, or in creating out of it the organs which it still lacks. This is historically how it becomes a totality.” This process is, of course, the story that Marx tells in *Capital*. Capital inherited a pre-existing mode of production; and insofar as “the mode of production itself had as yet no specifically capitalist character” (*Capital* I, 899–900), the maintenance of capitalist productive relations remained unstable.

3. Not until capital created its own specifically capitalist mode of production was it able to produce its own premises and thereby to reproduce itself spontaneously. Marx did not have, however, an economic perspective: the necessary condition for the development of capitalism as an organic system was not that the development of productive forces had to reach a certain level or threshold. Rather, *particular* productive forces were necessary to produce the workers that capital needed — productive forces that divide workers and make them feel dependent and powerless in the face of capital. “All means for the development of production,” Marx stressed about capitalism, “distort the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him” and “alienate from him the intellectual potentialities of the labor process” (*ibid.*, 799). Fully developed, Marx proposed, capitalist production sets “the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker.” It “breaks down all resistance,” producing “a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws” (1977, 899).

4. But, before capital was able to rely upon the dependence of the worker “in the ordinary run of things,” extra-economic measures, “artificial means,” were required to ensure that dependence. And, just as there was nothing neutral about the specifically capitalist mode of production, so also was there nothing neutral about the mode of regulation that capital required *before* capitalism was an organic system. Faced with workers who do *not* look upon the requirements of capitalist production as self-evident, workers who by education, tradition and habit consider the sale of their labor-power as unnatural, Marx stressed that “the rising bourgeoisie needs the power of the state”; it subordinates all elements of society to itself through the coercive power of the state (*e.g.*, “grotesquely terroristic laws”), using this power to compel workers “into accepting the discipline necessary for the system of wage-labor” (*Capital I*, 382, 899, 937). The mode of regulation must achieve precisely what the specifically capitalist mode of production later does — it must ensure the compatibility of the behavior of workers with the requirements of capital.

5. The specifically capitalist mode of production takes shape as capital alters the labor process because of the gap between capital’s goals and the limits it faces under the existing mode of production. To the extent that this particular mode of production develops workers who are dependent upon capital, there is less need for a particular mode of regulation. However, if there is neither the specifically capitalist mode of production nor a mode of regulation that ensures the reproduction of wage-laborers who are dependent upon capital, then, as Marx pointed out in his discussion of the colonies, capitalism is not irreversible (*ibid.*, 936–7).

6. In the same way, as communism emerges, the mode of regulation that it requires must also ensure the compatibility of the behavior of the producers with the requirements of the new society. But, this necessarily differs from the mode of regulation of capitalism which in its early days enforced the dependence of producers by removing alternatives to the sale of labor-power. Rather, the mode of regulation for communism must achieve *consciously* what the specifically communist mode of production creates *spontaneously* — the solidarity, sense of community, and the recognition as “self-evident natural laws” that “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”

7. With the development of the specifically communist mode of production, “the antithesis between mental and physical labor has vanished . . . the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly.” The particular productive forces developed within the new economic structure, thus, are no more neutral than those introduced by capital — they

are specific to the new society. Rather than dividing and degrading workers, in the society of “free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on the subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth,” the specifically communist mode of production fosters “the full development of the individual, which in turn reacts back on the productive power of labor itself as itself the greatest productive power” (*Grundrisse*, 158, 711).

8. Before it has produced its own communist premises, the new society advances in the direction of its completion by “subordinating all elements of society to itself, or in creating out of it the organs which it still lacks.” It creates its new productive forces, new human capacities, through practice — by ending the separation of “the intellectual potentialities of the labor process” from the producers and thus replacing capitalism’s fragmented, crippled human beings with “the totally developed individual, for whom the different social functions are different modes of activity he takes up in turn” (Marx, 1977, 799, 618). Consistent with the premise of the Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela (Article 62) that “the participation of the people in forming, carrying out and controlling the management of public affairs is the necessary way of achieving the involvement to ensure their complete development, both individual and collective,” through their practice in collective self-management and self-government, the associated producers transform themselves into the subjects that the new society requires.

9. Further, communist society subordinates the elements it has inherited from the old society such as individual self-interest by developing a *new social rationality*. Emphasizing production as an “exchange of activities, determined by communal needs and communal purposes” (*Grundrisse*, 171–2), the new mode of regulation focuses upon the community and its needs; and, it encourages the development of new social norms based upon cooperation and solidarity among members of society. Precisely because it understands that the old ideas are a material force, the emerging communist society acts as a subject by engaging in a battle of ideas to advance the new social rationality.

10. That new social rationality shares with individual rationality the recognition of the importance of efficient use of time; indeed, Marx stressed that this is “the first economic law on the basis of communal production.” As in the case of the individual, he indicated, “society likewise has to distribute its time in a purposeful way, in order to achieve a production adequate to its overall needs” (*ibid.*, 173). Acting consciously as members of a society, the associated producers identify communal needs and expend “their many different forms of labor-power in full self-awareness as one single social labor force” (*Capital I*, 171). In the process, “that which is intended for the common

satisfaction of needs," Marx indicated in the Gotha Critique, "grows considerably in comparison with present-day society, and it grows in proportion as the new society develops."

11. In contrast, we can speak of social irrationality. Where individuals search for an equivalent for their expenditure of energy, their individual rationality ensures that they distribute their time in a purposeful way *for themselves*; thus, they shift their efforts to those activities that promise the highest return to them, and they reduce their efforts if they consider the equivalent they are offered to be too low. Insofar as they view their work as a means to obtain money, it necessarily is conceived as "a burden, sacrifice etc" (*Grundrisse*, 470, 611), and thus something to be minimized despite the needs of others within society. This individual rationality is a market rationality. Atomistic individuals respond to price signals which stand outside them; they care nothing about the poor, the sick, families with more children, nothing about communal needs and communal purposes. This individual rationality is social irrationality.

12. There should be no surprise that the idea of distribution in accordance with contribution represents irrationality from the perspective of communist society. As I have indicated on a number of occasions (including in my paper for the first Marx conference in 2003, published in *Marx Ahora*, no. 16), this defect, which Marx described explicitly as "economically, morally, and intellectually" a characteristic of capitalist society, flows directly from the continued private ownership of "the personal condition of production, of labor-power." Not only does this continuation of bourgeois right generate inequality which inherently endangers solidarity within the society, but it also carries within it the tendency toward the disintegration of the common ownership of the means of production. Precisely because of the contradiction within ownership in communism as it emerges, that contradiction between common ownership of the means of production and private ownership of labor-power, problems rooted in these incompatible elements, constantly emerge; and there will always be two solutions — those that point back to capitalism and those pointing forward to communism.

13. The initial steps toward building communism upon its own foundations, in short, are not irreversible. If the society of associated producers has not yet succeeded in "subordinating all elements of society to itself, or in creating out of it the organs which it still lacks," capitalism can be restored. The only secure basis for the communist alternative is through the creation of a new structure, the specifically communist mode of production, which transforms both circumstances and the producers themselves through collective self-management and self-government — what István Mészáros has called "coordinated societal *self-management*." To the extent that this development does not occur as the inadequacy of the existing structure becomes

clear, the burden of preventing the disintegration of the elements of the new society depends upon the battle of ideas, the new mode of regulation.

14. The battle of ideas is two sided — within the new society it is the battle of social rationality vs. market rationality. Consider the problem of shortages within a society. Social rationality calls for democratic discussions within communities and workplaces in order to explore how to economize on the use of the product in short supply and also how to expand its output and availability. Individual or market rationality, on the other hand, would resolve this problem by increasing the price of the product in question and letting every individual make an individually rational decision — *e.g.*, to reduce its use, to substitute another product in its place or to find a way to secure additional income on an individual basis in order to maintain or increase current consumption levels. Each of these two approaches, however, produces more than a solution to a problem of shortage.

15. Recognizing that our activity transforms both circumstances and ourselves, we need to ask what kind of people are produced where society depends upon market rationality instead of social rationality? In the case of individual rationality, the idea of the old society which is reinforced is that solutions are individual, and that the real way to resolve problems is to obtain more money on an individual basis. In the case of social rationality, the idea reinforced is that the necessary solutions are communal in nature, and the people produced thereby are those who are fit to build the new society.

16. Finally, Cuba has made a major contribution to our understanding of the development of communist society by its emphasis upon the importance of the battle of ideas — which, at its core, *rejects* the assumption that cultural development is inevitably determined by a given level of production. This conception points to important elements in socialism for the 21st century, as suggested by Hugo Chavez in his stress upon the need for socialist consciousness (“socialist morals,” without which socialism is not possible) and, earlier, by Che Guevara in his recognition that “the development of consciousness does more for the development of production than material incentives do.” With his insistence that it is necessary to “eliminate as vigorously as possible . . . the lever of material interest,” Che recognized that the struggle for a new consciousness (the battle of ideas) and the attempt to build upon the defects inherited from capitalism point in different directions.

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