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Marxism is a humanism

by T.P. Wilkinson / July 5th, 2020

It is many years ago that Jean-Paul Sartre wrote an essay, which was, in fact, the preface to his magnum opus, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, the title of which was “The Search for Method”.

A significant transformation from his critique of Heidegger, *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre attempted to liberate European Marxism from its captivity in Russian party ideology and restore its historicity.¹

Contrary to liberal interpretations Sartre was not an advocate of either neo-Marxism or post-Marxism. If anything, and this can be seen well in his writings on colonialism, Sartre was arguing for a return to Marx as a historian and not only a political activist.² His distancing from the French Communist Party was not, in fact, a rejection of communism or Marxism but an insistence — actually consistent with Lenin — that the Russian Revolution produced a communist party for Russia and not for the world. It was incumbent on every revolution to create its own communist party in the consciousness of concrete historical conditions—conditions, which in France were obviously different from those in Russia.

The most important moment in Sartre’s essay is an anecdote that on its face has little to do with Marxism, class struggle or any other conventional political context. He relates a story about a woman who explains that she is filled with love. She is so saturated with love that she has yet to find any partner who is worthy of her, who knows how to appreciate her love — to love her with the immensity of her own love. Sartre writes that this love, about which she speaks; these complaints that she has not yet found someone worthy of her love are self-deception. He says that the only love that is real is that love which is actually lived. This implies in the end that one can question whether “love” is the right term for the lived experience in question, but there is no meaning to love that has no consequences in action.

This meant that the question of whether the PCF was really representing the working class in France or representing something else; e.g., the interests of the Russian communist bureaucracy in the working class in France, was not a theoretical question but an empirical one. It was not a denial of communism in the Soviet Union for Russian and other Soviet citizens. However, it was a refusal to confuse the concrete conditions of the Soviet Union — abstractly — theoretically — with those prevailing in post-WWII France.

In that sense Sartre was far closer to Fidel Castro’s view of communism as class struggle always situated in very specific historical contexts, which, of course, were changed by the struggle itself — a process he then attempted to explain in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. There is a strong liberal school that insists that Castro’s communism

was insincere or not truly international because of his disputes with both the Soviet Union and China. However, Castro was very clear that he did not live in Russia or China.

In the Soviet Union, communism was a strategy for industrialisation and thus economic and political independence from the Western financial elite to which the Romanovs had indebted the country. In the West; i.e., in Germany and France the class struggle was for the humanity of the working class. For Castro class struggle did not mean forced industrialisation of Cuba. On the contrary he argued that since Cuba's economic advantages lay in uniquely favourable agricultural productivity, the first priority of the revolution was food security combined with food export in return for goods that are needed but too expensive to produce domestically. Of course, the economic model of the US and Europe was (and still is) giving glass beads and old guns in return for valuable commodities.³ Therefore class struggle also meant finding the fairest terms of trade and not re-inventing the wheel.

The practical conditions under which a revolution became possible in China were truly “Marxist” — from the historical standpoint — but they only became communist once it was possible for the revolutionaries to act with some security. Before 1500, China- and not England(!)—was the workshop of the world. The collapse of the *ancien regime* after the Opium Wars left a country whose people could no longer rely on any state to protect them, let alone serve their needs. The most pressing need was obviously to create the conditions for the then overwhelmingly rural population to feed itself. The subsequent land reform, ending the extortionate rents paid to largely absentee landlords, enforced by the 8th Route Army was practical revolution even before theories emerged to define the government of the Chinese Communist Party.⁴

Again this is entirely consistent with Lenin's observations and attitude.⁵ Lenin too did not announce a revolution he knew could not succeed. He led a revolution of the possible. Since a revolution is not a finished product like a simple *coup d'état* in which one group of masters replaces another, Lenin could not foresee the future and did not try. Instead efforts went to make the future day by day. The fact that the Soviet Union would have to fight foreign intervention for some five years and later have virtually its entire economic accomplishment destroyed by the West in WWII did not permit much leeway for contemplation. On the contrary it forced the establishment and perpetuation of a wartime bureaucracy that became a burden once Western invasions were finally repelled.⁶

There is every reason to believe that Mao acted the same way—conceiving and fighting a revolution into a civil war based on immediately establishing the possible and the necessary. The civil war was not won by party debates but by peasants who had gained the stake for which they were willing to risk their lives. There seems to be a kind of universal contempt for peasants among those who live in towns and cities, especially if they do not work with their hands. Part of this tension is aggravated by the conditions of industrialisation under which peasants were deprived of their land and forced into labour camps (also called factory towns). There they became dependent on cheap food unless they still had family connections to the land.

The manipulation of this antagonism between rural and urban populations is aggravated by the intellectual and social formations that emerge in towns or cities—which are often opposed to traditional (and in the Western peninsula, ecclesiastical, especially since the Church was and is also a major landowner) formations. Or to put it simply, the clergy dominates the peasant and the worker is dominated by the factory organisation. Business adventurers; i.e., capitalists, exhibited at best indifference toward religion. Later it was recognised that this created an ideological vacuum into which the first communist organisations were able to move. The French Revolution had stimulated numerous attempts to secularise religion.⁷ Many of the pre-Marxian communist organisations were formed as lodges or fraternities modelled on the orders of the Church (or anti-clerical Freemasonry) they were to

replace. Such organisations were not only secular alternatives they were also attempts to acknowledge the intangible elements of struggle, what is known in Roman Catholicism as “spirituality”.

In reaction to the intensified organisation of industrial labour, a parallel movement among the theologians of capital (economists and engineers) developed. On one hand Auguste Comte published his work proposing a “religion of science”, Positivism.⁸ Then as the 19th century came to a close, amidst the greatest economic depression to date, the business corporation adopted and modified the ideological tools of the Church. This was acknowledged in the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.⁹ Although this encyclical is usually considered a sign that the Roman Catholic Church (and hence Christendom) was adopting modern humanism, nothing could be further from the truth. The papacy was simply catching up with industrial capitalism and beginning to develop the defence of its economic (and political power) for the 20th century. Together the Church and the corporation would fight for the “hearts and minds” of those they had neglected so long. Corporations would learn to be more like churches and the Church would align itself more closely with Business.

There are two basic myths of love– at least in Western culture, in which Marxism is clearly rooted. The first is love as praxis, the daily creation of the good for real human beings, which is complemented by struggle since there is no single universal way to create the good and it cannot be created alone. The second is love as an ideal directed inward and enforced by obedience and servility until death.

Christianity in the West has taught the latter. If the Church is the “bride of Christ” then, anti-communism is the harlot. The adulterous spouse of white supremacy is nihilistic, like the Christian dogmatic system from which it derives. The struggle in revolutionary praxis includes the struggle to free oneself from the abstraction and inward obsessions of obedience and servility captured as the love of some “god”– especially the tortured and murdered god of the Greco-Christian tradition.

Love in praxis is what Marxist humanism tries to describe. Liberation and love for real human beings are not ideals but ways of acting in the world. They are not simply intentions directed toward passive recipients but the creations of struggle and thus they are not very effectively bureaucratised, to say the least. Sartre’s Marxism was not opportunistic or vulgar pragmatism but based on a sincere understanding of historical materialism. Fidel Castro insisted that democracy was not to be measured by mere procedures but, most importantly, results.

Today we are faced with a global struggle in which the ruling class is imposing on the world’s real human population, procedures defined as medical, based on a conception of “health” that is as empty as Christianity’s promise of “salvation”. This should be no surprise. The merger of Church and Business has made it possible for the fear of sin and damnation to be fully secularised, packaged in sickness even the Virgin is too weak to heal.¹⁰ We are told that our obedience and servility is for the good of all. However, neither that good, nor those all, actually exist. Like Sartre’s infinitely loving woman for whom no love need be lived, our rulers like their progenitors in Christendom, hold infinite health and safety but alas, none of us are worthy of it. Yet instead of rejecting their manifest insincerity, their base motives, and their actual violence to us, we cling to that abstract faith of our fathers and mothers. Does this not reflect our own learned and deepest fear to love in struggle for life those with whom we are joined in struggle? Are we simply proving with our fear that we are afraid in the face of those who would rule us to struggle to be truly, real human beings?

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1958), *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1976), *The Search for Method* (1960). []

2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Der Kolonialismus ist ein System* in Articles, Speeches, Interviews 1947-1967, German edition of Collected Works, 1988. []

3. Lee Lockwood, *Castro’s Cuba, Cuba’s Fidel*, 1969. []

4. Lucie Bianco, *Origins of the Chinese Revolution, 1915-1949* (1971). []

5. Concisely formulated in V. Lenin, *Left-wing Communism: An infantile disorder*, 1920. []
6. See also Mosche Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System*, 1985. []
7. Jules Michelet, *L'Histoire de Revolution francaise*, 1969. []
8. Sartre argues that Comte's "cult of humanity" leads to a closed system of humanism, and to fascism. ("Existentialism is a humanism", 1946) An in fact Comte's positivism was an element of the ideological basis for military governments throughout Latin America; e.g., Brazil. []
9. Pope Leo XIII, 1891. []
10. In the midst of the so-called COVID-19 pandemic the principal pilgrimage site of Portugal, the Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in Leira was closed. I can recall people in incredible conditions aggregating before the shrine awaiting the mass and appearance of the figure representing the Virgin of Fatima, a miracle that celebrated its centenary only two years ago. One would think that if the Catholic Church sincerely believed in the power of the Virgin, the healing capacity of its pilgrimages, and the strength of Portugal's national shrine, the people would be encouraged instead of prevented from such an act of faith. []

Dr T.P. Wilkinson writes, teaches History and English, directs theatre and coaches cricket between the cradles of Heine and Saramago. He is also the author of [Church Clothes, Land, Mission and the End of Apartheid in South Africa](#). [Read other articles by T.P.](#)

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