

Marx's Critique of the Gotha Program, 125 Years Later

Mitch Weerth

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Karl Marx penned his CRITIQUE OF THE GOTHA PROGRAM 125 years ago. This anniversary, however, is not the main reason to study this document. Rather, the need to seriously grapple with it today is occasioned by our desire to work out an alternative to capital. The question to be posed here is: how can we be convinced, and in turn convince others, that a new society based on a conscious collective effort to reevaluate and satisfy human needs can prevail over the current trampling of humanity and the environment at the service of the self-expansion of value?

In previous issues of NEWS & LETTERS we have shown the error of those in the protests against the new stage of globalization who believe in humanity's ability to control capital (see especially "Can Capital be Controlled?" April 2000 N&L). The question to be posed here is: how can we be convinced, and in turn convince others, that a new society based on a conscious collective effort to reevaluate and satisfy human needs can prevail over the current trampling of humanity and the environment at the service of the self-expansion of value?

Marx's CRITIQUE speaks directly to this in three principal ways: 1) In its historical context it reveals the kinds of difficulties Marx's contemporaries had in basing an organization on his theories. 2) Its theoretical content is a profound critique of "socialist ideas that are not even skin-deep," in other words, that which to this day usually pass for "Marxism." 3) Its strictly philosophical content reveals unresolved problems that today's generation is faced with working out.

THE 'UNITY' AT GOTHA

The recipients of what Marx called his "critical marginal notes" on the Gotha Program were the leaders of Germany's Social-Democratic Workers Party (SDAP, known as the "Eisenachers").

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This party, with a little over 9,000 members in 1875, was formed in 1869 in the city of Eisenach. Its program declared itself to be a branch of Marx's International Workingman's Association (IWA), "adhering to its aspirations." It formed in opposition to the General Association of German Workers (ADAV, "Lassalleans" with about 15,000 members in 1875), founded by Ferdinand Lassalle 15 months before his death in 1864.

While Marx acknowledged Lassalle's contribution in organizing the first independent mass political organization of workers in Germany, he also criticized his attitude as being that of a future "workers' dictator." This was due to Lassalle's fruitless reliance on the Prussian state to bring about socialism "from above."

Marx's CRITIQUE is largely a critique of Lassalle's doctrines as expressed in the program that was drawn up to unite the two parties at a congress in the city of Gotha in 1875. The tragedy is that the program was authored not by the Lassalleans but by an Eisenacher, Wilhelm Liebknecht. (Eisenachers were considered Marxists due to their opposition to "state-sponsored socialism," familiarity with Marx's ideas and closer relationship to the IWA.)

Liebknecht was not prodded by his enemies to write a program that mirrored their ideas. He was so eager to unite the factions at any cost that after sealing the deal in a small meeting with ADAV leaders in December 1874 (this was prior to the unity congress and it excluded the SDAP's firmest critics of Lassallean doctrine), he wrote to Engels that his program meant "the complete victory of 'Marxian' communism over Lassallean sectarianism. And to achieve this victory, I would have been prepared for still further concessions."

The "victory" he refers to is the fact that the new party that emerged from the unity, the German Social Democracy, adopted the more democratic organizational structure of the SDAP in place of the dictatorial form Lassalle gave the ADAV. Liebknecht was absolutely certain that "free debate in such an organization would eventually eradicate the Lassallean misconceptions."

From the perspective of Marx's CRITIQUE it's hard to imagine what "further concessions" he could have made. But despite them, the unity was indeed seen as a victory by nearly all. August Bebel, an SDAP leader who tried and failed to correct some of the program's errors at the congress itself, expressed in his memoirs (written in 1910) a sentiment still heard today: "It was no easy task to agree with the two old men in London [Marx and Engels]. What we saw as clever calculation, adept tactics, they saw as

weakness and irresponsible complaisance; ultimately, the fact of the unification was the main point.”

It was not “the main point” for Marx, and on this he stood alone. Even Engels, who dutifully attacked the Gotha Program, was ambiguous about the merger itself. He was certain that it would lead to a new split (which it didn’t) and wrote that it “may be considered a great success if it holds out for two years” as an “educational experiment” for both parties.

ORGANIZATION AND PHILOSOPHY

István Mészáros, author of BEYOND CAPITAL is one of the few who have looked at Marx’s CRITIQUE as an organizational document. He seems to side with Marx when he writes: “. . .if the socialist revolution is seen as primarily political in character, rather than as a multidimensional, and therefore necessarily ‘permanent’ social revolution, as Marx defined it, in that case. . .unity overrides everything in importance.” To counter such “mania for unity” Mészáros proposes “socialist pluralism.”

This approach, while “agreeing” with Marx, seems to repeat the error of Liebknecht, and on a less vulgar level, Engels: that of assuming ideological differences will resolve themselves when placed in the right organizational framework. Marx, however, did not think there could be a strictly ORGANIZATIONAL answer to a CONCEPTUAL problem. If he did, he would simply have confined his criticism by pointing out, as he does in his cover letter, that his followers “surrender unconditionally to those who are in need of help.”

The CRITIQUE, on the other hand, is a critique of an organizational document. The meaning of this simple fact seems to have been lost on Marxists for generations. For while history has shown that any organization, no matter how large, will loose course without a philosophical rudder directed to the spirit of the times, “history” has failed to give us an example of the integrality of the two worked out as a living “revolution in permanence.”

MARX’S ‘MARGINAL NOTES’

To begin to get a handle on the problem requires, first, a thorough study of the CRITIQUE itself. Here we will have to limit ourselves to a few of its main points.

To the very first words of the program: “Labor is the source of all wealth. . .” Marx responds: “Labor is NOT THE SOURCE of all wealth. NATURE is just as much the source of use values. . .as is labor. . .” Leaving nature out of the equation to Marx meant

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“ascribing SUPERNATURAL CREATIVE POWER,” a typical ploy of the ruling class in whose interest it is to maintain their hold on the means of production.

As with most of the content of the CRITIQUE, this first paragraph is little appreciated by Marxists and non-Marxists to this day. Environmentalists will shun Marx because his supposed sole focus on labor automatically results in the wasting of nature, while Marxists eager to set the record straight likewise abstract from the total environment Marx situated the human subject in. As far back as 1844 he had written: “Just as completed humanism is naturalism, so this communism, as completed naturalism, is humanism.” The affirmation of the one is likewise an affirmation of the other.

Related to this is Marx’s objection to using other vague economic categories in an attempt to anticipate precise social relations that emerge with the overthrow of capitalism. This is the case with the Gotha Program’s call for the “undiminished proceeds of labor” to be distributed with “equal right” to all members of society.

In total contradiction to all those who attempt to pin the label of “socialism” on one or another state-capitalist society, from Stalin’s Russia to Castro’s Cuba, stands Marx’s insistence here that the law of value ceases right FROM THE START of the new society. He writes: “Within the co-operative society...the producers do not exchange their products; just as little does the labor employed on the products appear here as the VALUE of these products, as a material quality possessed by them...”

In no uncertain terms Marx is telling us here that from day one after the revolution labor-power will no longer appear in the shape of a commodity, bought and sold at value. There is nothing “transitional” about this aspect of socialism. What is undeveloped at the early stage is the fact that what the worker receives back from society, after necessary deductions for administration, health services, etc., is exactly what he gives to it: “The same amount of labor which he has given to society in one form, he receives back in another.”

“Equal right,” in this sense is to Marx still “a right of inequality in its content, like every right,” since all are seen only as workers, and we abstract from their real needs (one has more children than another, etc.) From this insight he projects the goal not of “equal right” but a society that would leave behind this “narrow horizon” and inscribe on its banner: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.”

What is so remarkable is that nearly every “Marxist” bows down to this concept as the “ultimate” that we all strive for yet disregards the fact that it flows from the sharpest

critique of their own most dearly held “socialist” theory (whether admitted or not): that of the law of value operates within socialism.

NATIONALISM AND INTERNATIONALISM

The concepts in the CRITIQUE are so au courant and interrelated that they speak in a most direct way to another burning issue of today that radicals are far from having in the marrow of their bones: internationalism.

Lassalle had written: “I allow the right of being a nation only to the great civilized peoples; to be assimilated by these is the only right I allow to the others.” The Gotha Program follows him by claiming that workers struggle “first of all within the framework of the present-day national state.” Marx attacks this formulation by pointing out that the German empire is “economically ‘within the framework’ of the world market, politically ‘within the framework’ of the system of states.”

The “international functions” of the working class, according to the CRITIQUE, is precisely what breaks from this bourgeois “framework.” Yet how many “Marxists” today refuse to support the right of Kosova to break from Serbia, some on the basis of Serbia being “socialist,” some on the basis of the Kosovars themselves not decidedly enough aiming for “socialism”?

It should not surprise us that this document points up the many glaring limitations of what passes for “Marxism” today. What still needs to be answered, however, is the question we began with: can it help to work out an alternative to capital?

ALTERNATIVES TO CAPITAL

Based on the content discussed above, the answer should be an emphatic “yes.” This was the first time anywhere that Marx had ventured to give an idea of what the new society would look like, from its initial stages to a time when labor would develop from being a “mere means of life” to “the prime necessity of life.” Isn’t this the very unifying element the different social movements of today are so in need of?

On the other hand, what seems to have been skipped over even by those who haven’t made the obvious blunders already mentioned, is the significance of a clear philosophic articulation of a “higher phase” of communism appearing only in 1875, and ONLY IN AN ORGANIZATIONAL DOCUMENT. Spontaneous, “pluralist” forms are always getting counterposed to the vanguardist, centralized forms while in the heat of the moment Marx’s philosophy drops out of sight.

Raya Dunayevskaya was the first to analyze Marx's CRITIQUE as an organizational document. What is compelling about her view is that she didn't see the CRITIQUE as being the last word on the subject. In two of her last writings on what she called "dialectics of organization and philosophy," written shortly before her death in 1987, she took up none other than Hegel, supposedly the most "idealist" of philosophers, to look deeper into the problem (these were included in the 1989 edition of her PHILOSOPHY AND REVOLUTION. Before we reject this as "abstract" in the manner Eisenachers rejected Marx, consider the following:

First, her original 1953 analysis of Hegel's Absolutes, which enabled her to present Marxism once again in its original form (see her 1958 MARXISM AND FREEDOM in a new 2000 edition) was occasioned precisely by her attempt to work out what she then called "the dialectic of the party." This problem, the relationship of revolutionary theory to mass movements, was seen as most thoroughly illuminated by, of all things, Hegel's "Absolutes."

Second, the content of the CRITIQUE itself points us, if only implicitly, to what Marx elsewhere called "the source of all dialectic," Hegel. We have seen what made Marx so furious about the Gotha Program: that revolutionaries should take a "retrograde step" in inscribing Lassallean ideas on their banner. Over and over again in the CRITIQUE he hammers this point home. In his covering letter he called it the "sanctification of the Lassallean articles of faith." Was it not precisely Hegel who, after completing his major works, referred to the reappearance of Jacobi's intuitionist philosophy of faith as a "reactionary" phenomenon?

It could be that none of the Marxists saw the need to build on Marx's concept of uniting philosophy and organization because they had no idea how deeply rooted the problem is philosophically and historically. Today we can't make that excuse.

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