

## Review - Marx's Concept of The Alternative to Capitalism

Written by Leslie Sklair

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LESLIE SKLAIR, JAN 13 2016

*Marx's Concept of The Alternative to Capitalism*

By Peter Hudis

Chicago: Haymarket, 2013

The immense project to publish all of the existing writings of Marx and Engels (MEGA<sup>2</sup>) begun in East Germany in 1972 will eventually comprise 114 volumes. Peter Hudis has made good use of the earlier volumes of this new edition to demonstrate that, contrary to popular and scholarly opinion, Marx did have a largely coherent concept of the postcapitalist future – socialism (not a stage, coterminous with communism). But more than this Hudis shows convincingly with the use of new materials published for the first time in MEGA<sup>2</sup>, that Marx's concept of the non-capitalist future comes out of the key concepts on which the Marxist theoretical framework is constructed. The nub of the argument is expressed as follows: 'while the scope of *Capital* is restricted to an analysis of capitalism, an examination of its most important theoretical concepts shows that Marx's most important work contains some important material regarding his view of a postcapitalist society' (148). While three 'important' in one sentence may be stylistically awkward, they indicate the priorities of this original book.

For Hudis, the key is the dual character of the labour contained in commodities (abstract vs concrete labour), a distinction whose omission fatally flawed the works of great thinkers from Aristotle to Ricardo. Hudis shows that Marx himself only fully worked this out in the drafts of the first volume of *Capital* and notes that it was on this point that Marx, for the only time, used the first person in the body of *Capital*—a claim of scientific discovery (150, note 14). From this all the other key concepts can be derived, both logically and in practice, lived experience. From the two-fold nature of labour is derived ideas of value, and the whole edifice of wage labour under capitalism; alienation and the fetishism of commodities; the inversion of subject and object/predicate. Hudis explains that Marx puns on the German terms for inversion and madness, and comments: 'An inverted world is indeed a *mad* world, insofar as the subject [living men and women] becomes the predicate and the predicate [social structures] becomes the subject' (43). This is exemplified in Marx's critique of the Hegelian analysis of civil society and the state, an ongoing problem for Marx and Hudis (and the rest of us).

Given the centrality of the distinctions between concrete labour and socially necessary labour, use value and exchange value, and the inversion of subject and object it is clear that to emerge from the grip of capitalism all these conditions of social organization will have to be transcended. As is well-known Marx argues that species-being—the capacity for free, conscious, purposeful activity—is systematically subverted by the capitalist system. Hudis skilfully demonstrates that these ideas are not simply some juvenile fantasy of the 'young Marx' but well-worked out concepts that re-appear all through Marx's life and works and provide a foundation for his alternative to capitalism. This is achieved on several levels: philosophically in Marx's engagement with the Greeks and Hegel et al.; economically in his critique of political economy; and politically in his life-long interventions in the class struggles of his day and his (sometimes damaging) disputes with political enemies.

Philosophically, Hudis raises Marx's difficult relationship with the work of Hegel all through the book, generally with admirable clarity, for example pointing out that Marx did not criticise Hegel for treating reality abstractly, but for

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treating the subject abstractly (inversion again – revisited in debates around postcolonialism but absent in this book). In 1875, in volume two of *Capital* (a passage that Engels left out) Marx says: 'I am a disciple of Hegel' (q. p5, n.7) and like all thinking disciples, he saw what had to be corrected in the work of the Master. Hudis displays solid and fair-minded scholarship in his reviews of many Marxist writers, surveying objectivists (Uno, Backhaus, Postone); subjectivists (Holloway, Negri & Hardt); and others. Hudis himself is attached to the Marxist-Humanist school inspired by Rosa Luxemburg and, more recently, Raya Dunayevskaya and he has published on the work of both of them, though he rarely allows this to cloud his judgement.

Economically, the alternative to capitalism has to abolish socially necessary labour, exchange value, and the wage system, and restore concrete labour and use value to their true places at the centre of the quest for human freedom, the argument being that free men and women will not chose capitalism. The current reality, of course, is that it is not socialism but capitalism and its hegemonic culture-ideology of consumerism that has monopolised the idea of 'freedom'. There are some brief but interesting discussions of Marx's guarded optimism about the possibility that in some forms of cooperatives 'workers in association become their own capitalists' (Marx quoted on p.179). While this is not an alternative to capitalism *per se*, it is a step in the right direction given that capitalism for Marx is itself 'the transitional form for a socialist reorganisation of social relations' (181). Hudis shows beyond doubt that Marx did, in various places, seriously discuss a host of practical problems that would have to be solved to move over time from capitalism to socialism. His sensible evaluation of the difficulties implied in the formula 'from each according to ability, to each according to need' and its variants, is a strong indication that Marx did not seek to provide the fine detail of postcapitalist alternatives. His project was to prepare the theoretical and practical foundations for the project.

There are, in my view, two important difficulties for Marx's concept of the alternative to capitalism and how Hudis constructs it. The first is the political issues it throws up. Hudis shows how the Paris Commune of 1871—the first time that the working class actually seized power in any meaningful fashion—changed Marx's view of the State. Marx no longer conceptualised the question as one of seizing the bourgeois state and putting another in its place (revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat) but began to see the very form of the State as 'despotic', the Commune 'breaks the modern State power' aspiring to 'the reabsorption of the State power by society' (all quoted on p.185). This is the road to social emancipation, the realisation of our species-being. We are left to wonder what would have happened if Marx had taken his anarchist antagonists more seriously and sought to build bridges.

The second is the problem of growth and degrowth. As has been pointed out many times, the Marxist conception of growth and economic development has some commonalities with capitalist theories of growth and development. While Hudis alludes to the ecological crisis at various points in the book he avoids the issue of whether Marx's concept of postcapitalism would be sustainable. This is unfortunate, because there would be many points of contact between Marx's concept and degrowth arguments on the nature of work, the need to problematize the hierarchic State, and the democratic potential of, for example, electronically connected networks of producer-consumer cooperatives. Though inversion of subject and object makes this seem impossible, people can chose not to engage in capitalist relations, gradually living more and more of their lives outside the ambit of the capitalist-dominated hierarchic state. Over the long term, changes in mentality are possible – the complete absence of Gramsci's theory of hegemony in the book misses an opportunity to interrogate this issue. Nevertheless, this is an unusually clear and fertile book, with an excellent index to guide us through and enough connections made to our own world to give it a real sense of immediacy.

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### About the author:

Leslie Sklair is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His work has focused on alternatives to capitalism and the transnational capitalist class. His new book *The Icon Project: Architecture, Cities, and Capitalist Globalization* will be published by Oxford University Press in summer 2016.

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