

Comment

**RETHINKING MARX FOR TODAY: A RESPONSE TO PAUL
KELLOGG'S AND IAN ANGUS'S REVIEWS OF MARX'S CONCEPT
OF THE ALTERNATIVE TO CAPITALISM**

PETER HUDIS

Oakton Community College

The thoughtful commentaries by Paul Kellogg and Ian Angus on *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism* provide a welcome opportunity to further discuss the conception of a post-capitalist society. Kellogg acutely captures the spirit of my work in writing, "Historical materialism is inconceivable without a human subject...the solution to the objective contradictions of capitalism lies in the subjective actions of the laborers." This infers that historical materialism is inconceivable without responding to the specific questions posed by these subjects. Those I call "objectivists" may not be interested in such an endeavor, since, as Kellogg notes, they tend to "bury the subjective under the fictive self-movement of structures"—which he rightly says is "intimately linked to Stalinism's long shadow." But are those who stress spontaneity and self-activity any more successful in connecting to the subject if they refrain from responding to its questions concerning alternatives to capitalism? While it true that the *actions* of subjects of revolt are key to transcending capitalism, that is just as true of the *theoretical* questions posed by them. These include: "What happens after a revolution? Is it inevitable that a new bureaucracy or ruling class will take over afterwards? Is freedom truly possible in a world in which no viable alternative to capitalism appears anywhere in sight?"

Of course, there are still those who contend that it is utopian and futile to delineate a post-capitalist society, since Marxism commands us to critique the existing conditions from which it can immanently emerge. But the argument is inherently self-refuting, for two reasons. First, if the analysis of present-day conditions is of such overriding importance, why act as if we are still living in the mid-nineteenth century, when Marxism took shape as a reaction against "utopianism"? If it is imperative to delineate political perspectives on the basis of present-day realities, why repeat the truths of a different era? Is it really self-evident that traditional objections to envisioning a new society retain their validity today, after almost 100 years of Stalinism and failed revolutions? Second, if the task of Marxist theory is to critique material realities, why presume that a comprehensive discussion of a post-capitalist future is out of order? If the future is immanent within the present, one must be logically consistent enough to

acknowledge the need to articulate what that future is. Since dialectical thought teaches us that the object generates its own categories of knowledge, the critical analysis of capital, the object of Marx's entire body of work, cannot help but illuminate aspects of its alternative.

To be sure, Marx refrained from making this the focal point of his work—largely because his commitment to proletarian revolution required *separating* himself from utopian blueprints that were developed irrespective of a materialist analysis of existing conditions. He bent the stick, *as he had to given the realities of his time*, away from any detailed discussion of the future. But we face a different set of realities today, when “the long shadow cast by Stalinism” and failed revolutions pose the gravest barrier in the way of effective anti-capitalist action.

Ian Angus's concerns tend to be of a somewhat different order, in that he notes (correctly) that I place more emphasis on the *form* of value than the *quantity* of value in discussing how Marx's critique of capitalism is premised upon a specific understanding of the transcendence of value production. Post-Marx Marxists have largely failed to grasp the radical implications of Marx's critique of value because they emphasized the quantitative side. But as Marx writes in *Capital*, there is nothing mysterious about the quantitative determination of value by labor-time:

It does not occur to the economists that a purely quantitative distinction between the kinds of labor presupposes their qualitative unity, or equality, and therefore their reduction to abstract human labor... It is one of the chief failings of classical political economy that it has never succeeded, by means of its analysis of commodities, and in particular their value, in discovering the form of value which turns value into exchange-value (Marx 1976, 173, 174).

Marx extended this critique to the “socialist” neo-Ricardians, who stressed the quantitative determination of value as a way to more equitably “organize exchange.” He was unequivocal in his critique, as seen in his interminable battles with Proudhon. And as I show in my book (Hudis 2012, 93-99), the infatuation with the quantitative determination of value was taken up, in modified form, by twentieth century orthodox Marxists who tried to determine how it could be utilized as a planning coordinate either for a “socialist” society or the transition to one. But since my argument is that such approaches, whether pursued by figures such as Paul Sweezy or Ernest Mandel, is completely wrongheaded, there was no reason for me to make the quantitative determination of labor time my focus.

This is mere background to Angus's broader concern regarding the relation of value and price. If the latter is the form of appearance of the former, and the former is

abolished, what is the *measure* that governs social relations in a post-capitalist society? Marx clearly addresses this in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, in stating that in the “lower” phase of socialism or communism *actual labor time is the measure* for distributing the elements of production. Individuals obtain from the common storehouse a given amount of goods and services that correspond to the *actual* amount of labor time they contribute to the cooperative or community. This marks a radical break from capitalism, since living labor is no longer reduced to an abstraction through the power of socially necessary time. Production for the sake of value and exchange value comes to an end, but exchange based on an “equal standard” or *measure—actual amounts* of labor time—persists. Since some may work longer hours than others there will be inequities in the amount of remuneration. This is inevitable, since “Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development which this determines” (Marx 1989, 86). In contrast, when we reach a higher phase of communism, a different principle prevails—“From each according to their ability, to each according to their need” (Marx 1989, 87). No longer is remuneration based on the amount of labor time contributed by the individual. Actual labor time ceases to be a measure of social relations. *No “equal standard” or measure of any sort applies in a higher phase.* The producers simply withdraw from the common storehouse what they need, and they give to society what they can, based on their natural and acquired abilities.

Such a future seems unimaginable—to those raised in a society based on value production. It seems inconceivable that people would freely give to society without any measure that determines their “just” compensation. Would not some hierarchical or legal authority be *impelled* to decide that for them? But that is Marx’s exact point in discussing the lower phase of communism: “Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development which this determines.” Only when we have learned to relate to one another based on a measure intrinsic to our subjectivity, actual labor time, is it possible to develop to the point where we can abolish social relations based on measure altogether.

Angus remains unconvinced, as seen in his concern over what measure would govern relations between cooperatives. This is an important issue, since Marx was aware that national coordinating bodies between them would be needed. He stated in his Inaugural Address to the Working Men’s International Association in 1864,

We speak of the cooperative movement, especially the cooperative factories raised by the unassisted efforts of a few bold “hands.” The value of these great social experiments cannot be overrated... At the same time, the experience of the period 1848 to 1864 has proved beyond doubt that, however in principle, and however useful in practice ... cooperative labor

ought to be developed to national dimensions, and, consequently, to be fostered by national means (Marx 1985, 11-12).

He does not go in detail into how to achieve this; nor does he spell out the principle that would govern exchanges between the communities. But given his many discussions of a post-capitalist society, this much is clear: he does not envision any kind of formal (quantitative) pricing mechanism to serve as the measure. It is here where Angus goes astray, writing “But if the products of one cooperative are to be exchanged, bartered, or passed on to another, some method of reckoning of the labor of one cooperative with another is implied.” A big “if,” mon frère! Marx states very clearly in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, “Within the collective society based on common ownership of the means of production, *the producers do not exchange their product*” (Marx 1989, 85). Marx is insistent that even in the most initial phase of a new society, no standard or measure that is independent of the self-activity of the subject is permissible. Democratically elected planning bodies would of course discuss whether the amount of time taken in creating a given product in a cooperative was injurious to the health or condition of laborers and/or the natural environment and make proposals according. But this is to be determined by the subjects themselves, through *an exchange of ideas and activities*—not through a material force (either the state or market) that exists independently of them.

Angus, however, is undeterred: he wants not only a pricing system but “a *totalizing* pricing system” in a post-capitalist society. He goes so far as to write, “If there were such an identity between the totality of value and totality of prices, then the totality of prices might in principle be organized on some other basis than value.” This, I must confess, is rather odd. Marx never ceases to remind us that the totality of values equals the totality of prices, but never once does he suggest “the totality of prices might in principle be organized on some other basis than value.” The reason is rather basic: a totalized price system can exist only in the presence of the money-form, which is the universal generalization of abstract, alienated labor. It is of course possible to have some kind of pricing system prior to the capitalist emergence of a universal equivalent, but a “totalizing” price system can only exist if there is a totalized system of value production. What kind of “totalizing pricing system” without value does Angus actually have in mind? He doesn’t say, and I doubt that the logic of his argument will permit him to say it.

Which brings us to the question of *system*. Angus is right that a totalizing system presumes a common measure. Capitalism is the first totalizing system, since it is completely governed by the drive to augment value. It is therefore no accident that it is only with capitalism that political economy emerges as a systematic theory. A systematic theory is possible only if its object presents itself in the form of a system. Socialism and communism, for Marx, represents a break from such a systemic totality in that human self-activity, and not its predicates, directs and governs social relations. The lower phase

can be viewed as a kind of system (though a de-totalized one), insofar as the distribution of the elements of production (and they alone!) are governed by a uniform measure—actual labor time. A higher phase, on the other hand, represents a transcendence of this transcendence. With the separation between individual self-activity and social existence overcome, society does not present itself to its members as a separate system. If it did, we would still be living in the “pre-history” of humanity. This is why the very last thing that “communism seems to require [is] some equivalent for value.”

Though space limits prevent me from giving this issue its due, what grounds much of Angus’s discussion is the claim that “the ‘transformation of value into price is a problem that *in principle* cannot be resolved.” This is a surprising declaration, given that it was solved long ago—as seen in the work of the Temporal Single-System Interpretation of Marx’s value theory (see Kliman 2007). The more recent work of Fred Mosely (2016), coming from a different direction, has made a similar case. There is no logical contradiction between Marx’s discussion of value and price; nor are they what Angus calls “two systems.” Value-Price in Marx’s work is posited as a single system on different levels of abstraction. At issue is not Marx’s failure (contra von Bortkiewicz and his many “Marxist” followers) to convert to a system of values into a system of prices, but rather the failure of many commentators of Marx to grasp the logical consistency between the discussion of value in Volume One and price in Volume Three of *Capital*.¹

Lastly, while there is a difference between the “real” value of a commodity as determined by socially necessary labor time and its “apparent” value as designated in the arbitrary movements of prices, I argue that Marx’s critique of capitalism goes much deeper than this essence/appearance dichotomy. He takes issue with the social totality itself, both in its essence and forms of appearance. Marx is not trying to develop a better system of organizing exchange than provided by capitalism. He thinks the only way to exit capitalism is to uproot the social relations of production that make necessary this distinction between essence and appearance in the first place. As Kellogg indicates, Marx offers no *objectivist* solution to these issues. Instead of conceiving of an alternative form of subjective activity that remains dominated by objective forms of its own making, Marx envisions new subject-subject relations—that is, *new human relations*. It is about time that theoreticians got down to addressing this largely unthematized dimension of the revolutionary project.² We would do well to follow the implications of the comment Marx

¹ See Roberts (2016): “There are not two ‘states of capitalism’ (one with values and one with money or prices). Marx’s view is a single state system. So there is no ‘mistake’ or logical contradiction in Marx’s explanation of the transformation of values into prices. The so-called transformation problem of values into prices and money does not exist.”

² For my most recent work that seeks to explore this in terms of the dialectic of race and racism, see Hudis 2015.

made in 1843, and which defined all his subsequent work: “All emancipation is a reduction of the human world and relationships to humanity itself” (Marx 1975, 168).

References Cited

Hudis, Peter. 2012. *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Hudis, Peter. 2015. *Frantz Fanon: Philosopher of the Barricades*. London and New York: Pluto Press.

Kliman, Andrew. 2007. *Reclaiming Marx's Capital: A Refutation of the Myth of Inconsistency*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Marx, Karl. 1975 [1843]. *On the Jewish Question*, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3. New York: International Publishers.

Marx, Karl. 1976 [1867]. *Capital*, Volume One. New York: Penguin Books.

Marx, Karl. 1985 [1864]. “Inaugural Address to the Working Men’s International Association,” in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 20. New York: International Publishers.

Marx, Karl. 1989 [1875]. *Critique of the Gotha Program*, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 24. New York: International Publishers.

Mosely, Fred. 2016. *Money and Totality: A Macro-Monetary Interpretation of Marx's Logic in Capital and the End of the 'Transformation Problem.'* Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Roberts, Michael. 2016. “Fred Mosely and Marx’s Macro-Monetary Theory,” in <https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2016/04/29/fred-mosely-and-marxs-macro-monetary-theory>.