

from *The Real World of Democracy
Revisited*, Humanities Press, 1994.
Reprinted from *Socialist Studies*

C. B. Macpherson on Marx

On the 100th anniversary of Marx's death, Canada's Society for Socialist Studies had me interview Macpherson and the Canadian historian Stanley B. Ryerson on their views about Marxism. The interviews were published in *Socialist Studies: 1983* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Publications, 1984), 7–12. Below is the interview with Macpherson.

F.C. *We have had a full century to examine Karl Marx's views, both as a theory and as embodied in social practice. How in your opinion has he stood the test of time?*

C.B.M. I think remarkably well. If we take his analysis and prescriptions together, their apparent shortcomings or failures are more a matter of error in timetable than error of analysis. I refer to the error in expecting a breakdown of capitalism and its supersession by a new kind of society much earlier than in fact has happened. He did have at least spurts of hope, especially at the time of the Paris Commune, that the new society was just around the corner. But even in that matter of timetable we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that he was more concerned to argue about the long run, that is, to argue from his general theory of historical change and particularly the laws of motion of capitalism.

I think all that analysis has stood up well. Labour has become more alienating—the degradation of work, as Braverman calls it. There has been, of course, the increasing concentrations of capital that Marx foresaw. There have been increasingly severe recurrent economic crises, and so on. We have to allow for some factors that he couldn't really have foreseen 100 years ago: the uneven development of capitalism that brought revolution first not in the highly developed capitalist countries but in the ones that had suddenly been

pulled into the capitalist orbit and things of that sort. It's true that capitalism has been a lot more resilient than at least subsequent Marxists expected. But still, capitalism has been badly shaken, and where it still exists it has had to go on the defensive. It has been saved repeatedly, chiefly by war and cold war. But war presumably cannot go on saving capitalism indefinitely.

I should say the only serious doubt is about the adequacy of Marx's class analysis and about the adequacy of his consequent prescription of a proletarian revolution as the only possible mechanism of a transition to a good society. Clearly the proletariat in the most advanced capitalist countries has not become revolutionary. It hasn't turned out to be what he called the universal class—a class whose consciousness of its own alienation would turn into a revolutionary consciousness and into revolutionary action. The working class in North America and Britain at least is very far from that. It is still mainly devoted to fighting to maintain or increase its share of the capitalist pie, without, as I put it in something I wrote recently, questioning the methods of the bakery.

F.C. *Some Marxists of a traditional sort have drawn the conclusion from what you have just said that we need to be patient, to wait until the sleeping giant wakes up, whereas some non-Marxists claim that once you admit this fact about lack of class consciousness you've proven that Marxism is simply wrong. How do you react to these views?*

C.B.M. Well certainly I don't think we should just wait, and it seems to me there are already indications that a lot of people are not. A lot of people other than the classical proletarians are not prepared just to wait.

On the point about the proletariat not having turned out the way Marx seemed to have expected, I don't know that we ought to fault Marx too heavily. He is on record as having foreseen a change in the makeup of the proletariat, it seems to me, of the need for an old fashioned revolution. I am referring to his expectation, which unfortunately is just hinted at in the *Grundrisse*, that the great technological advances that will be made just because of the capitalist drive for profits will increasingly replace living labour with what he called congealed labour, namely capital now in a highly developed technological form. Production would be taken over, more and more, by new instruments and new sources of energy—automation and all

that. Then, the source of profit would not be as now—the extraction of surplus value from living labour—but the increase of value produced by putting science and technology to work.

The point here is that this would produce a less oppressed and more educated and versatile working class. If the working class is likely to change in that direction, then one would no longer be counting on the utter grinding down of the proletariat, which is what we have usually thought Marx was relying on in all that talk about the universal class turning to revolution just because it was so totally exploited, totally alienated. Marx never pursued this other insight; so we don't know whether it would have led him to modify his view of the need for a proletarian revolutionary seizure of power, but in any case, a classical Marxian revolution now seems very unlikely in the advanced capitalist countries. I think Marxists ought to be exploring the possibilities of transition to the ultimate good society that Marx was after by other means and by means which I would hope would let us keep what is valuable in the liberal tradition, in liberal democracy.

F.C. *This of course calls to mind your own work which has been closely associated with questions of liberal democracy. Could you tell us how you see Marx in relation to these questions? What of Marxism do you think would remain in a socialist perspective and practice embodying liberal democratic values?*

C.B.M. Let me say first what I think is valuable in the liberal tradition. At the level of abstract theory it is something like John Stuart Mill's view of human nature as developmental, amounting to the full and free enjoyment and development of human capacities, everyone's capacities. This was seen to require quite a change away from existing social relations. This view of the essential nature of man seems to me virtually identical with Marx's ultimate humanistic vision. Marx was indeed sceptical of talk about the human essence, which usually implied an unchanging human nature. For Marx, of course, man makes himself, changes his own nature by changing his social relations. Hence Marx's remark that the human essence is in reality the ensemble of social relations. But this is in no way inconsistent with the developmental liberal vision. A socialist theory and practice which was faithful to Marx's humanistic vision would already embody that valuable element of liberal-democratic theory.

At the operative level, the liberal values that I want to see main-

tained are civil and political liberties: freedom of speech, association, publication, etc; freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment; freedom to exert political pressures whether by the vote or in other ways, and in general, civil and political liberties at least of the degree that we have them now in the liberal-democratic states. I would like to see that core of the liberal tradition kept, and the question then is: can it be kept, can it be fused in any way with the Marxian analysis?

F.C. *You know better than I that many Marxists think that the unique contribution of Marx to political theory was precisely to reject what you are outlining, that he was a collectivist as opposed to an individualist and that he rejected civil liberties as merely formal mechanisms which are taken advantage of by capitalists to serve their ends and to be thrown out when they stand in their way. Do you think that this is a false interpretation of Marx?*

C.B.M. Yes, I do. False and unhistorical. Let me take it both on the abstract level and the operative level. On the abstract level I would say that Marx is an individualist in the basic sense that his ultimate vision was of a society where every individual could be a fully human being. On the operative level it's true that Marx was apt to scoff at the civil liberties of the bourgeois state and all the rest of the state apparatus, and perhaps that's due to the fact that he was living and writing at a time when liberal democracy really didn't exist yet. There was a liberal state in some countries, but it wasn't democratic. The liberalism of 19th century capitalism didn't really extend very much to the working class. Few of them had the vote, and as for freedom of assembly, they were certainly chopped down pretty fast when their freedom of assembly looked dangerous to those in power.

No doubt that is the reason why Marx was able to dismiss civil liberties as a capitalist convenience. But with the subsequent growth of working class political muscle, the fact that they now all have the vote and have considerable power by their industrial organizations makes it harder to see the whole civil liberties package as just a convenience to capitalism. It may be that it is, but I would argue that it is also a necessity for any kind of democratic society in which the working class is going to have any place at all. If they couldn't organize, speak, publish, and so on, if they were denied the civil liberties they now have, never mind getting any more, it would simply set back the prospect of change toward socialism.

F.C. *This raises the question about how a transition to a democratic socialist society is possible. Could you say something about this subject?*

G.B.M. Let me start by saying that I think Marx's prescription of revolutionary proletarian action and the dictatorship of the proletariat, the vanguard state, were things Marx had to prescribe by default, so to speak. That is, as I said a moment ago, when Marx wrote there were as yet in the world no liberal democracies really. There were a few liberal states, but they weren't anything like fully democratic, and so Marx's prescriptions of a revolutionary overthrow of the whole liberal state made sense. Of course even then there were his well-known possible exceptions for England, America and Holland. I don't put any particular weight on that because the reasons he gave, as Lenin pointed out later, ceased to operate within a few decades. I am simply saying that Marx's prescription of revolutionary proletarian dictatorship was never more than instrumental towards an ultimately humanistic end, and that he could see it as the only possible means just because there was not yet in the world anything that resembled a democratic liberal state.

I suggest that that prescription is not necessary now, and that if it can be discarded the chances of reaching Marx's humanistic goals are much brighter. This is so because the vanguard state or rule by a vanguard is simply inconsistent with participatory democracy, and it is inconsistent with the final goal. Of course Marx counted on the state withering away, but the 20th century record on that is certainly not reassuring. I hope I am not making the mistake that many social democrats, I think, make, namely, the mistake of thinking that everything can be left up to the present parliamentary institutions with their acknowledged bias against widespread participation in any political process. Marx was surely right in assuming that wide participation would be needed in order to replace capitalism and the capitalist state, and he was right in thinking that this participation must be a kind in which people begin to change themselves, begin to attain a new consciousness of their own possibilities.

Marx seemed to have expected that the very depth of working-class alienation would lead members of the class to the new consciousness of their own nature, a consciousness that would feed on and be fed by their own involvement in the revolutionary movement. But, as I have said, our working class isn't that revolutionary. It doesn't feel that alienated, which is why it seems to me we can't

count on that. So the question is: what kinds of participation other than participation in a revolutionary worker's movement could possibly do the job? What could feed a new consciousness, turning away from consumerist satisfaction with simply material standards?

I've argued in one or two places that there are such kinds of participation now visibly emerging and likely to increase in strength and in potential as a leaven that could change the whole nature of the progressive movement. I mean movements concerned more with the quality of life than with the quantity of consumables. To mention only a few: the ecological movement, the anti-pollution movement, the related anti-nuclear and disarmament movements, various neighbourhood movements against the developers and against inner city decay, the movement for participation in the work place, worker's control or industrial democracy (certainly not much of that on this continent, but quite a bit of it in Europe) and, not least, the women's movement.

Well now, nobody knows if all these movements together can really be the steam of a movement which can transform capitalism. If they can, they would presumably be doing it without having to resort to vanguard rule, because all these movements get their steam from widespread grassroots participation. Incidentally, the whole process then wouldn't be relying on the working class entirely, because much of the steam for these movements comes from the middle class rather than or in addition to the working class.

F.C. *Regarding vanguardism, some say that avoiding a vanguard movement is just not realistic. The change of consciousness to which you referred surely would be a long and painful one. It would also be subject to a variety of forms of distorted consciousness which could be taken advantage of by powerful enemies of socialism and humanism, and in this environment would there not be a necessity for a well-organized group of people simply to take charge, namely, a vanguard?*

C.B.M. In fact, I have been reproached with overlooking just such a danger quite recently. A paper presented by Professor John Seaman at the American Political Science Association Meeting in Denver in September in effect made much the same point you just made. Suppose this process of change of consciousness does get started from the grassroots and does begin to make the political process more responsive and more participatory; still, that is likely to take an awfully long time. So the political authority, no matter how

democratic it is, is likely to feel the need to hurry it up. And that brings in a vanguard claiming to know our needs better than we do, and endangers the whole prospect of transition to a good society.

In reply I would say two things. First, although I have to agree there is a risk here, surely there is less risk to the whole transition prospect, and less risk to the achievement of basic human values in starting without a vanguard than if we were to put our reliance on a vanguard right from the beginning. Secondly, if what I consider the basic liberal and the basic Marxist value of individual self-development is not made the mainstay of the whole attempt at transition to a good society, then there won't be any transition; it won't even get started. And you can't make individual self-development a central value if you resign your judgment to a vanguard at the beginning. So on both those grounds I think the risk has to be discounted as less dangerous than the vanguard route.

F.C. *Another challenge that must surely be met has to do with the proletariat. Could one not say in response to your comments on this subject that only the working class has sufficient power to secure or safeguard socialism, and therefore all other movements you mentioned must take second place?*

C.B.M. I think it is simply not true, at least not in North America, that the working class is the only repository of this power. It has not used its power in the way socialists have wanted and shows very little sign of using its power to do this. It has used its power to get immediate material benefits or to hold on to its share but has not gone much beyond what Lenin called trade union consciousness, and I think that we cannot count on the traditional working class as an adequate resource. I don't think the working class on this continent is a force that is available for moving ahead to these ultimate goals, as contrasted with these other sorts of movements that I have just mentioned: the ecological movement; and anti-nuclear movement; workers' control movements where they exist (but they are a pretty late starter on this continent anyway); the peace movement; and the women's movement (and I know there is some criticism as well as a great deal of debate in women's circles and in Marxist circles about where the two should interact and how they could).

Because I don't think that the straight working class movement is itself an adequate available force for the transition, I think that all of these other movements together are much more likely to move us

ahead now. It seems to me that it is quite wrong for Marxists to say none of these other movements must be allowed to get in our way, that they must all be treated as secondary, and that the great reliance must be placed on the working class movement in a very tightly controlled way. That is really just throwing away resources making for change in the right direction, resources that could not be used if they were all to be denied any support except insofar as they were a part of a strictly working class movement. After all, a lot of these other movements are propelled rather more by middle-class people than by the working class, so that to insist that the working class should not encourage all these others seems to me to be completely short-sighted. For one thing it is rejecting the use of all the non-Marxist women's energies, and really that's a case of a Marxist cutting off his nose—and it is "his" rather than "her" nose, I think—to spite his face.

F.C. *Do you think that Marxism, itself, has anything to offer to the women's movement?*

C.B.M. No doubt it has. But what worries me is the probability that the theorists of the women's movement who start from Marxist positions are apt to end up in a narrow position that logically they don't have to take, but it seems to me there is a danger that they would do so. I have just one other point about the role of the women's movement. I think that the large part of it that is middle-class rather than working-class ought to be fully utilized. Working-class women aren't a sufficient resource, for just the same reason that working-class men aren't. The working-class, both male and female, have to devote their efforts largely to maintaining their real material incomes, that is, maintaining their positions as consumers, and are not likely to get too far beyond that horizon, whereas the middle and professional classes, male and female, are not yet reduced to that dependence on that narrow horizon. They still have some energy to devote to pressing for the quality of life rather than just material quantity. It's important, I think, to tap a resource which is now becoming more and more one that can be used consistently with Marxism, because they are both ultimately concerned with the quality of human life.

F.C. *Thank you very much.*