



## Reflections on Marxist Teleology

Thompson Dorothy

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# EPI-REVEL

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## Reflections on Marxist Teleology

Dorothy Thompson\*

With the death of Michel we have lost a friend whose work and whose company was a constant pleasure and a constant challenge. He was an ideas man and a language man. Although he and I were for most of the time a continent apart, by e-mail and by telephone I valued his company and his wit and wisdom on questions of language, literature and history in the fields of work that we shared. I no longer do much research and don't have any up-to-date original research to offer to his memorial volume. Instead here is a short piece based on the transcript of a contribution I made to the meeting to launch the memoirs of my old friend Professor John Saville of the University of Hull. I had gladly agreed to take part in the book launch but when I was sent the invitation I found that the organizers had rearranged things and had called the event "Marxism and History" with Eric Hobsbawm, John himself and me, listed as speakers. Eric has a lifelong commitment to Marxism and history and would, I knew, make a serious and considered contribution on the subject. If I had tried to give a talk with the same subject matter I would at best be repeating what he would already have presented in a much better form. So my contribution was perhaps a little less serious than it might otherwise have been, but it nevertheless touches on some of the problems with which I have been concerned during seventy-odd years as a historian and political activist.

I want to start with my friend Ali. I live in Worcester, a cathedral city which is on the whole fairly prosperous and pleasant. I live in the most working class area and Ali is the man who keeps the newspaper shop. He is a good friend. He helps run and organize a credit union that we are trying to get off the ground and so as well as buying newspapers from him I work with him in the credit union. His family comes from Kashmir but as he speaks English with a strong West Midlands accent I imagine he came over very young. He does, though, keep in touch with his family and is very much in touch with the sub-continent in general. I have learnt a lot from him. When I have been in his shop and heard him arguing with customers he has always been arguing and explaining about the politics of the Far East in

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\* Université de Birmingham, U. K.

150  
Dorothy Thompson

ways which I find sympathetic and with which I usually agree. When the other customers have gone we sometimes talk about politics, about the Afghan war and other things which concern him and me and our city. One day we had been talking about politics and Ali said "What do you think is going to happen?"

That is not a very easy question to answer and I just said "Well, I don't think things are going to get much better". He said (and I have probably got the details wrong here because I didn't note it down) words to the effect that "the prophet will come back to the world and he will live for a time and he will have a son and after that everything will be all right. It says so in the holy books and that is what I believe". I walked home absolutely staggered. Week after week, day after day, I had been discussing politics with this very knowledgeable, rational and reasonable chap who, in the end, believed that a pre-existing programme coming from outside would intervene in the affairs of the world and ensure a promised outcome. But I have to admit that as I thought about this I had a sense of *déjà vu*. Last week I was at a socialist history seminar in this city and one of the comrades said, as it were *en passant*, "of course the working class will transform the world" and I realized where my sense of *déjà vu* came from. Everything Eric Hobsbawm says about the fear of Marxism and the power of it when we were younger is obviously true and he is a much more serious person than I am. Nevertheless, underlying so many of the activities, the writing and the theorizing has been this teleological pattern — primitive communism, feudalism, transition from feudalism to capitalism, capitalism and finally socialism. These changes of system are to occur by violent revolutions and once the final one to produce socialism has occurred, the class struggle will be ended. The pre-history of class-riven society will pass and the real struggle of man against the environment will begin. This is of course a simplification, but nevertheless, if we look at a great deal of the writing about popular history that has been done in our lifetime, we see some of the problems that this teleology has brought to the subject. I have to confess that I came to the study of history by way of literature and language and not by way of the "science" of economics as the other two contributors did. Economics has never had quite the prescriptive power for me that it has for some and I have always viewed it with some suspicion. I accept it when it describes things, I have problems with it when it predicts things, and this may well have affected my approach to history.

When you get old — into the eighties, you tend to think that all the golden things happened in your youth. I do think, nevertheless, that the years following the second world war saw a huge explosion of intellectual activity. History, literature, sociology and other social sciences saw fundamental changes of direction. People like Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, as well the members of the CP Historians' group and

many social scientists, were much more concerned with the people of the country than with its institutions, its bloodlines and its high politics. Even Economic History departments tacked "and social" on to their titles and introduced some labour history into the syllabus. I think this is partly because many of the academics were or had been communists and had developed their interest in the common people — at least in the male ones — through their wartime experiences in the forces and in industry. This is where we all were in our teens and twenties. We were learning that ordinary people were often much more able than we were. They brought to the business of fighting a war at all the different levels, abilities which those of us who had had sheltered upbringings and had gone perhaps to rather posh schools had never really met. Working with people of all classes, at all levels of authority, reinforced our socialism and diminished any hesitance we might have in embracing the revolutionary values of liberty, fraternity and equality. I think it was this wartime experience, both as civilians and service men and women, that aroused the great interest in the history of the ordinary people which informed the writing of history in the second half of the last century, in ways which were exploratory, and in some ways explosive.

Labour History was not new. Douglas Cote, Lance Beales and a few others had already mapped out some of the territory but our generation has brought to it another experience and this affected our work and our politics in good and bad ways. In good ways, the communist party was a great organizing body. It really got things done. Members gave up all kinds of private and social activity in order to concentrate on the political task and they got on with it. On the other hand it did cut us off from a great deal of the radical political activity that was informing the whole population. Everybody else who had served in the war had shared this experience of defeating one of the most evil dictatorships that had ever existed and starting to build a new world. But many of us because we were so sure that only Marxists had the true prescription for the transformation of society were not prepared to accept lesser transformations. One of the first arguments I had in print was on the question of "palliatives".

There is a revolutionary tradition in British politics dating at least from the second half of the nineteenth century which claims that reforms introduced by reactionary governments, conservative or social democratic, make the people more satisfied with capitalist society and therefore hold back the essential socialist revolution. Free education, trade union recognition and free or subsidized health services seduce sections of the working class and thus delay the essential defeat of capitalism. Some CP members therefore did not welcome the Beveridge Report, or the setting up of the National Health service and the post 1944 education system. Others of us felt that whatever the danger of palliatives, these welfare state moves did

embody some of the values that had made us into socialists. Now in the various battles to defend the principles of the health and education and other services, we can see that they were far from being palliative in effect but were important ways in which socialist values have been to a degree incorporated in modern society. In the past we were often so sure that we had the only answer to the creation of a just society that we were prepared to cut corners and use any method to make the revolutionary changes. "Truth" as one party organizer told me when I was in the YCL "is what helps on the class struggle". As well as making the communists objects of mistrust among the general public — people to be voted for in tough trade union situations but rarely in local or national politics, this attitude made us lose respect for the important utopian traditions in British socialist thought. The division made between "utopian" and "scientific" socialism narrowed the spectrum of the study of radical and labour history. The great utopias have been treated as though they were models for post-revolutionary societies and not sites for social criticism. In our writing of labour and social history, we have also been to a degree entrapped in the teleology of Marxist analysis. We looked back for signs of revolutionary change and saw Chartism, for example, as a failed revolution. We applied the same template to most European societies, though we had problems when it came to Asia, so tended to look at the countries there simply as victims of European imperialism. In looking at European societies through the teleological lense we saw that popular movements which failed to rise and destroy the capitalist system were either premature or inadequately led. My main interest has always been in the Chartist movement, and when I first came to it much of the Marxist history was written within this teleology. The Chartist leaders, by their timidity or conservatism, had let down the class conscious and revolutionary British crowd, had drawn back just at the moment when armed revolution was possible. That there were genuine revolutionaries among the leadership was clear. We remember Theodor Rothstein's discovery of George Julian Harney; Bolshevik Bronterre O'Brien has also been a candidate for revolutionary leader as have some less well-known figures. The actual leaders, Feargus O'Connor in particular, were regarded as "backward looking" or cowardly. Discussion about the class make-up of Chartism and its ideas has almost always been based on the theory that "real" working class movements must be based on a programme of the expropriation of the expropriators and that anything short of that was merely an extension of bourgeois ideas of democracy. In fact, these historians were more concerned with what the working class of the period ought to have been doing than what it was actually doing. Many aspects of Chartism, the land company to name but one, were sidelined because they did not fit the revolutionary pattern. Since it was always assumed that heightened class consciousness, once achieved, had lifted labour politics on to a higher level, a problem remained that the unified class feelings of the

first half of the century clearly lessened, at least in their revolutionary potential after the mid-century. The theory of the "labour aristocracy" came to the rescue here, with the suggestion that the better-off skilled workers were bought off by the bourgeoisie with the wealth gained from imperial expansion. The actual achievements of the Chartists in terms of experience, the modification of many of the most brutal and confrontational actions of the post 1832 governments, and above all the foundation of sources of social and political power in the form of national trade unions, cooperative societies, building societies, and other bases from which working class political structures were to emerge, were rarely considered as Chartist achievements. In other words, when condemning revolutionary failures, labour historians often overlooked considerable achievements. They also failed to record activity which did not fit the pattern. I found this when I started to look at the role of women in the movement. I was originally disappointed at the limited demand for female suffrage and other items of the later feminist agendas. Although there were plenty of women in evidence, they seemed for the most part happy to demand the vote for their husbands and brothers, and never asked for the right to work. When in 1968 or so I gave a talk on Chartist women in New York, the first question I was asked was "Did the Chartist women demand twenty-four hour child care?" I had to explain to the radical feminist who asked it that what the Chartist women for the most part wanted was the chance to stay at home and mind their children instead of working in a mill, to be allowed to receive poor relief in their homes, and not to hand their children over to the poor law authorities, and above all for their husbands to receive a wage that would enable them to bring up their families in reasonable comfort, without their or their children's need to go out to work. If they should have been asking for a share in the productive process, for the most part they certainly were not.

What I have been trying to say is that the teleological element in Marxist thought and analysis has too often distorted the way we look at history. And indeed the way we look at contemporary events, particularly in some of the post-colonial countries. This does not deny the many insights into history and politics that reading Marx has given me and most of our generation. Edward, my husband, used to say that he worked within a Marxist tradition, and I would say the same. There are many problems with the tradition, for Edward it was always the lack of concern with morality, even with a definition of the moral dimension in society. At a simpler level, it is the danger of approaching historical events with a ready-made test kit derived from any kind of holy writ.

## Question

What is left of Marx if you abandon the teleology? Well Marx himself welcomed the Origin of Species and the theory of evolution because



it offered the possibility of progress without teleology. It is perhaps unfair to label his sophisticated analysis "teleology" but it is nevertheless based on an accepted view of past historical development which dictates what are the essential questions for historians to examine. We could say that it is not absolutely teleographic because it ends up by saying that society has to achieve the best way to survive on the planet, and even within his own theory this does not have to be socialism, but still he and Engels thought it was.

I don't, nor did Edward, call myself a Marxist. On the Latin American question there are surely moments there when we are looking at the struggle of the poor against the rich, not a struggle between classes standing in differing relations to the means of production. It was Marx's great achievement to describe class conflict within many societies, but many of us would not give the absolute priority to economic relations which he undoubtedly did, or assume its near-universality.

The terms of much Marxist and Marxisant historiography limit historical research : judgemental terms such as "backward-looking" applied to agricultural or societal systems do not help objective analysis. As an example, a now well-known scholar once argued with me that child labour in the factories was a good thing because it hastened the development of mature capitalism, without which socialism could not develop!