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Eliminate Marxism and Distrust Socialism: A Reply to Martinez Delgado

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Martinez Delgado is right to claim that Marxism was never as scientific or as proletarian as it purported to be. Of course, this is hardly an original thesis, but he defends it in a way that is bold and worthy of comment. Let us begin with Marxism's aspiration to scientificity. From its very origins, he maintains, Marxism has been burdened by *a priori* ideas, abstract dialectical categories whose logical unfolding supposedly determines the process of history. Marx and his disciples, it is argued, never managed to free themselves from Hegelian idealism, with its assumption of an 'ascent towards perfection' through the 'self-development of dialectical categories' (p. 5). Apart from being universal and abstract, these categories also tend to be bi-polar. The idealisation of 'capitalism', for example, is dialectically linked (as a clash of opposites) to the idealisation of 'socialism'. Likewise, the concept of social class is deemed to have two, and only two, sub-categories, capitalist and proletariat, regardless of the evidence of our senses, which indicates the existence of a third 'relevant' class that emerged with capitalism, 'a new class of cadres or managers' (p. 4). The precise composition of this class is left a bit vague by Martinez Delgado, but he implies that the managerial class developed a 'revolutionary sector'; and Marxism, he claims, is their ideology (p. 7). He is at pains to tell us that Marxism did not, through some kind of degenerative process, create the elite of cadres who so visibly dominated 'communist' societies. To the contrary, Marxist ideology was an *expression* of the cadre class. He posits a 'close accordance' between idealism and the 'class character of Marxism'. Historical teleology, as well as the idealisation of socialism, provides the perfect ideological cover for 'the hidden hegemony of the cadre class' (p. 9). To use Gramscian terminology, the 'organic intellectuals' – the bureaucrats, technicians, activists, and wordsmiths – associated with the working class movement became the new ruling class wherever Marxist socialism triumphed. This analysis is reminiscent of a similar analysis advanced a century ago by thinkers such as Weber and Michels, who dismissed Marxism as the ideological justification for a new power elite of 'officials' and 'intellectuals'.

It is interesting that, when attacking Marxist idealism, Martinez Delgado is referring neither to the Hegelian mystifications of Lukacs nor to the vacuous generalities of the 'critical theorists'. He is talking about Marx and Engels themselves, along with their 'orthodox' followers – thinkers who are normally described as materialists (in their ontology) and realists or even positivists (in their epistemology).

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Martinez Delgado is correct to challenge this description, and to contend that the classical Marxists were Hegelian in the sense that they made deductions about social conditions from abstract, *a priori* dialectical schemata with insufficient regard to actual facts. Like Bernstein, he insists that a science of society – which Marxism claimed to be – must be amenable to revision resulting from changing empirical reality; it ‘ought not to be based on the self-development of philosophical or ideological categories’ (p. 9). However, it is also true that abstraction from reality is fundamental to scientific inquiry. Sometimes, it is necessary to introduce simplifying assumptions for reasons of computational tractability. In formulating his Law of Falling Bodies, for example, Galileo assumed the non-existence of friction. ‘Galilean idealisation’, although it permits the introduction of false predicates into a theory, is driven by the ultimate goal of accurate representation, since it is assumed that any conclusions formed under ideal conditions will be applicable in non-ideal circumstances. Another type of familiar scientific abstraction – and one that especially pertains to Marxism – involves limiting a causal story to those factors that make a difference to the occurrence of the phenomenon, or to its essential character. Irrelevant details are stripped away in order to focus on a single property or a certain set of properties. Here abstraction serves an explanatory, instead of a computational, function, helping the scientist to demonstrate how fundamental properties of a system generate common patterns among disparate phenomena (Weisberg 2007).

The defect of Marxist ‘science’ is not that it uses abstraction to simplify reality, but that it allows these abstractions to *replace* reality. True scientists, once simplification has allowed them to (in their own minds) capture the essence of reality, then reintroduce detail and complexity in the hope that the theory can cope with it. If empirical evidence should contradict the theory, if sustained observation indicates that the theory has distorted rather than illuminated reality, the true scientist is prepared to modify or abandon it. In the case of Marxist ‘science’, this tended not to happen. The theory was treated as an absolute truth, regardless of any contrary evidence. Some Marxists tortured the facts so that they could fit into the Procrustean bed of theory, while others, inspired by German philosophical method, turned away from the idea of science altogether, viewing the socialist utopia as an ‘intuition’, not an empirical hypothesis. Marxism became either an elaborate tautology or the sworn enemy of scientific rigour.

My guess is that Martinez Delgado is aware of these subtle distinctions, but it is odd that he declines to address them. A more damaging gap in his analysis relates to what he calls ‘the managerial or *cadrist* nature of Marxism’ (p. 7). Reducing Marxism to its class origins, he thinks, provides a sufficient and properly materialistic explanation for the bureaucratic and oppressive nature of ‘actually existing socialism’, whereas other attempts to account for the ‘genetic’ link between Marxism and authoritarianism wrongly focus on features of the doctrine itself: its consequentialism, its holism, or its alleged messianism. Such explanations must be rejected, says Martinez Delgado, as they emanate from ‘an idealistic perspective more than a scientific one’. In other words, they seek to explain reality as a logical progression of ideas, thereby ignoring ‘the *material* structure of society’ (p. 8). While there is some truth in this criticism, his ‘materialist’ approach furnishes only a *partial* explanation of the unfortunate path taken by Marxist-inspired regimes. What was striking about these

regimes was not their domination by bureaucrats and managers but the extraordinary degree of their repressive intolerance. Just as we cannot explain Nazism purely in terms of the needs of capitalism, so we cannot explain Stalinism or Maoism solely with reference to the interests of a new elite. Marxist doctrine, like its fascist counterpart, appealed to the herd-like instinct in human beings, to the desire for a collective spiritual purpose, which had been undermined by the ‘autonomous individual’ of bourgeois liberalism. To ignore this ‘ideological’ aspect of Marxism when analysing Communist tyranny is to ignore the proverbial elephant in the room.

Notwithstanding his critique of Marxism, Martinez Delgado still denounces capitalism as ‘ever more clearly an economic system opposed to the *objective* interests of the majority of the population’. Moreover, the ‘only relevant...alternative is socialism’ (p. 11). But it is also his contention that not just Marxism but socialism itself reflects the interests of the cadre class. The ‘traditional socialist alternative’, we are told, is ‘favourable to a new form of exploitation and domination over the majority of the population’ (p. 11). This leaves the reader well and truly bemused. Berating capitalism for opposing the objective interests of the majority logically implies that there is an alternative system that *would* satisfy those interests. Otherwise, it is equivalent to criticising the weather or the setting of the sun. Some statements are inherently comparative. For example, the statement ‘John is short’ would make no sense if every other adult male on earth were the same height as John. An obvious deduction from Martinez Delgado’s assertions is that *no* socio-economic system can satisfy the ‘objective interests’ of the majority. In that case, we need to question his conception of objective interests. Is he defining them in an unrealistic way – in a way that parts company with the realm of possibility? Criticism of the present that is based on a utopian world of the imagination will convince no one. If we are going to ‘eliminate capitalism’, we need a practicable alternative. Perhaps sensing this flaw in his reasoning, Martinez Delgado retreats somewhat from his blanket condemnation of socialism, suggesting in his conclusion that it may be possible to develop a progressive but non-utopian and empirically-grounded (i.e. materialistic) form of socialism and socialist theory, constantly vigilant against the domination of the dreaded cadres but equally hostile to ‘the enormous private appropriation of concentrated wealth’ (p. 12). Given his pessimistic analysis, this suggestion reads like an after-thought, representing the triumph of hope over reasoned expectation.

Reference

Weisberg, M. 2007. ‘Three kinds of Idealisation’. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 104 (12), 639-59.