

The future of Marxism

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Marxism remains the philosophy of our time. We cannot go beyond it because we have not gone beyond the circumstances that engendered it.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

Marx laid the cornerstones of the science which socialists must advance in all directions, if they do not want to lag behind events.

Lenin, *Our Programme*, 1899

All my political life academics, politicians, pundits, including various leftists and radicals, have been announcing the end or death of Marxism or proclaiming the need to ‘go beyond’ it. They variously claimed that capitalism had solved its fundamental contradictions, that class was disappearing, that the proletariat was disappearing (André Gorz), that the collapse of Stalinism meant the end of socialism, that capitalism was spontaneously morphing into something else (post-capitalism?), that all ‘grand narratives’ of history should be abandoned (Lyotard and post-modernism), that history had come to an end (Fukuyama) and so on ad infinitum. I reject all this and agree with the statement by Sartre at the head of this article.

As long as there are class divisions and exploitation, alienation, oppression and crises, and these are increasing not diminishing, there will be resistance and those resisting will turn and return to Marxism to guide their struggles. This is because Marxism has no serious rival as a coherent critique of the system, as a strategy to defeat it and as a vision of a free egalitarian future. Therefore, I am certain that Marxism will have a future.

However, I also adhere to the statement from Lenin. Marx laid the foundations, but Marxism must be kept up and developed. Of course, Marxists after Marx have done this and there is a great legacy to build on – the work

of Engels, Plekhanov, Lenin, Luxemburg, Bukharin, Trotsky, Connolly, Lukács, Gramsci, Cliff, Harman and numerous less known figures¹ – but capitalism never stops changing:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society.²

So new challenges are continually thrown up. But before I go on to discuss some of these, I should first specify what I mean by the Marxism that has to be ‘advanced in all directions’. For me the core of Marxism is ‘the self emancipation of the working class’. Marxism is the theory of the working class struggle not just in the sense that it designates the working class as the agent of socialist change but in the sense that it is the theoretical expression of that struggle.³ Theories that move away from that – for example most of the Frankfurt School – may be influenced by Marxism but they are not, in my opinion, fully Marxist.

So what are the key theoretical issues that Marxists need to address now and in the immediate future? I am going to look at three: a) the changed and changing nature of the proletariat; b) the working class and identity politics – the struggle against oppression; c) the challenge of climate change and the anthropocene. Before embarking directly on the discussion some caveats are necessary. None of us knows or can know what problems and challenges will be thrown up in the future.⁴ I have therefore restricted myself to questions which are incipiently already posed in and by the present but on which more work needs doing. My list is not in any way intended to be exhaustive or limiting, merely to raise issues where I have something definite to say, without having any sort of definitive answers: that’s

the point - these are raised as intellectual challenges requiring further work by, I hope, many hands.

The Changing Proletariat

Given the characterisation of Marxism outlined above – as the theory of working class self- emancipation – the question of the nature of the proletariat today is obviously of enormous importance especially as it has changed so dramatically in recent decades.

In a footnote to the first page of *The Communist Manifesto* Engels defined the proletariat as, ‘the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour-power in order to live’. This definition always required a degree of qualification and amplification, for example to *exclude* those who appear to live by the sale of their labour-power, but are in reality hired managers, paid above the value of their own labour, in order to control the labour of others, and to *include* family members who depend on the income of a wage worker and the unemployed who form part of the reserve army of labour. But with these modifications I believe that Engels’ definition still stands today, provided we understand it as located within the Marxist theory of exploitation and class struggle. It is the fact of exploitation (the extraction of surplus value) that generates the antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie and which forms workers into a distinct class.

Moreover, this points to two very important facts. The first is that the working class which, when Marx wrote the Manifesto in 1848 existed only in North Western Europe (and a little in America) and numbered about 20 million, now numbers approximately 1.5 billion and exists in large masses on every continent and in almost every country in the world. The second is that even in the old ‘advanced’ industrialised countries like Britain, France or the US, the working class still constitutes the substantial majority of the workforce and of the overall population. However, the issue I want to raise here and which I believe needs investigation by Marxists is not the numerical size of the proletariat but its character and structure as a militant fighting force and potential revolutionary subject. The distinction is important. In Victorian England the largest category of employed workers was domestic servants but when it came to struggle, for example the General Strike of 1842, it was miners, weavers, spinners, pottery workers, mill

workers and factory workers who led the way; in 1888-89 it was the Match Girls, dockers and gas workers.

In the years 1917- 21, the largest, most revolutionary wave of proletarian struggle in history, it was metal workers who, from Petrograd to Berlin, Turin to Sheffield, were ‘the vanguard’, along with miners, dockers and railway workers. In 1979 Tony Cliff, when assessing the balance of class forces in Britain, noted that:

[S]hipyards, mining, docks and motor vehicle manufacturing, employing some 4 percent of the labour force in Britain, were the industries most prone, by far, to strikes. In 1965 these industries were responsible for 53 percent of all strike days in the country. The specific weight of these industries in the general workers’ front is much greater even than the figures show, because of the high level of concentration of workers’ power in them.⁵

Cliff then went on to argue that the decline in strikes and levels of workers’ organisation in these industries in the second half of the 1970s showed that the British working class movement had entered a serious down turn in struggle. This was roundly rejected by many on the left at the time but subsequent events proved him right. So in these terms – and internationally, not just in Britain – where are we today? One thing is beyond doubt: shipyard workers, miners, dockers and car workers are no longer the most advanced section of the working class in Britain for the simple reason that they barely exist.

Let’s look which sections of workers have been in the forefront of the struggle over the last few years. Here in Ireland, beginning with the LUAS workers (tram drivers) in 2016 we have seen disputes involving Dublin Bus and Bus Eireann workers, teachers, Dunnes Stores workers, Irish Life workers, Lloyds Pharmacy workers, Ryanair pilots, archaeologists(!)⁶, film workers and Google workers – a far cry from the traditional industrial proletariat. Probably the biggest victories were won by the LUAS drivers and the Ryanair pilots. At the same time it has to be said that the largest working class mobilisation by far in recent years and the most significant victory (because it defeated the state) was the Water Charges movement which was community not workplace based and driven.

In the USA the largest and most militant strikes this year were the massive rolling strikes by teachers. Other strikes catching the eye were McDonald’s workers

against sexual harassment and prison strikes against unpaid labour. In India in 2016 an estimated 160 to 180 million public sector workers went on a 24 hour general strike against privatisation and government economic policies. It was hailed as the largest strike in history. In Britain this year the most dynamic strike with the biggest pickets and most militant rank and file involvement was by UCU, the lecturers' union. In 2016-17 one of the key strikes was by junior doctors. The other day I saw a facebook post from a comrade in New Zealand which read 'Teachers on strike. Ambulance drivers on strike. Bus drivers on strike. Midwives on strike. The working class of Aotearoa is rising'.

In Spain on International Women's Day approximately 5 million held a strike against gender inequality and sex discrimination. Again, all this is a long way from what the industrial struggle looked like in 1889, 1913, 1919 or 1972.

Obviously it can be objected that the evidence I have put forward here is simply impressionistic. This is true but it is also my point. We need a Marxist analysis of who the modern proletariat is, where they are located, and which are its key sections from the point of view of potential power and militancy. Moreover that analysis needs to be both global and national. We need the international overview but the nationally specific element is also essential. Socialists still largely have to operate on a national terrain and the fact that miners have ceased to be a significant factor in the class struggle in Britain or Ireland does not make this true of South Africa or China. As Tony Cliff used to say, 'You can't find your way round the London Underground with a map of the Paris Metro'.

Cliff's metaphor applies even more theoretically and temporarily than it does geographically. There has long been a theoretical debate within Marxism as to whether white collar workers are proletarians or petty bourgeois/middle class. That needs to be resolved. In practice almost all socialists and conscious trade unionists will stand in solidarity with lecturers and junior doctors but the notion that such people are middle class persists and is damaging to the unity of the working class and to an understanding of its potential power. Even among those who accept 'in theory' the working class character of a teacher or lecturer the out of date cultural stereotype often survives and with it the conception that their role in the struggle is secondary.

There are three further points that I think will need to be considered and examined in depth in the necessary 'reconnaissance' and 'mapping' of the territory of the contemporary working class. The first is the class's newly developed global character. Socialists have invoked the international working class ever since the Communist Manifesto but the shift in this regard over the last few decades is qualitative.

In the twenty years from 1993 to 2013 the number of waged/salaried grew by 589,814,000 (a staggering 60% of the 1993 figure). An average of 29 million people joined the waged labour force each year. Moreover the growth of waged labour was concentrated in the developing countries. In the developed countries, the salaried/waged employee figure rose slowly from 345 million (1993) to 410 million (2013). In non-developed countries the growth was explosive, from 640 million (1993) to 1,165 million (2013). The non-developed world waged labour force is bigger than the global waged labour force twenty years ago. An estimated 445 million waged or salaried employees were in East Asia in 2013 i.e. more than in the whole of the developed countries!⁷

The largest working class in the world is, of course, the Chinese; it is followed by the Indian, the American (USA), the Indonesian and the Brazilian. Today even countries as impoverished as Pakistan and Bangladesh have a larger waged labour force than Britain or France. On the 8-9 January of this year somewhere between 150 and 200 million workers went on strike in India in what was claimed to be the largest strike in history. The idea that a worldview centred on the urban working class is somehow Eurocentric is completely out of date. The growing internationalisation of the working class applies not only across nation states but within them. Kim Moody in his book *On New Terrain*, which is a partial fulfilment in relation to the US of the programme I am proposing, points to the 'growing diversity' of the American working class.

Blacks, Asians, Latinos composed over a third of the US population in 2010, compared to 20 per cent in 1980... These racial and ethnic groups now make up a large and growing proportion of working class occupations. Blacks, Latinos and Asians, including immigrants, composed about 15-16 percent of the workers in production, transportation, and material

moving as well as service occupations in 1981 and now make up close to 40 percent of each of these broad occupational groups. Furthermore, these groups are spread throughout these occupational categories to a much larger degree than in the past.⁸

This growing diversity applies, to a greater or lesser extent, to the composition of the working class of numerous countries today – even Taiwan now has 700,000 migrant workers – and in each case the details of this and its implications need to be analysed.

Alongside this diversity there is the growing feminisation of the workforce. Women now make up 40 percent of the employed workforce worldwide. In many countries – and not always the countries people might expect – the percentage is much higher. Some examples:

% women	% women
Angola 50.1	Nepal 51.8
Armenia 46.1	Portugal 48.8
Australia 46.2	Russia 48.6
Azerbaijan 48.8	Sweden 47.7
Belarus 49.7	Togo 49.2
Benin 9.2	Vietnam 48.1

[All figures from the World Bank Data website <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.F>]

These figures are easy to obtain and to list but what really counts is to integrate them into an analysis of the class struggle in both its economic and ideological/political dimensions. The figure for Ireland stands at 44.9% – not spectacular by international standards but marking a sharp increase from 34.4% in 1990; a fact which has almost certainly had a huge ideological impact, as manifested in the big victory in the Abortion referendum. In China, with the world's most important working class, the female percentage has actually fallen slightly from 45.2% in 1990 to 43.7%. But we know that the 'immigration' of tens of millions of young women from the countryside was a crucial element in China's extraordinary economic transformation⁹, so what is happening here and how does it impact on the struggle of the Chinese working class? India, with the second largest working class, is a major exception: women making up only 24.5% of the workforce. Again, why and what effect does this have on the contours of the struggle? Another very interesting fact contained in the figures for the US presented by Moody is that the

category of 'proletarianising' lower professionals is 80% female¹⁰.

All this constitutes a call for a great deal of work by present and future Marxists. But one thing is clear: the old image of 'the proletariat' as a white, male, industrial worker, so deeply lodged in our collective consciousness, must be buried.

The Working Class, Oppression and Identity Politics

I believe much work needs to be done on the question of the relationship between the working class and what is often called 'identity politics'.

Since Lenin wrote 'What is to be Done?' revolutionaries have known that they should be 'tribunes of the people' fighting all cases of oppression.¹¹ Moreover, they have to work to train the working class in this spirit *for the sake of the working class's own political consciousness*.

Working class consciousness cannot be genuinely political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to *all* cases, without exception, of tyranny, oppression, violence and abuse, and no matter *what class* is affected.¹²

This principle remains completely valid today but, I would suggest, there has also been shift in how it needs to be applied as a result of the changed nature of the working class discussed above. This, too, will need to be investigated. To illustrate the nature of the shift I'm talking about let me give the example of the great British Miners' Strike of 1984-5. The example is important because it has been recounted endlessly at socialist meetings and in socialist literature as a kind of model of how workers learn in struggle to oppose oppression.

At the beginning of the strike the National Union of Miners' journal used to contain a pin up and young miners on their demonstrations used to shout to the young women watching 'Get your tits out for the lads!' but by the end the strike the pin ups had gone, and the sexist chants were dropped. The change came through the combination of the magnificent role of miners' wives and girlfriends in supporting the strike and the miners interaction with wider socialist and feminist circles who were in solidarity and who argued with them about their attitudes to women. Similar processes occurred in relation to racism and black people and to homophobia and gays. I personally remember hearing a miner on a picket line explaining how, until the strike, he cared

nothing for blacks but then, as the miners themselves experienced police brutality, he came to understand and identify with black people and their struggle. Again I know from personal experience that the interaction with socialist activists was part of this transformation. The well known film *Pride* is a brilliant representation of how the same process worked in relation to homophobia with a contingent of miners leading the Lesbian and Gay Pride march in 1985 and the Labour Party conference committing itself to support LGBT rights on a motion from the NUM.

All this is excellent of course but notice something: in this account the central protagonists in this epic class battle were white male industrial workers. The oppressed groups – the women, blacks and lesbians and gays – were, in a sense, external to the struggle. This was less true of the women than of the others, but nevertheless broadly the case. The solidarity given by and to the three oppressed groups was immensely important, as Lenin stressed, for the development of their political consciousness but it was not so important, and certainly not decisive, for the outcome of the strike. In the 1972 miners’ strike it was solidarity from engineering workers (at Saltley Gates) that was decisive. In 1984-5 the key question was solidarity or lack of it from steel workers and the decisive moment was probably the Battle of Orgreave. Again if we return to Tony Cliff’s four key industries – shipyards, miners, docks and car workers – they were all predominantly white male workers. That is not how the struggle looks today.

Today, because of the changes noted in section one, many, probably most, of the important economic strikes involve workforces that are significantly or even majority female. Teachers’ strikes, health workers’ strikes, cleaners’ strikes, retail workers’ strikes are all examples. Moreover, in most western countries and especially in Britain and the US these strikes are likely to be massively multicultural. The major transformation in public attitudes to homosexuality and (albeit to a lesser extent) to gender fluidity internationally mean that any substantial strike will include significant numbers of openly LGBTQ people, including on pickets, strike committees etc.

It follows, therefore, that the struggle against sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia is not only crucial for the wider political consciousness of the working

class but also for its basic unity in the economic struggle, even within most workplaces and industries.

How this relates to community and street based struggles which show signs of increasing importance – the anti-poll tax and anti-water charges movements, and now the French *gilets jaunes* are examples truly mass community movements, as were the Egyptian Revolution (in its initial phase) and the Syrian Revolution, the *Indignados* and the Occupy movements – is complex and needs studying. In general communities are even more gender balanced i.e. majority female, than workplaces; note the prominent role of working class women in the water charges movement in Ireland and in the *gilets jaunes*. On the other hand many communities will tend to be more ethnically/racially segregated than workplaces which makes it at least possible for such movements to have a racist dimension or infection in a way that is less likely in a mass workplace strike. Again there needs to be a specific mapping of the territory: Hackney is not Rochdale is not Plymouth; New York is not Dallas and Paris and Sao Paulo are something else again. What is important is the Marxists in every country should be asking these questions and charting how these profound social changes are shaping the class struggle and the struggle against oppression.

Another feature of the recent period, with the potential to increase in the future, is the emergence of ‘non-traditional’ strikes called in a ‘non-traditional’ way. Thus there was the Day Without Immigrants in the US on 16 February 2017, against Trump’s racism and his racist wall, which closed restaurants across the country. Then there was the Polish Women’s Strike in October 2016 which defeated government plans to further restrict Polish abortion rights. Ewa Majewska offered the following account in ‘When Polish Women Revolted’ in *Jacobin*.

It was Gocha Adamczyk, a member of the left-wing *Razem* Party, who, through a simple Facebook event, called for Polish women to protest against the proposed abortion bill in September 2016. She invited women to post their pictures wearing black and adding the hashtag #BlackProtest. The call for Polish women to “strike” against the proposed abortion bill was announced by Krystyna Janda, the famous actress known from Andrzej Wajda’s film *The Man of Steel*. These simple yet powerful ideas inspired more than 150,000 Polish women — and more abroad — to

join the online protest, wearing black to symbolically mourn their reproductive rights. Demonstrations had already begun earlier that year, in April, when the first version of the bill appeared. But it was after the bill was introduced to Parliament in summer 2016, with the #BlackProtest online and the Women's Strike on October 3 on the streets, that they reached worldwide prominence and the peak of their strength. All of this culminated in the International Women's Strike on March 8, 2017.¹³

In Argentina on October 19, 2016 the *Ni unameno* (*Not one woman less*) collective organized a women's mass strike, in response to the murder of 16-year-old Lucía Pérez, who was raped and impaled in Mar del Plata. It consisted of a one-hour pause from work and study early in the afternoon, with protesters dressed in mourning for what was known as *Miércoles negro* («Black Wednesday»). These protests became region-wide and gave the movement a greater international momentum, with street demonstrations also taking place in Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico and Spain. In the run up to International Women's Day in 2017, inspired by Poland, a group of activists in Ireland called for a Strike 4 Repeal, demanding a referendum. The initial reaction of some on the left was conservative and sceptical – this is not how you call REAL strikes, without going through the unions etc. – but through social media the idea gained momentum and, while it's not possible to know how many people actually went on strike on the day, it is fact that several thousands of, mainly young, women and men converged on O'Connell Bridge and occupied it for several hours in a vibrant and exciting action.¹⁴

Then on 8 March 2018 came Spain's feminist mass strike. Beatriz Garcia, Marisa Prez and Nuria Alabao report:

Since 2016, international women's day has become the rallying point for a new feminist activism in many countries. Poland, Turkey, Italy and large parts of Latin America have seen demonstrations of tens of thousands on March 8th, raising new and old slogans against sexist violence, for reproductive rights and equal pay. But Spain stood out on 8 March 2018, both for the scale of the mobilization—an estimated 5 million—and for its militancy: not just a demonstration but a nationwide

women's strike, *unahuelga feminista*, a stoppage of waged work, care and shopping. In Madrid, the action began at midnight on March 7th with a traditional *cacerolazo*, the sound of hundreds of banging pots and pans ringing out from the central square, Puerta del Sol. Women teachers, hospital workers, students, housewives and journalists joined the strike *en masse*. The evening of March 8th saw a million-strong demonstration, six kilometres long, transforming the city centre into a vast fiesta with music and carnival puppets. In Barcelona organizers counted 600,000 parading through the streets to the feminist rally in Plaça de Catalunya. In Bilbao, a crowd of 40,000 packed the Plaza del Sagrado Corazón and sang along with the women's group onstage in a feminized version of the old militant song, *A la huelga!* Many spoke of a *15M feminista*—a turnout comparable to the Indignados' occupation of the squares from 15 May 2011 in its scale, autonomy and social diversity. Yet plenty of those celebrating this year's International Women's Day were too young to remember 2011.¹⁵

The connection between these forms of struggle which, given their success, look likely to continue and increase, and the changing nature of the working class is evident. Another effect of these changes is that, while what is often called 'identity politics' is rising, it is by no means necessarily counterposed to class politics, and separatism, in the sense in which it was prevalent in the late sixties and seventies, is hardly in evidence. Separatism was partly a response to the unreconstructed sexism prevalent on much of the left, especially the US left, in the sixties and the left has improved since those days, but there is also a connection to the changes I've been talking about. I think the decline of separatism is a reflection of the fact that the struggle against oppression is now predominantly internal to the working class.

Separatism was always primarily a middle class perspective, a means of carving out a social/political perspective within capitalism (even if that might be a nation state as in some varieties of black nationalism and early Zionism) rather than challenging capitalism as such, or simply a vehicle for career advancement, especially in the media and in academia. Separatism is manifestly inappropriate to a situation where there is a collective struggle against a common enemy, i.e. a real battle to be won. This is not just about workplace

economic struggles; it applied strongly in the campaign to win the Repeal referendum where any notion that men should be excluded from the campaign (from voting, canvassing, marching?) would immediately have been seen, by virtually everyone involved, as shooting ourselves in the foot.

This doesn't mean difficulties with identity politics have gone away. It can be, and is, used in a self-serving, divisive and sectarian way.¹⁶ Nevertheless many of the concerns of identity politics in the context of the struggle against oppression are legitimate, e.g. gender and ethnic balance in meeting panels and speakers at rallies, provided they are applied sensibly. Moreover, the general use in the movement of 'new' terms such as 'privilege' and 'intersectionality' is largely positive. For Marxists the key question here is not unpacking the flaws in the, usually academic, theory 'behind' or associated with the term, but looking at what it actually means to the people who use it. So with 'privilege' the main point is not the deficiencies of the theory in Peggy McIntosh's *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, but simply that when people refer to white or male privilege they are citing a manifest fact – that there are advantages in many situations in being white or male or both, and that often the recipients of these advantages are not fully aware of them¹⁷. Similarly with 'intersectionality', regardless of the merits or otherwise of Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, what counts most is that generally it is used to argue for solidarity between the oppressed and against economistic sectionalism and separatism – things Marxists are entirely in favour of. At the same time we need to be aware that critiques of identity politics can easily be used to bolster or lead to reactionary conclusions.¹⁸

To conclude this section, all the tendencies discussed here – the changing nature of the working class and the consequent shift in the character of the struggle against oppression - are likely to continue and develop further. There is the danger that Marxism is not yet up to speed in charting these developments and responding to them. This danger is compounded if Marxists, out of concern to defend the fundamentals of their tradition, react in a conservative way to the challenges presented by a changing world. But provided this reaction is avoided Marxism is very well placed to rise to the challenge precisely because Marxism is able to grasp the links between diverse social, economic and political

phenomena in a way unmatched by any academic discipline or alternative theoretical perspective.

Facing up to Climate Change

The third major issue Marxism will have to respond to in the immediate future is obviously climate change. Given that when its foundations were laid down catastrophic climate change was not even dreamt of, Marxism has proved remarkably effective in dealing with this new challenge. If pride of place goes to John Bellamy Foster for his pathbreaking *Marx's Ecology*, which demonstrated a deep concern with the environment at the heart of historical materialism, and for his theory, based on *Capital*, of a 'metabolic rift' between capitalism and nature, numerous other Marxists have contributed to forging a Marxist and socialist response to this existential crisis for humanity and for the world's species.

Thanks to the work of Foster, Paul Burkett, Andreas Malm, Ian Angus, Jonathan Neale, Kohei Saito, Martin Empson and others, it has been clearly established: a) that the driver of climate change and the wider ecological crisis is capitalism not human nature or even 'industrial society' as such; b) that humanity already possesses the knowledge and technology to halt climate change (through a massive shift to renewable energy, public transport, sustainable building, and non-beef agriculture, combined with large re-forestation); c) that the inability to tackle climate change derives not from this or that superficial character of the system or even some ingrained ideological mindset (a 'belief in growth' or 'an addiction to consumption') but from capitalism's fundamental dynamic: its in-built drive to accumulate capital and to expand in its relentless struggle for profit.

Moreover, this analysis has provided a strong basis for propaganda and agitation and it will continue to do so. It points to a necessary critique of the idea that climate chaos can be stopped by reforming individual behaviour or by altering patterns of consumption. It is particularly important in relation to the reactionary and potentially disastrous attempt by governments and ruling elites to load the burden of combating climate change on ordinary people while protecting the giant corporations, states and their military machines, as we have seen with Macron's fuel taxes (and the mass revolt against them) and with the proposal for a carbon tax in Ireland. It suggests strongly that what we need internationally are mass movements from

below for ‘system change not climate change’ and that combating climate change needs to become an integral component, like anti-racism and anti-imperialism, of the international socialist and working class movement.

All this stands and will continue to stand. We carry on the fight on all fronts for the fundamental changes required to stop the headlong rush towards catastrophe. However, the extreme urgency of the situation raises another difficult question. The recent IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) Report has said the world has 12 years to bring about fundamental and unprecedented change or face disaster. The question Marxists have to face is: what if capitalism does not change course either at all or in time and the world heads in to the territory of 2 or 3 per cent Celsius warming?

There is, I have to say, every reason to believe that this will be the case. The governments of the world have known the basic facts of climate change for over 30 years – at least since the IPCC was established in 1988 and issued its first Report in 1990 – and they have done nothing serious about it. And despite all the scientific warnings and all the fine words of David Attenborough and all the ‘earth summits’ they still not doing anything serious, by which I mean they are still not taking action on the scale necessary to deal with the problem. Neither Kyoto nor Copenhagen nor Paris, regardless of their failures, even attempted, even aspired to, the action required by the crisis we are facing.

The main strategy of the corporations and governments has been to talk the talk but not walk the walk. It has been to engage in massive ‘green washing’ while continuing business as usual. The case of Volkswagen epitomises this approach. In 2013 Volkswagen proclaimed

“Resource conservation and sustainability in the production sector are pivotal for achieving our Group goals for 2018. We are aiming not only to adopt eco-friendly practices but also to strike a balance between the three main factors: economy, ecology and society.”¹⁹

In September 2015 it was revealed that Volkswagen had been intentionally and systematically cheating environmental tests on carbon dioxide emissions of millions of its cars (about 11 million in all). The cars were fitted with a special device that lowered emissions when the cars were being tested but allowed the level of

emissions to rise dramatically in ordinary driving.

In so far as a section of the world’s rulers has an alternative strategy it is that of Trump and Bolsonaro – engage in the most absurd climate change denial (‘it’s a Chinese hoax’, or ‘it’s a Marxist plot’) which really signifies a determination not to give a damn and to tough it out, in the belief that they and their class will be protected from the worst of the catastrophe.

The result of all this is that concentrations of key gases in the atmosphere that are driving up global temperatures reached a new high in 2017. In their annual greenhouse gas bulletin, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) says there is no sign of reversal in this rising trend. Carbon dioxide levels reached 405 parts per million (ppm) in 2017, a level not seen in 3-5 million years. And this is the decisive statistic. Greenhouse gases in the atmosphere are cumulative – once there they stay there. It doesn’t matter if the rate of greenhouse emissions in the EU are slowing or somewhere else has cut their commitment to fossil fuels; the world has one atmosphere and if the concentration of greenhouse gases in that atmosphere is rising then the course to disaster has not changed. The Titanic is still headed for the iceberg.

We can say ‘we need a revolution’ and indeed we do say so and we should say so. But what if, despite our best efforts, the international revolution doesn’t arrive in the next 12 years? We are then into the territory of catastrophic climate change. The meaning of this needs to be clarified. It does not mean the world will end in 12 years; it doesn’t mean humanity will be wiped out; it doesn’t mean we will all be up to our knees in water; and it doesn’t mean – yet – what Marx called ‘the common ruin of the contending classes’. It means the intensification of extreme weather events on a hitherto unprecedented scale – more droughts, more fires, more storms, more floods, more destruction of crops and more refugees. It means therefore the extreme intensification of the class struggle. In the face of disaster the rich will not unite with the poor, the capitalists will not unite with the workers – they will save themselves and their own (in class not national terms) and let the rest of us starve, drown or wander the streets. And there will be, as there always is, resistance.

This is the challenge for Marxism. Marxists are going to have to think about how we address this new and unprecedented state of the world. What will we

pose as the way forward in a world in the grip of major climate change? The question exists at two levels that are distinct but, of course, interlinked. The first is the level of immediate strategy and tactics, of demands, slogans, mobilisations, in the face of climate change induced disasters. The second is at the level of charting a way out of or dealing with a situation in which massive and, perhaps, ongoing climate change is already an accomplished fact. I mean more here than just calling for socialism, but attempting to spell out what socialism would mean in those circumstances. We are not at present equipped for this and this is a call for individual and collective work.

Obviously I am not able to answer my own questions here but I do want say a bit more about them. In terms of responding to ‘natural’ disasters I think it is fair to say that generally speaking in the past the left has often responded at a propaganda level after the event but not attempted much of an immediate intervention as the disaster was unfolding. Katrina in New Orleans would be an example of this and the same would seem to be the case with the recent California fires. But what if the hurricanes and the wildfires are recurring and ongoing in a short space of time? Then we would have to respond with both immediate and strategic demands. Thinking about this will have to be both global and national. We will have to learn from each other’s experiences internationally while also understanding that although climate change is by its nature a trans-national phenomenon, the impact of climate change will vary enormously from one part of the world to another – from the Sudan to Bangladesh, from the Gulf of Mexico to Australia.

Then there is the question of the nature of the economy and society that might be able to fix, or be compatible with, a hothouse world. In *New Left Review* 111 (May-June 2018) Troy Vettese argues for what is known as ‘the half-earth’ solution. The key problem, he says, will not be population or economic growth but ‘land scarcity’ and what he suggests is that humanity will have to confine itself to one half of the earth’s land surface while the other half is reforested and re-wilded, so that half the world would absorb greenhouse gases from the atmosphere. It would also involve compulsory veganism because that and only that would permit the required reduction in the use of land for arable farming.

Now Vettese’s article and proposal is clearly utopian,

not in the sense of being inherently impossible (I do not know if it is hypothetically possible) but in the sense that it contains no link, and doesn’t attempt to establish one, between where we are at present and this imagined alternative society. But my point is that we are going to need, before too long, serious non-utopian Marxist thinking that addresses the issue of what kind of other world we are advocating. Moreover, the agitational demands and responses that we make in the face of mounting disasters will need to point in the direction of such an alternative – a socialist alternative certainly but a concretely articulated one.

These are massive and daunting issues and at the moment they not seem the most pressing ones, compared for example with the complexities of Brexit or the rise of the far right, but it won’t be long before they are very pressing indeed and if Marxists don’t have answers for them the right and the fascists most certainly will. That is why I think the Marxist ‘hive mind’, especially Marxists a lot younger and more able than me, needs to get its thinking cap on. Needless to say this is in no way counterposed to fighting in the here and now to do everything we can to prevent humanity coming to this dreadful pass but a necessary preparation for the probable future.

Conclusion

If we look at the world today with a theoretical perspective and theoretical categories inherited from the past and not developed to take account of new circumstances and new types of struggle, the conclusions we draw are likely to be highly pessimistic: the level of class struggle is low, the far right is on the rise, the left is very weak, all we can do is hold on until things get better. But as Gramsci says, quoting Marx, ‘A resistance too long prolonged in a besieged camp is demoralising in itself.’²⁰ Besides we do not have unlimited or indeed very much time before the stakes in the struggle rise enormously higher. If, however, we grasp that the international working class is much stronger than ever before and continually forging new forms of struggle and we use our Marxism not just to defend old truths but to face new challenges, above all the challenges of the anthropocene, then it becomes clear that there are huge opportunities for resistance and transformation and for breakthroughs by the left both now and in the period ahead. The future of Marxism is to rise to this task.

14 Notes:

- 1 I have listed here the main figures in what could be called the classical Marxist and then the international socialist traditions to which I adhere, but this doesn't mean there are not a multitude of others – William Morris, Karl Kautsky, Rudolf Hilferding, Victor Serge, Walter Benjamin, Clara Zetkin, Theodor Adorno, Raya Dumayevskaya, CLR James, Ernest Mandel, Franz Fannon, Amilcar Cabral, Perry Anderson, John Berger, Alex Callinicos, David Harvey, Mike Davis, Angela Davis etc.etc. - from whom, whatever my disagreements with them and their disagreements with each other, there is an immense amount to be learnt.
 - 2 Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*.
 - 3 This is how Marx understood his theory. I argue the case in John Molyneux, *What is the Real Marxist Tradition?* Bookmarks 1985.
 - 4 Gramsci on prediction. 'In reality one can "scientifically" foresee only the struggle not the concrete moments of the struggle, which cannot but be the results of opposing forces in continuous movement'. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London 1971, p.438
 - 5 Tony Cliff, 'The balance of class forces in recent years', *International Socialism* 6, Autumn 1979. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1979/xx/balance1.htm>
 - 6 The archaeologists' dispute, which is ongoing as I write, is, significantly, over exceedingly low pay.
 - 7 John Molyneux, *Lenin for Today*, London 2017 p.26
 - 8 Kim Moody, *On New Terrain; How Capital is Reshaping the Battleground of the Class War*, Haymarket, Chicago, 2017. P.35.
 - 9 See for example, Leslie T. Chang, *Factory Girls*, New York, 2008.
 - 10 See Kim Moody, as above, p.40. The exact accuracy of such a statistic is debateable because the categories are debateable, but the trend is significant and should be explored further because this is likely to be an important sector of struggle.
 - 11 It is true that the same idea is there in Marx – witness his support for Poland, Ireland and the North in the US Civil War – but he did not give it the same general 'programmatic' expression as did Lenin.
 - 12 Lenin, *What is to be Done?* Peking 1975, p.86
 - 13 <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/03/poland-black-protests-womens-strike-abortion-pis>
 - 14 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7JYEfXi2RM&t=95s>.
 - 15 Beatriz Garcia, Marisa Prez and Nuria Alabao, 'Spain's feminist strike', *New Left Review* 110, Mar/Apr 2018 p. 35
 - 16 The same, of course, can be said of 'workerism'.
 - 17 For those who like quotes from the classics to back up arguments this is a nice one: "When ten intellectuals, whether in Paris, Berlin, or New York, who have already been members of various organizations, address themselves to us with a request to be taken into our midst, I would offer the following advice: Put them through a series of tests on all the programmatic questions; wet them in the rain, dry them in the sun, and then after a new and careful examination accept maybe one or two.
The case is radically altered when ten workers connected with the masses turn to us. The difference in our attitude to a petty-bourgeois group and to the proletarian group does not require any explanation. But if a proletarian group functions in an area where there are workers of different races, and in spite of this remains composed solely of workers of a privileged nationality, then I am inclined to view them with suspicion. Are we not dealing perhaps with the labour aristocracy? Isn't the group infected with slave-holding prejudices, active or passive?
It is an entirely different matter when we are approached by a group of Negro workers. Here I am prepared to take it for granted in advance that we shall achieve agreement with them, even if such an agreement is not actual as yet. Because the Negro workers, by virtue of their whole position, do not and cannot strive to degrade anybody, oppress anybody, or deprive anybody of his rights. They do not seek privileges and cannot rise to the top except on the road of the international revolution".
Leon Trotsky, 'Closer to the Proletarians of the Coloured Races'. (1932) <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1932/06/black01.htm>
 - 18 See Gary Young's interesting article, 'It comes as no shock that the powerful hate "identity politics"' <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/05/no-shock-powerful-hate-identity-politics>
 - 19 http://www.volkswagenag.com/content/vwcorp/info_center/en/publications/2014/05/Group_Sustainability_Report_2013.bin.html/binarystorageitem/file/Volkswagen_
 - 20 Karl Marx, 'The Eastern Question', 14 September 1855, cited in Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1971, p.239
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