

REVOLUTIONARY SUBJECTIVITY & THE CRISIS OF MARXIST SOCIOLOGY

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BIRNBAUM & THE MARXIST CRISIS

. "A revolution in Praxis which cannot begin with its own theoretic presuppositions is in fact not a revolution at all." Thus, Birnbaum ended his classic article delineating the main dimensions of the crisis in Marxist sociology (1973). The crisis of Marxism refers to the contradictions in the realms of theory and practice in Marxism. This critique of Birnbaum's constitution of the crisis also applies to neo-Marxist and critical-Marxist literature. Birnbaum's constitution of the crisis in Marxist sociology is an exemplar of neo-Marxism because it is a lucid and comprehensive exposition, and because it is well-known to non-Marxist sociologists. This critique is not an oblation to Marxist canons of orthodoxy. Nor is it an affirmation of the canons of conformist sociology. Rather, the intent is to overthrow the repressive dimensions of the social system, to transform it into a more emancipated mode. Birnbaum's "Crisis of Marxist Sociology" is too conformist itself.

. It is useful to conceive the relation between a crisis and its constitution in a critique as a dialectic of objective facticity and subjective meaning. The critique presupposes the crisis, and the crisis shapes the critique. Crises do not just occur. They are socially defined and constructed by active willful human agents. The critique must be interpreted as a deliberate, intended political act which represents, promotes and shapes the interests of a social base. We expect that the constitution of a crisis in Marxist sociology can and will have a social impact, either to transform or reinforce existing social relations. I do not argue that Birnbaum is wrong in saying there exists a crisis in Marxism, or in the dimensions which he recognizes. Instead, my concern is with the theoretical and practical nature of the crisis itself which

Birnbaum has constituted. But he fails to do justice to the issue of a crisis in Marxist sociology due to his objectivist method. On the political level Birnbaum's constitution of the crisis will have repressive, reactionary consequences and will salvage elements of Marxist sociology which prevent the emergence of a revolutionary and emancipatory project.

. This refutation will be accomplished by 1) reviewing Birnbaum's constitution of the crisis in Marxist sociology; 2) explaining the contradictions of neo-Marxist theory from the perspective of revolutionary subjectivity; 3) reconstituting the crisis in a more radical fashion by drawing from Bakunin's critique of the theory and practice of the nascent Marxist movement.

. In Birnbaum's objectivism, the crisis of Marxism revolves around historical transformations which have rendered traditional Marxist categories of analysis inapplicable to the realities of the modern world. Birnbaum conceives these transformations as the external conditions of objective facticity. These changes require the emendment of Marxist concepts of social classes, the state, culture, and methodology, if Marxist sociology is to recognize the new realities. The historical transformations have occurred as dimensions of the shift of the capitalist world from a laissez-faire to a monopolistic form. This trend has produced changes in and among the capitalist and socialist worlds and the third world. In the capitalist world, technological developments and working class activity have relativized the process of pauperization. With the formation of a world market and the onset of imperialist expansion near the end of the Nineteenth Century, the redefinition of oppressed and oppressing classes along national lines entailed the shift of the onus of exploitation to the "new proletariat" of the colonized

nations. The "old proletariat" of the western industrial nations was elevated to a rather privileged economic position, and became an accomplice in exploiting third world nations.

. The failure of the proletariat in industrial nations to actualize itself as a collective revolutionary subject, as required by Marxist theory remains a mystery to critical Marxists. By traditional Marxist theory, the proletariat's revolutionary potential results from the process of pauperization in which the individual worker realizes that capitalism cannot grant real reforms, and finally sees revolution as the only way to create rational and humane social forms. The worker sees through the mystifications of ruling class ideology and attempts to struggle collectively to overthrow capitalist society. This subjective component of Marxist theory never came about, and it accounts for both the Leninist theory of the party in What is to be done?, and the Bernstein reformist mode of socialist activity as responses to the crisis of Marxism.

. Marx, the Marxists, and the neo-Marxists never expected the bourgeoisie to drift quietly into history. Instead, the proletariat was confronted with a ruling class in the form of its executive committee - the political state. In its struggle with the bourgeoisie, the proletariat was forced to contend with the institution of legitimate coercion and its powerful apparatus of laws, courts, prisons, police, and army. For the proletariat to abolish all class distinctions and antagonisms by the Marxist argument, the proletariat needed to seize state power and abolish capital politically by converting the means of production to state property.

. The precondition to establish a worker's state or a revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat is a political organization to take state power: the proletariat must have a political party. But neither Marx nor Engels spent much time elaborating a theory of the

party. In Piccone's view (1971) Marx assumed that the party would emerge as the spontaneous act of the workers under the particular socio-historical conditions which would also permit the the proletariat to emerge as a class. But Marx and Engels do indicate that their theory was not consistent with the assumption of a spontaneous party. In the Manifesto they argue that the communists do not constitute a separate party opposed to other working class parties, with interests different from those of the proletariat. The Communists are merely the most "advanced" members of the proletariat, who, more than their fellows, have learned and understood the meaning of the social and economic factors tending to revolution.

. The Communist objectives, according to Marx, are identical to those of the proletarian class: to unite all proletarians by a strong class consciousness which will allow them to destroy bourgeois hegemony. Marx took the Communist Party to be the consciousness of the socio-historical processes which will inevitably result in revolution. The revolution, as social action carried out by fully self-conscious human agents, could not occur without the free acts and deliberate planning directed by the party. But these subjective requirements are contingent on external processes in capitalist society. The pressures and crises of capitalism will force the proletarian to a position where he can no longer escape or deny the necessity of revolt. The communist movement represents the self-expression and moving force of the proletariat. It constitutes the proletarian's awareness of the objective, ongoing class struggle. Finally, it provides the workers with principles and the organizational structure needed for revolutionary action and for acquiring political power.

THE CRISIS The crux of the crisis of Marxism is the proletariat's failure to actualize itself as a

revolutionary class. For class consciousness to develop and for revolutionary acts to emerge, the individual subject must identify with others of the same life-conditions. According to Marxism, the worker who does not identify with the objective interests of his/her class is falsely conscious of his/her social being. The Marxists and the neo-Marxists construct the issue in terms of the perspective that consciousness always depends on social being or objective facticity. The workers never became the ideal Marxist revolutionaries because they never became poor enough. Capitalism cheated socialism out of its imminent and historically necessary victory by throwing the workers a few crumbs, in permitting trade union participation. Thus the revolutionary class struggle lost its fire. Though this explanation sounds similar to the bourgeois view of the relation between wealth and political consciousness, it served as the basis of Marxist theory of the party, the Leninist justification of the lobotomy of the proletariat, and the Bernstein compromise with capitalism. It continues as the basis of the neo-Marxist constitution of the crisis of Marxism. They claim that conditions external to Marxism are responsible for the crisis.

. The neo-Marxist focus on external conditions ignores the constitutive role played by thought, consciousness, will, or subjectivity in the social construction of reality. This is a contradiction which Marx himself disputed in the Theses on Feuerbach (1972 107). Materialism was to be critiqued for its one-sidedness in its reduction of human activity to that of mere response to the external stimulation of objects. Marx noted that humans make external circumstances as much as external circumstances make humans. Therefore, social reality is to be understood reflexively in terms of revolutionizing practice or practical-critical activity. Thus, the object of the revolutionary movement cannot be thought of as something distinct from the activity of the

humans involved.

. Consistently missing from the neo-Marxist constitution of the crisis of Marxism is the role of Marxist theory and practice in the social construction of the objective facticity of the crisis and the constitution of the reality of the modern world.

. Marxism, as a powerful social movement served to create external circumstances as much as external circumstances served to create Marxism. History is not a determinist linear process of the unfolding of objective laws of development in which humans have no importance. To argue this is to regress to a pre-Marxian, pre-Hegelian crude materialist understanding of social reality. This perspective permeates the neo-Marxist view of the crisis, despite their claim that they want to avoid collapsing both object and subject into the object. To the revolutionary, it is inconceivable that external, objective facticity could succeed in existing and operating independent of human activity. Without the principle of revolutionary subjectivity, as advanced by Marx, no perspective can be an adequate critique of historical formations or social processes.

. If the historical transformations of which Birnbaum and other neo-Marxist speak have contradictions and if Marxism contributed to the construction of these contradictions, then it follows that Marxism - especially in its nascent form - must have contradictions too. Yet Birnbaum and other neo-Marxists ignore the contradictions in the theory, practice, and development of the nascent Marxist movement in favor of the objective facticity of the historical transformations. For example, Katsiaficus (1979) affirms the typical neo-Marxist view that since 1917 Marxism has been a repressive ideology. To ignore the contradictions of the nascent movement frustrates an adequate critique of the new realities. How can a real "revolution in Praxis" emerge without examining the original premises?

BAKUNIN'S CRITIQUE OF MARXISM

. The founding of the First International Workingman's Association in London in 1864 was the first important opportunity to disseminate the Marxist perspective on socialist revolution. The First International included socialists of various hues, and was committed to the melioration of the life condition of the working class. Marxism had a following before the founding of the First International, but Marx and Engels saw it as a viable instrument to combat capitalism and speed the forming of the proletariat as a revolutionary class for acquisition of state power. But Marxism was not the only perspective on how the proletariat is to be actualized, and how best to liberate it. Marx and Engels found an able antagonist in the great Russian revolutionary Michael Bakunin. Bakunin was well-versed in the revolutionary dialectics so prevalent in the radical religious and political literature which emerged from the split between the rightist and leftist Hegelians. Bakunin was also a deeply committed revolutionary who worked tirelessly to emancipate the proletariat and all oppressed people. Unlike Marx, Bakunin objected to the goal of the taking of state power by the proletariat or its representatives, and to the organizational structure of the proletariat revolution as promulgated by Marx and the authoritarian communists.

. As an anarchist, Bakunin rejected the very idea of taking state power as reactionary. True liberation of the proletariat demanded dismantling the apparatus of political oppression along with the means of economic exploitation. Criticizing the Marxist theory of the state, Bakunin posed the question: If the proletariat is to be elevated to the status of a ruling class, as Marx demanded, then whom is it to rule? Bakunin argued that the obvious answer is that there will be another social category, another proletariat, which will be subdued by the new rule of the workers' state. The

very essence of the state is the domination of one class by another, and the result is always exploitation. This is why socialists, if they are to be consistent and succeed, must be enemies of the state as well as enemies of capitalism. Bakunin said:

"I detest communism because it is the negation of liberty, and I cannot conceive anything human without liberty. I am not a communist because communism concentrates all the powers of society and absorbs them into the state, because it leads inevitably to the centralization of property in the hands of the state, while I want to see the state abolished. .. I want society, and collective or social property to be organized from the bottom up through free association, and not from the top down by authority of any kind" (Guerin 1972 22).

. Getting closer to the chief defects in Marxist theory, Bakunin asked what the Marxists meant by saying the proletariat will be elevated to the ruling class. Germany then had nearly forty million citizens. Would all of them be members of government? In such a case, there would be no government at all - a Bakunin ideal. But this was not what the Marxists intended. By the rule of the proletariat, they meant the rule of a few representatives elected by the people. Despite this democratic base, Bakunin argued that the Marxist ideal of the workers' state will even so be the control and direction of the great mass of people by a privileged elite, a still more dangerous lie, because it professes to express the "people's will."

. The Marxists claim that the state will be composed of workers with interests identical to those of the proletariat as a whole, but workers who more clearly understood historical conditions and the prevailing social tendencies. Bakunin said that these will cease to be workers once they become rulers and assume positions as the representatives of the people. Despite the Marxist claim that they

will be dedicated and "scientific" socialists, they will constitute a new class. They will effect the "... despotic control of the populace by a new and not at all numerous aristocracy of real and pseudo-scientists. The uneducated people will be totally relieved of the cares of administration and will be treated as a regimented herd. A beautiful liberation, indeed!" (1971b 331)

. But even the Marxists know that their theory of the worker's state is a contradiction and that their government based on superior understanding will be a dictatorship regardless of its putative democratic base. They attempt to resolve the problem by calling it a temporary transitional phase on the road to socialism. Their only object is to elevate and educate the people in political and economic matters to such an extent that the state itself will die from irrelevance.

. Yet the entire Marxist theory of the state is fraught with irreconcilable contradictions. If the state would really be of the people, why eliminate it? If the acquisition of state power is really necessary to emancipate the workers, then the workers are not free, so why call it a workers' state? The anarchist polemics against the Marxists intended to force the socialists to confront the idea that the free association of the working masses from the bottom up should be the aim of their movement, and that every state, even in the transitional form advanced by the Marxists, is still despotism and domination. The Marxist argument that only their dictatorship can create freedom for the people is answered by the anarchists that "Dictatorship has no objective other than self-perpetuation, and that slavery is all it can generate and instill in the people who suffer it" (Bakunin 1971b 332).

. Freedom, the emancipation of the proletariat can be created only by freedom, by the emancipation of the proletariat by itself and for itself, and as a fully

conscious revolutionary class that is organized voluntarily. The libertarian socialist and anarchist theory entails an assault on all forms of human domination, whether political or economic. In contrast, Marxist theory leads to a glorification of the state, and under the guise of politics, allows them to make compromises with agents of the bourgeoisie and forced them toward reaction.

. What Bakunin disliked most in Marxist theory of the state was the effect the manifest authoritarianism of Marx and the communist parties had on the developing proletarian movement and the revolutionary concept of its struggle for equality. This was most evident in Marx' ultimately successful attempts to dominate the First International by elevating Marxism as the official doctrine of the workers' liberation movement. At first, no clear socialist perspective dominated the First International. It was composed of autonomous units dispersed through Europe and America. They collaborated at higher levels mainly to support struggles in local areas. For Bakunin, vagueness of the First International ideology and autonomy of the local units was an advantage consistent with the principles of revolutionary anarchism. They permitted enough flexibility to adapt the general program to specific needs at the local levels, which would actualize the proletariat as a revolutionary class.

."For the International to be a real power, it must be able to organize within its ranks the immense majority of the proletariat of Europe, of America, of all lands. But what political or philosophical program can rally .. all these millions? Only a program which is very general, hence vague and indefinite, for every theoretical definition necessarily involves elimination and in practice exclusion from membership" (Bakunin 1917a 293).

. Bakunin emphasized that the original principle of the First International, the spontaneous ordering

of the proletariat as a revolutionary class, was needed to ensure the overthrow of capitalism and the state. The attempts by Marxists to organize the proletariat externally in an authoritarian hierarchy is a contradiction in principle, and only a change of masters. The choice for the socialists was clear to Bakunin:

"We must return to our original principles and omit the specific political issue, thus leaving the sections and federations free to develop their own policies. But then would not each section and each federation follow whatever political policy it wants? No doubt. But then, will not the International be transformed into a Tower of Babel? One the contrary, only then will it attain real unity, basically economic, which will necessarily lead to real political unity. Then there will be created .. the grand policy of the International - not from a single head, ambitious, erudite, but incapable of embracing the thousand needs of a proletariat .. but by the absolutely free, spontaneous and concurrent action of the workers of all countries" (1971a 297).

. The solidarity and unity of the proletariat could not be externally imposed by a dictatorial elite. Rather, this solidarity already existed in the everyday experience of the worker. The workers only needed facilitation to organize themselves, to struggle for their self-defined aims and goals. The duty of the revolutionary is to lend expertise and articulation to those who sought it. The International itself, Bakunin reminded the socialists, was not founded by Marxists or any other socialist group, but by elements in the proletariat who saw the need to establish an international organization of struggle against capitalism. By authoritarian emphasis Marxism was certain to destroy the International and impede and mutilate the workers' movement.

. Bakunin felt that the workers emancipation must be based on the workers' own actions, and

their subjective identifying with others of the same life situation, and the ability of each worker to act as a spontaneous and free being. The proletariat must affect its own liberation, resulting from practical and critical action which must remain libertarian and egalitarian. Marxist theory and practice of revolutionary organization, like its theory of the state, denies the proletariat the right of self-organization, and externally imposes the communist party as a directing force simply in lust for power. Bakunin called Marx the "Bismark of Socialism."

BAKUNIN & THE MARXIST CRISIS

. While the domination of radical sociology by Marxism must end, it should not be replaced by Bakuninism. This would defeat the theory and practice of anarchism. The contradictions which Bakunin exposed serve to illuminate the crisis, which has been apparent in the neo-Marxist constitution of the crisis. These have in common the mystification that there exists an objective reality which must be defined for the masses by a scientific political elite. All of these deny the rationality, intent, spontaneity, and creativity of the individual. All argue that the crisis of Marxism is due to conditions external to the theory and practice of Marxism. But the crisis of Marxism emerges from the interaction of the movement and the conditions in which it has operated. Marxism must not be externalized. It must be viewed as a tool which possibly can contribute to the overthrow of alienated social life worlds, and not as an end in itself. If Marxism is inimical to revolutionary projects, it must be abandoned.

. Most contemporary neo-Marxist constitutions on the crisis of Marxism, including Birnbaum's, are more attempts to salvage Marxism than attempts to develop new revolutionary theory. But skepticism is appropriate for a theory and practice which seeks to replace capitalist monopolies with a socialist monopoly, a one-dimensional

vision of reality with a one dimensional radicalism, and an authoritarian state with another authoritarian state.

. Althusser (1969) insists on a concept of Marxism which has made its statist, bureaucratic and scientific manifestations both possible and reasonable in the confines of the logic of the theory and application of Marxism. The Marxist claim to absolute truth, and its appeal to the structure and processes of objective facticity, which must be defined, interpreted and presented by the scientist intellectual elite, either possessing or pursuing state power, contradicts the existence of a truly revolutionary project.

. There is another contemporary Marxist response to the crisis which can be applauded for incorporating some of the elements of the revolutionary subjectivity of the anarchist critique. Based on the attempts of Korsch, Lukacs, Gramsci, and the Frankfurt School to recapture the Hegelian structure of Marx' thought, contemporary critical theory has raised the question that something may have been wrong with Marxism from the beginning. One of the best attempts to reconstitute Marxism is that of Paul Piccone (1971). He argues that Marxism was invalidated because the proletariat failed to actualize itself as a revolutionary class, and that this occurred because Marxism did not have an adequate theory of consciousness. His argument faults the working class for failing to fulfill the truth of Marxist theory. Thinking of humans as automatons whose behavior must be controlled to fulfill the "truth" of a theory is a cynical legitimation for oppressive and alienated social formations. The anarchist criticism is that Marxism has never operated other than as a tool of oppression for this reason. Apparently, Piccone believes that the proletariat itself would not have existed were it not for Marxism! He includes no discussion of the theory of the nascent movement as the source of the crisis. One could more easily

argue, as Bakunin predicted, that the proletariat could not emerge as a revolutionary class because of Marxism.

. Blind allegiance to Marxism is an obstacle to the radical transformation of society, and has prevented the neo-Marxists from examining their own theoretic assumptions. Like their predecessors, Birnbaum and Piccone abandon practical critical action by arguing that the crisis of Marxism is a result of conditions external to Marxism, and by denying that Marxism played a part in constructing these conditions. This objectivist line of reasoning is identical to that which permitted the early Marxists to justify the authoritarian control of the workers' movement. The Bakunin critique can be a starting point for a real "revolution in Praxis" in radical sociology.

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