

Online Article

Is Marxist Method Political Economy?

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It is common to hear the phrase ‘Marxist political economy’ from both Marxists and non-Marxists. It is also as common to describe Marxist political economy as a method of analysis. Except for some astute observers, virtually any radical political economy gets labelled as Marxist political economy.

Two related questions, somewhat rhetorical, I want to raise are: is there something, some distinct discipline, or a theoretical framework which can be called Marxist political economy? Is political economy a Marxist method of analysing, understanding or interpreting the world? My answer to both these questions is in the negative. There is neither a distinct theoretical framework which can be called Marxist political economy nor is the method of Marxism political economy.

Marx’s project in his definitive work *Capital* and even earlier writings was a critique of political economy, not its affirmation in any modified form and much less an invention of an alternative political economy. The sub-title of *Capital* is *A Critique of Political Economy*. The major premise of Marx’s critique was that the then political economy (and that is true of current economic theories as well) was based on showing the *relation between things* in which real human beings, if at all, are

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then inserted as personifications of structures or economic categories. Marx’s project was to subvert the existing economic categories and expose the fetishism of things in which economic theories are embedded. For Marx, it is the human being as a social being who acts, who makes history, who creates conditions of his or her existence. In the dominant capitalist mode of production, these conditions appear and are presented as the creators of real human beings, a perversion based on elucidating the *relationship of things in themselves*. It is these appearances, perversions and inversions that Marx’s critique aimed at exposing and revealing the real content, which are the social relations that human beings enter into to produce and reproduce their lives and conditions of existence. ‘History does nothing’, Marx said. History ‘does not “possess immense wealth”, it wages no battles. It is Man, living Man who does all that, who possesses and fights, “history” is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve its own aims; history is

nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims’ (Marx and Engels 1844). In the same vein Capital is nothing, not a person apart from the real human being, but the creation of the real human being, creation of human labour. Capital is a social relation not a thing in itself. Thus both capital and labour have a social character in a historically constituted social relation between real human beings. But under capitalism this reality is turned upside down. The creation of labour, capital, presents itself as an alien object which controls labour.

I would therefore conclude that there is no Marxist political economy nor alternative Marxist economic theory with its own concepts and categories. Rather, what we have is a critique of extant economic theories and their categories which appear and present themselves as things in themselves. Marx’s analysis and exposure of these as inverted and perverted forms hiding real social relations at once give us the Marxist method. And that method is historical materialism, not political economy.

Variouly called the ‘materialist conception of history’, or summed up by Engels as ‘historical materialism’, is Marx’s method of analysing, understanding and interpreting the world. The best summation of the ‘guiding principle’ of their

works, as Marx called it, is in the oft-quoted passage in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness ... it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness (Marx 1971 [1859]: 20–1).

This passage is pregnant with several important pointers which can be summarised as the main propositions of the historical materialist method.

First is the proposition that the foundation of society is the way human beings, as social beings – social because there is no such thing as an individual being outside society – produce their material and social existence. In the process of producing their life conditions, human beings enter into social relations of production with each other and with nature using and fashioning the means of acting on nature, that is forces of production. Thus a mode of production is an ensemble of interconnected relations of production and forces of production, the character of which is historically constituted and historically specific.

From this proposition we can derive two fundamental aspects of the method of historical materialism. One, that it is historically

specific. The method does not abstract social relations from history. Two, that it centres human activity, which is perforce social activity, in the production of human existence. In short, human agency is integral and organic to material production. So material production is not objectified nor is there a sharp division between ‘the objective’ and ‘the subjective’.

Second is the proposition that social being determines social consciousness. This needs to be fleshed out further as other Marxists have done. Here I am particularly attracted by E. P. Thompson’s conceptualisation which posits class experience or class ways, which mediate between social being and social consciousness (for a discussion of this see Wood 2016). This has the merit of bringing in class cultures, mores and ‘ways of doing things’ to enrich the social being in a particular milieu and society. The development of class consciousness therefore becomes a process of ‘becoming’ rather than a *deus ex machina* imposed from outside. Interposing real life class experience between social being and social consciousness helps us to go beyond the somewhat sterile debate on class-in-itself and class-for-itself.

The third point to make is that historical materialism is a revolutionary methodology in at least three ways. First, for Marx, his method of analysing and understanding society was preeminently a political project. Historical materialism is not simply a philosophical or theoretical construct to understand the world but a political project to understand it so as to change it. Since capitalism itself is a historical phase in the history of humankind it can be changed and superseded. Unlike bourgeois theories and ideologies which see elements of capitalism, albeit in their infancy, from time

immemorial and therefore current capitalism as its maturation, the Marxist method sees it as a specifically historic project which can be changed and transcended. This is an important point to underscore in the present atmosphere of gloom and despair where even Marxists have given up any hope for a revolutionary transformation of capitalism and have come to accept it as the only game in town.

Second by its stress on *social* productive forces and *social* relations of production, which are dynamic and changing, historical materialism draws in human agents involved in struggle on the terrain of change – capital fighting to restore and reinforce the existing status quo while labour is struggling to change it. Relations of production are not given and cannot be taken for granted. They have to be constantly reproduced and refurbished just as the hegemonic worldview of the bourgeoisie has to be constantly renewed.

Let it therefore be said that Marx’s formulation that at a certain stage of development, material productive forces come into conflict with existing relations of production which become fetters on its further development, thus setting into motion the era of ‘social revolution’ (1971 [1859]: 21), ought not to be interpreted literally or mechanistically. The conflict between productive forces and relations of production is a *social* conflict, between classes, not a conflict between things. Thus the conditions for fundamental changes mature within the womb of the capitalist mode. It is in the course of struggle, class struggle, that the revolutionary class becomes class conscious. What appears as ‘ten days that shook the world’¹ is actually a culmination of the maturing of seeds of revolution in previous decades.

It is in this context that we should see class and class formation as a process. Classes are not some determinate categories given by structures but rather social agents implicated in the process of production such that they are 'in formation'. In the capitalist mode of production what defines classes is the process of production and appropriation of surplus – who produces surplus and who appropriates it – rather than their relation to the means of production or a hierarchy of incomes or ownership of assets. Thus class too is not a determinate sociological category but rather a process in which they are in formation.

And this brings me to what I believe is the central problematic of historical materialism. The central problematic of historical materialism is class struggle in which classes are historically determined social agents implicated in the social process of production and involved in social struggles in the course of the process of reproduction of the dominant mode.

Class struggle therefore is central to the method of historical materialism.

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In conclusion, let me pose a question that, I'm sure, is also on your minds. Why am I going over the same old treaded ground which supposedly every Marxist knows and has read over and over again and regurgitated as often. There are at least five reasons which have pushed me to do this. I'll go over them very briefly, given the constraint of time.

First, the assertion that the methodology of Marxism, that is historical materialism, is taken for granted by Marxists is simply not true in the present conjuncture which is

overwhelmed by a variety of marxisms and post-marxisms. Even leading Marxists often stray away from historical materialism in their concrete analysis of concrete conditions. Many such analyses are conspicuous for their absence of discussion on class struggles; rather they spend time on abstract economic categories which are presented as Marxist categories and concepts of analysis.

Secondly, many Marxists, both the old guard and those from younger generations, think, believe and present the Marxist method of understanding society as radical political economy which they call Marxist political economy.

Thirdly, absence of class struggle in radical analysis which goes under the name of Marxism leads to scenarios of doom and gloom so far as the revolutionary transformation of capitalism is concerned. Socialism is seen as a distant utopian dream, good for speculation but short on concrete, practical reality. Detached from concrete struggles of the working people, radical intellectuals substitute their erudite discourses for real life struggles, or class struggles, of the working people.

Fourthly, some Marxists and many non-Marxists accuse Marxism of economic determinism and class reductionism. Although this is an old trope of bourgeois intellectuals it continues to hold sway and, in the process has enlisted even Marxists or so-called post-marxists. Unfortunately, the structuralist analysis of some Marxists who present their method as the method of Marxist political economy lends itself to such criticism.

Fifthly, Marxism is often accused of stressing the economic moment at the expense of the political

moment. Contrary to this accusation, as I have endeavoured to show, politics is central to historical materialism. Historical materialism is preeminently a political project. There are fine examples of Marxist writings using historical materialism which have given us far more profound analysis and understanding of the political moment in different societies in different historical periods.

Finally, I want to throw spanners in the works of post-marxist marxisms – call it what you may – post-modernism, postcolonialism, post-capitalism, decoloniality discourse etc.). These discourses, as they call them, gleefully celebrate the 'end of Marxism' and concurrently its socialist project. Just as Fukuyama's 'end of history' was short-lived, so will the variety of post-marxisms end up in the dustbin of history, if not sooner than later.

References

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Note

1. This is the title of John Reed's (1919) book describing the Russian Revolution which he witnessed first-hand.