

A question of ethics

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*Paul Blackledge, **Marxism and Ethics: Freedom, Desire and Revolution** (SUNY, 2012), \$80*

Ethics has been a problematic area for Marxism ever since its beginnings. Marx himself wrote very little on the topic, and what he did write seems paradoxical. On the one hand, he appears to deny that his outlook involves ethical values at all. Socialism, he insists, is not a mere ethical ideal; it is rather the real and concrete form of society that will result from the revolutionary forces currently at work in capitalist society. “The working classes have no fixed and perfect utopias to introduce...they have no ideals to realise; they have only to set at liberty the elements of the new society which have already been developed in the womb of the collapsing bourgeois society”.¹ On the other hand, there is quite clearly a moral dimension to his criticisms of capitalist society and his vision of a socialist alternative.

These apparently conflicting strands of Marx’s thought have given rise to an enormous amount of controversy among subsequent Marxist philosophers. Blackledge gives an impressively comprehensive and detailed account of these debates in this major new study. After describing the views of Marx and Engels on ethics, he then traces these controversies from the ideas of Second International figures such as Bernstein and Kautsky, and the responses of Lenin and Lukács, through the work of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Marcuse), Sartre and the British New Left (EP Thompson, Perry Anderson, Alasdair MacIntyre), to the debates in contemporary academic philosophy. He deals not only with the ideas of recent analytic philosophers like GA Cohen and Steven Lukes, but also gives an excellent account of recent discussion by continental philosophers, including Simon Crichley, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. Interestingly, he shows how similar the ideas of these camps have been, though superficially they appear to be so different and disconnected.

Blackledge’s own position emerges from this historical account. He rejects the view that capitalism is pregnant with the socialist future as a form of historical determinism that denies human freedom and political choice, and leads to ethical “nihilism”. He associates this “obstetric” view (as GA Cohen called it) particularly with the dogmatic certainties of “Stalinism”, though in fact it is more widespread than anything that can be encompassed even by such a catch-all term, and comes from Marx himself as the quotation above illustrates.

However, as the revolutionary potential of the working class has increasingly come into question, many have argued that the Marxist critique of capitalism and its vision of socialism are embodied in universal ethical principles rather than on problematic historical grounds. Blackledge rejects this sort of ethical approach as well. Marxism does involve an ethic, he maintains, an ethic of freedom-but this is not an abstract moral doctrine derived from disinterested or universal principles. The values of Marxism arise out of the concrete situation and actual struggle of the working class to overthrow capitalism and to create socialism. When Marx says that the working class has “no

ideals” to realise “he should not be understood...as suggesting that Marxists have no vision of a better future”, but rather that their values are “immanent” and “rooted in the real movement of things” (p133).

This may seem to lead inevitably to relativism. However, the revolutionary working class is not simply one particular and sectional interest group in capitalist society. As the agents that are struggling to create socialism and transcend class divisions, workers are “the potential agents, not only of their own liberation, but also of the universal liberation of humanity” (p53). Thus, like Lukács, Blackledge argues that the working class is potentially the “universal class”. Moreover, the values that it represents have not been imposed upon it externally from on high, but are immanent in society itself. “Freedom is best understood as an immanent potential which evolves over time through a process of collective struggles” (p57).

The idea that the working class is a revolutionary force in modern capitalist conditions is widely questioned. It is mainly because of doubts on this score that many Marxists have abandoned the revolutionary basis of Marxism and settled instead for an abstract, ethical utopianism of a sort that Marx himself explicitly repudiated. It is one of the main strengths of Blackledge’s book that he confronts this issue so directly. In response to the non-revolutionary conditions that now exist, Marxists should adopt what Lucien Goldmann called a “tragic vision”: without a basis for hope, they should nevertheless continue to hope (p141). They should look beyond the limits of the present through a “wager” on future possibilities of change. “Marxism involves not a deterministic prediction of the socialist future of humanity but rather a wager on the revolutionary potential of the proletariat” (p142). This wager is based ultimately on the solidarity that develops in working class struggles. These require and exhibit the socialist “virtues” of community and cooperation. They prefigure a future socialist society and demonstrate its feasibility.

In making these arguments, Blackledge draws heavily on some early writings by Alasdair MacIntyre. At first, this may seem a surprising source. MacIntyre is now a Catholic social philosopher steeped in Aristotelianism who rejects Marxism. However, in an earlier period he was an active Marxist—initially as a member of the Communist Party, then in the British New Left, and then as a Trotskyist in the Socialist Labour League and the International Socialists (pp185-186).²

The Aristotelian language of “virtue” seems an anachronistic way to describe the ethics of Marxism. More importantly, it is doubtful whether the social psychology of small scale struggles can provide a sufficient basis for a socialist ethics. Feelings of solidarity are a feature of many kinds of protest movement. A socialist ethic needs a more specific grounding.

Fundamental to Marxism is the insight that there are far larger, objective-economic, social and historical-forces at work within capitalism, creating the contradictions that will lead towards a specifically socialist society in the future. The operation of these is largely passed over in Blackledge’s account, which portrays Marxism in political terms as primarily a philosophy of revolutionary struggle.

Marx is referring to these objective forces with the “obstetric” picture that Blackledge is so critical of. No doubt Blackledge is right to question the simple determinism that can easily be read into this picture. But we must be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Marxism is not simply a philosophy of political commitment and struggle. It essentially involves a historical theory according to which capitalism is only a particular and limited stage that, because of the objective conflicts at work within it, is destined to come into crisis and to generate the forces that will lead to its overthrow and to a new and better form of society (“better” in the sense of freer, as Blackledge argues).

Though he objects to Marx's "obstetric" language, Blackledge cannot so easily reject the aspect of Marx's thought that it describes. Indeed, he relies on it when he argues that the working class is a revolutionary force "immanent" within capitalism. True, this is not a purely mechanical process guaranteed automatically to deliver a better society. Nevertheless, according to Marx this will happen as a matter of fact. And, if it does, it will do so partly because the capitalist system will generate increasingly severe and incapacitating crises,³ and partly because political forces will arise to abolish capitalism and build a new society.

For Marx, the main component of this force will be the working class. That is where the problem lies. Though capitalism has led to recurrent and severe crises, there is no sign of the emergence of a revolutionary working class. It cannot be conjured up by political commitment alone. If it does emerge that will be because larger-social, economic and historical-forces are at work, driven ultimately by the increasing socialisation of the means of production and exchange.

That is to say, the "wager" on the emergence of revolutionary forces that Marxism makes is not based only on the experience of solidarity in struggle, but on the existence of objective forces at work in capitalist society. To say this is not to deny freedom or to exclude a role for ethics, as Blackledge fears. Correctly understood, freedom does not exist only in the absence of determining conditions; it is not a merely negative phenomenon. It depends not only on the removal of the restraints of capitalist society; it requires also the creation of positive conditions which enhance people's abilities and give them the power actually to exercise freedom and choice. This has been, and will be, the effect of the social and historical developments that Marx describes.

These are large and fundamental issues. The most important thing about Blackledge's book is that it raises them. It moves beyond what has become the well-worn ground of the dispute within Marxism between ethical nihilism and universalism and takes the debate onto more substantial and promising new ground.

Notes

1: Karl Marx, 1871, The Civil War in France, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/index.htm

2: See Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson (eds), 2009, Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism: Selected Writings, 1953-1974 (Haymarket).

3: There is a quasi-mechanical aspect to the occurrence of economic crises, in that the market is an alienated system out of people's power to control.