

Capital and Marx's vision of communism

By Tom Rigby

KARL Marx's *Capital* can only be understood when we grasp that his critique of political economy, his understanding of alienation and his vision of a communist society are integrated parts of a single world outlook.

Everything Marx wrote is informed by his belief that human beings are capable of achieving communism. By communism he meant not Stalinism and the Gulag, but their opposite — a society in which the freely associated producers rationally regulate their relations with each other and with nature for the purpose of the self-development of all.

Marx wanted to see an end to the state, money, class exploitation and the ruinous effects of the division of labour, especially, the separation between physical and mental labour. Working class victory in the class struggle would make possible the collective utilisation of advanced technology for the benefit of all humanity, rather than for the aggrandisement of a tiny class of exploiters. The first priorities would be to answer the basic social needs of the world's population for health, education and housing and to reduce the working week so as to create the free time needed to make democratic self-rule a reality. The human productivity freed in this manner would enable society to move rapidly to full blown communism, that is, a society able, as Marx put it, to inscribe on its banner: "From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs!"

Communism was conceived as a higher form of evolution for the social animal, *Homo Sapiens*. It wasn't just a more desirable state of affairs, a utopia that we could hope or wish for; it was a potential inherent in human beings as a species and in human social evolution.

When we describe capitalist society as inhuman for what it does to people, we are assessing it by reference to what we believe human beings are capable of. Only if you think communism is possible does it make sense to describe as inhuman a system that does not allow real self development and freedom. Otherwise the term is what it seems to right-wing philosophers, empty rhetoric.

What is inhuman about capitalism is the fact that all people — and the working class much more than anyone else — suffer under the condition that Marx described as alienation. What we are alienated from is our own humanity.

The modern wage worker is, like all human beings, a "social animal". We can live as individuals only in and through society. The basic social bond is labour — the purposeful transformation of nature to suit our needs. Labour is by definition social. Like language it could not possibly develop without human beings living together and working together.

Under capitalism labour takes the form of wage labour — a commodity to be bought

and sold. The means of production are the private property of the capitalist class. Lacking any other means of existence the wage workers are dependent on the capitalists to whom they sell their very life activity (in the form of labour power) in order to survive. As a result, the creative powers of social labour are reduced to a mere means of making money for the capitalist.

This subordination of wage labour to capital takes place under the veneer of the free, equal and fair exchange of commodities. To see how it works we have to look at the commodity, which is to capitalism what the cell is to the human body.

THE commodity is anything that can be bought and sold on the market. This is the form that human labour-power and its products take under capitalism. Things that are not the products of labour — like uncultivated land — only tend to become commodities when labour power itself has assumed that form.

The labour that produces commodities has a dual nature: it is both a concrete, useful thing, producing a particular use value, and also a part of the general pool of social labour.

Exchange is possible because the commodities exchanged are both different and similar. What they have in common is that they are all products of human labour. But this common element is not any specific, concrete kind of labour. (If things were the same, there would be no point in exchange.) Rather, each commodity represents a fraction of the total labour expended by all members of society. This is what Marx called Abstract Labour. It has no specific, concrete, qualitative properties — it is not brick laying, computer operating, or car building, but all of these, what all of them have in common — and so, it can only be measured quantitatively.

The only way to measure the quantity of labour is by its duration, that is by its expenditure of time. The measure of value of any commodity is the amount of labour time — on average across society — needed to produce it. This is what Marx called the socially necessary labour time.

Capital grows out of the exchange of commodities. The general formula for capital is M-C-M' — the exchange of money M for commodities C and then the sale of those commodities for more money, M'. The rationale for this circuit can only be the self expansion of capital. This relentless drive of capital towards self-expansion is the defining characteristic of the capitalist system. More and more economic activity is brought under its sway as the world market and factory production develop. This drive reduces human beings to mere appendages of machines,

destroys whole industries and communities, and puts at risk any form of social provision — like a free health service — that cannot serve profit-making.

Marx called the difference between the amount of money put into the capitalist circuit M-C-M' and that taken out, surplus value.

The origin of surplus value is labour power. The use-value of labour power for the capitalist lies solely in its ability to create new value. Its exchange value is the labour time socially necessary for its production (the labour time necessary to produce the goods the worker will buy with his or her wages in order to sustain and reproduce life).

In the process of capitalist production he who has purchased labour power, the capitalist, can use it for far longer than the period of time needed to produce the goods consumed by the worker and his or her family in the form of wages. The rest of the wage worker's labour time goes free to the capitalist. That's how capitalist exploitation works. The thing bought, labour power, has the unique, "magical", quality of being used and consumed and in that process somehow producing for its user, the capitalist, more than it costs him. What the capitalist buys is human creativity, human life.

Alongside this exploitation goes the phenomenon Marx described as "commodity fetishism". Human beings experience their relations with other human beings, with their own social product, and with the instruments of their own labour, not as simple and open co-operation between free individuals working to transform nature to gain common ends, but as relations between things. And, what's more, between things with strange powers!

If this sounds strange, think about the everyday language of capitalist society — people are treated like things and things are treated like people. Human beings are "worth" so much metal or paper, while money "leaves the country" and the market "makes decisions." Human beings lose control of their lives to things they create. This false consciousness reaches its most extreme form in the idea of the "hidden hand" of the market. The everyday relations of commodity exchange somehow combine together through the market to distribute goods in the most efficient way possible. The market becomes an All-Seeing, All-Knowing, All-Doing God. This is not just false consciousness. Capitalism really does lack any coherent, conscious social control of production. Instead it has the remorseless blind drive for profit, competition between capitalists, crises and mass unemployment.

The worship of the market practised by academic economists and the leadership of the Labour Party is really a confession of the lack of human control over the very activity that makes us human — social labour. Socialism is, fundamentally, about regaining human control.