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## Theory and Class Struggle: An Introduction to the Section

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## Theory and Class Struggle: An Introduction to the Section

### Abstract

An introduction to our new section "Theory and Class Struggle" by the Section Editors - Raju Das and Robert E. Latham.

### Keywords

Class Struggle, Marxism

Given the reciprocal connection between theory and the project of changing the world through class struggle, *Class, Race and Corporate Power* is launching a new section: ‘Theory and Class Struggle’.

The primary aim of this new section is to help advance the process whereby the knowledge generated under the rubric of academic Marxism can be directed toward advancing the class struggle. There is a great deal of relevant knowledge – such as the study of crisis, neoliberalism, or the history of organizing for struggle – which could be assembled as a resource toward that end. However, given that this knowledge today comes out of the academy, the theory that directly speaks to advancing class struggle will mostly need to be extrapolated. There are a meaningful exceptions to this in the work of scholars such as Alex Callinicos, Himani Bannerji, Jodi Dean, David Harvey, Michael Lebowitz, Leo Panitch, and Vijay Prashad.<sup>1</sup> Our aim, however, is to help move academic Marxism beyond this condition of exceptionality.

We need theory that now and into the near future directly helps shapes praxis and allows for better political judgement; or is that hopeless and instead we can just develop left Marxist thought on its own with the hope that the new thought will come to shape praxis as we slowly come to see the world differently?

In this section, we will invite three types of intervention.

1. Interviews with contemporary Marxist academics about the relation between their scholarly work and the fight against capitalism and for socialism.
2. Theoretical reflections on specific class struggles (struggles by workers and petty producers; struggles by students, youth and progressive intellectuals) in different parts of the world.
3. Critical assessment of key Marxist texts from around the world and from across various time periods in terms of their intellectual/theoretical and practical significance for class struggle in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

While our primary focus is on academic Marxism, we are very open regarding intervention types two and three above to work from non-academics. We view such knowledge production as central to the advancement of the class struggle. Especially important here is the mixing of academic and non-academic theory and knowledge, where the insights can be seen as complementing one another.

## **Theory and Practice**

The inspiration for initiating this section initially stems from something noted by Marx: a hope that his ideas would ‘allow of...concerted action by the workers, and give direct nourishment and impetus to the requirements of the class struggle and the organization of the workers into a class’ (Marx’s letter to Kugelmann in Marx and Engels, 1982: 171–172). In another context

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<sup>1</sup> This is only a small sample of a much wider potential list and those scholars mentioned are purely illustrative rather than indicating any endorsement of their various political proposals for advancing class struggle.

Marx (1866) said: ‘I consider that what I am doing through this work [his theoretical work for *Capital*] is far more important for the working class than anything I might be able to do personally [e.g. politically, at a working class gathering]’.

Some might recall Mao’s claims about theory and practice. In 1937 he wrote: ‘[f]rom the Marxist viewpoint, theory is important. ...But Marxism emphasizes the importance of theory precisely and only because it can guide action. If we have a correct theory but [if we] ...do not put it into practice, then that theory, however good, is of no significance.’ (Mao, 1937:para 19). For some reading, this in the 2020’s might seem to be a very dismissive claim. On the one hand, since the fall of the Soviet bloc, the capitalist road being promoted by China, and the relative weakness of the struggle against capitalism in the global North, Marxist scholarship has helped keep the Marxist tradition alive, so to speak. On the other hand, we don’t know whether theory may take time to find its putting into practice and whether it indirectly enters and influences practice in ways not easily perceived.

Moreover, we might consider whether, by definition, scholarship that employs the Marxist dialectical method prompts its author to maintain a connection between theory on the one hand and the intention and actual political practice involved in changing the world on the other. Analysis that rests on dialectics should see everything as changing and in principle therefore it ‘does not let itself be impressed by anything.’ (Marx, 1887:15). A Marxist analysis resting on dialectics is ‘in its very essence critical and revolutionary’ (ibid.). This new section not only assumes that, it thinks it of great benefit to draw out emphasize, and aid in developing from within such dialectical scholarship the implications for politics and praxis more broadly.

But is theory that bears on revolution all that really counts in the end? When Marx wrote what has become a motto regarding the relationship between knowledge and change he did not follow it up with qualifications and further explanation about change. Change in the world, we know well, happens in two forms. Some changes are intra-system and other changes involve changing the system itself (i.e. changing one mode of production – capitalism – to another, socialism).

Is it the case that theoretical knowledge holds out potential for informing system change, and that empirical types of knowledge concern change within an existing system (on the assumption that empirical knowledge does not have the critical reach of theory)? If that is the case, then the practice that is informed by knowledge that is only empirical can only inform more reform-oriented changes (immediate and small-scale changes, including policy-changes of a given government or changes in trade union strategies). The practice that is informed by knowledge of a more theoretical nature (such as mechanisms of class-exploitation, etc.), when combined with more empirical knowledge (including historical facts) conducted in the light of a defensible and dialectically-informed theory, can be about more radical, thorough-going changes, which, as a starting point might be based on the struggle for immediate changes or transitional demands.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Transitional demands stem ‘from today’s conditions and from today’s consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to... the conquest of power by the proletariat’ (Trotsky, 1931). Transitional demands include the demand that: everyone enjoy secure employment with a legislated living wage automatically rising with inflation in the cost of subsistence goods and services, that everyone has access to housing and health-care, and so on.

The more radical changes, ultimately, can address the fundamental needs of the majority. So, true, scientifically-arrived-at knowledge that unpacks fundamental mechanisms in society is, generally, in the interest of the majority and can contribute to revolutionary changes. It is very important here to underscore that we are not setting up an opposition between empirics and theory but a necessary condition (the need for dialectically informed theory that can only be enhanced/enriched by empirics).

Revolution requires a material force. In classical Marxist terms that has meant a numerically large mass of workers who are suffering, who are concentrated in major geographical centers of production and exchange, and in cities, and who become class conscious and who are engaged in trade union and political struggle. However much parts of that formula have changed after a century of capitalism's revolutionary transformation, which Marx pointed to from the *Manifesto* on, it is hard to imagine in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that socialist revolution does not still require: agitation, organization, propaganda and theory, and program (the view of what is to be done and how). One can say that knowledge or theory informs propaganda work and program, as well as agitational and organizational work. It is true that knowledge, or rather theory, is not enough for revolutionary change.

The material force of the capitalist world must encounter the material force of organizations of the masses. But without knowledge, *revolutionary* change will not occur, and practice will be limited to small-scale intra-system changes at best: 'without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement. This idea cannot be insisted upon too strongly at a time when the fashionable preaching of opportunism [reformism] goes hand in hand with an infatuation for the narrowest forms of practical activity' (Lenin, 1902:12). Revolution does need, apart from agitation, propaganda and organization, "a correct revolutionary theory" (Lenin, 1968). Without theory that helps understand that transformative capitalism and its dynamic impact on political and social life, in any given period, the masses will not possess class consciousness. Marx says: "before the proletariat wins its victory on the barricades and battle lines it announces the coming of its rule by intellectual victories, by [the] emergence of working class intellectuals."

Indeed, ideas, and especially, ideas in the form of theory, can become, or it can serve, 'as a material force'. For this to happen, i.e., for theory – or knowledge, more generally-- to serve as a material force against the existing material force to be transformed, two conditions need to be met. One is well-known and straight forward for Marxist scholars. Theory must 'grasp the root of the matter', i.e., it must understand the origin of human suffering at its roots which are located in the social relations and the mechanisms. The latter concern exploitative property relations, supported by the class-state, which produce a material world where there is profit and enjoyment in one pole and misery in another pole.

The second condition is that theory must grip the minds of the masses. The obvious side of that is the recognition that to change and challenge the world, ideas have to be changed and challenged. Conservative ideas must be challenged. Existing ideas advocating change (progressive ideas) must be challenged too so they become more radical. The more complicated side is that the production of radical ideas needs the participation, in this process, of thinkers connected to and of the masses, including thinkers who have de-classed their bourgeois or petty-bourgeois origins. While we have seen this side developed especially by Gramsci on successive

Marxists, it still remains complex and challenging. It is hoped that some participants in this section will attempt to advance this side further.

If *theory* says that capitalism is the major cause of humanity's problems, then this points to the socialist proposal for change (socialist *program*). In this process a given theory and program holds the prospect of shaping propaganda and agitation, providing the theory gets transmitted to a form and venue – the organizations of the masses -- where it can fulfill that function.

In a 1979 essay titled "Theory and Practice: an Introduction to Marxian Theory contending with these sorts of issues, Paul Mattick (1979) wrote: 'In his [Marx's] own theoretical work his aim was to serve what he considered the practical needs of the working class in its struggle against capitalism throughout the world. This for Marx did not mean an abandonment of claims to objectivity or scientific truth, but the opposite'. Taking sides, producing theory that can be part of mass mobilization, and making true knowledge claims based on reason and evidence are not mutually contradictory. 'Communists must be ready at all times to stand up for the truth, because truth is in the interests of the people' (Mao, 1945).

Indeed Mattick (1979) emphasized that *Capital* is not, as it has been taken to be, only a "theory of capitalist development." *Capital* for Mattick "by demonstrating a new way of interpreting them, provides a necessary weapon for the struggle against the system'. In a letter to a friend, Marx (1867) said: '*Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*....is without question the most terrible missile that has yet been hurled at the heads of the bourgeoisie (landowners included)."

The question is how do we make connections, today, between the masses and the incredibly useful theory being generated through academic Marxism. Looking back to the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century we can see that what Mattick (1979) describes regarding Marx held true: "The main task that Marx took on as a revolutionary intellectual, however, was the task of theory: the elaboration of a set of concepts, at a fairly abstract level, that would permit a better comprehension of the struggle between labor and capital. He wanted his work on capitalism to 'be more accessible to the working class – a consideration which to me outweighs everything else.... The function of theory was to help the movement as a whole clarify its problems and possibilities.'" Certainly *Capital*, as we know, is and was a challenging text. Yet in that time many of its ideas, in specificity and spirit, were translated and transmitted into the consciousness of the working class. Lenin was we know on the front lines of this stating: "Marx's philosophical materialism alone has shown the proletariat the way out of the spiritual slavery in which all oppressed classes have hitherto languished. Marx's economic theory alone has explained the true position of the proletariat in the general system of capitalism" (Lenin, 1977: 48). For him it was no wonder that "The enemies of democracy have, therefore, always exerted all their efforts to 'refute', undermine and defame [the philosophy of Marxism as] materialism, and have advocated various forms of philosophical idealism' (Lenin, 1977: 45).

Althusser (1976) claimed: "Everything that happens in philosophy has, in the last instance, not only political consequences in theory, but also political consequences in politics: in the political class struggle." We know that the "last instance" can sometimes be far off or difficult to discern. It is hoped this new section can help bring aspects of the "instance" of the consequences of theory to life.

## Conclusion

If it is true, as Trotsky (1973: 115) claimed, that “The willingness for revolutionary action is a precondition for mastering the Marxist dialectic”, then it must be true that as a material-dialectical analysis of society, “Marxism [is] the theoretical tool of revolutionary action.” Marxist analysis and revolutionary action including willingness for it cannot live in two separate worlds. This is the case even if during long stretches of time – perhaps our own – they may seem mostly to do so, or even more strongly there may at points appear to exist some justification for saying that there is ‘no one-to-one mapping between a particular (Marxist) political practice, a particular (Marxist) theory and a particular (dialectical materialist) philosophy’ (Brown et al., 2002: 2).

Human knowledge arises from practice and in turn serves practice. Theory and practice can only fully develop in connection with one another. Given the close connection between theory and practice, it is important to ask (as Fracchia, 2013 does in the context of Lukacs): “what is the politics of one’s theory and what is one’s theory of politics?”

The attempt of humans to try to understand the world seems to never cease as knowledge and theory develops forward and sometimes backward. If it is accepted that to change the world one needs to know the world scientifically and critically, then the intention to change the world -- the willingness for revolutionary action – can inform the way in which some try to know the world. Trotsky (1942) in his way spoke to this last point: “If it is possible to place a given person’s general type of thought on the basis of [their] relation to concrete practical problems, it is also possible to predict approximately, knowing [their] general type of thought, how [they] will approach [a] practical question.” What he and all Marxists should seek is to shape those “general type[s] of thought” and articulate what options are seen to be at hand to “approach [a] practical question.”

This inaugural edition of the new section entitled Theory and Class struggle presents interviews with three distinguished scholars about the connection between their intellectual claims and the fight against capitalism and for socialism:

Dr. Lilia Monzo is a professor in the Education program at Chapman University in the Greater Los Angeles area. She talks about the need for a unifying struggle against capitalism, racism, sexism and all forms of oppression.

Dr. Tom Brass formerly taught in Social and Political Sciences at Cambridge University. Dr. Brass talks about his work on capitalism and unfree labour, which has implications for a critique of a two-stage theory of revolution.

Dr. Alfred Saad-Filho is a professor at King’s College London. Dr. Saad-Filho discusses the nature of neoliberalism and how working class movements can break the hold of authoritarian neoliberalism.

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