

Karl Marx and Nonviolence: Do Marx's Ideas Have a Place in a Dialog around Peacemaking?

Two presentations

Presentation by Allan Lummus, past Board Chair of the Mid-South Peace and Justice Center

We decided to keep our comments to about 15 minutes each so we will have plenty of time to discuss at the end, so be thinking about what you would like to hear more of and be prepared to ask us at the end.

What in the world is Karl Marx doing here, sharing space with Gandhi and King and nonviolence and peace? Certainly, Terry and I must be confused and wandered in here by mistake. No, Terry and I do think Marx, one of the leading social philosophers of the modern era, has something to offer all of us who are concerned about creating a nonviolent world.

First, a disclaimer is in order: we have not found a secret text that proves Marx was a closet pacifist. No, he thought that violence could be and should be used against those who would use force against you. In his day the armies were likely to be formal armies of Kings suppressing the masses of people who dreamed of democracy; or those same armies defending the right of companies to impose 16-hour work days and unlivable wages on workers.

A good example of Marx's thinking on violence is his press coverage of the Wigan Riots.

With regard to the Wigan riots, Mr. Cowell, the leader of the laborers at Preston, has declared in a public meeting that he very much regretted what had occurred in Wigan. ... There was no sense in working people collecting together and destroying the property they had produced. The property itself never did them any injury — it was the men that held the property that were the tyrants. Let them respect property and life, and by proceeding in a peaceable, orderly and quiet manner, they might rely on the struggle terminating in their favor.

Now I am far from defending the aimless acts of violence committed by the Wigan colliers, who have paid for them with the blood of seven men. But, on the other hand, I understand that there is a great difficulty ... in proceeding "peaceably, orderly and quietly," when they are driven to acts of frenzy by utter destitution and by the cool insolence of their masters.

The riots are provoked by the latter in order to enable themselves to appeal to the armed force and to put down, as they have done in Wigan, all meetings of the workingmen by order of the magistrates. The riot which occurred in the town of Wigan, on Friday afternoon, was occasioned by the coal kings of the district... meeting....in order to deliberate on the demands of the colliers, and by their coming to the resolution to repudiate all compromise with the men.

[Karl Marx, "The Wigan Riots," in *The New York Daily Tribune*, 1853]

Can you imagine such a news article in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*? Here we see Marx contextualizing violent actions by the workers who destroyed factory property after being locked out and replacement workers hired. He is no King. The local labor leader bemoans the violence, which would have been an easy out for Marx to let the labor leader's words stand: "let them respect property and life" and "proceed in a peaceable, orderly and quiet manner." But Marx argues that violence does not come in a vacuum, it is a response to the violence of the coal kings backed by the state's army. Marx draws our attention to social violence embedded in a system that treats human beings as things/object and enthrones money as King/subject. Humanity in service of Profit. This inversion of humans' place in the world was at the root of Marx's critique of capitalism.

In one of his first major campaigns as a newspaper writer, Marx took up the cause of the poor who were using the pieces of wood that were on the King's Forest floor for firewood. Marx argues that the needs of poor, who had always collected wood scraps, should take precedence over the abstract arguments of private property.

In direct contradiction to those writers of fantasy who profess to find in the representation of private interests ideal romanticism, immeasurable depths of feeling, and the most fruitful source of individual and specific forms of morality, such representation on the contrary abolishes all natural and spiritual distinctions by enthroning in their stead the immoral, irrational and soulless abstraction of a particular material object and a particular consciousness which is slavishly subordinated to this object.

[Karl Marx, "[Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood](#)," in *Rheinische Zeitung*, 1842]

Marx argued that the abstraction substitutes the object (private property) and the rightful subject (human beings), so that the human beings become objects and that the concept (private property) becomes the subject. Once this abstraction becomes concretized into flesh of the capitalist system, workers become cogs in the machinery of profit and they can be used and dispensed with as another heartless, soulless thing. Marx goes on in *The German Ideology* to explain how on the surface under a market system human experience seems more free. But in reality it is not, because people's day and life is in service of forces not only lying outside themselves but also outside their own consciousness.

Thus, in imagination, individuals seem freer under the dominance of the bourgeoisie than before, because their conditions of life seem accidental; in reality, of course, they are less free, because they are more subjected to the violence of things. [The German Ideology](#)

Slavoj Zizek captures this quality of Marx well in his essay "The Spectre Is Still Roaming Around!" In this essay Zizek evokes Marx's ghost or specter which haunts the entire globe, ceaselessly searching for new places to exploit. This specter, which has all the qualities of cancer with its constant self-perpetuating expansion, is more than an ideological abstraction that ignores human and environmental concerns. Behind this abstraction are real people and the natural world. These natural resources, both human and ecological, are the fuel which stokes the engine of capital. The problem is that engine has no gauge to regulate the amount of fuel (both human and environmental) used. Unlike earlier pre-capitalist forms of violence, violence takes on a new character in capitalism. Zizek says,

Therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism, much more uncanny than the direct pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence: this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their "evil" intentions, but is purely "objective," systemic, anonymous. Here we should recall Etienne Balibar who distinguishes two opposite but complementary modes of excessive violence in today's world: the "ultra-objective" ("structural") violence that is inherent in the social conditions of global capitalism (the "automatic" creation of excluded and dispensable individuals, from the homeless to the unemployed), and the "ultra-subjective" violence of newly emerging ethnic and/or religious (in short: racist) "fundamentalisms" — this second "excessive" and "groundless" violence is just a counterpart to the first.

The URL is <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/zizek/zizek-the-spectre-is-still-roaming-around.html>.

The connection between market fundamentalism and religious, nationalist, and ethnic fundamentalisms is clear. From Iraq to Katrina, from Brown & Root to Blackwater, the face of capitalism is structural violence. One cannot understand the explosion of nationalist, religious, and ethnic fundamentalist violence without taking into account the market fundamentalist assault on local communities and cultures. Iraq is a perfect example. The pre-war planning done by the Bush administration was a blueprint for totally opening up the entire Iraqi society to pure unhindered market forces, 100% privatization of all natural resources including oil. The entire legal code was redesigned to allow for foreign companies to exploit the local markets free from governmental regulation and oversight. All the work was important so that the processes (governmental actions that promote corporate profit making) are invisible to the general public. We can discuss in more detail during the discussion period the relationship between capitalism on the one hand and religious and nationalist fundamentalism on the other if you like.

Marx's life work can be understood as an attempt to make visible what the capitalists want to remain invisible, directly describing how market processes objectify human beings. In response Marx promoted a philosophy that re-subjectifies human beings. For Marx, while revolution implied material force, an equally important component of revolution was the philosophy of human freedom which would allow people to understand their rightful place in the world as subjects of history, not mere objects of it.

Karl Marx, Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction

"The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism of the weapon, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses.... as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for (hu)man beings, the root is (hu)man (beings themselves). " [Marx, [Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction](#)]

Both his critique of the system, but also the projection of what could come were one and the same. By creating a system where all could feel fully human, they are at once undermining the old and preparing the ground for the new. We can have a system that has ended military exercises, but still is violent to the core. Whether it is the structural or subjective violence, both are sustained by the objectification of human beings. To create a nonviolent world we need to begin with the root. The root is the human subject. Only in the truly free subject can a peaceful, nonviolent world be built. Let's not be satisfied by ending this war today, but projecting the goal of a transformed world built on a radically free human subject in relationship to a world full of equally free human beings. Only then, will we live the song we love to sing..."we ain't going to study war no more."

Presentation by Terry Moon, "Woman as Reason" columnist, *News & Letters*

As Allan illustrated, Marx was not a pacifist. He lived at a time before King and Gandhi, before non-violence had been used successfully by those struggling for freedom. We don't know what impact such a movement would have had on him. But what Marx did that does speak to King's thought, is that he developed a whole philosophy of what it means to be human--a philosophy that is about liberation. This is important in today's world when, far from liberation, a new generation of youth face the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the possible bombing or invasion of Iran, and, as we meet, Turks and Kurds are dying in the northern hills of Iraq. Our whole world is engulfed in combat, from Iraq to Colombia, and from Congo to Sri Lanka.

It is no wonder that conferences like this exist as people, youth especially, yearn for peace as they reject a deadly society they did not create. Marx's philosophy, what he himself called "a thoroughgoing Naturalism or Humanism," can help us here once we come to understand that what concerned him was the creation of a world where humanity could realize its full potential. Unfortunately, Marx's philosophy is mostly unknown because Marx is taught--especially in the U.S.--as an enemy of freedom, or we are taught that pre-1989 Russia, or China, or Cuba today, are living expressions of Marxism instead of what they **really** are and were--totalitarian monstrosities, state-capitalisms calling themselves communism.

Even those who call themselves Marxists often reduce his thought to one discipline or another, like economics or politics. But to see Marx's relevance to a conference like this, we must delve into--or at least take a quick dip, time being so short this afternoon--into Marx's philosophy of revolution. To do so, we have to depend on the thought of Raya Dunayevskaya, who is the founder of Marxist-Humanism in the U.S. and of the organization, News and Letters Committees. (Show *N&L*.)

What Dunayevskaya has done that can help us today in our quest for a peaceful world is make explicit the humanism that was implicit in Marx's philosophy from his 1844 Humanist Essays to the last writings we have from him in the early 1880s. Thus she singled out that in his 1844 Humanist Essays he saw what he was working out was not materialism or idealism but a new unity of the two--the truth uniting both. Martin Luther King, Jr., was an idealist, but towards what tragically became the end of his life, his philosophy was developing beyond the single idea of non-violence. That is partially captured in his much quoted phrase: "True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice." This is something Marx speaks to because his exploration of exactly what is capitalism exposed the **social roots** of violence and thus the need for justice and a **human** world.

Marx exposes that, in the very way we create the things we need--as well as a lot of things we don't need--there is embedded an alienation so deep that social inequality is the hallmark of our society. We don't believe we have to prove that here at a conference where everyone is aware of the obscene disparity between the rich and poor of our world, a disparity that continues to widen exponentially.

This alienation Marx exposed relates to King's statement that, *"One of the most persistent ambiguities that we face is that everybody talks about peace as a goal. However, it does not take sharpest-eyed sophistication to discern that while everybody talks about peace, peace has become practically nobody's business among the power-wielders. Many men cry Peace! Peace! but they refuse to do the things that make for peace."*

Why is it that all the leaders talk endlessly of peace, and yet do nothing but prepare for one war after another? Marx speaks to why that is so. It was always true that the U.S. didn't go to war in Iraq because of some mythical weapons of mass destruction. And while there is no question that Iraqi oil was one reason, we must ask: is oil only the appearance of what is of the essence to capitalism? That essence is unfettered expansion. Capital's nature is to always expand. Marx called it capitalism's "werewolf hunger for surplus value." Iraq isn't so much about oil, but about control of oil and of a whole region of the world.

If all barriers to capitalism can't be breached by deals like NAFTA and CAFTA, then they will be demolished by war. At all costs, capital must expand. But it isn't a question only of greed, or of a flawed human nature. Rather, Marx showed that capitalism, the system of how we produce commodities, has an inhuman direction. If a capitalist has a good heart, if he wants to pay his workers a decent wage and give them good working conditions, he will not survive. He'll go broke, lose out to some company in Taiwan or Mexico, where the workers are super-exploited, their working conditions grim and dangerous, and the commodity that they produce cheaper than our fair-minded capitalist can create with his well-paid workers in their safe and expensive factory.

There's no way in this workshop that I can explain **fully** how Marx showed us what capitalism is, and therefore what we have to uproot. We've brought several things with us that you can have that will go into more detail. (Show *Marxism and Freedom*: and "Can Capital Be Controlled?") Here, what we can say, is that what allowed Marx to understand capitalism is his humanism expressed in the fact that he never took his eyes off the worker--what the worker was doing right at that point of production, right when that worker was making those shoes for Nike, sewing those underpants for Victoria's Secret, or even flipping those burgers for McDonald's.

Briefly -- and this is not the whole picture -- Marx saw that the commodity the worker was creating had a twofold character: 1) a use value. That is, the commodity the worker created was something useful, a coat, underwear, shoes, food. And 2) the commodity also had a value above and beyond its usefulness. (If you want to grasp this think about how it is that you can compare the "worth" of a bushel of apples to a coat, or the worth of hubcaps with candy bars.) Further, Marx saw that the commodity could not have this twofold

character if what created it, the labor itself, did not also have that twofold character. Everyone knew what kind of labor creates a use value. Sewing creates clothes, cooking creates meals. But Marx asked, what kind of labor creates value? The exchange value of commodities is not produced by concrete labor, that is, sewing or cooking, but by what Marx called abstract universal labor **that belongs to a certain organization of society**, capitalism.

The reason I want to go into this kind of detail -- although I realize it's not enough detail to really explain capitalism -- is to stress why it is not enough to fight for peace alone or against the manifestations of capitalism. If we want peace, if we want to transform capitalism into a truly human society, we have to transform the very way we produce all the things we need. It's not just a question of how we distribute what's produced, if we want to uproot capitalism we have to transform both **why** we are producing the way we do and **how** we do it.

All kinds of countries have been called Marxist when they are in fact state-capitalist countries that produce commodities that have exchange value, countries where workers have no control over what they do and where they experience alienated labor. Perhaps because of this, Marx has been accused of being a statist. But Marx wanted to smash the state. Russia or China, Cuba or Albania, were nothing like Marx's idea of a new society. In fact, they turned his theory of liberation into its opposite, the practice of enslavement.

Marx had surprisingly little to say about what would replace capitalism. He had no blueprints for the new society. Raya Dunayevskaya, the founder of Marxist-Humanism, singled out one of the few places where Marx was compelled to talk about the new society. It is in his *Critique of the Gotha Program* -- marginal notes that he wrote expressing his dissatisfaction with a new unity manifesto of two socialist groups. This is part of what he wrote:

"In a higher phase of Communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and with it also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but itself life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly -- only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his or her ability, to each according to his or her needs!" (Read again and explain.)

It is important to stress that Marx didn't just have an economic theory, he had an entire philosophy of liberation. He had a fantastic vision of the great potentiality a free human being could possess. All of his economic categories are also philosophic ones. Because this was so, Marx's concept of socialism did not just mean state planning, or a redistribution of wealth, or trading one set of rulers for another; but it meant the establishment of a new society based on totally new **human** relations.

What Raya Dunayevskaya insisted on showing is that to Marx, every economic category was also a human category. So that capitalism is revealed, not as private capitalists vs. the state being the capitalist; not as a question of a problem in the dispersal or circulation of resources--although that is a problem; but that

capitalism is a system of social relations that are alienated, that have an anti-human direction, and that the quest for universality, the desire to become a complete human being and abolish the alienation that is so prevalent in our lives today, is every bit a consequence of capitalist production as is the ever widening gap between the rich and poor.

King was right when he said that, "True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice." And "justice," the way King meant it, is not a narrow term. One can see in the demand and yearning for justice--for a just society grounded in the freedom of the individual--that "quest for universality" that Marx saw in the struggle of workers to control their activity, their labor. I began this talk by saying that Marx developed a whole philosophy and had an expansive vision of what it means to be human. Let me end by quoting a fragment of that philosophy which will, I hope, give you a different view of Marx that you may not have had before. It is from the first draft of *Capital*, the *Grundrisse*, which was not published in Marx's lifetime. This is another place where he gave a hint about his vision of a new society, where wealth would mean something completely different. He wrote:

"...When the narrow bourgeois form has been peeled away, what is wealth, if not the universality of needs, capacities, enjoyments, productive powers, etc., of individuals, produced in universal exchange? What if not the full development of human control over the forces of nature--those of his own nature as well as those of so-called 'nature'? What if not the absolute elaboration of his creative dispositions, without any preconditions other than antecedent historical evolution which makes the totality of this evolution--i.e., the evolution of all human powers as such, unmeasured by any previous established yardstick--an end in itself? What is this, if not a situation where man does not reproduce himself in any determined form, but produces his totality? Where he does not seek to remain something formed by the past, but is in the absolute movement of becoming?"