

Occupations, insurgencies and human nature: Paul Mason and/or Karl Marx

Wednesday 25 July 2012, by [LE BLANC Paul](#) (Date first published: 24 July 2012).

Table of contents

- [How Flawed is Marxism?](#)
- [An Un-Dialectical Marx](#)
- [Human Nature and Revolutionary](#)
- [Insurgency in the Twenty-First](#)

Paul Mason is one of the best journalists covering the global economy today. His book *Live Working, Die Fighting: How the Working Class Went Global* is an essential resource for anyone concerned about the workers' struggle against oppression and for liberation in the past, present and future. I met him while I was in thick of Pittsburgh's G-20 protests, which he was covering for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). I had already read his splendid book (which I was using in one of my courses) - and his front-line television reportage of the protests and the realities generating them was outstanding. [1]

We have a right to expect from him a smart and provocative account of the 2009-2011 insurgencies, occupations and revolutions that have now flowed into the deepened struggles of 2012. That is what he delivers, in my opinion, with his recently published *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere*. [2]

This challenging "must-read" volume is a journalistic account with a difference, informed as it is by radical and revolutionary social theory (most obviously, through not exclusively, Karl Marx). It boldly inserts itself into the animated discussions and debates not just of various journalists and social scientists but especially of the various activists who are engaged in the insurgencies, protests, and occupations. It is meant to provoke discussion and debate - because this is what the volatility and complexity of our times demand.

It is in this spirit that I want to challenge an aspect of what Mason presents. It will certainly be worth engaging with other aspects of his account - some of which strike me as incredibly fruitful, and some of which do not. Here I want to restrict myself to the question of where Marx fits in to our understanding of and involvement in the struggles of the twenty-first century.

How Flawed is Marxism?

Although he has clearly read Marx and the Marxists, Mason seems to have had (as have many of us) negative experience with some of what has passed for Marxism over recent decades - indicated by references to "hermetically sealed ideologies" and "orthodox Marxism" and "clunking Leninist orthodoxy." [3] In a stimulating comparative analysis between the global insurgencies of 1848 and today, he warns against two mistakes:

"The first would be to ignore the classic dynamics of revolution - to imagine that material antagonism between the democratic business class and the workers can remain suppressed forever. The second mistake would be to think there is nothing new, seeing only the parallels with what came before and ignoring the changes in personal identity, knowledge, and behavior described above [in his discussion of shifting culture and consciousness generated by the internet]." [4]

There is much that is new distinguishing our world from that existing at the time of the *Communist Manifesto*, nor can any serious Marxist argue that Marx fully understood all facets of *his own time*, let alone the global realities existing 125 years after he last closed his eyes. Mason performs a tremendous service in pointing to multiple new realities – especially regarding the dynamics of globalization and the internet – at the same time suggesting and testing out various ideas as to what this adds up to.

Mason seriously undercuts his own contribution, however, by the way he portrays the actual “Marxism” of Karl Marx. Accepting this flawed interpretation limits (a) our ability to understand what Marx actually believed, but also (b) the actual dynamics of revolutionary social change both historically and in our own time. In what follows, I want to recount and critique what Mason says about Marx, then suggest the implications this correction has for a different understanding of some of the realities we face today.

An Un-Dialectical Marx

A fundamental methodological problem is that Mason tends to present Marx’s outlook in an undialectical manner. By *dialectics*, I am referring to a way of seeing things that comprehends reality as consisting of dynamic contradictions – things evolve because they contain components going in different directions, the opposite of something is inherent in that very thing, etc. Therefore to say that such-and-such a reality “only” means one thing, to present something as “all or nothing,” to fail to be alert to processes involving the dynamic interplay of various factors, etc. generally suggests that the dialectical method is not being used. And since Marx himself was steeped in the dialectical methodology, to present him in such a manner is highly problematical. [5]

Mason very much approves of Marx’s inclination to take technological development as seriously as he himself does in emphasizing (though some might argue over-emphasizing) the importance of the internet in the economic realities and political insurgencies of our own time. In seeming to embrace Marx’s critique of utopians resistant to the advances of capitalist technology, however, he offers the following:

“Capitalism itself, Marx argued, was headed in the direction of big enterprises, which the capitalists would own collectively via the stock markets. Co-ops and utopian villages were a distraction. You had to find a way to take control of this big stuff – finance, industry and agri-business – and create enough wealth so that, when you redistributed it, it would eliminate human need. Only then, Marx said, could you begin to address the alienation and unfreedom at the heart of human existence.” [6]

Capitalism itself, he believed, had created a social group whose material interests would force them to seize the means of production: the proletariat, owning nothing but their own capacity to work. However, there was nothing in the lifestyle of the workers themselves that could foreshadow the freedom they would create.

This flat approach is not simply the notion of a stodgier “mature” Marx (as some analysts have argued) but is read by Mason back into the ideas of the young romantic-revolutionary Marx of the early 1840s who argues (as Mason quotes him) that human emancipation can become a reality only when “an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships, he has become a species-being.” Mason explicates: “Marx believed this truly social life – ‘species being’ – could not be attained without abolishing capitalism. . . . Because Marx believed capitalism could only atomize, only alienate, he concluded that this ultimate human emancipation, in which people would express their freedom through communal interaction, could only happen after it was gone.” [7]

It is not entirely clear that Mason equates Marx’s outlook with that of what he terms “orthodox Marxism,” but to the latter he explicitly attributes a political conclusion that is in harmony with all we have just summarized: “Since capitalism can only produce the alienated, helpless human being, social conditions have to be changed from above, by benign state intervention.” [8] (This is also consistent with the position which many anarchists – some of whom Mason seems to treat uncritically – have falsely or erroneously attributed to the allegedly “state-socialist” Marx.)

This absolutely was not the theory either of the young Marx or the mature Marx. But Mason is entirely correct to assert that “the actual history of organized labor is a long refutation of this theory.” One of the key realities that Mason emphasizes – to which I will return – is the fact that “from the late nineteenth century, workers did develop highly sophisticated subcultures in which they attempted to develop civilized and communal lifestyles.” Shifting from past to present, he adds that “it might be possible to achieve this ‘species-being’ under capitalism.” Mason elaborates:

“The technological and interpersonal revolutions of the early twenty-first century pose precisely this question. Namely, is it now possible to conceive of living this ‘emancipated’ life as a fully connected ‘species-being on the terrain of capitalism itself – indeed on the terrain of a highly marketized form of capitalism, albeit in conflict with it? . . . What if – instead of waiting for the collapse of capitalism – the emancipated human being were beginning to emerge spontaneously from within this breakdown of the old order? What if all the dreams of human solidarity and participatory democracy . . . were realizable right now?” [9]

Human Nature and Revolutionary Struggle

There are those who deny that the conception of “human nature” has anything to do with Marxism, although this question has been pretty much resolved by Norman Geras, Terry Eagleton, and others. [10] Indeed, a careful reading of Marx – particularly the young Marx of the 1840s, whose outlook was never repudiated as the old lion aged – reveals that the notion of “species-being” refers precisely to that nexus of qualities making human beings specifically human. People need, for their very self-realization, the dynamic combination of freedom (self-determination), genuine community, and creative labor. These interdependent qualities are organic to what we are as a species. [11]

The full realization of our nature has been repressed, and its qualities grotesquely distorted, by the oppressive and exploitative dynamics of class society, capitalism no less than others. This was the very starting-point of revolutionary struggle, what Marx referred to as “the categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a degraded, enslaved, neglected, contemptible being.” [12]

Yet Marx never asserted that this (degraded, enslaved, etc.) is all that people could possibly be under capitalism. His entire life – from his teen-age years onward – constituted a romantic rebellion against accepting this condition for himself and for anyone else, including (most definitely) under capitalism. As a radicalizing young activist, his thinking was transformed through contact with the insurgent movement arising among radicalizing workers. “You would have to attend one of the meetings of the French workers to appreciate the pure freshness, the nobility which bursts forth from these toil-worn me,” he wrote to Ludwig Feuerbach in 1844. “It is among these ‘barbarians’ of our civilized society that history is preparing the practical element for the emancipation of mankind.” [13] In the same year he elaborated on this point in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*:

“When communist artisans associate with one another, theory, propaganda, etc., is their first end. But at the same time, as result of this association, they acquire a new need – the need for society – and what appears as a means becomes an end. In this practical process the most splendid results are to be observed whenever French socialist workers are seen together. Such things as smoking, drinking, eating, etc., are no longer means of contact or means that bring them together. Association, society, conversation, which again has association as its end, are enough for them; the brotherhood of man is no mere phrase with them, but a fact of life, and the nobility of man shines upon us from their work-hardened bodies.” [14]

We find here a clear manifestation of the “species-being” of these proletarian individuals, well before the abolition of capitalism, in a manner that could indeed “foreshadow the freedom they would create,” as Mason puts it. In the next few years, Marx and his comrade Frederick Engels immersed themselves in this crystallizing labor-radical subculture. In her brilliant collective biography *Love and Capital*, Mary Gabriel describes their intimate connection with the German Workers Educational Association and leading activists of Britain’s Chartist movement: “Marx and Engels learned much from these German and English

veteran revolutionaries, who instructed the two younger men not only on the history of their movements but on the practical aspects of organizing.” She adds: “The pair returned to Belgium fired up with ideas for radicalizing the working-man in Brussels and beyond.” [15]

The formation of the Communist League followed, with Marx and Engels assigned to write a manifesto for the newly constituted entity. Their experience with the conscious left-wing of the developing workers’ movement is imprinted on the *Communist Manifesto*. There we see a capitalism that was *both* a force destructive of the community-freedom dialectic essential to “species-being,” *but also* a force creating new conditions for the flourishing of a vibrant solidarity “on the terrain of a highly marketized form of capitalism, albeit in conflict with it” (to repeat what Mason tells us is happening today).

“As industry develops, the proletariat does not merely increase in numbers: it is compacted into larger masses, its strength grows, it is more aware of that strength,” wrote Marx and Engels. They added that “unity is furthered by the improvement in the means of communication,” and the political education of the workers is advanced by divisions and rivalry among factions of the ruling classes – providing understanding and intellectual weapons that can enhance working-class power. The result would and should be the development of social movements for various reforms, the development of trade unions, and the organization of a political party animated by the kinds of “species-being” dynamics so prevalent among the French, German, British and Belgian working-class radicals who had taught the two young men so much. Marx and Engels envisioned this multifaceted workers’ movement “winning the battle of democracy” and turning the state into a instrument of such working-class political power that would – by degrees, but systematically and relentlessly – push forward to the greater and greater flourishing of the “species-being” of the great working-class majority – an “association of the producers” in which “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” [16]

The flourishing of freedom, community, and creativity, however, would not and could not “wait” until after a triumphant revolutionary overturn. These qualities would necessarily provide the inspiration and energy to drive forward struggles for the revolutionary goal. Marx and Engels believed that the potentiality of the working class to become a force that could bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old could only come about as workers prepared themselves, and transformed themselves, through the kinds of movements and struggles that had inspired and transformed Marx and Engels themselves.

The richly multi-faceted International Workingmen’s Association in which Marx played so central a role from 1864 to 1872 (the First International) also had such qualities in its various affiliates. The International was part of an even broader labor movement (one thinks of the militant class warrior William Sylvis and the National Labor Union in the United States of the late 1860s, friendly to and interacting with the International, which never quite got around to affiliating), profoundly influenced by, but also influencing, the distillations of working-class experience that found their way into the International’s deliberations and resolutions. Much of this would eventually become identified as “Marxism” – and appropriately so – but this can best be comprehended as reflecting “dreams of human solidarity and participatory democracy” (to steal another of Mason’s formulations) that infused not only ultimate goals but also the daily struggles of the labor movement of that time. [17]

To conclude, there was in fact a high degree of correspondence between the theoretical perspectives of Karl Marx and the actual history of organized labor, not “a long refutation of this theory.” It was hardly a “refutation” of Marxism that “from the late nineteenth century, workers did develop highly sophisticated subcultures in which they attempted to develop civilized and communal lifestyles.” The development of such labor-radical subcultures was inseparable from the actual development of what came to be called “Marxism.” To miss this (and to imply the need for an anarchist “correction”) can lead to dead-ends both in understanding the history and in orienting us for the present and future.

It is worth noting that Mason himself by no means lumps all Marxists together in his critique. Specifically, he points to C. L. R. James as breaking the mold of “orthodox” rigidities in a path-breaking history of the Haitian revolution (which showed how people “on the margins” in fact had a central impact on world history) – “James’s book *The Black Jacobins*, produced in 1938, shaped the outlook of black activists in the

1960s and 1970s . . .” [18]

In fact, we can find James and his co-thinkers arguing in 1947 a perspective that unites the spirit of Marx himself with the “species-being” aspirations of young insurgents among the 99% today – the notion that the laboring and oppressed majorities can and must take control of their own situation *now*:

“The struggle for socialism is the struggle for proletarian democracy. Proletarian democracy is not the crown of socialism. It is its basis. Proletarian democracy is not the result of socialism. Socialism is the result of proletarian democracy. To the extent that the proletariat mobilizes itself and the great masses of the people, the socialist revolution is advanced. The proletariat mobilizes itself as a self-acting force through its own committees, unions, parties, and other organizations.” [19]

The very title of the polemic containing this passage is “The Invading Socialist Society” – indicating that the elements of the liberating socialist future are present in the very nature (“species-being”) of the people who can and must struggle for and achieve their own liberation. It suggests that these struggles themselves constitute a partial realization, in the capitalist here-and-now, of the goals of freedom, creativity, and participatory democracy. Nor was this simply the outlook of C. L. R. James. When he wrote *Black Jacobins* and “The Invading Socialist Society” he was an eloquent militant in a worldwide revolutionary movement embracing the orientations of Leon Trotsky, V. I. Lenin and most fundamentally Karl Marx. [20]

More than Mason seems to acknowledge, therefore, the intellectual and political resources represented by the broader revolutionary Marxist tradition have a vital importance for revolutionaries of the twenty-first century. As one substantial group of intellectuals and activists has recently argued in regard to Lenin, Trotsky, and Rosa Luxemburg, “the body of analysis, strategy and tactics to which they contributed was inseparable from the mass struggles of their time. Critically engaging with their ideas can enrich the thinking and practical activity of those involved in today’s and tomorrow’s struggles for a better world.” [21]

Insurgency in the Twenty-First Century

The vibrant labor-radical subcultures – which to a large extent developed in fruitful interaction with Marx’s perspectives – were increasingly undermined and battered under the impact of what actually happened in the twentieth century:

- the rise of bureaucratic-reformism in much of the labor movement (social democracy) – diluting and distorting Marxism;
 - imperialism and a horrific global war with a multi-million death toll that devastated the working class and left in a shambles what had been built up by the First International and the Second (Socialist) International;
 - an only partial success of working-class revolution leading to the rise and triumph of bureaucratic-authoritarianism in most of the remaining workers’ movement (Stalinism) – diluting and distorting Marxism;
 - the fierce and murderous onslaught of fascism in its various forms, whose primary purpose included the violent destruction of labor movements (and labor-radical subcultures) in such countries as Italy, Germany, Spain and beyond;
 - the devastation of an even more horrific second world war.
- And this was only the first half of the century!

The second half of the century (amid the Cold War years and even more after) saw an accelerating and increasingly profound global restructuring of capitalism, all of which had a devastating impact on the

labor-radical subcultures. Certainly in the United States, the combined impacts of long-term prosperity, consumerism, suburbanization, added to Cold War anti-Communism, left little of what had once been a vibrant labor-radical subculture existing from the Civil War to World War II. The large-scale dismantling of the traditional industrial working class, with the proletarianization and expansion of service-sector jobs, involved a decomposition and re-composition of the working class that seemed to raise questions about the future possibility of labor insurgency. [22]

As Mason skillfully shows, the economic crisis of capitalism that began in 2008 changed the rules of the game. The global picture is somber:

“The present system cannot guarantee the existence of 7 billion people on this planet. It cannot even recognize their basic humanity. It can offer the poorest a brutal route out of poverty, but it is paid for by impoverishing the workforce of the west [Europe, the U.S., etc.]. And it is always conditional, always contingent on growth, which has faltered after 2008 and may not return for years. . . . The economic crisis has begun to collide with the long-term strategic problems we knew were going to come in the twenty-first century, but were not expecting to impact so soon: climate change, energy depletion, population stress.” [23]

This material basis for the global resurgence of anti-capitalism has dovetailed, as Mason also shows us, with the truly revolutionary expansion of information and communication technologies - not available to all, but most definitely facilitating the crystallization of new mass radical subcultures among growing numbers of people throughout the world. These people - culturally and politically and economically diverse - constitute, in a variety of ways, proletarianized layers that, in various contexts, have tended to merge into the explosive insurgent mobilizations stretching from 2009 to 2012. Those of us who have thrown ourselves into the occupy movement in the United States are part of a global process whose future is unclear. Mason aptly notes “the lack of a coherent left,” and that “the mainstream left” in particular appears political confused.” [24]

We are all learning, learning, learning - trying to sort out new realities and experiences in a way that we can land on our feet while continuing to absorb what is happening and what is possible, continuing to learn through doing, striving to interweave coherence and relevance and revolutionary edge. It is possible (certainly necessary!) that there will come into being a very different “mainstream left” than what has passed for that in recent decades.

To do what needs to be done, we must make good use of the actual revolutionary approach of Marx.

Paul Le Blanc

Footnotes

[1] Paul Mason, *Live Working, Die Fighting: How the Working Class Went Global* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012) - though I had, and photocopied for my students, a copy of the 2009 British edition. For Mason’s BBC coverage of the G-20 protests in Pittsburgh, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBDxGaSZytE>

[2] Paul Mason, *Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions* (London: Verso, 2012).

[3] *Ibid.*, 144, 147, 149

[4] *Ibid.*, 175

[5] See Henri Lefebvre, *Dialectical Materialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), and John Rees, *The Algebra of Revolution: The Dialectic and the Classical Marxist Tradition* (London/New York: Routledge, 1998).

[6] Mason, 142

[7] Mason, 142

[8] *Ibid.*, 142, 143, 145

[9] *Ibid.*, 143, 145

[10] Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (London: Verso, 1985), Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 79-86, 99-100, 120-121, 137-138, Ernst Fischer, with Franz Marek, *The Essential Marx* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 15-36.

[11] See, for example, primary texts in Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat, eds., *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), 275, 293, 303, 394-395, 457.

[12] *Ibid.*, 257-258

[13] Quoted in Michael Löwy, *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 65.

[14] in *ibid.*, 90.

[15] Mary Gabriel, *Love and Capital: Karl and Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Little Brown and Co., 2011), 91. On the notion of “labor-radical subculture,” see Paul Le Blanc, “Radical Labor Subculture: Key to Past and Future Insurgencies,” *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society*, Volume 13, September 2010, 367-385.

[16] These passages from the *Communist Manifesto* can be found in numerous editions, for many most easily on-line at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/> — although the most useful edition is Phil Gasper, ed., *The Communist Manifesto: A Roadmap to the World’s Most Important Document* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005). Also see Hal Draper, “The Principle of Self-Emancipation in Marx and Engels” at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1971/xx/emancipation.html>.

[17] A valuable survey of the work of Marx and Engels in the First International can be found in August Nimtz, *Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough* (Albany, NY: State University Press of New York, 2000), 169-252 – but also relevant is his *Marx, Tocqueville and Race in America: The ‘Absolute Democracy’ or ‘Defiled Republic’* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 2003). On discussion of labor-radical subculture, Marxism and U.S. labor, as well as specifics on William Sylvius and the National Labor Union, see Paul Le Blanc, *Work and Struggle: Voices from U.S. Labor Radicalism* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1-59, 110-123. Also quite relevant and fascinating is Robin Blackburn, *An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln* (London: Verso, 2011), which surveys aspects of the interplay of Marx’s ideas with elements in the larger culture of the United States down to the early twentieth century.

[18] Mason, 149.

[19] C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya, “The Invading Socialist Society,” in C. L. R. James, *A New*

Notion, edited by Noel Ignatiev (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010), 28.

[20] See "Introduction: C. L. R. James and Revolutionary Marxism," in Scott McLemee and Paul Le Blanc, eds., *C. L. R. James and Revolutionary Marxism: Selected Writings of C. L. R. James 1939-1949* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), 1-37.

[21] <http://getpoliticalnow.com/>

[22] These themes are explored in Paul Le Blanc, *Marx, Lenin and the Revolutionary Experience: Studies of Communism and Radicalism in the Age of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2006), and again in Le Blanc, *Work and Struggle*.

[23] Mason, 209.

[24] *Ibid.*, 187.