

The state of Marxist history today

Tuesday 21 August 2018, by [GIBBS Ewan](#), [GOVAN Dexter](#), [PRASHAD Vijay](#) (Date first published: 6 June 2018).

This interview was designed to highlight the differences of thought between two Marxist historians, each focused on radically different parts of the world, with one more experienced colleague and one exciting prospect for the future. In effect, I sought to highlight how differences in circumstance might lead to diverging interpretations of theory. What struck me as I compiled and edited this interview, however, was not divergence, but harmony. Of course, there are differing opinions in the interview which follows, but two shared and salient themes emerge. The first is the desire among Marxist historians to constantly expand our horizons, incorporating new techniques and ideas to strengthen our analysis. The second is more cautionary. It is a profound scepticism of the elimination of meta-narratives from history. While specialisation brings welcome depth to our discipline, it must not do so at the expense of the broader picture.

I am extremely grateful to both Vijay Prashad and Ewan Gibbs for devoting their time to this interview. It was conducted by email over a number of months and their stimulating dialogue challenged many of the presumptions I had when commencing the project. I hope that readers will enjoy the interview and reflect on what it might teach us, not just as Marxists, but as historians more generally. I hope more broadly that readers of the Toynbee Prize Foundation website who may not consider themselves Marxists are able to identify with the themes of this interview: the importance of embracing new methods and ideas; the salience of global histories; the need to challenge institutional assumptions within our discipline.

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Ewan Gibbs lectures in sociology and social policy at the University of the West of Scotland. He was awarded a PhD in 2016 for a study of deindustrialization in the Scottish coalfields. Ewan has published on the moral economy of Scottish colliery closures, the poll tax non-payment movement, policy-making and the idea of a Scottish 'industrial nation', and on the intellectual origins of 'left-wing' Scottish nationalism.

-Dexter Govan (University of Cambridge)

DEXTER GOVAN: What is your current area of research and how do you think it's influenced by Marxist theory?

VIJAY PRASHAD: My research in recent years has gone in two directions. First, towards an exploration of Communist history; second, towards an understanding of the new shape of global accumulation and therefore of contemporary imperialism. As a historian, I found over the years an

interesting development in such wide areas of study as labour history and social history. Many scholars came to these fields not from Marxism but with a heavy dose of post-modernism and its ancillary fields. What they brought to labour history and social history in general was certainly an interest in the lives of ordinary people; but what they were not interested in was the question of organisation and organised forms of struggle. So – drawing from the very rich assessments of spontaneity and organisation developed by Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin – I wrote an engaged history of the Indian communist movement (*No Free Left: the Futures of Indian Communism*) and worked with the LeftWord Communist History Group to produce the first volume of our projected multi-volume work, *Communist Histories*. In the introduction to the edited book, I spent a great deal of time working on the problem of spontaneity and the implications this has for the present.

The second area of work that I have been involved in has been to understand the long history of the post-colonial predicament, from the end of the old empires (British, French, Dutch and Portuguese) to the entry of Western imperialism at a deeply structural level – now either as neo-colonialism or through the domination of rent-seeking monopoly firms that privilege intellectual property rights in the global commodity chain. Drawing from earlier Marxist thinkers on imperialism – including Ernst Mandel – I studied the demise of the Third World Project's New International Economic Order, the emergence for a brief moment of the BRICS bloc and the crisis of imperialism today. This was in *The Poorer Nations* (2013).

I have now left the academy after two decades of teaching to run a research institute (*Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*), where we are going to spend a great deal of time trying to understand – based on detailed empirical studies – the structure of contemporary imperialism and the possibilities for the reconstitution of popular movements towards a post-capitalist future. The first Occasional Paper from *Tricontinental* (in *The Ruins of the Present*, Working Document #1, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, March 2018) details the unstable structure of contemporary imperialism and the possibilities for the re-composition of global socialism as its antidote.

EWAN GIBBS: My work relates to the Scottish experience of deindustrialization, the declining contribution of industrial activities to economic output and employment. In 2016 I completed a PhD thesis at the University of Glasgow which explored deindustrialization in Lanarkshire, which was Scotland's largest coalfield upon coal mining's nationalisation in 1947, between the 1940s and the 1980s. Since then, I have continued my focus on coalfield restructuring and its cultural and political ramifications through researching energy policy's formulation and application at both the UK and Scottish level.

From a Marxist perspective I am studying the relationship between long-term changes in the means of production to shifts in political consciousness. I am influenced by Eric Hobsbawm's subtle consideration of such processes, but more specifically by his analysis of nationalisms built on "the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist." This has included an emphasis on the popular customs through which deindustrialization was contested. It draws on E.P. Thompson's illumination of the moral economy through which English plebeian consumers imposed cultural norms upon burgeoning agrarian capitalism. Unlike Thompson's effort to "rescue" the early working class from posterity's condescension, I have the benefit of talking to former workers directly. Oral history theorists such as Alessandro Portelli have stressed the benefit of a Marxist history which can reconnect individual stories and memories with collective political experiences of major change to give more effective voice to those normally only written of in crowds.

GOVAN: Are we living through a crisis in Marxist historiography?

GIBBS: No. I think we are living through something of a welcome rebirth of Marxist-influenced scholarship, which is attaining far greater popular resonance than was the case in either the 1990s or 2000s. This is unsurprising given that formally dominant ideas are experiencing a profound crisis of legitimacy in the face of both ongoing economic stagnation and a succession of developments that orthodox political scientists ruled impossible. In this environment, it is a welcome development that there has been a growth in creative attempts to interpret Marxist ideas for the present period, and that in some cases these have attained popular acclaim. One of the most high-profile outcomes of this was the publication of Piketty's *Capital in the 21st Century*. It not only sold widely, but has reshaped popular discussion of economic inequality and given scholarly credibility to Occupy Wall Street's demonisation of 'the 1%'.

It's also important to be aware that there was never a solid and cohesive body of exclusively Marxist historiography. Thinking as far back as the Frankfurt school and the emergence of a strengthened canon of Marxist historical writing during the 1950s and 1960s, there were evident crossovers with other traditions and new methodological approaches. For instance, in the UK, the Communist Party's Historians Group was clearly in dialogue with the French *Annales* school through the development of a *longue durée* outlook which emphasises the "slow and powerful march of history". More recent inclusions of discourse analysis or Lacanian psycho-social analysis should also be understood as potentially fruitful tools for developing more profound understandings of historical experiences. I am wary, though, of the danger of analyses tending to downplay the political elements of social experiences, or providing essentially technocratic guides to a socialist future and omitting struggle and the agency of workers in favour of enlightened policy-makers. Historians have a prominent role to play in opposing such perspectives.

PRASHAD: Was there ever a period when there has not been a crisis in Marxist historiography? The debates in Marxism have been and should be rich because we believe that – as Lenin wrote – 'the most essential thing in Marxism, the living soul of Marxism, is the concrete analysis of concrete conditions'. Dead theory should be nothing for a Marxist. Our Marxism must be creative, must engage with new advances in science and in the world, must be alive to constant debate and development. Marx's favourite motto was 'doubt everything'. I take that as an essential point about our framework. So if there is a debate, I welcome it, if there is a crisis, it is an opportunity to develop our theory.

Marxist historiography faces a challenge in the West largely because Marxism has been either treated as illegitimate or it has been domesticated into an apolitical methodology. This surrender did not take place globally. In other parts of the world, the connection of socialist intellectuals with political movements was not broken. From Brazil to India, socialist intellectuals continue to be engaged in leftist movements and often as members of leftist parties. This is very significant for the temper of the work they produce. Post-modernism, with its attendant cynicism, did not appeal to them. Certainly, critiques made by post-modern scholars were of course taken in hand, but not the futile sensibility. That was rejected. These scholars who produce rich historical and sociological work are not often read in the West, and are therefore not seen in the West to define the contours of such a thing as 'Marxist historiography'. This is part of the old international division of intellectual labour. It will take a great deal of effort to break this barrier and to prevent Western scholarship – with its own parochial manners and context – from posturing as global scholarship.

GOVAN: It seems there's a reluctance on the part of many social historians to engage with the concept of class, or when they do so, to create new structures of class for contemporary history. Is this approach compatible with Marxism, or are traditional divisions of class universal, and essential, to the practice of history?

PRASHAD: It is true that there is a retreat from class, and has been one for several decades. There

are perhaps two reasons for this retreat. First, there has been the emergence of other social categories – ethnicity and race as well as gender and sexuality – as a major focus of historical research. These are important developments and concentration on them has certainly enriched the historical record. But there has been a tendency, for whatever reason, to see these as somehow antithetical to class, as if a class analysis is somehow opposed to an analysis of sexuality or of race. The working-class, for instance, is made up of people with a multitude of social identities. To ignore these identities is to ignore the richness of working-class life.

Second, the collapse of the USSR of course penalized Marxism and made it harder for Marxist scholarship to thrive. A very strange reading of Gramsci emerged to undermine the question of class, where Gramsci's notion of the 'subaltern' was mobilized not only in Indian historiography but elsewhere to concentrate on questions of power to the exclusion of questions of property. This was part of a wider 'cultural turn' that began to shy away from a turn to political economy. I think any Marxist historiography must carefully find a way to attend to the question of property (class) as well as power (social identity). These are snakes wrapped around each other. To look at one without the other leaves the historian in danger of being bitten.

GIBBS: At the risk of sounding like an old Soviet textbook, Marxism has an understanding of class as a relationship centred on the means of production and economic exploitation at its heart and draws much of its power from this. But crucially, in my view, this doesn't preclude an understanding of class which is alert to cultural dimensions. It is also vital that Marxists are sensitive to precision within understandings of class relating to power in the workplace and control over the means of production that disaggregates between sections of the waged workforce. In this sense, as valuable as I think Ellen Meiksins Wood's defence of class as an analytical category was, Marxist historians also need to start analyses of class within a given dense and complex historical environment. This requires understanding class as a dynamic relationship and using the historical imagination to understand how stratification was internalised within popular consciousness.

A recent example of this with huge merit is Jefferson Cowie's volume on the American experience of the 1970s, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*. Far from arguing that from an objective perspective class was abolished, Cowie instead combines a story of left-wing trade union revival with an analysis of how feminist and civil rights movements challenged the existing 'new deal' cultural understanding of class which was exclusive in both race and gender terms. These are weaved through low and high politics and pop culture to understand how the politics of collectivism ultimately atrophied in the late 1970s. Cowie effectively tells a story of the 'unmaking' of a working class as a political subject, as opposed to E.P. Thompson's story of a 'making'.

There has been much debate over Thompson's famous contention that class was a 'happening' rather than a structure. I think it is most useful for us to conceive of this in terms of class situations being processes. Within British social history, and in much contemporary political discourse, it is usual to consider class as relatively static and marked largely by cultural signifiers of consumption and status. It is vital that Marxists are able to confront that by demonstrating the volatile realities of class as an economic and political experience.

GOVAN: It's striking that in your previous answers you both emphasised the important role that Marxist historians have in influencing economies and society. Do you think there's a hypocrisy to this given the majority of the intellectual product of Marxist historians is inaccessible to the public? In escaping the academic bubble, is it important that we attempt to produce freely accessible content?

GIBBS: I think that we have to be aware of the political obligations that Marxists have to reach audiences beyond the academy and to try where possible to shape public debates. But I think that

should be tempered by both realism in terms of the limitations we face as individuals and a commitment to teaching. I raise the latter because, especially in a UK context, the stereotype of inaccessible academics in ivory towers has been massively internally challenged by the massification and neoliberalisation of universities. Ensuring a place for Marxist-influenced accounts of history within the curriculum is an important commitment. As we increasingly face utilitarian pressures to justify the value of history it is vital that we are able to demonstrate that, in a period of economic, social and environmental crises, Marxism is of immense use to understanding the world, but that we also protect the value of studying history for its own sake too.

In terms of publications, very few academics are making significant sums of money from publishing their research, at least outside of their overall salary. Journals certainly don't pay for articles and earnings from typical academic books are minimal. More importantly, most of us would bite your hand off for opportunities to reach significant audiences through our work. There have been trends towards academics being more media aware, penning articles for newspapers and blogs which have far wider circulation than journals, and Twitter has also been a medium that has been used for academic contribution to public discussions.

PRASHAD: There are many different kinds of audiences for the work that an intellectual does, including a socialist intellectual. There is the work of trying to come to an understanding – at the theoretical level – of the concepts that are necessary to understand the motion in a society at a particular time. This work is often quite abstract and written in a kind of shorthand. There is nothing untoward about that, since this is to help a socialist intellectual work out problems that are not easily done in transparent language. Then there is the work that is produced for the militants, who are often at a different level of literacy than the academic and of the masses in the key classes (the workers, peasants and unemployed). Militants have experience through party schools and party journals in the language of Marxism and of socialist praxis. Finally, there are texts produced for workers, peasants and the unemployed which have to be produced to be received by these key classes. This is not to say that these texts must not be complex and must be written in a simplistic style. Not at all, since these texts must carry the precise complexness of the system as worked out by the socialist intellectual at the highest level of abstraction. This is how intellectual work is done in the communist world to which I belong, and it is a model for how to produce socialist ideas.

It should be said that in many countries of the West – as I noted previously – the linkage between socialist intellectuals and the mass movements is broken. This means that many socialist intellectuals are unmoored from the necessary linkage to workers, peasants and the unemployed. But this does not exhaust the possibilities of Marxism in the West. There remain important political forces of the Left, many of them in need of a theory that will provide clarity in complex times. A vague tendency to the Left is not sufficient, for the drift into the shoals of compromise with the present is a reality. One hopes that more and more intellectuals in the West and elsewhere find their feet in the social and political movements, anchor ourselves in these movements, try to learn from them and to teach them, to become part of them.

GOVAN: Have Marxist historians done enough to address the challenges raised by post-modernist thought?

PRASHAD: I think there has been a great deal written from a Marxist standpoint to clarify the situation of postmodernism. Aijaz Ahmad's essays are by far the most important contribution in this vein. His essays in *The Marxist* (2011) and in the volume for Irfan Habib (2002) are by far the most comprehensive studies on the emergence of postmodernism, its context and its fallacies. This is not a knee-jerk dismissal of postmodernism. Ahmad spends a great deal of time understanding the work of Lyotard and Derrida, offering his views of what – from a Marxist standpoint – is valuable and what is intellectually and politically infeasible. One of the most important points raised by Ahmad is the

absence – in this literature – of any consideration of imperialism. In Foucault's narrative of the 'Modern Age' the role of imperialism, of the theft of wealth and of ideas is similarly absent. The world outside Europe simply does not exist for the postmodern thinkers. For those who worry about the lack of attention to social identities, many influenced by Foucault, this significant lacunae in Foucault's work has not been sufficiently attended to.

Certainly, many of the themes in the better works of postmodernism are not unfamiliar to the Marxist tradition, though there is this great difference between the two traditions which has not been sufficiently underlined: that postmodernism cynically surrenders to power, whereas the Marxist tradition holds fast to the idea of human emancipation. This is a political judgment, but it has implications for how one writes history and how one understands social consciousness and social praxis. I'd say we Marxists should be a little less forgiving of the deep cynicism at the root of postmodern thought.

GIBBS: Post-modernism and post-structuralism have presented both huge challenges to the core contentions of Marxism while also suggesting fruitful lines of inquiry for developing future research agendas. The biggest single threat post-modernism presented to Marxist historians, and perhaps to all historians, was the rejection of metanarratives. As Eric Hobsbawm contended in *On History*, the value of history, and especially accounts influenced by Marxism, lies in the explanation of at least part of how human beings have gone from living in caves to inhabiting a world connected by the internet and globalised trade. A hegemonic contention that history is not in fact a series of linked ruptures and transformations buttressed by the claim that history itself had ended, results in major introspections. My biggest concern in that respect is a serious weakening of the will to advance claims of world-historic significance. It might not be a coincidence that it was a journalist, Paul Mason, who published an influential global labour history, *Live Working or Die Fighting* (2008) that dared make the claim that there were huge parallels between the experiences of class formation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and our own period.

Post-structuralism's biggest threat lay in the deconstruction of agents and consciousness as remotely coherent entities. I am less convinced that line of argument has quite so deeply embedded itself. This is especially visible in the development of oral history. Although it has been strongly influenced by post-modern thoughts on the self, it also requires a view of cohesive experience and understanding with at least the potential for counter-hegemonic narratives. Where historians influenced by Marxism have been confident enough to answer the challenges these agendas pose, such as in relation to the body, health and employment, they have provided the basis for strong lines of inquiry and sophisticated analyses that do not overlook factors relating to economic and political power and agency. Looking forward, we will perhaps be best served through a willingness to be both receptive to the areas of research that post-structuralism opens without allowing analyses of narrative construction to overwhelm considerations relating to popular experience of employment and social reproduction.

GOVAN: It's been incredibly interesting comparing your views on the state of Marxist history in 2018, but as we look forward, what would you like to see in the next five years from Marxist historians?

GIBBS: I'm wary of prescribing a particular area or method of research to colleagues developing a plethora of interesting critical studies. One case I would make is for Marxist historians not to lose sight of the vitality of economic history or for the canon as a whole to lose sight of the centrality of labour relations, both domestic and industrial, to the development of history. These matters are often far from the forefront of formal politics or the events that tend towards being understood as having determined the unravelling of history, but are usually fundamental in determining the longer-run flow of events and changes in social relations that affect the mass of 'ordinary' people's lives.

More broadly, it is vital that Marxists continue to contest and defend some form of metanarrative history. The single biggest impact that post-modernism had in corroding the power of Marxists was contesting the notion that history has broad sweep explainers. Marxism requires a defence of the centrality of class struggles across human history, 'from above' as much as 'from below', including where they were not overly referred to in a class-conscious terminology. Marxist historians must also continue to analyse the historical specificity of the social relations, crises and forms of consciousness associated with capitalism. Essentially, whilst it is vital that Marxist-inspired historical analysis is not reduced to Soviet hagiography or a tautology that enshrines the inevitable coming of socialism, it is also crucial that its practitioners realise its power to explain our present juncture. In this they owe an obligation, if they are claiming to write as Marxists, to understanding the continued political relevance of history and to in some way contribute to the development of counter-narratives and counter-hegemonies to prevalent versions of the past that tend to bolster the already powerful. I'm inherently cautious about being bombastic or overly directional there—I don't think that obligation extends to subscribing to a very particular reading of Marxism or Leninist activism. But it does have to mean some sort of dialogue with political struggle and people who are engaged with collectively representing the interests of workers or oppressed groups.

PRASHAD: This is a difficult question because of the sheer diversity of interests of Marxist historians and scholars. I would like to see a range of work emerge out of the Marxist analytic and out of an interest in left politics. I think we need to see a great deal of innovation and creativity in the way in which the analytic is developed.

I'd like to see much more robust engagement with praxis. This is a real problem in contemporary left scholarly traditions: a withdrawal into theoretical assessments that are often somewhat too specialized and removed from the struggles in our world. I am reminded of the concern of Karl Korsch from the early 1920s in his book *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923), where Korsch worried that Marxism in the West had forgotten that it was to be a guide to political struggle. It was viewed, he wrote, as 'a set of purely scientific observations', detached from class struggle. It is often forgotten that our tradition is to seek a living totality, that it emerges out of a theory towards socialist revolution. So it is this *ethical* standpoint towards the world that I hope will reveal itself in the work of Marxist historians and Marxist scholars.

This should not be misunderstood. I am not saying that scholars should be propagandists. Far from it. Scholars need to use our skills, the fruit of social labour, to understand the nature of the class struggle in our time—a struggle cut through with the efflorescence of social identities and through various forms of class aspiration—and to develop a sense of the history of this struggle. Such a glance at the past and of the present will allow us to understand the conditions for transcendence of this particular, historically-contingent system that we live with. We are almost embarrassed to take this kind of attitude to scholarship. There is a sense that we *should* as part of the professional character of our disciplines keep a detached mood from the world. I believe that this 'embarrassment' is part of a class attack on the possibility of producing knowledge for the working-class, the peasantry and the socially oppressed sections towards their liberation from hierarchies of property and power.

Dexter Govan, Vijay Prashad, Ewan Gibbs

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