

Capital and the Ur-praxis of Socialism

Preliminaries

If we are talking about a Marx for our times, then we have a lot of catching up to do. The labour process and the working class of today is *so* different from that which Marx knew!

During Marx's lifetime it was an axiom of capitalism that the number of 'unproductive workers' had to be reduced to a minimum. In 1898, Frederick Taylor promoted 25% of the workers at Bethlehem Steel into supervisory positions with a 30% wage increase, and increased productivity by a factor of 10, while splitting the industrial working class itself into numerous strata.

The truism that the manufacturer made a profit by keeping hours as long as possible and wages as low as possible was turned on its head in 1914 by Henry Ford, who cut 1 hour from the working day, doubled wages, and made a mint, while creating a corporatist layer within the industrial working class.

Then John Maynard Keynes, bless his soul, gave us the welfare state, and what remains to this day the core of the organised working class in the old capitalist countries, in service sectors – health and education, and building and maintaining infrastructure – apparently spending and not creating surplus value, but organised and socialist-minded nonetheless.

As macroeconomic reform gave way to microeconomic reform, Toyota came along and turned Frederick Taylor inside out, passing the supervision of labour back to the shop floor and bringing the market inside of the capitalist enterprise itself.

Now we have Google & Facebook who employ a small crew of so-called symbolic analysts to cream the profits off the unpaid labour of the users of their product. Meanwhile, most of what looks like industrial labour is being done in countries where the labour process and the working class still look much like it did in Europe in Marx's lifetime.

Only two things remains the same: the great stumbling block – capital, and its nemesis, the organised working class. But that working class is *so* different.

I. Goethe, Hegel, Marx, Vygotsky

My talk will be in two parts. In the first part of the talk I want to present a methodological insight I draw from Marx's *Capital*, and then in the second part, use this insight to address current ethical-political imperatives.

Working from the present back into the past, it was Lev Vygotsky's idea of "unit of analysis" that put me on to the trail. There was a lot of confusion among Vygotsky's followers about what this meant. I came to understand it by tracing it back to its

origins in Marx, Hegel and Goethe. So I will now tell this story, very briefly, in the traditional way, from the past up to the present.

Goethe, Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky are part of a line of thinkers who, in their own way in their own time, sought to understand processes *as a whole*, and made a conception of the whole the starting point for a reconstruction of the concrete. Easy to say, eh? but how *do* we grasp something as a whole? What form does a conception of the whole take and how is it arrived at? Our task is to place ourselves in that tradition in the fight for socialism.

Goethe's discovery, which he first put forward in 1787, was the archetypal phenomenon, or *Urphänomen* – the simplest observable thing which exhibits the essential features of the whole process.

Hegel described it this way in an 1821 letter to Goethe:

“What is simple and abstract, what you strikingly call the *Urphänomen*, you place at the very beginning. You then show how the intervention of further spheres of influence and circumstances generates the concrete phenomena, and you regulate the whole progression so that the succession proceeds from simple conditions to the more composite, and so that the complex now appears in full clarity through this decomposition. To ferret out the *Urphänomen*, to free it from those further environs which are accidental to it, to apprehend as we say abstractly – this I take to be a matter of spiritual intelligence for nature, just as I take that course generally to be the truly scientific knowledge in this field.”

Goethe's insight was realised in cell theory, but modern cell theory developed only in the 1830s; microscopes were not sufficiently powerful in Goethe's times to reveal the complex microstructure of organisms. It was Goethe's aim to discover the *Urphänomen* by what he called 'delicate empiricism' which entailed training the senses, immersing yourself in the subject matter, withholding judgment or hypothesis, not looking behind phenomena for invisible forces – just the phenomenon itself.

But this kind of intellectual intuition Hegel could not accept. Hegel demanded that development be grasped *rationally* which entailed grasping the process not as a phenomenon but as a *concept*.

Accordingly, the *Urphänomen*, or Archetypal phenomenon, underwent a kind of transformation in Hegel's appropriation in which it became the abstract concept, or *Urbegriff* (that's my word, not Hegel's), which develops from the abstract to the concrete in just the way Hegel described in his letter to Goethe.

Marx appropriated this idea from Hegel, but in Marx's hands the *Urphänomen* was again turned inside out. In the passage of the *Grundrisse* known as “The Method of Political Economy” Marx recapitulates the same process of digging down to the abstract concept, and then rising from the abstract to the concrete, reconstructing the concrete as “the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse.” But there is an important point of distinction and to which I must draw attention.

In his Preface to *Capital*, Marx says that “in bourgeois society, the commodity form of the product of labour – or value-form of the commodity – is the economic cell-form.” But he makes an important clarification in his 1881 Notes on Wagner: “I do not proceed from the ‘concept of value’ ... What I proceed from is the simplest social form in which the labour product presents itself in contemporary society, and this is the ‘commodity’.”

So long as wealth presents itself in the form of commodities, people are constrained to exchange commodities in order to live. So Marx gives first place to the mediating *artefact*, the material conditions. But:

“The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.”

We can see that the *Urphänomen* which became the *Urbegriff* has now been transformed by Marx into the *Urpraxis*, the simplest unit of practice which exhibits the essential features of the whole, bourgeois society – exchanging commodities. Practice changes material conditions, which in turn constrain and enable practice, which in turn transforms the conditions of labour, and so on.

In moving from a theory of the social reproduction of bourgeois society, to a theory for the practical overthrow of capitalism, we require a theory of praxis. In this spirit, we read *Capital* as making its beginning from the simple, artefact-mediated *practice* of *exchanging products of labour*.

In Chapter 4 of *Capital*, Marx shows how the cell. C-M-C', is inverted into M-C-M' and a new process of ascent from the abstract to the concrete is initiated beginning from the unit of capital, the capitalist firm, buying in order to sell at a profit.

So we have *two* units.

Goethe hoped to determine the *Urphänomen* by means of his ‘delicate empiricism’, and Hegel hoped to make social practices and history intelligible by means of a logical critique, for example, reconstructing a concrete idea of the modern state on the basis of *freedom*: the simplest social form of freedom being *private property* – the *Urbegriff* of freedom, and the state as the social form of concrete freedom.

Marx made the *Urphänomen* of his science a *real act of social practice*, not an imagined social practice, but one whose norms had *already been* produced by the development of bourgeois society and could be the subject of observation, visceral experience and intervention. By turning Hegel’s *Urphänomen* inside out, Marx recovered an important element of Goethe’s *Urphänomen*.

Part II.

I now come to the second part of my talk.

Neither Goethe, nor Hegel nor Marx were talking just about a theoretical method to be applied to subject matter; all claimed that the social process itself worked this way. So

a study of the social process, and in particular, participation in the struggle for social change and intervention in social processes should reveal to us the logic of social life, and in particular the *Urpraxis* of social change, and this concept provides us with the guide for understanding socialism at the current juncture.

My study of contemporary currents of social theory has led me to the conclusion that for the solution of the problem of socialism, it is necessary to choose a unit of analysis and that this unit must be an *Urpraxis*. The usual unit of analysis for social theory – social groups of one kind or another, is good only for describing social reproduction and cannot reveal the dynamics of *social change*; theories based on the individual as a unit of analysis are not worthy of the name social theory at all. Furthermore, all contemporary human science is affected by the departmentalisation of the academy, which itself reflects the rupture of the modern world view into great societal forces and institutions on one side, and individuals and their families on the other, arranging the deck chairs on the social Titanic. Social revolution demands that this dichotomy be transcended. As I indicated above, I found what I needed not in social theory but in Cultural Psychology, specifically, the strand of theory founded in the early Soviet Union by Lev Vygotsky.

The unit of analysis I use for understanding social life in general and revolutionary change in particular is the *Collaborative Project*, or ‘project’ for short. A project is not an aggregate of people but of actions, explicitly *artefact mediated actions*. So just as Marx used two units of analysis: exchange of commodities, C-M-C, and buying in order to sell at profit, M-C-M', I use both a micro unit, artefact mediated actions, and a molar unit, collaborative projects. Cultural Psychology is the science which deals with artefact mediated actions and I don't wish to say any more about that at the moment.

However, what is posed by the adoption of collaborative project as a unit of analysis are two interrelated studies, which alas are hardly even embryonic in their development: the study of the *internal dynamics of collaborative projects*, and the study of the *collaboration between projects*, both conflictual and cooperative. It is upon this problem, the relations between projects, that I believe the future of socialism rests.

‘Project’ is by no means an esoteric concept these days, in fact it is even fashionable. And my meaning differs from the everyday concept only in that I do not include individual actions as projects, which is part of the reason that I say ‘collaborative’ projects. Almost invariably people *join* projects, and only rarely have the privilege of launching one. It is by and only by participating in projects that a person effects anything in this world.

Projects are not eternal, but have a life cycle: they begin with a group of people unconsciously sharing a social position of some kind for which a problem or opportunity arises; a solution is floated which brings people together to participate and it becomes a social movement; strategies, tactics and aims change and subsequently, the project either withers away or an adequate concept is formed and becomes institutionalised, and the concept around which it mobilised enters into the everyday culture of the given community. Hegel described this process in detail in his *Logic*.

The relevance of collaborative project as a unit for social change today, at this juncture, reflects the developments in the productive forces themselves. Just as parties have become ineffectual in bringing about fundamental social change, capitalist firms have changed their form in ways reflective of the changing demands of our times. The Left itself now already looks like so many independent projects. That's life! The communist party which was able to coordinate the activity of millions of members is gone long, long ago, along with the great capitalist firm which directly employed all the people who worked for it. Projects have *become* the real unit of social formation, not in theory, but in social reality.

A project is a collaboration. I call projects 'collaborative' because in projects numbers of autonomous individuals collaborate towards universal, though ever changing, ends. But the more important aspect of collaboration is that *between* projects. Collaboration *as such* means projects fusing together in a common endeavour and sharing a common identity. Collaboration between projects in which the separate identity is maintained include: colonisation (or philanthropy), exchange (or bargaining) and *solidarity*. (Note that solidarity here is nothing to do with Durkheim or Weber).

I have made a modest study of some collaborations as such. These include the fight against AIDS in Australia, which was a collaboration between the Gay Rights movement (which also mobilised sex workers and drug users), the Medical Science institutions and a group within the Hawke Labor government. It was a successful struggle and an international exemplar, impossible without that collaboration.

Also, the fight to ban Asbestos in Australia. The asbestos industry had nobbled medical scientists, regulative authorities and government ministers, but this formation was defeated by a collaboration between the trade unions and health professionals in the Workers Health Movement which secured the collaboration of some journalists, labour law firms and victim self-help groups. Once again, only such a collaboration could have changed people's minds and rid Australia of this deadly trade. There need to be more of these studies, but more importantly, more of such collaborative projects.

My point is this: people will participate in projects and give it their best shot. The problem is that we have to *learn* how to collaborate with other projects. Above all we have to learn the meaning of solidarity. It is on this alone that the future of socialism depends.

As the Rules of the International Workingmen's Association declared in 1864:

That all efforts aiming at the great end hitherto failed from the want of solidarity between the manifold divisions of labor in each country, and from the absence of a fraternal bond of union between the working classes of different countries;

The French workers had invented the word *solidarité* on the barricades of Paris in the first working class uprisings against the bourgeoisie. The French had learnt the hard way that without solidarity the army could defeat them one barricade at a time, as they had in 1832. By 1848, the Chartist movement, which had united 5/6 of the population of Britain against the ruling capitalist class had also learnt their lesson the hard way.

“Solidarity” entered the English language from the French at the Chartist Convention in London in April 1848, popularised by *The People’s Paper* of Ernest Jones and Julian Harney – leaders of the left-wing of the Chartists and founders of the Communist League, for whom Marx and Engels wrote the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

The Rules of International Workingmen’s Association began with the maxim: “the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.” These two principles: self-emancipation and solidarity, together make the irreducible and inseparable foundations of the workers’ movement.

That self-emancipation is necessary is almost self-evident; if the working class is to take public political power it can learn and equip itself for that task only through the work of freeing itself and abolishing the conditions of its own exploitation. No-one can do that on their behalf. Self-emancipation is self-creation, the way in which working class self-consciousness, in effect, the working class itself, is constructed. Without self-emancipation there can be no working class, only billions of individual wage-workers, socially and politically controlled by capital.

The opposite of self-emancipation is attaining freedom as the gift of another party. Such a thing is actually impossible; a class which is freed by the action of another class or group is only thereby subordinated to their liberators, even if these be well-meaning. How then is a socialist group to foster the liberation of the working class if the liberation of the working class is to be *their own* achievement? The answer to this conundrum lies in the principle of *solidarity*.

The need for solidarity arises from the fact that the working class does not come into the world readymade as a single, homogeneous, organised stratum of society. It comes into the world divided into strata, trades, national, religious and ethnic groups, and spread across the globe in numerous cultural and linguistic communities, and as I have remarked the working class has become more not less diversified since. Energies are dissipated in numerous projects, very many of which contribute in some way to the socialist project, but independently and often in conflict with other projects.

The modern working class can realise its own emancipation only by the collaboration of these disparate projects. The aims and methods of projects will differ, but the autonomy of every project within a broad movement remains until at some future time, maybe, they voluntarily create and submit themselves to a shared discipline.

When one group finds itself under attack, *provided they fight back*, then others have a duty to come to their aid. This duty and its practice is called ‘solidarity’. The results of solidarity are three-fold. In the first place, as a result of the aid received from others the struggling group may survive. Secondly, they learn who their friends are, and coming at their hour of need, they will not ever forget this.

But most importantly, through their struggle, whether successful or not, their collective self-consciousness, agency and self-confidence is enhanced.

However, this is not automatically the case; sometimes ‘helping’ someone is a violation of solidarity. If another group comes along and ‘saves’ them, then the ‘rescued’ group may be grateful, but their working class self-consciousness is not enhanced but at best subsumed under that of the rescuing party, who in any case, as often as not, do more damage than help.

The principle of solidarity, which guides how different sections of the workers’ movement come to each others’ aid, avoids such dangers and ensures that the self-consciousness of both the struggling party and the party offering solidarity is enhanced in the very process of bringing them closer together.

It is a simple rule:

when coming to the aid of another party, do so under *their* direction.

You do it their way, not your way. If your own beliefs are such that you cannot place yourself under their direction, if you believe that they are so misguided, then solidarity is impossible. But if they can contribute in some way to socialism then ensuring that they are not defeated is important, and you will surely be able to find *some* way of supporting them according to their own practices. This may be by donating to their fighting fund or sending a message of solidarity or whatever. But if you are going to participate in the struggle of another section of the workers’ movement, then the principle of solidarity demands that you do so *under their direction*. The working class is unified by voluntary association, not by conquest or even persuasion.

To be clear, I am not making a call for unity on the Left. This is neither possible, nor actually desirable. Preparing and building a movement which can overthrow capitalism and make something *better*, is the most complex task imaginable, and it is not planned or directed. It is diverse, with many centres. But nor am I making a libertarian, anarchist call for self-expression and multiplicity.

We have to teach people how to collaborate; we have to teach people how to practice solidarity. People will do what they will. If people are not struggling for social justice, then there is nothing we can do to bring that into being. We cannot accelerate the *Zeitgeist*. The job of Marxists is to show people how the practice of solidarity builds a movement for self-emancipation.

A world in which solidarity is universal is already socialism.

To be clear, again, I am not arguing for a loose movement of diverse projects. That is what already exists. I am not arguing against building a party to win seats in Parliament; I am not arguing against building a monthly journal of Marxist theory, or a direct action group opposing evictions or an antifascist group to defend communities against racism, or building a cadre of professional revolutionaries. All these are part of the struggle for socialism. It is not a question of one or the other, but of how to bind them together in bonds of solidarity. And at the moment, young people do not even know the meaning of the word.

But it is *solidarity* which is the *Urpraxis* of the socialist project.

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