

Social production controlled by social foresight

We print here an article version of a talk given by Colin Waugh at Independent Working-Class Education Network (IWCE) meetings on 15 October 2016 at the Philadelphia Workingmens Club, Sheffield, and on 26 November 2016 in Norwich.

The best short definition of socialism that I know is 'social production controlled by social foresight'. This phrase was used by Karl Marx in 1864 in his *Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association (IWMA)*. (The IWMA was a link-up of trade unionists in Britain and elsewhere.) In the relevant part of this document, Marx was praising the struggle by unions to force factory owners to accept a working day limited to ten hours, and within this the relevant sentence says: 'This struggle about the legal restriction of the hours of labour raged the more fiercely since, apart from frightened avarice, it told indeed upon the great contest between the blind rule of the supply and demand laws which form the political economy of the middle class, and social production controlled by social foresight, which forms the political economy of the working class.' ('Middle class' then meant people like factory owners.) What, then, did Marx mean by 'social production'?

He saw virtually all production as social up to a point, but here he was contrasting modern industrial production with small-scale production, for example with agriculture carried on by peasant families for their own consumption, or with artisans selling their individual product directly to customers. He knew about earlier forms of production that were social in this sense, for example large-scale irrigation works in ancient societies, pyramids and so on, for instance in Egypt, India, China and South America, or Roman roads, aqueducts and other such works. But he saw modern industry as the prime example because it drew large masses of people off the land

into industrial centres, people for whom therefore food (for example bread) had to be mass produced; because it involved the large-scale use of fossil-fuel power sources; because it entailed large-scale extractive processes, as for example deep mining of coal; because it depended on large-scale agriculture (as for example the production by slave labour on plantations in the USA of cotton as supplied to Lancashire); because it developed big transport systems, for example canals, railways and steamships; because it had created a world market in commodities; and, above all, because it involved the trans-national cooperation of vast numbers of people. However, we should also ask: what did Marx mean by 'production' itself, whether 'social' or not?

He saw production as a distinctively human activity, and he did so mainly because it involves a high degree of forethought. Yes, non-human animals do stalk their prey, build dams, store nuts and the like. But humans are the only species to survive primarily by evolving a massive memory capacity, with the result that they can:

reflect on experience; pass the results of this reflection culturally to the next generation; use notation systems such as spoken and written language to plan activity; adapt rapidly to changes in their environment; and regularly produce sustained surpluses of food, fuel and other necessities. So on this view there is a difference in kind between what humans do to survive and what other species do.

However, as production becomes more and more 'social' - that is, large-scale and complex, a stage is reached where it's no longer enough for foresight to be exercised only at a day-to-day, technical level,

and now it must also operate at an over-arching, strategic level as well. But when this stage is reached the question then arises: what if production has become highly social but the foresight that goes with it has not kept pace? In other words, you have industrial production but it's controlled by a small group, just as in, say, ancient Egypt, decisions about large-scale public works were taken by a thin layer of priests, courtiers and bureaucrats. Worse still, suppose that this small group exercises 'foresight' purely in its own interests, and suppose that those interests are contrary to the interests of the immense majority. For example, suppose this minority is using the majority to its own advantage and their detriment. In that case, production would be 'social', but any over-arching foresight that existed would be anti-social.

This was the situation with regard to industrial production in 1864. British industry dominated much of the world, but the vast majority of those involved in this, including not just industrial workers and farm labourers in Britain itself, but also vast populations in the USA, the Caribbean, West Africa, India, China, Egypt and other areas, had no say. In this situation, Marx argued that production should be controlled at a strategic level by an extremely radical form of democracy. This democracy, he believed, must extend to strategic decisions about what shall be produced, by whom, using what means and materials, and about what would be done with that product, in whose interests, and it must be exercised primarily by what he called 'the associated producers' - the workers; in short, 'social production controlled by social foresight'.

Contrast

But what was Marx getting at here when he talked about 'political economy'? (As we have seen, he used this phrase twice, and he drew a contrast between the 'political economy of the middle class' and that of the working class.)

Marx based his economic ideas on what we would now think of as the classic bourgeois economists, especially Adam Smith and David Ricardo. However, he also thought of his economic writings as a 'critique of political economy', a phrase which in 1867 would form the subtitle of his book *Capital* (Volume 1). What lay behind this form of words? Smith and Ricardo both wrote that labour was the source of economic value. They could do this because both of them, and Smith in particular, wrote before the well-off felt threatened by an industrial working class that might be influenced by what economists wrote. By Marx's time, however,

the dominant economists, including, for example, Jean-Baptiste Say, Nassau Senior and Andrew Ure, had rejected the labour theory of value in favour of a supply-and-demand model of value.

These writers called themselves 'political economists', hence Marx's 'critique'. Their starting point was an imaginary individual producer. (Marx criticised such arguments as 'Robinsonades' - a reference to Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe*.) They developed the idea that supply and demand leads to the best possible overall outcome, so must not be interfered with. It can be argued that both these assumptions are superstitious. The Robinson model - the idea that the basic form of production is an isolated individual - is at odds with history, anthropology and other ways of discovering how social formations have developed. The supply and demand model, on the other hand, assumes that there is what has been called a 'hidden hand' - that is, a supernatural force working behind everyday phenomena. So what then did Marx mean by 'the political economy of the working class'?

Marx developed his own distinctive version of the labour theory of value. His key insight was that when workers who don't own the means of production have to work for the capitalists who do, what is bought and sold as a commodity is not labour but labour power, the capacity to work. Arguably this is the biggest single insight in Marx's thinking, and it has big implications beyond economics, but it's also something that everybody who's done a routine job knows. At some level, every such worker knows that what an employer buys is your ability to work in a specified field for a specified time. For example, sometimes they will keep you standing idle in the freezing cold or whatever, and you have to pretend to work (that is, to supervisors or the like) and then they will fling you into violent activity that is at the limits of your strength, endurance and so on.

To me this shows that Marx's economic thought was rooted in his conversations with workers, for example with exiled German artisans in Brussels, Paris and London, with Chartist workers both in London and, especially via Frederick Engels and his partner Mary Burns, in Lancashire. So by 'the political economy of the working class' Marx meant an elaborated version of workers' own experience, and that was what he spent most of his life trying to provide.

To conclude, then, 'social production controlled by social foresight' is a good definition of socialism because it is rooted in workers' experience, because it reflects a systematic attempt to make sense of things at a wider and deeper level than mainstream assumptions, and because it expresses this briefly, in plain language.