

On BARBARISM, HISTORICAL MATERIALISM and FORCED DIVISION OF LABOUR

The most gripping and central theme of Marx's concept of historical materialism is the inevitability of each stage's occurrence throughout history. Society begins in a state of primitive communism and makes its way through slavery and feudalism, capitalism and socialism before returning back to communism in an 'end of history' type event when class conflict ceases (Marx & Engels 2001, 94). An article by John Bellamy Foster, however, seeks to illustrate that the notion of eventuality that exists in historical materialism is indeed in danger; that it can be hijacked by the forces of barbarism, and that that barbarism may be present now in the guise of rampant capitalism (Foster 2004, 11).^{*} Contained within this description of barbarism is an implicit account of a forced division of labour that may prevent the next stage in historical materialism from developing in the modern industrial world.

Foster introduces his article by speaking about the contemporary usage of 'barbarism' in reference to international terrorism, but quickly notes that the effects of global capitalism are set aside in the conversation (2). This sets up an analysis of barbarism, that the Marxian treatment, "while scattered in his writings, was complex and reflected the numerous contradictions embedded in civilization or capitalism in his conception, which raised the possibility of degeneration as well as progress (toward communism). (Foster 2004, 4)" Barbarism was seen as a component of capitalism under the bourgeoisie, a mechanism by which trade is both propagated and protected.

[I]n the place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single unconscionable freedom—free trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation (Marx & Engels 1998, 38).

^{*} Page numbers will correspond with the print-out from the *MONTHLY REVIEW* website.

Barbarism thus becomes embedded into the society and civilization through the reliance of the modes of production upon it. Without exploitation how could the factories in Manchester keep working? Without imperialism how would Britain sustain itself as an economic power? The usage of the word by Marx and Rosa Luxemburg was perhaps a radical updating from the traditional usage—as regards to the uncivilized—but to look at the destruction of Europe in the First World War or the famines of India in the 1800s, what civilization could there be (Foster 2004, 9)? Barbarism became more pronounced in those frontiers of empire: “The more global way in which Marx and Engels utilized the concept of barbarism, however, was in the treatment of the relation between center and periphery of the capitalist world economy. (6)” This concept of ‘center and periphery,’ exemplified perhaps in “the East Indian and Chinese markets, [and] the colonization of America (Marx and Engels 1998, 36)” will later play in the hands of the globalization debate of the late 20th century and the desire to bring neoliberalism to parts of the world still virgin to the Nike swoosh.

In historical materialism, the notion of regression should be anathema. But Foster notes that even Marx and Engels were at least somewhat aware of this possibility: “History could therefore move forward toward socialism or backward toward barbarism—or worse promote a more systematic, capitalist form of barbarism, naked in its imperial ambitions. (8)” [In the *COMMUNIST MANIFESTO* Marx and Engels do indeed take pains to write about “a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. (1998, 35)”] Even more presciently comes this quote from G.V.S. de Silva: “Barbarism in one or two powerful countries will overwhelm the rest of humanity,” a condition that Foster sees in the contemporary era with the United States (11).

Thus the progressivism of Marx’s historical materialism comes under fire due to this barbarism which presents itself in the form of a forced division of labour. Indeed, Durkheim speaks of the central faculty of the forced division as being that “the distribution of social functions ... does not correspond ... to the distribution of natural abilities. (311)” The exploitation of factory workers, cotton slaves or coffee growers are undoubtedly just a few of many examples that could be put forth to describe this situation that societies find themselves in. It is this

forced division that allows each empire to exist, but in Marx's historical treatment, each empire falls as the ruling ideas come under fire, and the ruling class cannot keep the modes of production exclusive to itself (Marx & Engels 1998, 42). However, there is a way by which this can be halted, whether temporarily or for an extended period of time.

Struggle still occurs, because of the fact that there must still be victors and vanquished. ... But this constraint does not resemble the other form; it has nothing in common with it save the term. What constitutes real restraint is when even struggle becomes impossible, and one is not even allowed to fight (Durkheim 1997, 313).

Durkheim's concern about the forced division of labour, that it presents circumstances in which class conflict may not be able to come about, must be updated for a society in which the ideas of restraint and conflict are never even present. In the modern U.S. class consciousness has been twisted or ignored in ways not imagined even a decade or two ago; concerns about class become discussions of social status and what one watches on TV, and not about inequalities of wealth and even the meaning of 'working class' and 'upper class' (though some commentators are trying to raise this with the President's recent Social Security plan). When forced division of labour becomes established not just in material form but also in psycho-social forms, in which it appears to most of the population to be natural though it is clearly anything but, then the conditions for regression become ever-present.

Extrapolate this to a global scale and we see Foster's reason for concern.

With its immense military power and its willingness to use force, the United States is now leading the world into what Mészáros has called 'the potentially deadliest phase of imperialism.' In attempting to prevent revolution (or indeed any way out for the populations on the periphery), the United States is seeking to transcend the only certain law of the universe: change (12).

By denying not just struggle but the notion that there is anything to struggle against, the United States and its Western allies are tempting the fate of history. They are casting neoliberalism, the great hope of global market capital, as the be-all, end-all of world society; that from this point out it is MTV and cheeseburgers for everyone, unless you happen to be making sneakers. To ensure this, and arrest "the decline of U.S. economic hegemony," the United States must "[put] its

huge war machine in motion in order to prop up its faltering hegemony over the world economy. (Foster 2004, 11)”

Foster, after discussing uses of torture by the U.S. throughout the past century and its widespread prevalence now, then addresses the environmental & ecological consequences of such imperialist tendencies:

The war in Iraq, which is about the control of oil as a means to world domination, is itself a manifestation of the U.S. refusal to change direction regardless of the consequences for the planet. ... [A]s Marx intimated at one point, [this] constitutes the very essence of barbarism (15).

Later in his chapter on forced division of labour, Durkheim poses this question in regards to placing someone in a untenable position: “how could it be valid if, ... I have profited from a situation that, it is true, I had not caused, but put someone else in a situation where he had either to give way to me or die? (317)” This is precisely the question that must be answered by the United States and the rest of the West today.

But if the question is not answered, or answered sufficiently, then what comes next? Foster makes clear the threats posed by an unending cycle of exploitation and imperialism:

Only the transcendence of capitalism, in the direction of socialism, offers the possibility to escape from the current state of barbarism and a worsening ecological collapse. ... The choice that we confront ... is whether ‘socialism’ or ‘the ruins of imperialistic barbarism’ is to be the future of humankind (16).

Marx and Engels envisioned mankind progressively improving upon itself, but despite the many historical examples they were able to draw upon—patricians and plebians, lords and serfs—surely nothing could have prepared them for the onslaught of modern hyper-capitalism mixed with ultra-concentrated military power (1998, 35). It is this scenario that may sustain the forced division of labour—between the classes here at home and abroad—to such an extent that its abolition becomes the stuff of theory, impossible and even unimaginable.

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