

Marxism for the Few, Or, Let 'Em Eat Theory

by Doug Dowd

Monthly Review, April 1982

The years since the Second World War have unquestionably produced more people in the United States who see themselves as Marxists, more Marxist periodicals and books, more university and other classes taught by Marxists (in public and in "movement" schools), and more Marxists functioning in a broad range of community and other activist groups, than at any time in U.S. history, and all these by some multiple.

But, in the same years, and despite growing and widespread cynicism, skepticism, despair, and anger of ordinary working people concerning various aspects of the society (though seldom "the system"), the upsurge of Marxism has just as unquestionably coincided with — not, one trusts, caused — a noticeable decline in the overall political effectiveness of the left in the United States, and an associated dimming of prospects here for even a mildly improving, let alone a democratic socialist society. The Marxists, mostly out of, or still connected with, universities, tend to function like a suburban swimming pool: self-contained and self-purifying.

Meanwhile, oozing like a poisonous oil spill over the entire social landscape, is the right. Steadily and with increasing effectiveness, it has wheedled and whined and shouldered its way toward ever higher kinds and levels of power and authority, and even of affection and respect.

Social change takes place with twists and turns, not in straight lines; so current trends are unlikely to persist indefinitely: they could be reversed or they could accelerate into an even snore dangerous zone. Because society and its processes are not fully understood, we are unable to do much more than fret and guess about the future as we seek to shape it politically: a perverse basis for a smidgeon of hope, if also for at least as much more gloom. Still, it is at best unsettling that the relationship between the amount of Marxist social analysis and the main drift of the U.S. political process since the Second World War appears to be inverse.

Why is this country that way? Might this melancholy and ominous condition be altered for the better, even a little? Are there any portents of desirable change?

It may seem paradoxical to assert that the main hope for understanding and changing all this is to be found within the Marxian analytical framework. The political ineffectuality of Marxism in the United States is the consequence most importantly of the nature and history of U.S. capitalism, a history that has created imposing obstacles for those seeking to build a socialist society. But also important in explaining this feebleness has been what U.S. Marxists have and have not done, who they are, and their "style."

U.S. capitalist history is clearly more substantially important than the behavior of Marxists in accounting for the limited impact of Marxism here. Because it has been much examined, we need only summarize the relevant aspects of that history. U.S. capitalism has been the most successful by far of all capitalist societies. Its success must be measured not just in its demonstrably superior economic performance for the past two centuries or so, but in its connected ability to make willing ideological captives of almost all the population — and thus to deflect, to deform, and to vitiate that "class consciousness" expected by Marx to assist capitalism in its own overthrow.

The principal and familiar sources of U.S. capitalist strength will be noted briefly; then we shall attempt to illuminate the ways in which U.S. Marxists have been socialized so as to be even less effective politically than might reasonably be expected, were only so-called objective processes to be taken as determining.

That U.S. capitalism has been by its own standards so successful, both economically and sociopolitically, is not difficult to explain; nor is it as easy to explain as its vocal supporters think when, begging the question, they glibly attribute its achievements to the country's having been the most capitalistic of capitalisms, the least fettered by political and social interferences with profit-taking — with having been, in short, the most businesslike of all societies. All these characterizations of our history are in some sense apt, but they reverse cause and effect.

As this society settles steadily into the swamps of mindlessness, mindless analyses of the society and its history have naturally emerged and spread, aided and abetted by the diverse means in which its chief salespeople, nowadays Milton Friedman and Ronald Reagan, have been able to blanket us by their foggy messages. Needed social policies have been cut back from their always inadequate levels and will be even more so, or terminated entirely; meanwhile, harmful policies are expanded or introduced. An already bad socio-economic situation becomes intractably and savagely worse — while, perversely, opening the eyes and ears of the troubled populace even more to the simplistic nostrums of Professor F. and his henchmen of the “supply-side.” Ah wilderness! And what a need, what an opportunity for radical analysis!

To say that the capitalist groupies are begging the question when they explain U.S. strength by its having been super-capitalistic requires an examination of other and more fundamental processes in our history. Doing so enables us to understand how and why the United States could be so different from, among others, France, Great Britain, Germany, and Italy — so different, and in so many ways.

The answers lie in a U.S. history replete with blessings absolutely unique to us: blessings of location, of human and nonhuman resources, of the timing of our appearance on history's stage. All of these showered down on U.S. capitalism from our colonial days and into the second half of this century. Meaning what?

Meaning that anything and everything that might facilitate the emergence of industrial capitalism, whether by nature or in social relations, became available on the U.S. part of this continent, especially once we gained control over our own political processes after 1776.

Item: The U.S. was born into a world able to provide it with capital, with technology, and with labor, as needed, cheaply and even freely (whether as slaves or as a free labor force raised to working age elsewhere).

Item: As the Europeans earned and received the epithet of imperialists from, among others, the people of the United States, those very people, from Plymouth hock onward, were garnering the most bountiful empire of all, violently and at bargain basement prices, in the pleasing names of “Manifest Destiny,” or “Westward Expansion.” These were neither the first nor the last of the euphemisms that have allowed us to stifle our consciences, bolster our pride, and feed our arrogance as a people; to see ourselves as a special breed whose energy and ingenuity have made this nation the standard-bearer for all of humanity.

Item: Our assembling empire became an overflowing cornucopia of all that was needed and wanted by U.S. capitalism, on, over, and under the land, all well located and easily transported on our lakes and rivers and up and down and beyond our several coasts (or on canals and railroads financed through some combination of foreign and state capital). Descending upon our economic development process like manna from heaven were great quantities of fibers (cotton and wool), foodstuffs (grain, and meat, and everything else), timber, and minerals (including those very special minerals, gold, silver, and petroleum). Control over these vital resources alone assured the United States a very special lift beyond economic strength to economic supremacy.

Item: From the early nineteenth century, the U.S. economy grew strongly in rhythm with European economic development. The Europeans encouraged and financed and gobbled up our production in great and rising quantities. We came to economic adolescence and then to maturity as an economy in a seller's market for our exports and in a buyer's market for our imports, as foreigners competed with each other for both.

Item: The always high proportion of immigrants in our working population, for a variety of reasons combining what they left behind and what they hoped for here for themselves and their children, and taken

together with the nourished dynamics of hate and envy revolving around color and religion and national backgrounds, meant that notwithstanding the harshness of labor conditions (except for a minority, and for short periods), the working people in the United States have been neither effectively class-conscious — however much they might hate the bosses — nor politically active, except now and then, here and there. Nor is it enough to blame the frequently corrupt and complacent trade-union leadership for any or all of this: in unions as in government, we get the leadership we put up with.

Item: The ability of this most successful of capitalisms to keep business costs down and profits up by exploiting its superabundant natural resources and its imported (and slave) labor was accomplished with accompanying sociopolitical immunity so far as all but a very few knew or cared — until very recently. And now, as the last years of the twentieth century howl in our faces, we confront environmental and social minor or major disasters of mounting intensity. Not least among these, of course, are hardening racism and enduring poverty, continuing the long-standing ability of those on top to rule over and exploit those so deeply divided by our history.

Item: But the cream of the historical jest is found in the habit of our people, including many of those most harmed by all this, still to accept (or to find themselves unable to refute) arguments that place the responsibility for our problems anywhere but upon the normal functioning of U.S. capitalism, anywhere but upon the shoulders of those who made the decisions, that made them tire profits, that gained them the power to continue to make the decisions which add up to social rape. If any of this can be dealt with by paying for it with money, moreover, the payment will be made by the individual taxpayer and consumer, not by those whose thrust for profits and power created this society and its problems.

Item: The art of mind management, so advanced today as to scare the hell out of many of its victims and even some of its makers, worked its powers effectively in the recent and distant pasts as well. Its major and abiding accomplishments are two: (1) as Paul Baran has put it, “to make us want what we don't need and need what we don't want”; and (2) of effectively blaming the victims of our social ills and, even more, of inducing the victims to blame themselves — perhaps the major triumph of individualism, American-style.

So it went and, despite serious and growing difficulties in the domestic and global political economy, so goes still the ideological hold of U.S. capitalism on the bulk of the population. For our purposes, this shows up in the stubborn inability — what Thorstein Veblen called “the trained incapacity” — of our people to think about this system as a system, let alone to work for a different one. U.S. history has surrounded the social consciousness of our people with a tough membrane that allows in only those ideas that can be absorbed harmlessly or that nourish the capitalist system.

Any assessment of the political weaknesses of radicals in the United States must therefore begin with the superstrength in this country of what Antonio Gramsci called “bourgeois ideological hegemony” — that is, the “consenting acceptance” by the people of capitalism's basic ways and means and standards. That the degrees of acceptance in the entire capitalist world have been substantial is revealed by capitalism's longevity, despite the hell and high water of this century's convulsions; but the United States holds the record in this respect — with few exceptions Americans' attitudes toward capitalism range from enthusiasm to narcosis. The difficulties facing Marxists here are thus formidable indeed. But the ways in which radical intellectuals have functioned have added to those difficulties.

III

There has not been a period in U.S. history in which resistance to the capitalist process has been absent; but for the past generation or so the role of radical intellectuals has been disproportionately great in that resistance. From our first years, both enslaved and free workers and liberal and radical intellectuals struggled and worked to tame or to displace the system. Focusing on that resistance in the twentieth century, and comparing the two decades before the First World War with the several since the Second World War (leaving aside the interwar period), it is striking to note that the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of both the workers' and the intellectuals' politics have not only changed, but that their relative positions in the political spectrum have reversed. (These changes, it must be kept in mind, took place against a major alteration in our educational structures: in absolute numbers there are more college graduates today than there were high school graduates before the First World War.)

In the period before 1914, the rising political tendency among U.S. workers was toward socialism. They led a strong and dynamic movement neither needing nor receiving much help from intellectuals. As James Weinstein has shown in his *Decline of Socialism*, the socialist movement in its heyday, from about 1910 to 1920, had over 250 newspapers and elected over 300 people to local and state offices scattered all over the country. As the 1920s began, there ensued a long and tortuous process in which the nature, the adherents, and the leadership of the socialist effort were all transformed, and the movement itself fragmented and diminished.

Nowadays the socialist movement in this country is a predominantly mental worker/student/intellectual effort, but these radical intellectuals (as distinct from intellectual radicals) are by no means the lineal descendants of the pre-First World War intellectuals. The latter were liberal reformers seeking, as has been said, "to bandage the running sores of capitalism": to clean up its slums, lessen its financial panics, reduce its corruption and instability, and the like. They energized the Progressive Movement and became the brain trust of Wilsonian liberalism. In a somewhat more volatile mixture, they guided much of the New Deal; and it was their political heirs who functioned in the 1960s in a way to earn the label of "cold war" or "corporate" liberals.

Today's radical intellectuals for the most part came into being as the bitter opponents of these older varieties of liberal reformers and their policies. While workers from the 1920s on moved from left to center and right, intellectuals bifurcated, most remaining where they have usually been, on steady center or the right; but with a large number moving toward and into — indeed, in some sense, becoming — the left.

It was the period after the Second World War that was critical in producing both the "pacification" of the working class and the "radicalization" of many among the now enormous numbers of university-trained people. Steadily rising levels of material well-being brought the industrial working class into effective harmony with the system; illumination of the means and consequences of achieving those levels here and abroad produced dissent and rage among university-connected radicals. Workers, with rare and widely noted exceptions, came overwhelmingly to eschew radicalism both in practice and in principle and, if anything, have placed themselves more often than not staunchly on the side of the status quo. When worker dissatisfaction and worry have surfaced in the recent past and in the stagflating present, it has almost always resulted in targeting the wrong enemies — social policies, Arabs, students, *et al.* — and thus strengthening the hand of the real enemy: the capitalist system.

The effort to build a socialist society rests the present in the hands mostly of radical intellectuals, and mostly by default. Reluctant though they are to grant it, it is they who are now one of the two main hopes for rebuilding an effective socialist movement in the United States. The other source of such hope, although dangerously so, is the hulk of the working population (whether or not seen by others or themselves as "working class") as it continues to founder on the sharp rocks of stagflation and as its hopes for beneficial change are pulverized by the political hammer blows of the Reagan administration. The number of radicals is substantial, if also impossible to know with anything resembling accuracy. Their analytical tendency, and increasingly so, is toward Marxism. Their background is the university, and, as will be seen, much of their energy, their style, and their arguments developed in response to their intellectual mentor-enemies, as well as to the larger social system. It is time now to examine the work of these left intellectuals, to note their positive contributions, and to seek to explain their self-inflicted wounds.

IV

The 1960s were the critical years for the emergence of radical organizations and caucuses in all the professions: in the academic crannies of the social sciences, the humanities, and the natural sciences, as well as in the practicing professions of architecture, engineering, law, and medicine. Associated with all these organizations are radical journals: and there are many journals (such as *Socialist Review*) that connect with no particular profession or discipline, as there are also a few radical newspapers (such as the weekly *In These Times*).

Most of these now quite numerous organizations and periodicals were born within the past fifteen years, although there are some few that go back farther, including *Science & Society* (1936), the weekly (*National*) *Guardian* (1948), and *Monthly Review* (1949). In one way or another all these served the diverse

and vital functions of keeping left ideas alive and spirits warm through several decades in which that was a difficult and often risky job. More to the point, altogether these and other publications not cited were vital in making the radical efflorescence of the 1960s possible, whatever the numerous defects of both the nourishers and the nourished. Also important to note is that as the list of radical organizations and their publications and readers lengthened during the 1960s and 1970s, feeding and being fed by them was an ever-growing number of radical books, published by conventional and by a few radical publishing houses. In short, by the 1970s radical ideas, whether chic or not, had found a viable market.

All that was something new for the United States. The years up to and through the 1950s were rife with difficulties for those who sought radical analyses to read, or outlets for their own ideas, whether in classrooms or in print. Such difficulties still exist, but they are of lesser proportions. For at least ten years now, the left could not reasonably complain that its ineffectuality has been caused by its inability to be read or heard. The reasons, at least some of them within our reach, lie deeper.

It will bear repeating that the major obstacle to effective political work in the United States is the absence of a mass. based political movement on the left, for which radical intellectuals are only minimally responsible. Be that as it may, there has been so little progress toward building a bridge between radical analyses and the daily lives of our people, that this gap would seem to be *the* problem for U.S. radicals. The fault does not lie entirely in our stars; notwithstanding the undoubted contributions the left has made in holding back the dark in recent years, it has the responsibility of confronting and diminishing its persisting inadequacies.

Looking closely at just one of the numerous radical organizations (the one I know best), the *Union for Radical Political Economies* (URPE), might help us to locate both the positive and the negative traits not only of this but of many other such organizations connected to university and professional life. URPE serves well for this purpose, as a leading species of its genus, for a variety of reasons: it was among the first of the social science organizations begun in the 1960s and has both lasted and grown; and it has done, and gone through, just about everything that the others have, for better and for worse.

V

URPE from its beginnings to the present has had a membership made up almost entirely of graduate students and younger faculty members in economics. It announced itself at its first conference in 1968, held at MIT. Three papers were delivered: (1) a presentation of Marxian economic theory. (2) a critique of conventional ("neoclassical") economic theory, and (3) a friendly critique of Marxism and an unfriendly critique of conventional economics from the vantage point of Thorstein Veblen. What URPE has done since then may be seen as a complex variation on that first conference, most especially as concerns elucidations of Marxian economic theory and criticisms of the mainstream: its audience remains economists, and its primary concern is economic theory.

There had been much more than just that, on and somewhat beneath the surface, in the attempts by URPE people to develop the theory of imperialism, for example, and persistently to explore the ways in which Marxism does (and does not) illuminate women's history and conditions. But it is economic theory that occupies the center of the URPE stage; and what is meant by economic theory constitutes one of the major deficiencies of radical economics (as is also true for its conventional opponents). Until radicals in economics and other disciplines can get their heads screwed on straight as regards the uses and abuses of theory, their efforts cannot but be misdirected.

Despite all, to be sure, URPE has made a substantial and valuable contribution not only to the lives and work of its members, but also to many others not formally associated with it. Thus, its main periodical, the *Review of Radical Political Economics* (RRPE), has served students and teachers of economics with radical inclinations and has increased their numbers, whether as a serious publication that can be studied or, also of great importance, as one that can be written for. Until the RRPE it may be assumed that a substantial percentage of potentially fruitful radical ideas died stillborn for lack of an outlet — as is, of course also true for disciplines other than economics. More elusively, though not less importantly, the upfront tendencies of (most?) radical economists today are facilitated by having an organization, publications, and, here and there, university programs. It is impossible to know what the psychological and intellectual damages were

for the closet radicals of the earlier period, but it is certain that they were serious. The present is not as different from the past as day is from night, of course; nor has URPE been more than one of many factors in changing such matters for the better; but the present is still very different indeed from the past, and URPE has been significant in widening that difference.

URPE publishes more than RRPE, and does more than publish and have meetings. Directly and indirectly, it makes possible a variety of publications, aimed at academic and nonacademic audiences: URPE "Reading Lists," to assist teachers at various levels; pamphlets originating both in its "Economics Education Project" and in response to local requests on specific issues; the growingly popular, readable, and very useful *Dollars & Sense*, an inexpensive monthly. Beyond publications, URPE has a "speaker's bureau," and its local chapters often work with trade unions for educational purposes, do what they can to defend their members against the never ending attempts to fire radicals, and participate in the larger political struggles of the time.

As an organization, finally, it must be said that all along the way URPE has sought not only to move the society toward socialism but also itself to function in exemplary ways that consciously break from the oppressive, exploitative, and elitist practices of capitalist society. Having said all this, it must also be said that, for URPE as well as for other new groups, between the ideal and the reality a shadow has fallen. It is the shadow of elitism, no less debilitating because it is unconscious and against the principles of those whose practice it is.

VI

In our history those who have fought against the status quo, whether to reform or to transform it, have typically and understandably been in resistance; they have had the quality, essentially, of protesters. Their achievements in presenting an alternative and compelling social vision to their actual or potential supporters have therefore been limited, at best. It has also meant fighting on the terrain of the enemy, and with its weapons. All this has clearly been true for the radical professional organizations.

The habits of mind and of style of radical intellectuals have been and are still learned at the feet, under the thumb, or in response to the blandishments of, their elitist, conventional super-individualistic, cheerfully haughty professors: professors who largely determine "their" students' destinies through grades, and support for jobs, grants, and promotions; professors who (dare one say it of incipient Marxists?) frequently function as father figures.

Even though one may be an incipient (or arrived) Marxist, one thus becomes habituated to asking particular questions in the particular ways of the academy, and to accepting the tatter's standards for conducting and for judging investigations. There are no other standards for academics. Highest marks are given for the most abstract, the most "theoretical," the most formalistic and footnoted, and so it would seem, the most unintelligible essays. It is not just that such essays appear in the journals of the radical professional organizations with distressing frequency, it is also, and even more importantly, that those who write them must spend so much time and energy on such things — and not spend it on what is so desperately needed and they could provide were they to set their minds to it: analytical and research efforts on the problems of ordinary people that rightly cause dissent and dissatisfaction, work that could be used to illuminate the relations between immediate issues and the fundamental nature of the capitalist system. Of course such work is being done: *Dollars & Sense*, already mentioned, does it for the economy, and there are workers' educational programs and "socialist schools" run by radicals. But not enough of that is done, and most of it is carried on as though in a college seminar; meanwhile, too much of so-called theoretical work devours the energies of what could be socially more useful minds — and continues to suffocate the potentialities of Marxism.

In short, those who edit, write for, and eagerly read the elegantly theoretical essays in all too many radical journals have allowed themselves to become entrapped in the academic mold. They write for each other in the arcane language of the professions; and, although they consciously and vigorously reject the methodology of bourgeois social science, they too often continue to work within those very confines. They indulge in theorizing, out of thin air; they have a tendency to nest in Marxological disputation, to continue the interminable variations on how much surplus value will fit on the head of a pin, or the depths to which

opposites interpenetrate. It has long been true that the elegant robes of conventional social science have, in the name of theory, provided a fig leaf of decency to an otherwise ugly reality; radicals can and must do more and better than that. They could become — and I use my words carefully — socialist missionaries or assistants to such missionaries; could use their privilege to end, rather than to become, a part of the perpetuation of privilege.

VII

Finally, and to make matters worse, it is not only their academic mentors who have set partially false standards for radical intellectuals; so have the so-called revolutionary politics that came to prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Just as in their intellectual work radicals must find a level less elegant, more concerned with demonstrable problems, and more easily communicable to other serious people (whether or not intellectuals), so too their political work must find a middle ground between the complacency of their fellow intellectuals (and most of the rest of the population) and the childlike posturing of those who present themselves as revolutionaries.

Almost all of the radical organizations (and periodicals) have been driven by struggles centering on this problem. The struggles between those imbued with revolutionary cant and almost everyone else, including the theoretical lords, have involved everything from office takeovers to, more persistently, wasted and misdirected efforts. Perhaps the greatest costs, however, are those arising from the shrill political style that has “succeeded” in typifying the conferences and most of the literature of such groups. Like the emphasis on high theory and its priestly language, the bristling political terminology of radical intellectuals has as its major effect the repelling of possible allies among those potentially interested.

It comes down to this, then: radicals, academics or not, have typically acted and written as though their language, their modes of expression, and their “consciousness,” are the “correct” standards; others must come to them. The mountain must come to Mohammed. Quite apart from the questionable politics of being even unconsciously contemptuous of one's needed and sought-after allies, the question must be faced as to what can sensibly be meant by the term “false consciousness” and, a different question, by the term “true consciousness.” That one would include, among other possible meanings of the term “false consciousness,” Baran's notion of system-generated “false needs” and the self-defeating targeting of the wrong enemies by the mass of the population, is doubtless true. But the consciousness of radicals is equally riddled with illusions and self-defeating beliefs and actions. What is needed is for all of us to work toward developing our understanding, our social consciousness, so that we can know what our needs and our possibilities have been, are becoming, and could become. Intellectuals have a role in assisting that development; everyone does.

We live now in still one more period of capitalist history when the system has produced new and large troubles for itself and for its captives. Will those of us who have specialized in the study of capitalism's processes, and who are brought to horror and rage by its day-to-day activities, allow it once more to survive its “contradictions” and, in doing so, once more to emerge as an even more pervasive, even more dehumanizing system? Or shall we try, now, to learn better what we know and how to communicate it not only to each other but also and especially to the millions who only suspect, and fear, and hate?

[1982:] Doug Dowd is a professor of economics at California State University, San Jose, and author of *The Twisted Dream: Capitalist Development in the U. S. Since 1776*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1977).

June 24, 2003