

31 March

3CR Solidarity Breakfast

*The Poverty of Philosophy*

Only five weeks to go for Marx's birthday bash on 5 May 1818. Last time, we talked about his criticism of the Young Hegelians in *The German Ideology*. This morning, we'll build on that work's materialism to look into Marx's early encounters with political economy. Then four weeks from today - *The Manifesto*.

*Diversion*

But before going on with Marx's birthday celebrations, I'd like to say something about another birth, actually, a re-birth: the killing and resurrection of the Corn God, which is what the holidays this weekend are really about. The Christians nicked that Pagan festival – like they stole everything else. Rather than ignore Easter, let me suggest that 3CR audiences download a feature film, *Brand New Testament*. I'll make only one recommendation. Were Corrie Bernardi made to watch *Brand New Testament*, he'd die of apoplexy in the first ten minutes.

There is a segue back to Marx. *Brand New Testament* is set in Brussels where Marx took refuge after being expelled from Paris.

### 1. Misery and poverty

This morning, we'll examine his first major publication on political economy, *The Poverty of Philosophy*. That title reverses the English translation of *The Philosophy of Poverty* by the French reformer, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-65).

More than pedantry is involved in going back to the French titles.

Proudhon's title is *La Philosophie de la Misere*. Marx plays on this for *Misere de la Philosophie*. To translate 'misere' as 'poverty' isn't wrong but it leaves out an important element. We've become familiar with 'misere' from Victor Hugo's novel, *Les Miserables*. The new Penguin edition, however, has a different title – *The Wretched*.

There are links between being poor and feeling wretched, but they're not one and the same. Real-wage increases can come with working conditions that degrade us. Marx gives this rolling denunciation in *Capital*:

The 'constant revolutionizing' that is essential for accumulating capital 'mutilates' and 'cripples' when it does not 'degrade', 'destroy', 'torment', 'deform', and 'distort the worker into a fragment of a human being.' That's what he means by alienation and estrangement.

### 2. Do the poor get poorer?

Marx is often accused of predicting that the working-class must get poorer and poorer. He didn't. Indeed, it was a key disagreement with Proudhon who believed in an 'iron law of wages'. Proudhon, therefore, claimed that strikes and trade unions could do the workers no

good. Marx shot back that the level of our wages is determined by the relative strength of the contending classes. We see that today when the working-class is disorganised. Real wages stagnate and our relative share declines.

### 3. What is property?

Proudhon had published his first book in 1840. Its title asks *What is property?* The opening sentence gives an answer which continues to resound:

'Property is theft.' Proudhon argues that property allows a small number of people to live off the labour of the vast majority. These views attracted the young Marx and Engels.

However, the more Marx studied political economy the further he moved beyond Proudhon. We shall see why by delving into Proudhon's answer that 'property is theft'. Getting the answer right is crucial for how we wage our side of the class struggle today, and every second of every day.

Property can indeed be theft. But under what conditions? Before we can draw a line between when property is theft and when it isn't, we need to ask 'what do we mean by property?' The prime distinction is between one's personal possessions and the instruments of production.

Anti-socialists scare people by alleging that we want to nationalise their toothbrushes. That nonsense directs attention away from what we do need to confiscate. They are the factories making toothbrushes, the warehouses where they're stored and the supermarkets where they're sold.

In those three places, capital realises the surplus-value extracted from us as wage-slaves. It's hard to see how anyone could use her or his personal toothbrush to achieve those ends. I don't see many people queuing up to rent a pre-used toothbrush?

*Rent:* The term 'rent' opens a further line of inquiry. A second Big Lie put around is that home-owners are mini-capitalists. To live in one's own house cannot extract surplus-value from anyone else. And if you don't extract surplus-value, then you ain't no kind of capitalist.

But what happens if you become a landlord? Even then, you're not extracting surplus-value from your tenants. They pay their rent out of the wages they receive so that their employer can extract surplus-value.

*Wages:* Mention of wages and wage-slaves takes us to the heart of the matter.

Proudhon is right to point out that control over the instruments of production allows some people to live without working. On the other side of the coin, the majority work without living in the fullest sense of that term – hence our immiserisation.

Marx's great discovery is that, in capitalism, 'exploitation' is concealed under an equal exchange. On average, capital pays labour for the full value of the only commodity that we wage-slaves have to sell. That commodity is labour-power, bought and sold in units of labour-time.

Marx did not understand that in 1847. For some years thereafter, he thought in terms of capital's buying 'labour', not time-units of labour-power. Here is an important lesson for

us all. The Marx who was born two hundred years ago was not the Marx who published *Das Kapital* 49 years later. He had to work out for himself much of how it is that capital can keep on expanding.

He did so by study and by engaging in struggles. We have the benefit of his discoveries. But they're not a free gift. Like him, we have to study and to engage in struggle. As we said last time, to change the world we have to learn how to interpret its dynamics. To interpret them, we have to involve ourselves in changing them. And like Marx, we have to remain ever alert to the 'constant revolutionising' that characterises capitalism. Memorising formulae won't do.

*Swindles:* The fact that capital, on average, pays in full for the commodity it buys from us means that the core of class relations is not theft. Yet we all know that each and every individual firm engages in swindles each and every day. They swindle their wage-slaves; they diddle their customers; and they cheat on each other. That behaviour encourages people to accept Proudhon's answer that 'Property is theft.'

Despite the universal presence of 'swindles', I've never seen any Marxist explain the role of swindles. To do so, we'd have to start from Marx's concept of 'equal exchange' as the source of exploitation. This morning isn't the occasion to spell out how thievery and equal exchanges flourish side-by-side. A very shorthand answer is to be found in another element in capitalist accumulation – namely, competition. To survive, each firm seeks to stay one step ahead of the pack. 'Theft' helps.

*Primary accumulation:*

Landlords stole the common from the goose. In other words, they stripped the peasants of the productive property to remain self-supporting.

After 1500, the powerful made themselves richer by stealing gold and silver from central and southern America; by stealing ten million chattel-slaves out of Africa; and by stealing water and soil around the world, including with the invasion of this continent. That kind of 'theft' still goes on in PNG, in Brazil and in India. Each of those thefts operated differently. And each kind evolved over the course of 400 years. Change is the only constant.

Yet, at each moment and in every place, capitalism came into the world 'dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt.'

But capital could not go on expanding merely by plunder. So how does capital go on expanding? To repeat: Marx's great discovery is that capital pays in full for the labour-power it must 'possess' so that it can expand in order to continue to exist. We should repeat three times everyday: 'There can be no such thing as a fair day's pay under the rule of capital.' Only then will we keep our brains above the supersaturated solution of bourgeois bullshit.

Marx's reply to Proudhon is only 100 pages long and is certainly well worth finding the time to absorb. But the needs of capital keep us time poor. So Annie will post a ten-page summary penned by Marx himself.

#### 4. Proudhon the person

Proudhon's faults were his muddled ideas. Like Feuerbach, he never made peace with the church or with the state. As a political activist he remained admirable. His writings earned him three years in prison. A later book sent him into exile in Brussels. He dies aged 56 as one of the wretched.

We're back where we began in recommending a feature film set in Brussels – *Brand New Testament*. More than that, Brussels is the location for our next session, on *The Communist Manifesto*.

Humphrey McQueen