

UC-6: "Movements, Power, Hegemony and Agency" [in English]

Saturday 15 October, 13.45–15.00 and 15.15–16.30, Kata

Part A (UC-6A, 13.45–15.00):

Elena Lange: "What Marx's Critique of Vulgar Economics Can Teach us Today"

(Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich)

'Value', Marx famously contended in the section on fetishism in the first chapter of Capital 1, 'does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic.' While before and in Marx's time, classical political economy had a profound interest in the question of value and its distribution as 'wealth' within society – regardless of its ahistorical and inspecific views of labour under capitalism – in the last decades, neoclassical and Keynesian economics, as well as 'economics' as an academic subject, has ignored the task of explaining the social origin of 'the accidental and ever-fluctuating exchange relations between the products' that as prices constitute their primary object. Regular academic textbooks on 'How the economy works' will generally be silent about the character of labour that produces 'wealth', and quite often also about the origins of 'profit'.

Marx's self-imposed task was to develop a theory of surplus value ('profit') that would acknowledge the basis of equivalent exchange. His great intervention was the concept of 'abstract labour' that can only be understood in delineation from the classical economics' concept of labour. While he delineated his idea from classical theories of value, he however much stronger refuted the 'vulgar economic' idea that surplus value and capital came from the circulation of commodities or were a 'fruit' of capital itself. According to Marx, vulgar economy does nothing but 'interpret, systematize and turn into apologetics the notions of agents trapped within the bourgeois relations of production.' My paper will look more closely at some 'vulgar' economic theories that still inform today's understanding of how capitalism works and present Marx's deconstruction of them, based on his theory of (surplus) value and exploitation.

Paul Rækstad: "Human Development, Practice, and Prefigurative Politics"

(Ph.D. in Philosophy, University of Cambridge)

This paper explores how Karl Marx's conception of practice can inform, and be informed by, the experiences and theorisations springing from the New Democracy Movement. It argues that Marx's conception of human development and practice gives us a unified and compelling way to think about the self-educational and self-emancipatory effects of prefigurative struggles for social change. It is thus a contribution to developing and using Marxist tools for creating a better world.

It begins with an overview of Marx's theory of practice (sometimes called 'praxis') through an analysis of his conception of human 'powers' (Kräfte) and 'needs' (Bedürfnisse), and consciousness, and how they interact through the human life process. With this in place, I go on to connect this conception to work done by people like Michael Lebowitz and John Holloway on the importance of developing revolutionary subjects and their capacities for living and acting differently, and to the claims about the importance of affective politics in the work of thinkers like David Graeber and Marina Sitrin.

Next, I distinguish three different senses of prefiguration that are important, noting, in particular, the importance of a narrower conception of prefigurative politics focusing on specific organisational and institutional forms on the one hand, and a wider conception of prefigurative politics, which further emphasises a certain kind of ethical and moral consistency, on the other.

The third and final part of the paper presents five arguments, drawn from a Marxist account of revolutionary practice, for the necessity of prefigurative practices: (1) it's important for developing revolutionary subjects with the right powers and capacities; (2) for developing subjects with radical needs; (3) and for developing revolutionary consciousness. Prefigurative politics, far from being contrary to Marxist thought properly understood, is rather required by it.

Xiang Wan: "Rethinking and rebuilding Marxist theories of history: An approach based on interpersonal relationships"

(Ph.D., Lecturer of Modern History, Xi'an Jiaotong University)

Historical materialism, once considered to be a universal interpretation to social development by the Left, became under harsh criticism not only because of the failure of Soviet Communism but also for its atomist understanding of human beings as well as the ossified theory of five types of social formations, now almost obsolete among historical theorists. Classical interpretation of historical materialism, centered on the interrelationship between productive forces and relations of productive forces, embodies interpersonal relationships in the socioeconomic milieu, yet neglects the diversity of interpersonal relationships and the complexity of ownerships ensued from it. Therefore, an inevitable oversimplification of interpersonal conflicts into class struggle, as well as a widespread impression of economic determinism, has overshadowed the vivid theoretic treasure trove of Marxist theories of history.

A tentative research of the works of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, and others, this paper is aiming at providing an interpretation of Marxist theories of history based on the study of interpersonal relationships. I will scrutinize the private vs. public dimensions of interpersonal relationships, just as the antithesis between sex and gender, love and marriage, family and kinship, clan and race, as well as the duality of personal dependencies in class societies: how slaves and serfs behaved in private and public with regard to their relationships to their owners. These diversified forms of interpersonal relationship are fundamental to the circulation of productive means, as demonstrated in the works of Karl Marx and Marxists on history.

The conclusion is, then, the driving force of human history is interpersonal relationships – at most public spheres it manifests in the way of class struggle. Yet the diversity of interpersonal relationships calls for much more elaborate Marxist theories of history, which Karl Marx started for us in the most striking manner.

Part B (UC-6B, 15.15–16.30):

Alpesh Maisuria: “Class Struggle in Cultural Formation in Contemporary Times: A Focus on the Theoretical Importance of Antonio Gramsci and the Organic Intellectualism of Russell Brand and Pablo Iglesias”

(Senior Lecturer in Education studies, University of East London)

In this presentation, I posit the argument that strategies for class struggle need to be sensitive to cultural formations, which change temporally and spatially over time. I highlight the importance of Italian revolutionary Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s attention to culture and hegemony as aspects of mounting and then sustaining class struggle for revolutionary social transformation. I animate culture and hegemony in class struggle using examples of the organic intellectual work of Russell Brand and Pablo Iglesias. Brand and Iglesias are important as examples of how a momentum of consciousness for praxis can emerge through working at the level of cultural formation to appeal to the masses. Finally, drawing on the example of Cuba where direct democracy has been used to update the revolution, I make the simple yet profound point that voting does not necessarily mean representation. I conclude by suggesting that for critique of the neoliberal status quo to be effective for social transformation, it needs to be accompanied by visions of an alternative world as feasible, this is a world that can exist.

*This presentation draws from the following paper: Maisuria, A. (2017) Class Struggle in Cultural Formation in Contemporary Times: A Focus on the Theoretical Importance of Antonio Gramsci and the Organic Intellectualism of Russell Brand and Pablo Iglesias. In McLaren, L and Monzo, L. (2017) (eds.) Revolution and Education Special Issue Knowledge Cultures Journal, Addleton Academic Publishers. 5(1)

Mikkel Flohr: “An Existing Untruth’ – Marx’s Critique of Political Theology”

(Doctoral student in Political Theory, Roskilde University)

The question of state power cannot be ignored today. Whether contemporary social movements seek to evade, contest or capture state power, they all have to contend with it, making an analysis of the state acutely necessary. However, most contemporary conceptualizations of the state are marred by political theology, that is, the essentially religious conception of the state as a sovereign subject that transcends and determines society from without. In spite of the descriptive limitations and normative implications of this conception it remains predominant within both the popular imagination and political

theory. In Karl Marx's preparatory notes for his unfinished Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of State, he identified Hegel's political philosophy as the summation of this tradition of 'political theology,' which was to be the subject of his projected critique. However, the manuscript was never finished nor published during his lifetime. The aim of this paper is to reconstruct and reevaluate Marx's manuscript in light of his explicit intent of criticizing political theology, which has so far been ignored in the literature. The paper argues that the contradiction between state and society that derives from the implicit transcendent-theological lineage and structure of political theory/theology, can be overcome via the (post-)Hegelian resources of Karl Marx's unfinished manuscript. Marx's resolution emphasizes the primacy of society in regards to the state, without therefore resorting to abstract negation, as most prior critiques have done. Rather he suggests that it is precisely the social significance of this idea and concomitant practices that constitute the earthly existence of the modern state: political theology may be untrue, but it remains an "existing untruth."

Arto Artinian: "Political Struggle and the Intermediary Spaces of the Operational Level of Politics"

(Ph.D. in Political science, Borough of Manhattan Community College – City University of New York)

Close to a century has passed since Antonio Gramsci introduced his war metaphors in the study of revolutionary politics and capitalist hegemony. In the intervening years, the revolutionary turbulence of the twentieth century, and capital's successful counter-offensive, have re-established liberal hegemony over the immediate horizons of the politically possible. The combined experiences of the last century have produced a field of political struggle of vastly increased complexity. Among the most significant ones can be listed the extension of total war to political struggle in general, and the appearance of a new, intermediary, layer of struggle, that occupies the spaces of everyday life between the tactics of immediate experiences, and the strategic dynamics of capital's social reproduction as a whole.

This paper starts from the premise that fundamental questions of political struggle, power and hegemony are best approached as war-like conflicts. Similar to war since Gramsci's time, political struggle takes place most decisively at the intermediary space between the tactics of street politics and the strategic dynamics where capitalism is itself reproduced as a system of social formation, what I am calling the operational level of politics. The paper aims to conceptualize this intermediary, operational level of class conflict as the key space where the patterns and ideas of everyday life are subject to contestation and control. In other words, operational politics conditions ideological space, thus playing a decisive role in political struggle and the maintenance of hegemony.

On the left we have often written about the role of tactics and strategy, but the operational level has so far been absent from our analysis. This paper is an initial effort of conceptualising this overlooked, but core facet of politics today, and in doing so to help articulate a new dimension in the praxis of political struggle.