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A Conversation with Karl Marx (1818–1883) on Why There Is No Socialism in the United States

Joshua Simon

Below, I reconstruct as accurately as possible a remarkable conversation I happened to have while walking with my dog today on Hampstead Heath. Barrington (my dog) is a sweet but strong-willed terrier, prone to pursuing his own inclinations. This afternoon, we were taking advantage of a rare break in the clouds, following one of the Heath's many improvised paths when Bear (as he is affectionately known) suddenly broke away, dashing through a hedgerow and barking with great animation. Giving chase, and incurring some minor scratches on the way, I was relieved upon emerging from the brush into a small clearing to find Bear retrieving a tennis ball thrown by a girl of around ten, much to her delight and that of her two younger sisters. Near where the girls were playing, a middle-aged man with a heavy beard sat on a blanket, surrounded by the remains of a picnic and several newspapers. I apologized for Bear's poor behaviour, and was trying to bring him to heel when the man put down the volume from which he had been reading aloud (Shakespeare if I'm not mistaken) and addressed himself to me.

Marx: I perceive from your accent that you are, like me, an exile on this island. Tell me, was it political dissent that forced you to depart your native land?

Me: Well, no, not really. I'm an academic, you see – a political scientist to be specific – and when I was offered a position here in London I decided to move, but I have to say I really like –

Marx (interrupting): A political *scientist*, really? What an intriguing field! And from America? A longstanding of interest of mine, as it happens. I've even thought of moving there myself.¹ Please, sit

¹ For Marx's interest in America, see: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Letters to Americans, 1848–1895: A Selection* Leonard Mins, trans., (New York: International Publishers, 1953); Robin Blackburn, *An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln* (London: Verso, 2011). For Marx's thoughts on moving to the United States, see: Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 185–6, 258–60.

with me for a moment. My daughters seem to be enjoying your hound more than my bard. Have a glass of this good *bier*, and tell me, how fares the workingman in America?

Me: The workingman? Not too well, I'm afraid – at least relatively speaking. From what I've read, unemployment is down a bit since the last recession, and corporate profits and the stock market have recovered famously, but real wages haven't grown in at least fifteen years, and income and wealth inequality are as high as they've been in a century.²

Marx: Hmm. Yes. Well, I'm not surprised. These trends are expressions of the tendencies inherent in the capitalist mode of production itself. You see, the capitalist's insatiable appetite for surplus value and the scourge of competition drive him to pursue the expansion of his productive power through accumulation and technological improvement. This has, of course, a most revolutionary effect upon society, enormously increasing social output and average consumption, but there are other consequences. The development of the productive power of labour cannot keep pace with the advance of accumulation and technological improvement. Thus, the organic composition of capital changes. The ratio of constant to variable capital grows,³ and as a result – I say, you're looking a bit dazed. I thought you said you were a political scientist! Are you following me at all?

Me: Uh, yes, I think so. The ratio of organic to variable capital grows –

Marx (interrupting): The ratio of *constant* to variable capital grows! Machines replace men, dead labour overwhelms the living! More and more can be produced in fewer and fewer hours by fewer and fewer labourers. This is progress, no? But there's the rub. As the contributions of variable capital – labour – decline in the production function, giving way to capital, the rate of profit must also decline, and this breeds over-production, financial speculation, and finally, crisis.⁴

² David Leonhardt, 'The Great Wage Slowdown of the 21st Century', *The New York Times*, 7 October 2014, A3; Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, 'Income Inequality in the United States, 1913–1998', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 118, no. 1 (February 2003), 1–39; Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, 'Wealth Inequality in the United States Since 1913: Evidence from Capitalized Income Tax Data', NBER Working Paper 20625 (October 2014).

³ Here, and at several points below, I take some licence in mixing direct quotation, sincere paraphrase and shameless misrepresentation from Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, chapter 25.

⁴ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, chapter 15.

Me: So, the recession in the United States –

Marx (interrupting): Represents only the latest in a long line of crises: a violent and forcible solution to inevitable contradictions, which swells the ranks of the reserve army of unemployed workers, reduces wages, raises rates of exploitation, and thus, for a time, restores the disturbed equilibrium.⁵

Me: ‘For a time’, you say?

Marx: In the aftermath of each crisis – during the period the bourgeois political economists brazenly term a *recovery* – the same tendencies that precipitated the prior breakdown return and intensify. Accumulation and centralization leap ahead, but along with the constantly diminishing number of capitalists, who usurp and monopolize all the proceeds of this process of transformation, the mass of miserable and exploited labourers grows. However, with this too grows the revolt of the working class. With each crisis, the knell of capitalist private property sounds. One day, the expropriators will be expropriated.⁶

Me: But surely we are very far from that day.

Marx: In America, capital accumulation has proceeded further than anywhere else in the world. The capital stock is the most technologically advanced in the world. And the ratios of constant to variable capital are the highest in the world. The rate of profit declines, the periodic crises worsen, and the struggle between capital and labour intensifies. With every turn of the screw, the workingmen of America come closer to understanding the true conditions of their own existence. They will be the first to recognize that capitalism has outlived its usefulness, and show the rest of the world the image of their own future: socialism!⁷

Me: It does sound very convincing when you say it, but there is one problem.

⁵ For an account of the financial crisis of 2007–8 by reference to Marx’s comments on the ‘law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall’ see Andrew Kliman, *The Failure of Capitalist Production: Underlying Causes of the Great Recession* (London: Pluto Press, 2011). For a modified version of the argument, written before the crisis, which emphasizes the effects of globalization on declining profitability, see Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence* (London: Verso, 2006). For critiques, see also: Nicholas Crafts, ‘Profits of Doom?’, *New Left Review*, no. 54 (November–December 2008), 49–60; Michael Heinrich, ‘Crisis Theory, the Law of the Tendency of the Profit Rate to Fall, and Marx’s Studies in the 1870s’, *Monthly Review*, vol. 64, no. 11 (April 2013); and David Harvey, ‘Crisis Theory and the Falling Rate of Profit’, unpublished manuscript (2014).

⁶ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, chapter 32.

⁷ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, Preface to the First German Edition.

Marx: What problem?

Me: There is no socialism in America.

Marx: No socialism? That's preposterous. I've read myself about the Workingmen's parties, the Railroad Brotherhoods, the Knights of Labor, and all the rest.⁸

Me: Well, yes, there is a strong tradition of industrial militancy in America, and there have been some prominent American exponents of revolutionary socialism, but the labour movement has never produced a competitive political party. In this sense, the United States is somewhat exceptional.

Britain has the Labour Party, France the *Parti Socialiste*, and Germany the SPD, but in the United States neither of the political parties is a party of the working class, and neither party incorporates any commitment to socialism, revolutionary or reformist, in its platform. If socialism is going to overtake the world, it seems unlikely that it will emerge first in America.

Marx: I must admit, that does come as something of a surprise, and a rather disappointing one at that. But you're a political scientist, so please explain it to me. Why is there no socialism in the United States?

Me: I think many Americans would say that they have ideals and beliefs that are simply inconsistent with socialism. They are generally suspicious of the state and of state authority, and they are particularly opposed to state intervention in the economy, because they believe that a free market reliably rewards hard work and stimulates innovation.

Marx: Truly a world seen in *camera obscura*. But, surely, this can only be part of your explanation. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.⁹

If we grant, for the moment, that American capitalism has proved uniquely resistant to socialism because Americans are uniquely committed to bourgeois institutions and ideologies, it is still left to you to explain why they are so committed. What accounts for the unusual strength of their beliefs?

⁸ For Marx's optimism regarding the American labour movement, see Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, 3–5.

⁹ Marx, *The German Ideology*, part 1.

Me: A fair question. The answer might lie in the unique conditions surrounding the country's founding. As I am sure you know, the settlers that colonized North America fled economic limitations and religious persecution in Europe, and they did not duplicate the European class system in their colonies. Instead, they created a novel, truncated society – one without a landless peasantry or hereditary aristocracy, only a universal middle class of small property-owners and labourers who aspired to be small property-owners. The availability of land across the frontier of settlement made even the most destitute labourer's economic aspirations seem achievable. At the same time, the early abolition of property qualifications for the franchise after independence seemed to confirm the impression there were no classes in the United States. In these conditions, the ideals and beliefs I mentioned became reflexive for Americans, and as a result, they were as indifferent to the challenge of socialism in the later era as they were unfamiliar with the heritage of feudalism in the earlier one.¹⁰

Marx: No feudalism, no socialism, is that it? Well, that's a theory, anyway, but not a very good one.

Me: Where does it go wrong?

Marx: It explains, perhaps, why the emergence of socialism was delayed in the United States, but not why it failed to emerge as capitalism matured. The conditions surrounding primitive accumulation in a colony such as the United States *are* unique. With the relative scarcity of labour and relative abundance of land, the social dependence of the labourer on the capitalist, that indispensable requisite of exploitation, is torn asunder. So long as the settler can escape the workhouse to begin an independent existence, he cannot be exploited to the same degree as his metropolitan counterpart, a result as frustrating to the socialist organizer as to the grasping capitalist.¹¹ But these days are fleeting. Capitalism compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to become bourgeois themselves. In short, it creates a world after its own image.¹² The American frontier has vanished. The safety valve is closed. American capitalism has advanced in

¹⁰ Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, 5–6.

¹¹ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, chapter 33.

¹² Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, part 1.

great strides, overtaking even its English predecessor. So, to understand the persistent absence of socialism in the United States, we must consider other factors.

Me: I suppose you're right. But what do you have in mind?

Marx: To describe the pre-history of the United States as simply 'not feudalism' is rather narrow, isn't it?¹³ It is true that the pattern of primitive accumulation in America differed from Europe's but we must think more broadly about the idiosyncratic class system of a settler colony. While the settlers themselves enjoyed more opportunities to own property and labour independently than they might have in Europe, their privilege came at others' expense.

Me: That's true! The frontier wasn't really uninhabited at all, and settlement entailed the forced removal or elimination of millions of people –

Marx: Precisely. Consider also that America's problematic deficit of labourers was met, not by the natural increase of the original settler population, but by the introduction of new peoples – Africans, southern and eastern Europeans, and Asians – transported voluntarily or involuntarily to North America to fill out the sparse ranks of the working class.

Me: That's also true. But what does it have to do with the absence of socialism?

Marx: Racism and nativism have persistently split the American working class into hostile camps. The Anglo, Protestant labourer resents his African, Asian and Catholic counterparts as competitors who threaten to lower his standard of living. The material advantages and personal dignity he derives from the relative oppression of darker-skinned and newly-arrived workers lead him to regard himself as a member of the ruling class. Consequently, he becomes a tool of the capitalists, strengthening their domination over himself as well as the others. He is repaid with interest by the objects of his disdain, who see in the Anglo, Protestant worker an accomplice and a tool of their oppressors. This antagonism is kept alive and intensified by the political parties, by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by the entire ideological apparatus at the disposal of the ruling classes. It is the secret

¹³ Rogers M. Smith, 'Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America', *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 87, no. 3 (September 1993), 549–66.

of the impotence of the American working class. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power.¹⁴

Me: I think there's a lot of truth in that. It is clear that throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, despite the earnest efforts of some socialist leaders, nativism and racism impeded the formation of a unified working-class politics in the United States, while at the same time helping legitimize the repression of labour activism.¹⁵ From the middle of the twentieth century up to the present day, civil rights legislation and immigration policy have proven to be effective partisan wedges, splitting the American working class between the two dominant parties, and thus reducing demands for the redistribution of income and wealth through taxation and government spending, to say nothing of socialism.¹⁶ But one issue still bothers me.

Marx: What issue?

Me: The absence of socialism makes America exceptional in comparison with Europe, but the *Americas* are another story altogether. Nearly every country in the New World, except the United States, has a competitive socialist or social democratic party. In Latin America and the Caribbean, quite a few countries are currently governed by socialist parties. And for over half a century, Cuba has offered the world an example of actually existing socialism! So the United States is exceptional even within its own hemisphere, but here its idiosyncrasies cannot be explained as effects of the absence of feudalism, or as results of racial and ethnic divisions within the working class, because those factors are present throughout the Americas, and for the same reason they are present in the United States: a history of primitive accumulation, as you put it, under colonial rule.

¹⁴ Marx to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt, 9 April 1870.

¹⁵ Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, 16–50; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991).

¹⁶ John Roemer, Woojin Lee, and Karine Van der Straeten, *Racism, Xenophobia, and Redistribution: Multi-Issue Politics in Advanced Democracies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Marx: Well that is truly surprising. I never imagined *Latin America* in the global vanguard. I must confess that, frankly, I have never given much thought to the region at all.¹⁷ But now I must ask, how do you explain the extraordinary success of socialism in Latin America?

Me: That's a question as big as the one we began with, but I'll give it a try. The domestic divisions you've described in the American working class exist within a broader, international division of labour. This is impossible to understand if one assumes that the emergence and development of capitalism follows the same pattern in every country – one must think, instead, of capitalist development as proceeding within a world system, which integrates different parts of the world in different ways. The United States, along with Western Europe, formed an industrial core of this system, while Latin America, along with Eastern Europe, most of Asia, and Africa formed a primary-goods producing periphery. The spoils of this system were and are divided unevenly, not only within the core and the periphery, but between the core and periphery. The working classes of the core, though they are exploited, enjoy a much higher standard of living than those of the periphery. This produces antagonisms analogous to the domestic ones you described, and with analogous effects. The international division of labour invests the North American working class with a material interest in the maintenance of the capitalist world system. They not only fail to support the revolutionary socialism of their Latin American counterparts, they also work actively against it, helping to elect governments that have violently suppressed socialist movements and deposed socialist regimes. While these interventions have limited the success that Latin American socialists have had in implementing their programmes, they have also provided a powerful impetus to socialism itself in Latin America, allowing socialist parties to present themselves as the enemies of Yankee imperialism as well as capitalist exploitation. In this sense, the absence of socialism in the United States and its strength in Latin America could be seen as two sides of the same coin.¹⁸

¹⁷ See José María Aricó, *Marx y América Latina* (Mexico City: Alianza Editorial Mexicana, 1982).

¹⁸ Theotonio Dos Santos, *Imperialismo y Dependencia* (Mexico City: Editorial Era, 1978); John Toye and Richard Toye, 'The Origins and Interpretation of the Prebisch-Singer Thesis', *History of Political Economy*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2003), 437–67; Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

Marx: A very intriguing concept, this world-system – and one that rather fundamentally revises the terms in which I’ve thought about capitalism. But I am prepared to endorse its implications.

Me: What implications do you mean?

Marx (standing and gesturing with great emphasis): Well, comrade, this means that the revolutionary struggle cannot succeed – until the **WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE!**

Epilogue:

As my new acquaintance rose to his feet, and punctuated this striking insight with emphatic gesticulations, we were joined by a woman, apparently returning from a walk. She seemed unsurprised by the man’s excitement, and, after introducing herself to me, chided him affectionately for forcing me to endure his lecturing. She then instructed the girls to begin packing up their things. After a few pleasantries, we parted ways and Bear and I set off for home.