EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

IN THIS ISSUE

In his careful study (“London’s Lost Revolution”) of the 1196 uprising led by William Longbeard, perhaps the first-known instance of overt class conflict in Britain, Dominic Alexander traces the treatment of the episode in all subsequent periods of time, up to the present. He shows how the story systematically disappears from historical memory in certain periods, most notably in the years following World War I and the Russian Revolution, and asserts that “a fuller recognition of Longbeard’s revolt would do much to re-assert the centrality of class conflict in the history of Britain.” We invite
readers to embrace the details, such as they are known, of this remarkable story, both to confirm the centrality of class conflict and all that that entails — but also in the interest of finding and preserving, for its own sake, as much as possible of what is, ultimately, the story of all of us. Marxism not only uses history for present purposes; it is also the highest culmination of humanity’s effort to know, to understand, to be, in the fullest sense: we are, after all, as Hegel would have insisted, our history.

The work of Soviet philosopher and theorist of critical pedagogy, Evald Ilyenkov, is becoming better known in the English-speaking world (see also the review in this issue by Sean Sayers of Ilyenkov’s *Intelligent Materialism*). In “Evald Ilyenkov’s Marxian Critique of Epistemology and Education,” Siyaves Azeri studies Ilyenkov’s contributions to a rigorous pedagogy based in the Marxist tradition, and traces his links to the work of Pavlov, Luria, Leontiev and other thinkers in the rich vein of social psychology produced in the early and later Soviet periods. Azeri draws a sharp contrast between Ilyenkov’s approach to education and the more familiar work of Paolo Freire, insisting that the latter fails to place capitalist education within the frame of capitalist relations of production as a whole.

Almost a century after Engels’ *Dialectics of Nature* came to light, and with the controversy surrounding the separation of dialectics from the natural world, and of Engels from Marx, nowhere nearing conclusion, Hub Zwart (“Friedrich Engels and the Technoscientific Reproducibility of Life”) presents a noteworthy analysis combining the philosophical and the scientific–practical standpoints. In fact, Zwart provides a useful departure from the rather heavy emphasis on the philosophical problem of dialectics, by focusing on the modern issue of technoscientific production of life — the synthetic cell. Drawing upon scientific developments well after Engels’ time, Zwart hopes to raise the issue of the epistemological status of dialectics, and the role of dialectics in scientific practice, to a new level, but one that does not abolish the inherent tension between human achievement (theoretical and practical) and the “astounding complexities of living systems.”

Our “Communications” section this time offers a debate, on the issue of electoral politics, between August H. Nimtz (a major contributor to present-day research into the thinking of Marx, Engels and Lenin on this topic) and David Laibman (Editor of this journal). Any attempt at interpretation by the undersigned would seem like a taking of unfair advantage! I will only point out the obvious: the enormous importance, and timeliness, of this discussion, at a moment when the 2020 elections in the USA are looming. We hope, and expect, further contributions to this long-standing but by no means exhausted conversation on the left. As Nimtz says: “Let the debate continue!”

The great Latin American political philosopher and activist, Marta Harnecker, passed away last June. Mindful of the numerous obituaries and
celebrations of her life and work that appeared at the time, *Science & Society*, despite our quarterly schedule and sometimes painfully long lead time to publication, asked our regular contributor and Editorial Board member, Steve Ellner, to prepare a statement for us on Harnecker’s legacy. Ellner’s thoughtful appreciation rounds out this issue’s “Communications” section. Also lost to us recently is the prolific African Marxist scholar, Samir Amin; we lead off the “Reviews” section with reviews of two recent books by Amin, by Molly Geidel and by Chris Vials.

Finally, we present a “Review Article,” by Chinese scholar Chen Hong, on a new 2018 edition of a major Chinese text on Marxism — *An Introduction to the Basic Principles of Marxism*. While some readers may see this as essentially a promotional exercise and are quite reasonably skeptical of Marxism where it exists, or has existed, as an official ideology, close reading of Chen’s presentation of the book should reveal some nuances that ought not to be ignored. Marxism develops in many ways, and in many places. We also note Chen’s comparison of modern Chinese Marxism with the school of post-Soviet Marxism, in the work of, Alexander Buzgalin and Andrey Kolganov, among others, also reflected in the pages of *S&S* in recent years.

**THE MARX MEMORIAL LIBRARY FUND APPEAL**

We have received an urgent appeal from our comrades and colleagues at the Marx Memorial Library (MML), in London.

On September 24 last year, a severe rain storm breached the roof of the library building at 37a Clerkenwell Green, putting 60,000 volumes at risk. Fortunately, quick work by volunteers and by the London Fire Brigade and Islington Heritage Staff was able to minimize the damage, but as MML archivist Meirian Jump explains, the crisis has “highlighted the need for an urgent programme of works to restore our historic building, protect our collections and transform access to Marx House.” Thus, a Lenin 150 Fundraising Campaign was announced, seeking £50,000 “to celebrate Lenin’s 150th birthday on 22 April, 2020.” The proceeds will cover structural repair, storage, monitoring and detection systems, and enhancing access to the building and its priceless archives.

The Lenin anniversary is especially appropriate, as the Russian revolutionary leader once had an office at the MML, and edited *Iskra* (The Spark) there.

Due to *S&S*’ glacial publishing schedule, we have already missed the April deadline, but donations will still be timely, and useful. Donations may be made online, at www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/support, and further information obtained by writing to Meirian Jump, at m.jump@marx-memorial-library.org.uk.
IS CAPITALISM A BLESSING? A FEW QUESTIONS ABOUT DEFINITIONS AND DIALECTICS

The organization Intelligence Squared U. S. (“IQ²”), which distributes radio and video debates to address “a fundamental problem in America: the extreme polarization of our nation and our politics,” held a formal Oxford-style debate on November 11, 2019 in New York City, on the motion: “Capitalism Is a Blessing.”1 The motion was proposed by John Mackey, co-founder and CEO of Whole Foods Market, and by Katherine Mangu-Ward, editor-in-chief of Reason magazine; it was opposed by Bhaskar Sunkara, founding editor of Jacobin magazine, and by Richard Wolff, professor (emeritus) of economics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

The debate was wide-ranging, and no attempt will be made here to provide a comprehensive summary. IQ²’s interest in “polarization” in the USA translates to widespread official concern about evidence of the growing attractiveness of “socialism” (however defined) to ever-larger numbers of young people (and voters generally), as evidenced in numerous polls; this concern led to production of a position paper on the topic by the President’s Council of Economic Advisers, “The Opportunity Costs of Socialism,” in October 2018. Many articles, books and interviews have also emerged recently, to address questions about “what socialism would look like,” and to envision the “99 Percent Economy.”2

The IQ² debate focused instead on “capitalism,” in relation to “socialism” (which, for mainstream thinkers, basically means “government control”). I will address this briefly, after first summarizing the key views of the two

1 Information about Intelligence Squared U. S. can be found at www.intelligencesquaredus.org/about-iq2. A full transcript of the debate is at https://www.intelligencesquaredus.org/debates/capitalism-blessing. I am indebted to August Nimtz for providing this reference.

presenters of the motion, “Capitalism Is a Blessing,” at the debate. I see this as entirely complementing the presentations of our colleagues Sunkara and Wolff, and urge readers to read the transcript of the proceedings for details.

Mackey presented data charts to support his main conclusion:

... there have been 40 socialistic experiments countries have done in the last 100 years. Every one of them has failed. There has never been the answer. It’s been tried, and it fails every time. It’ll always fail; it’s deeply flawed. ... Ninety-seven percent of all the wealth the humanity has created in the entire history of our race has occurred in the last 250 years: 97 percent. Here, you can see what’s happened as capitalism took off.

His general conclusion: “Capitalism is creating wealth not for a few, but for billions of people. ... The problem is not that there’s an unequal distribution of income in this world. There’s an unequal distribution of economic freedom.”

Mackey’s co-presenter, Katherine Mangu-Ward, amplifies this key argument: that voluntary transactions constitute economic (and social) freedom. She refers to what she calls “the double thank you”:

Now, you know what this is. You do this when you buy lunch. You go, you say, “Hi. I’d like a hot dog.” The guy says, “I’ll take your money.” You swap, and then you say, “Thanks,” and he says, “Thank you.” That right there, that is capitalism’s signature move. That is what capitalism is about. ... The beauty of market capitalism is that it’s built from voluntary interactions. ... And that is an enormous important moral difference.

I think it fair to say that the argument for “capitalism” is mainly comprised by these two elements: an empirical claim that capitalism is historically associated with technical advance, rising productivity and reduction of poverty; and a close connection of capitalism to economic freedom, defined exclusively as voluntary interchanges among individuals.

In what has come to be recognized as a seminal intervention, Canadian political scientist C. B. MacPherson, more than 50 years ago, addressed the libertarian definition of “freedom,” as found in Milton Friedman’s classic, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962).3 Friedman had defined a voluntary exchange as one that each party to the exchange has the capacity to reject: the right (and actual ability) to withdraw from the exchange — to not participate in it — if the terms of exchange are not to the individual’s liking. He argued

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from examples of early commercial relations, transactions among what Marx would have called “simple commodity producers,” to the modern (dare we say “capitalist”?) economy: the institutional pathways, Friedman had asserted, are now more complex, but the essential relation is the same. Thus: capitalism — the “double thank you,” in the terminology of present-day debater Mangu-Ward — is inextricably linked to freedom — the voluntary nature of individual exchange.4

Now the main socialist critique of capitalism, in the Marxist tradition, is this: Grant all of the conditions for externally uncoerced exchange — absence of any forms of physical coercion, and full legal protections of the rights and avenues for redress of all participants. Now even with exchange taking this ideal, pure form, we observe that, when the great cross-over from socially equal individuals to the classes of capitalist society has occurred, visible market transactions — especially the all-important purchase and sale of labor power — mask and incorporate a pervasive form of coercion. We give this coercion a special name: exploitation. The propertyless worker has no choice but to enter into exchange with the capitalist, so that the capacity to withdraw is absent. MacPherson:

It is easy to see what Professor Friedman has done, but it is less easy to excuse it. He has moved from the simple economy of exchange between independent producers, to the capitalist economy, without mentioning the most important thing that distinguishes them. . . . the separation of labour and capital, that is, the existence of a labour force without its own sufficient capital and therefore without a choice as to whether to put its labor in the market or not.

Thus we have: the “voluntary” exchange that is not voluntary at all!

The whole defense of “capitalism” as a “blessing,” then, rests on two pillars: a profound and distorted individualism built right into the definition of capitalism, and a deeply unhistorical (and undialectical) sense of the historical record. (More will be said on the second point shortly.)

Exchange, in the world of pro-capitalist debaters Mackey and Mangu-Ward, happens only between “individuals”; these “individuals,” however, are abstractions from the actual, community-based people whose real individuality depends also on their existence as social beings. How does Marx put this?: “The human essence . . . is, in its reality, the ensemble of social relations” (Theses on Feuerbach). Marx and Engels also dissected, quite early on, the deep underlying confusion between “markets” and “capitalism” in the

4 This is almost a tautology. Since capitalism is defined as uncoerced individual exchange, and freedom is defined as being limited to this mystical concept (“mystical,” because there is no such thing as completely unconstrained human behavior), the tight connection between “capitalism” and “freedom” is a foregone conclusion.
minds of pro-capitalist (bourgeois) thinkers. As though speaking directly to our present-day pro-capitalists, they write:

You are horrified at our intending to do away with private property. But in your existing society, private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population. . . . You reproach us, therefore, with intending to do away with a form of property, the necessary condition for whose existence is the non-existence of any property for the immense majority of society. (Communist Manifesto, Monthly Review Press, 1998, 30.)

It is all here, except that in the 170 years that have passed since these words were written, “nine-tenths” has become “the 99%.”

The capitalist blessing, then, turns out to be a deeply rooted system of compulsion, so powerful because it takes on an outward form similar to the little “double thank you” of the hot dog vendor and his/her customer. Perhaps precapitalism, not capitalism, for these folks, was the real blessing.

What, however, about the historical association of capitalism with rising productivity and wealth? Mackey could have quoted Marx and Engels: “The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. . . . What earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labor?” (Manifesto, 10). Capitalism’s achievements, however, are not its own. Capital accumulation has always relied on slavery, plundering of colonial possessions, war and genocide to enrich its beneficiaries. But even more to the point, it has relied on its own sophisticated system of exploitation — that great, voluntary market which provides an insidious disguise for the coercion afforded to the capitalist class by its structural monopoly over the means of production. Barring certain periods in which subaltern classes have mobilized and resisted impoverishment and destruction, the polarization of wealth and power has decimated and all-but-destroyed the conditions of life for millions around the globe. The undoubtedly real increase in production of wealth has been deformed by the immense polarization surrounding its distribution and enjoyment; by instability and financial crisis; and by the headlong rush toward ecological disaster. We live in a world in which social existence, to varying degrees in different locations, is increasingly threatened by both physical and social tensions stemming from uncontrolled acquisitive greed. Capitalism, then, progressively undermines its own achievements.

5 These are all, of course, well-known citations. I am not trying to advance Marx-scholarship here; only to remark on the extent to which our present-day pro-capitalists have failed to penetrate even into long-established understandings.
Capitalism didn’t create the wealth of the last 250 years. It captured it — after the wealth was created by the countless millions of laborers, manual, intellectual and creative. And capitalism has promoted productive and social development best when forced to do so by resistance from below, and when aided by government resources that were turned to these uses under massive social pressure. The immanent tendency of capitalist power, left to itself, is destructive. To attribute all of the achievements of humanity in recent centuries to “capitalism” is, at best, ludicrous.

As for the 40 or so socialist “experiments” that have failed: It is rather that they have been done to death, by a combination of holdovers from the countries’ pasts; intense military, economic and cultural aggression from the ruling centers of the capitalist world; and the difficulties resulting from attempts at social development on very slim and immature foundations. We should remember, too, that capitalism also had all sorts of early blossomings going back centuries, even millennia, before conditions came together for capitalist social relations to thrive and persist.

I will sum up by returning to the IQ2 debate question: “Is capitalism a blessing?” We have already taken note of the issues surrounding the definition of “capitalism,” and I will avoid any further inquiry into the implications of “blessing.” In fact, the real problems may lie with the “to be” verb, in the form “is.” This is, in fact, the most undialectical word in modern languages. Sunkara, in the debate, in fact suggested using the past tense: “Was capitalism a blessing?” Like all modes of production, capitalism clearly had aspects that could be described as blessings, and others that were more like curses. In the thinking of all concerned, from Marx and Engels to Mackey and Mangu-Ward, capitalism has been enormously progressive, especially in its earlier phases; but these progressive features were (and are) tightly bound up with all of the social forces within the systems in which capitalism was (is) the core component. The role of subaltern classes in struggling to achieve advances such as public education, health care, water and sewage treatment, etc.; and, indeed, their battle for higher living standards providing the incentive for technical change; the role of government in providing funding for basic research, railways, canals, roads, infrastructure — all of this is part of the assessment of “capitalism’s” achievements in any period of time. Finally, the balance between blessings and curses shifts, perceptively, toward the latter as the system matures and becomes less and less compatible with human development, especially as the imperatives of ecological sustainability and the globalization of expectations become more severe.

Finally, we are only beginning to confront the possibilities of democratic choice and democratic planning — the real potentials of socialism — as the world’s peoples mature politically, and the possibilities inherent in modern technology become apparent. We will increasingly be aware of what we might
accomplish, once society is freed from the constraints of narrow, egoistic individualism and private accumulative goals.

If we can get structured capitalist greed to peek out from behind its ideological disguise as “individual choice,” we might even find that transcending capitalism can increase the opportunities for individual autonomy and for increasing the number and quality of those “double thank you’s.”

D. L.