

MARX AND GLOBALIZATION: UNCOMMON REFLECTIONS ON AN APPARENTLY PARADOXICAL CONNECTION

Article Particulars

Received: 21.9.2017

Accepted: 26.9.2017

Published: 30.10.2017



Dr.E.DILEEP

Asst. Professor, Department of English and Communications,
Dravidian University, Kuppam, AP, India

Abstract

As the phrase “apparently paradoxical,” in the later part of my title evinces, I am, of course, aware of the incompatibility, at least on the superficial level, between the two terms at the beginning of my title, i.e. “Marx” and “globalization”. Perhaps, one may even feel that “Marxism” might be a better theme for enquiry instead of “Marx”. But there are at least two reasons why I prefer Marx to Marxism. For one thing, Marxism cannot be thought of as a singular noun at present, considering the bewildering varieties and versions of it that are available now. In comparison, I feel, the discussion of Marx would be relatively less inchoate and more productive. Moreover, as Melvin Rader states persuasively at the very beginning of his book on Marx’s historical thought, Marxists cannot claim any monopoly of Marx. Notwithstanding these subtle differences, we cannot ignore the reality that any discussion related to Marx or Marxism in the intellectual ethos dominated by postmodernism, poststructuralist, or post-colonialism and such post-isms may seem, at best, a matter of antiquarian intellectual interest and, at worst, doctrinaire fanaticism. On the other hand, “globalization,” the second keyword in my title enjoys a great popularity in the discourses of modern academia to the extent that we can safely consider it the most frequently invoked word either by academicians or others. Despite the awareness of this apparent dichotomy between Marx and globalization, the present essay attempts to argue that in a way they are mutually complementary to one another and an intrinsic and beneficial connection between the two could be established on further probing. I envisage this endeavor as a modest attempt, more in the predominantly imaginative Mandevillian tradition rather than the rigorous, analytic Baconian tradition. Thus, what is hinted at here is only a line of thinking that is capable of further development rather than a comprehensive theory or view.

Keywords: globalization, Marxism, postmodernism, Baconian tradition, expressivism, social science

The Dilemmas of Marxism

Let's start with Marx. Marx's oeuvre has produced a cornucopia of interpretive literature that makes any definitive statement on his intellectual edifice an impossibly daunting task. Nevertheless, like most of the profound ideas in the world, the basic tenets of Marxism can be expounded in a simple way. Marx saw human history as a process of unfolding of human potentialities in a way that is conditioned by material realities. Here, one could sense the continuation of an intellectual lineage, that could

be traced back to what Charles Taylor (13) called “expressivism” in Hegel. But Marx’s oedipal rebellion on his intellectual predecessor, Hegel, consists in not seeing the source of this historical unfolding in some abstract idea or *Geist* but in the workaday, prosaic realities of life among which he privileged the productive activity of human beings that is carried out on a regular basis to meet their daily necessities. Marx is frequently accused of determinism and reductionism in thus privileging the productive activity of the people; but as Peter Singer— whose attitude towards Marx cannot be characterized as sympathetic— observes incisively (94) that Marx’s theory:

. . .laid the foundations for a new social science which would explore the relations between such apparently unconnected areas of life as the tools people use to produce food and their political and religious beliefs. Undoubtedly this is a fruitful area for historians and social scientists to investigate. In opening it up, Marx shattered the assumption that our intellectual and spiritual lives are entirely independent of our economic existence.

From this sociological insight of Marx, we could move on to another aspect of his thought that reveals his socialistic commitment. A lifelong concern for human misery and socially organized repression is an unmistakable facet of Marx’s thought. As is well-known, in this respect, Marx is not the first one in the intellectual history of humanity. But what constitutes his uniqueness is his resistance to any criticism of social injustice based on sentimental and idealist commitments. His thought is characterized by an attempt to integrate the criticism of social injustice with the realistic understanding of social forces. As we have seen, Marx saw the historical evolution of humanity as a process conditioned by material abundance, or the lack of it, which in turn is conditioned by the degree of development of productive forces. This brought him to the conclusion that the most developed capitalist countries would be the first ones to start a socially reconstructive radical initiative. In this connection, history seems to have chosen the opposite path. The countries that witnessed a transformative revolution like Russia, and China are in fact the most backward parts of their respective continents, when they went for such an alternative.

Another historical dilemma about Marx is that, instead of offering a comprehensively democratic society — that is democratic not only nominally but effectively — these countries that experienced social revolutions, ended up in tyrannical regimes that are frequently discussed on an analogy with pre-capitalist societies than as post-capitalist alternatives. When these countries are taken to be the incontrovertible embodiments of official Marxism, another myth about Marx as an advocate of totalitarianism, is historically forged. To be sure, the democratic commitments of Marx are so obvious, that one does not need much study to feel the democratic element in Marx. Beginning from one of his first essays on censorship, included in the first volume of his *Collected Works* (109), to the well-known questionnaire answered by mature Marx and included in the *Reminiscences of Marx*

and Engels, where he mentions "servility" as the quality that he detests the most (266), his democratic temperament is so transparent. As Andrew Collier observed (2-3) rightly:

Marx's espousal of democracy is all the more striking in that it is unique among first-rank German thinkers. Leibniz lived before democracy was on the agenda; Kant and Hegel were advocates of constitutional government, but not universal suffrage; Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were frankly antidemocratic; and in more recent times, Frege wanted to disfranchise Jews, Husserl showed no interest in politics, and Heidegger flirted with the Nazis. Which leaves Marx as the sole democrat among the great German minds?

These are the two major dilemmas that any affirmative interpretation of Marx should grapple with convincingly.

The Dilemmas of Globalization

Now, we can turn to the watch word of the contemporary society, Globalization. Evidently, globalization is not a new phenomenon; but with the advent of the new millennium, the processes that constitute globalization are intensifying and bringing about a new world order. It is a process whereby a particular feature of the social world that previously was different in one country to another, has become more and more homogenized across the globe. This has prompted Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s, to coin the phrase that became so popular these days, "global village".

Globalization as we know it can be described best as the increasing mobility of capital through the transfer of goods and services as well as the greater exchange of information across borders. This is mostly due to the improvements in technology and the opening up of new markets. The capitalists of the third world and developing countries, as well as the advanced countries' capitalists seek to gain a competitive edge over each other by the process of capitalist accumulation either by increasing profits or by lowering costs. As the profit-hungry global capital knows no boundaries, crossing of boundaries and politico-cultural barriers has become a conspicuous feature of globalization, which could even shrink temporal and spatial dimensions of human existence and this prompted the geographer David Harvey to handily introduce, in 1990, the phrase "time-space compression." But, what are the consequences of this process?

Instead of the clamorous recognition given to globalization as a homogenizing agent, it is almost universally perceived that globalization has given rise to a section of trans-national global elite that has organized itself into smaller and smaller pockets scattered over large territorial and political boundaries. In this way, globalization has only exacerbated the stratification that was inherent in capitalism in its pre-globalization forms. In a way, globalization has even intensified these elitist formations by extending its sphere of influence even to the cultural realms of the society.

Cultural globalization notes the flow of information, goods and people across the world, which economic globalization stresses during the steady advancement of

capitalism across the globe—a tendency typified by the global reach of MacDonald's, Pepsi and Microsoft. Words like *Coca-colonization* have come into existence to verbalize this multifaceted reality where economic considerations go hand-in-hand with cultural maneuvering. In spite of all this complexity, Marx's thesis of economic predominance over political and other spheres could be clearly seen in the phenomenon of globalization. Can anyone talk of globalization without mentioning the role of international financial institutions like the WTO, the World Bank, and the IMF?

Besides the problem of global class polarization, we have another dilemma somehow connected with globalization. In the pre-globalization stages of capitalism, the dominant forms of social intervention that aspired for a better alternative are political and more or less backed by class consciousness. But in a globalizing world, the most predominant forms of resistance seem to be religiously motivated or sporadically terrorist, or originated in some sentimental nostalgia for the socially extinct primitive practices and ideology. The globalizing social scenario presents itself in a gloomy way, so much so that, one could not see at least the hazy contours of a better future.

Anatomy of a Historical Paradox

We have come to a crucial point now, where we are going to consider the dilemmas of Marx and globalization in their interconnection. Paradoxical, as it may sound superficially, the point is that in spite of their seeming incompatibility in their isolation, Marx and globalization have a lot to do with one another that is—again strangely—beneficial for both of them. The relevance of Marx's thought for globalization, has already received a considerable attention. As Peter Hudis writes in an article titled *Marx in the Mirror of Globalization*:

One interesting—some would say surprising—aspect of the ongoing discussions and debates about globalization is the renewed interest being shown in the ideas of Karl Marx, which only recently seemed to have been consigned to the dustbin of history. In the journalistic and academic worlds alike, a number of reappraisals of Marx's work are appearing that identify the 19th-century thinker as "the prophet of globalization" because of his focus on capital's inherent drive for self-expansion and technological innovation on the one hand and its tendency to exacerbate social inequality and instability on the other. Even some of globalization's most fervent supporters note the importance of Marx's work for anticipating the imbalances and disturbances associated with the unfettered expansion of global capital.

The reasons why Marx and Engels' works are worth returning to on globalization is that they were among the first writers to systematically investigate global capitalism and its tendency to transcend the national barriers. They considered the worldwide economy to be dynamic, and now we see that the nation-states were affected by international trade and trends, rather than the other way round. This is all the more

remarkable when we consider that both Marx and Engels came from societies just emerging from pre-capitalist economies.

Though the exact term “globalization of capital” is absent in Marx, the underlying concept could broadly be taken as implication in the Marxian term “world market.” To be sure, expressions like “world market” as well as “foreign trade” figures in many of Marx’ writings including the most-read, *Communist Manifesto*, where they appear as the recurring leitmotifs. For instance they say (488):

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of Reactionists, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilised nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production the intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.

I hope the reader will excuse me for such a longish quotation. But, I am tempted to do so by the striking relevance of the passage that makes us feel as if we are reading a thinker living in the globalization era. One need not fish for such strikingly modern-sounding passages in *The Communist Manifesto*. They could be found generously scattered all over the text testifying Marx and Engels’ appreciation for capitalism’s transformative potential. As Gail Omvedt rightly remarked “The Communist Manifesto itself reads almost like a paean to the forces of globalization.”

Marx’s writings on capitalism also offer a powerful challenge to those who claim that capitalism is all conquering and immune to challenge. Marx’s argument that capitalism by its very nature is dependent on the world of labour, and so vulnerable to human action, is highly relevant to the debates on globalization. How could we ignore the fact that one predominant reason which contributed to the recent success of Obama in the USA is his containing attitude against outsourcing? Marxism, as the inheritor of the best of European enlightenment has a powerful theoretical analysis to offer to the people who are not easily carried away by the resplendent narratives of globalization. An awareness of such a theory can check the proliferation of primitive ideologies among the anti-globalization activists and could reduce the possibilities of

senseless human holocausts. But what is not properly appreciated in the Marx-Globalization conceptual symbiosis is the importance of globalization for Marx. Indeed, the two dilemma of Marx we have discussed— the break out of revolution in the relatively underdeveloped countries and their eventual degeneration into despotic regimes— are intrinsically interconnected. The first one explains the second one, if I could say so. Arguably, it is not incongruent with the thought of Marx— that envisioned an inextricable connection between politics and economics in the much familiar base-superstructure theory— if an economically retarded society inescapably suffers from political primitivism in spite of the revolutionary interventions. In fact, a contrary result can be a big intellectual challenge for Marx. Even then the first dilemma of Marxism remains a historical enigma crying for analysis.

One of the historical distortions that Marxism earned for Marx is the ossification of his thought into a water-tight system by systematically ignoring conceptual inchoateness and rich complex ambivalences. Any theory that has the ambitious goal of capturing the complexity of ever changing organic social reality cannot be so cut and dried in its conceptual articulation. In fact Marx does not share some of the later Marxists' preoccupation with conceptual precision disregarding their dynamic validity. In an instance that could be an archetypical example of his open-ended attitude, Marx expresses his ambivalence (103-4), in a letter to Engels, on 8 October, 1858: The specific task of bourgeois society is the establishment of a world market, at least in outline, and of production based upon this world market. As the world is round, this seems to have been completed by the colonisation of California and Australia and the opening up of China and Japan. The difficult question for us is this: on the Continent the revolution is imminent and will moreover immediately assume a socialist character. Is it not bound to be crushed in this little corner, considering that in a far greater territory the movement of bourgeois society is still in the ascendant?. Thus, it is not the all-pervasive spread of capitalism that poses a challenge to Marx and be a cause of intellectual ambivalence but precisely the lack of it or its incompleteness. It does not require exceptional clairvoyance here, to see that globalization has the potential to bring about that completion, and it can offer a classical capitalist scenario to Marx, had he been still alive, by its capitalistic homogenization of the world. Perhaps, now, the fast-globalizing world is getting more and more Marxian than it was in Marx's own times.

In-Conclusion

When I made the above statement that may sound anachronistic and preposterous to the postmodernly trained ears, I have only Marx's socio-economic analysis of capitalism in mind. Then, what about the second facet of his thought? — the vision of a society where the human community is not a spontaneously developed hostile force (like any other blind natural force) against individuals but just a form of their collective expression and assertion. Frankly, I believe the answer to this question can only be inconclusive at this stage, though it seems, as it is now, that Marx stands a

very feeble chance of vindication. But, I believe that the possibility or the impossibility of a better future society is understandably much of our own problem than that of Marx's. Of course, Marx will also face an intellectual problem, when he is understood as a prophet who preached about the inevitable betterment of the society, which is almost what is widely believed about him. But the real, humanly Marx writes (482) even in his youthful, sanguine days of *The Communist Manifesto*: The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. [These classes] . . . stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. (Emphasis added). Surely, the question as to how the intensification of social stratification generated at a world scale by globalization is going to resolve is a crucial practical question for us than an intriguing theoretical question for Marx.

References

1. Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins Of Cultural Change.* Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990. Print.
2. Hudis, Peter. "Marx in the Mirror of Globalization". 10 November 2009. <http://www.net4dem.org/cyrev/archive/issue7/articles/Hudis/hudis.pdf>
3. Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. *Collected Works.* Vol. 1. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975. Print.
4. Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. *Collected Works.* Vol. 6. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976. Print.
5. Marx, Karl. "Confessions". *Reminiscences of Marx and Engels.* Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1980. Print.
6. Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. *Selected Correspondence.* Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1982. Print.
7. Omvedt, Gail. "Marx and globalization". *The Hindu.* 10 November 2009 <<http://www.the-hindu.com/2001/03/01/stories/05012524.htm>>.
8. Rader, Melvin. *Marx's Interpretation of History.* New York: OUP, 1979. Print.
9. Singer, Peter. *Marx: A Very Short Introduction.* New York: OUP, 2000. Print.
10. Taylor, Charles. *Hegel.* New York: CUP, 1975. Print.