

## **Brexit, Marxism and Government in the Future Assembly**

We find ourselves in unusual times. As I speak it is 4<sup>th</sup> February 2019 and the next two weeks will be decisive in British politics. Both our main political parties seem to have been captured by their own extreme wings. The Conservatives are unable to achieve consensus on what our country's departure from the European Union might mean. They are opposed by a Labour Party that is now openly Marxist in its approach. Theresa May has put forward a proposal to leave the EU that is pretty effective in meeting what people imagine was in the minds of Leavers when they voted for Brexit in 2016. However, it cannot hide the reality that if we leave the EU, there has to be a border with the political bloc we have left. No other alternative to Theresa May's plan exists and that plan must first survive a negotiation with an EU, which rejects it, and then a vote in Parliament, which will probably reject it. There is no way to leave the EU without creating worse living standards. The Government is in disarray.

Assuming Theresa May's plan fails, one of several deeply unattractive possibilities lies before us: either Parliament seizes control of the Government and tries to lead, or we have a General Election to put another government in place or we have a chaotic and disastrous exit from the EU. Since Parliament seizing control is unprecedented and hard to organise, and no-one sane wants a chaotic exit from the EU, a General Election seems the most likely outcome. There are just two problems with that. Firstly, it changes nothing in the matter of how to leave the EU. Secondly, as 12,874,284 people voted Labour in the last election, we must therefore reflect on the real possibility of a Marxist government in the United Kingdom. This might be a dispiriting proposition, given that few ideas have been more thoroughly discredited and rejected by history than those of Karl Marx.

Marx believed that the world could only be improved by 'class struggle', where the oppressed workers rise up to seize control from the ruling class. Private property would be abolished. If you want to see what happens when policies like are carried out, look at the news and consider what has happened to Venezuela.

Yet, let us look on the bright side. There is no doubt that everyone in this room is regarded as a class enemy by our potential future Prime Minister and his Chancellor of the Exchequer. There is no doubt that they will pursue policies that are designed to break up the life and institutions with which we are familiar. A Marxist vision of the future is one which has little place for Merchant Taylors' School. It might seem odd, under those circumstances, to note that in fact, all of us in this Hall almost certainly hold Marxist views. I am willing to bet that you would find yourself in agreement with much of what Marx said, once you set aside his lunatic economic policies.

Marx wanted to focus our attention on what goes wrong with our experience of work. He went on to identify five key factors that help explain what makes work fulfilling - or otherwise.

### **ONE: I want to see myself in what I have made**

In his search for what makes work fulfilling, Marx writes beautifully about workers needing 'to see themselves in the objects they have created'. Work offers us a chance to externalise what is good inside us (let's say, our creativity, our rigour, our logic), and to give it a stable, enduring form in some sort of object or service independent of us. Think of the person who built this Head Master's chair: it is strong, honest and elegant. Now its maker would not

always have been these things: sometimes he or she might have been bad tempered, despairing, unsure. Yet the chair is a memorial to the positives of his or her character. Marx observed how in the modern world, fewer and fewer jobs allow us to see the best of ourselves in what we do, especially in Capitalism, which often forces us to specialise.

### **TWO: Money is not enough**

We are not motivated by money, once we have enough to get by. When workers cannot see an outcome as a consequence of their labour, they find their job depressing, no matter how well they are paid. Over the years, these workers find their jobs do not *add up* to anything. There is no long-term objective to which their work is directed. We would be satisfied if we laboured for years on a large project, which eventually resulted in an overall, complete task. But few jobs allow that sense of conclusion and achievement. Most of the time we are trying to keep our head above water and continue to do so until we simply stop.

### **THREE: Work should be meaningful**

How does work get to feel 'meaningful'? Marx says either it helps the worker to reduce the suffering of others or else it helps them to increase delight in others. A very few kinds of work, like being a doctor or a teacher seem to fit this bill perfectly. But if you work in something that feels meaningless, you suffer - even if the salary is a decent one. Marx thought this painful experience was so important he gave it a special name: alienation.

### **FOUR: Specialisation deadens the soul**

The modern economy is incredibly specialised, which makes it highly efficient. But specialisation means it is seldom possible to try out a variety of jobs over a lifetime. It would be almost impossible nowadays for someone to have a go at being a doctor, then an architect and then a pilot before they reached retirement age.

In Marx's eyes, we are generalists. We were not born to do one thing only. It is merely the economy that - for its own greedy ends - pushes us to sacrifice ourselves to one discipline alone. So in the Communist Utopia, Marx proposed that it would be 'possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner...but without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.' Marx's vision is one of rounded human development, which work frustrates.

### **FIVE: Progress should make life easier**

Why are we all so anxious all the time? Marx had a diagnosis. Because capitalism can make human beings feel expendable: we are just one factor among others in the forces of production, who can be sacked the minute that costs rise or savings can be made through technology. There is no job security in capitalism. Communism - emotionally understood - is a promise that we always have a place in the world's heart: that we will be cared for, that we will not be cast out.

Marx adds that our sufferings are unnecessary. We actually have the resources to make our lives far easier than they are. Our factories and systems are so efficient, we could give everyone on this planet a car, a house, access to a decent school and hospital. Few of us

would need to work. But we don't. In 1700, it took the labour of almost all adults to feed a nation. Today a developed nation needs hardly anyone to be employed in farming. Soon manufacture will need very few people. We see unemployment as dreadful but, in Marx's eyes, it is a sign of success: it is the result of our unbelievable powers of production. The job of a hundred people can now be done by one machine. Logically, the goal of economics should be to make more and more of us unemployed and to celebrate this as progress rather than as failure. Abundance *should* mean more leisure.

For too long, being a Marxist has meant you agree with the least impressive part of Marx's ideas: his economics. But Marx's brilliance lay in his diagnosis of the problems of work, even though he had no idea how to go about curing those problems. We should all be Marxists, in the sense of agreeing with his analysis of our troubles. But then we need to go out and find the right solutions, ones that will really work.

Unfortunately, none of Marx's insights can be implemented without a successful economy. And if our new rulers follow Marx's economic ideas - which they have said they will - none of the above will be delivered as the state will be too poor. Nor will they solve the mysteries of Brexit. Nevertheless, as we look at what the future might bring, it might give you *some* solace to know that you have *some* points of agreement with those who *might* doing the damage.

Finally, my suggestion is this: if you are old enough, get onto the electoral register so that your voice can be heard, whatever your beliefs. And for everyone in the room, I hope you are motivated to consider politics as a possible future career. We need leadership in this country and I hope that there are some in in this Hall today who will one day provide it.

*Thanks to the BBC for material.*