

Spectre of Marx and old ghosts haunt the ailing capitalist machine

Michael Wayne says the current global crisis makes the case for every generation discovering the value of *Das Kapital*

If there was one characteristic that marked the interregnum between the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the opening up of China to international capitalism and the economic crisis that exploded in 2008, it was an extraordinary lack of historical consciousness. How else to explain the hubris and complacency of the period, when the political and economic elites really seemed to believe their own propaganda?

They declared that a new economic paradigm had arrived, bringing with it undreamt promises of wealth and consumer bliss, as long as the market was left to do its own thing. Only a supreme historical blindness could have convinced the political and economic elites to forget an elementary truth, simple enough to enunciate and borne out by nearly 400 years of history: namely that the capitalist system remains structurally prone to major economic crises. Even the elites cannot escape this uncomfortable truth today.

But they are still fleeing from another closely interconnected one and it is this: when economic crises happen on a large scale, they produce a political crisis which we may call in academic terms a “paradigm shift”, but on the streets it looks more like revolt and even

sometimes, whisper it, revolution. So little have the political elites learned that on the right – a term that now covers most of the mainstream political spectrum – the crises are seen as an opportunity to drive the neo-liberal agenda further and complete what in Britain started as Margaret Thatcher’s revolution using a political script that sounds, as with the first endeavours to privatise the police, like a Hollywood science fiction film.

Capitalism has never been particularly good at dealing with history. It would rather forget that it was born, it resists awareness of where social wealth comes from and shudders at any intimations that it may just be mortal. Karl Marx spent a good deal of *Das Kapital* decoding the categories of bourgeois political economy and showing how they repressed the inconvenient historical and social foundations of bourgeois society. If he thought that classical political economy was bad, then the arid and abstract doctrines of the neo-classical paradigm, which has dominated university economics departments, corporate boardrooms and Cabinet meetings, would have made his beard fall out.

Neo-classical economics seems to be completely blind to any sense that there



Michael Wayne: ‘Capitalism has never been particularly good at dealing with history.’ Photo: Jacob Wayne-O’Neill

are political consequences to be paid when driving through neo-liberal policies which are profoundly destructive. The surprise and the indignation on the collective face of the European political and economic elites, that the Greeks have had the temerity to reject the pro-austerity policies imposed on them, is palpable. Yet the artillery of economic austerity raining down on Greece from the European

political process, and a gradual blurring of the boundaries between the political and economic elites.

In the past, Marxists – perhaps not without reason – would have been lambasted for crass economicism and neglect of the “autonomy” of the political if they portrayed politicians as corporate glove puppets. But the evidence coming out of the Leveson inquiry, where not only government policy is in accord with the desires of corporations, but government ministers even ask corporate functionaries for advice on how to sell that policy to a sceptical public, reminds us that the autonomy of the political is a construct, not a fact of nature. And the past three decades of neo-liberalism has been spent dismantling that autonomy.

Not only has the sophisticated Marxist critique come to pass, but capitalism seems determined to prove that even the crude Marxist brushstrokes paint a picture closely resembling reality. What Leveson is uncovering is shocking, but we must not pretend that this is anything else but the laying bare, in an extraordinarily public way, of a nexus of political and economic power that is institutionalised. What ought to worry the political and business class is how narrow the social base is on which they are resting, and how every day the Occupy movement’s slogan of the 99 per cent against the 1 per cent strikes many as a not too extravagant exaggeration.

The economic crisis now gripping Europe also predates 2008. I recall a common discussion on the left in the late 1980s. After Thatcher had deregulated the City in the “Big Bang”, we pondered how long finance capital, now uncoupled from the real economy, could keep going without crashing and burning. Twenty years might seem like a long time in the answering, and indeed many on the left during that time abandoned the conversation altogether and resigned themselves to the “new paradigm”.

But the tick tock of history goes at a different rhythm from the biographical life of the individual. The signs of the coming fall were there, however,

beneath the euphoria of the market, floating occasionally into the consciousness of Western capitalism like a bad dream.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Japan, which in 1970 had touched rates of profit as high as 40 per cent and which as recently as the ‘80s was still seen as the poster boy of advanced capitalism, entered a decade-long recession. The 1997 South East Asian crisis came and went with relatively short-term effects, but politically the most important events were in Latin America where the Washington Consensus was rolled out throughout the 1990s. T

he Washington Consensus prevailed from the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement into which Mexico was incorporated – and what a bright future as a narco-gangster-society that helped to create – all the way down to Argentina at the tip of the continent, whose banking crisis in 2000 was an

shortages amid torrential downpours, or environmental degradation and toxification, the hollowing out of representative democracy, the erosion of workers’ rights, the growing inequalities between the rich and the rest, the dismantling of the public sector, and the destruction of social gains and rights built up over decades; whether we are talking about a lost generation of young people whose skills and potentialities can find no gainful employment; the reduction of education to obedience, conformity and discipline; the transformation of the media from tools of information, connection and creativity to purveyors of ignorance, sensationalism and tired clichés; whether we are talking about the economic violence of the system or the decreasing room to peacefully protest without being truncheoned, tasered or worse – all these problems and more can be traced back to the question of capital.

And unless we name the system within which these problems are developing, public debate, public discourse and policy agendas are doomed to stay at the surface level, addressing symptoms at best, or making the problems worse by following the same discredited capitalist nostrums and prescriptions that are responsible for the problems in the first place.

The scale of the economic and political crisis demands bold political leadership, vision and imagination. In the past 20 years, traditional vehicles for political action – the political party in particular – have been criticised for their bureaucracy, lack of democracy and responsiveness to urgent problems and demands.

New social movements have developed a range of alternative models within civil society that have stressed participation and action. These movements have included community-based groups running services and addressing local problems in the context of economic crisis. This also includes the rejuvenation of older forms of left organisation such as workers’ co-operatives.

Yet the traditional model of bringing

about social change by acquiring political power through party-type structures remains indispensable. In Latin America, the articulation of political parties with a diverse range of social movements has been a feature of left politics. The “Big Society” is nothing more than an expropriation and cynical reinterpretation of this idea in the service of the neo-liberal agenda of cuts and privatisation.

Because of this, it might be tempting to dismiss it altogether and forget that it has its origins in the left. A more genuine articulation between parties and civil society would recognise that the bottom up, participatory and democratic practices of the social movements require resources and legal frameworks to flourish in the context of co-operation rather than competition. In the social movements there are the seeds of a more substantive democracy to compliment and rejuvenate a withered formal democracy and reconnect shrinking parties with civil society.

Marx did not see it as his job in *Das Kapital* to write what he called “recipes for the cookshops of the future”. He was usually averse to speculating in any detail about what a future society that had advanced beyond capitalism would look like. Nevertheless, we can glean from his work at least three broad principles that would need to be institutionalised in order to move beyond capitalism.

The first principle would be to shrink the working day for individuals – and use all the productive power built up by the productive forces to increase leisure time for all. A new post-capitalist society would have a different measure of wealth from the old one. Under capitalism, labour time is the measure of wealth. After capitalism, disposable leisure time outside labour would be the measure of wealth. Capitalism can never deliver on that.

The second principle of a society that was truly social, a society that admitted there was no need for artificial scarcity, is that production would be geared around use and need, not private exchange. Marx begins *Das Kapital* by saying: “Use values... constitute the



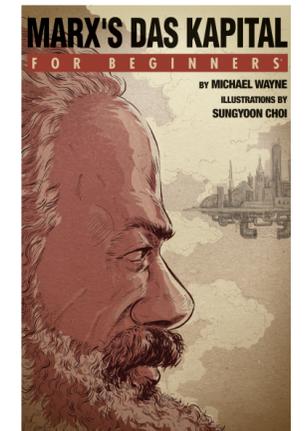
A generation of young people is betrayed

substance of all wealth, whatever may be the social form of that wealth.” He then goes on to spend the rest of *Das Kapital* showing how the social form of wealth that is capitalism, perverts, degrades, distorts, blocks and destroys use values. Use values, the substance of all wealth and the social form of that wealth, have never been in more contradiction than they are under capitalism.

The free association of the direct producers of society is the third great principle of a society that has gone beyond the primitive, backward social

relations of capitalism.

Such a notion is an abomination to capital; it does everything it can to discredit the idea. But consider this. According to the Office of National Statistics, last year British companies were sitting on a cash pile of £752 billion. At the same time, corporations want to pay less tax. Is this private hoarding of social wealth not the true abomination? It is certainly in flat contradiction with democracy in any meaningful sense of the term and social justice, let alone the free association of the producers.



Michael Wayne is Professor in Screen Media at Brunel University. He has written widely on Marxist cultural theory, film, television and media and is currently co-directing a documentary film based on Friedrich Engels’ book *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (see www.conditionoftheworkingclass.info for details). He is the author of *Television News, Politics and Young People: Generation Disconnected?* (Pulgrave, £52.50) and *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (Pluto Press, £22.99). His latest book *Marx’s Das Kapital for Beginners* (Steerforth Press, £11.99) is published this month



Crash and burn: the global economy is a world of trouble and the consequences are tumultuous