

Recently there was a debate with interlocutors Slavoj Žižek and Jordan Peterson regarding which socioeconomic system yields most happiness. While I have disagreements with points proposed by both sides, Peterson clearly misread, or actively misrepresented, Marxism.

In his opening statement, Peterson put forward 10 critiques of the Communist Manifesto as a critique of contemporary and historical communism as a whole. Even at its writing in 1848, the Communist Manifesto wasn't the only piece in the Marxist canon, so to speak, nor is it today; indeed, while all Marxists keep the core of the Marxism proposed in Marx's original writings, many ideas have since been developed--the dialectic in action, no doubt. Whether it be modern-day Leninists or left-communists or even anarchists with Marxist influences, to look at the communist movement as unified in theory, a theory of the 19th Century no less, is to overly simplify a complex issue. Unfortunately, oversimplification is not the only recurring issue with Peterson's readings.

Peterson presented the first axiom he was to contend: in his words, that "history is to be viewed primarily as an economic class struggle." This notion is of course purveyed in a range of Marxist literature; one needn't look further than the first sentence of the first paragraph of the manifesto. Peterson claims that this proposition is debatable because "there are many other motivations that drive human beings [...] and those have to be taken into account". Here he seems to be missing what exactly the dialectic is, both when applied to history and otherwise. A basic analogy for the dialectic, while simplified, is evolution; a turns into b which turns into c and so on. The importance and relevance here is that the signs a, b and c are all humanly constructed (not what they signify, but the system through which we categorise). We are well aware that evolution is continuous--species a doesn't spontaneously give birth to species b, a distinct species, instead over a long time period there is development (a development driven by material, calculable causes). Likewise, the dialectic can be viewed as the human rationalisation and functional categorisation of a stream of data; in our case, history. Another essential quality of the dialectic can be seen in the word for it; it deals with two *contradictory* phenomena and the sublation process thereupon. Hence, in viewing history dialectically, one must look at the primary area in which there are contradictions. This leaves us with an economic lens. One such contradiction is what Richard Wolff, and others, calls the "exodus of capital"--these contradictions are numerous in number. This isn't even mentioning that many Marxists would claim that the economic is the main influence over how other factors socially manifest themselves.

For his second contention, he claims that class struggle, and other forms of hierarchical struggle, predate capitalism. No Marxist has ever claimed otherwise. Peterson, however, seems to think Marxists link all struggle, of class and otherwise, to capitalism; again, no Marxist holds this position. Rather, unsurprisingly, class struggle is linked to class. These class struggles happened within pre-capitalist economic systems, such as the lord/serf dynamic and the lord/rising bourgeoisie and the slave owner/slave dynamics and so much more. In Engels' *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, he explains a number of these dynamics. This is not the only Marxist piece that does so.

Then, he says that--for Marxists--it's as if nature doesn't exist. This is quite simply untrue. For instance, Engels began writing an entire book, *Dialectics of Nature*, on this question. In fact, for Marxists--or, at least, those interested in dialectics--a massive test of the dialectic is nature. Peterson, who seems to have read only the Communist Manifesto, doesn't see the underlying reasoning behind the dialectical method, nor does he even grasp the dialectic at its most basic. Marxists don't ignore nature, Peterson, they just have a different analysis of it. Developing this point, he says that not all issues are economic; many problems are just due to human needs like hunger and the "struggle for life in a cruel natural world". Yet again, Peterson fails to grasp the fundamentals of not just Marxist economics, but economics in general. Economic systems arise *because* of these human needs. In fact, at the core of all economic systems is the exchange or distribution of food and the like. Peterson seems to believe that base human needs and economics are unrelated when, in fact, combatting these needs is just one of many areas within the scope of economics.

Next, and throughout his argument in general, he seems to misunderstand the Marxist critique of capitalism. Capitalism, for every Marxist I've had the pleasure of talking to or reading, is better than its predecessors and is certainly better than the absence of any economic system. Marxism is more than wanting to abolish capitalism; it's also striving to replace it with something else. One may argue that if something isn't broken, why fix it? The problem is, as earlier alluded to, the internal contradictions inherent to capitalism *necessitates* a change; every contradictory idea must, in the end, be negated.

Furthermore, he argues that hierarchies are--to some degree--necessary. Again, most Marxists wouldn't contest this at its core; the problem is, however, that Peterson's argument implicitly and baselessly sneaks in requiring *economic* hierarchies. To name just one other form of hierarchy, there are epistemic hierarchies; i.e., hierarchies of knowledge. While most Marxists disagree with the current state of education, all Marxists believe that a teacher holds, or should hold, an epistemic hierarchy over the students and therefore has the authority to teach (although no more, which is where many of the issues with the education arise from). Peterson is either being disingenuous or, more likely, unaware that he's assuming that *economic* hierarchies are required.

He also argues that one doesn't rise in an *economic* hierarchy by exploiting people. This notion is just untrue. In economics, every gain *must* come from someone else; i.e., every dollar a capitalist makes *must* come from the value produced by the worker. Under capitalism, there is extraction of surplus value, a form of exploitation. Rightfully, this point of his was met with laughter from the audience.

Peterson's next issue is that he doesn't understand the difference between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. He seems to understand it as simply and solely exploiter/exploited, as evidenced by him saying, "It's not so easy to make that firm division between who's exploiter and who's exploitee". This is indeed true. The problem, however, is that that isn't how these classes are

defined. To make a complicated subject simple, for the sake of time and ease, someone is bourgeois if they engage in the social relation of capital; i.e., if they invest money in a commodity and then make a profit from it (or M-C-M' in common notation). Proletarians, on the other hand, sell their labour, a commodity under capitalism, to make money to buy food, clothes, and so on, also commodities (here, the notation is C-M-C). There is a clear-cut definition, Peterson just isn't aware of it--although the exploiter/exploitee definitional error is understandable given common non-theoretical political discussion. He then uses the USSR as an example of this going awry; he says that, for instance, the "red terror" was borne of this. This "terror", however, was political--not purely for theoretical reasons. Also along this line of reasoning, Peterson argues that Marxists ascribe all good to the proletariat and all bad to the bourgeoisie. Again, this is untrue; the term *lumpenproletariat* (the term for the non-class conscious proletariat) exists for a reason, not to mention the fact that many Marxist theoreticians tend to stray from concepts like good and bad for a number of reasons. This is likely Peterson applying his own moralising of binaries to other binaries where there just is none; the closest one could argue is repression of the bourgeoisie in some praxis, but this isn't about absolute good or bad, it's about abolition of class.

The next issue he has is with the dictatorship of the proletariat. As is common among many right-wingers, Peterson falls prey to the perhaps dated naming of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Rather than being a dictatorship as the term is commonly used today, it's more turning the class system on its head such that the proletarians are those in charge--to put another complicated topic simply. Instead, proletarian state is a more precise term for today. All his further contentions centering around this are therefore incorrect because he's simply not arguing against something that Marxists actually believe. Other Marxist works, *Critique of the Gotha Program* to name just one, would be useful for Peterson to expand his understanding of this concept.

Then Peterson espouses directly contradictory ideas in quick succession; he claims that Marxists don't value what I'd call the logistical work within capitalist management after claiming that Marxism doesn't work because those in the proletarian state can't possibly perform this same logistical work sufficiently--implying, therefore, that Peterson thinks Marxists don't value logistical work at all but also want to establish some body to carry it out. Almost certainly cognitive dissonance at its greatest.

His next issue is the Marxist problem with profit. I can see why Peterson's contention would arise; the problem is from how so many people, Marxists among them, use terms like theft. Except in a legal sense, it's better to avoid such terms entirely *unless* one wants to appeal to an audience; this is, of course, exactly what Marx was doing. Even with that, Peterson seems to misunderstand how companies work--the bourgeoisie don't usually engage in "abstract labour". At most, they once did *before* they became capitalists. Almost all capitalists invest and fund and so on while proletarians are the intellectual and manual labourers. Then he changes his claim to mean all the work a capitalist does to look after their labourers--this, simply, does not necessitate a capitalist. Proletarians are all capable of being trained in fields like workplace

safety and the like. The capitalist performs a role that the proletarians could (and do) themselves perform--not to mention that unions, marketing departments, "human resources" departments, etc. exist for a reason. Then there's also the logical issue of perpetual growth. For perpetual growth, everything must be eventually commodified; once everything is commodified, what is there to commodify to grow? Raising prices would cause issues because people would be unable to buy, increasing world population would drive down labour costs and/or produce unemployment, etc.; no matter what the solution is, internal contradictions arise. Internal contradictions necessitate negation and, therefore, the next stage of history--communism--is necessary.

Next, he seems to again misunderstand the proletarian state. He claims that there's no theory behind the increase of productivity following the establishment of a proletarian state. The, or a, theory behind it is alienation, which is touched on in Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and elsewhere. In fact, this can be seen in Catalonia 1936-1939, a place I have issues with but where alienation was at least mitigated. He also seems to think that a proletarian state is the end-goal of communists. Again, this is untrue; it isn't meant to be a utopia, Peterson, because it's a stepping-stone to the lower and then higher phases of communism.

Speaking of these phases of communism, while Peterson doesn't say this in his opening statement (instead, it arises in the discussion period), the idea of the lower and higher phases of communism, I hope, can illustrate to Peterson (and by Peterson I mean whoever is reading this and shares his ideas) what Marxists support in regards to equality. Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* explains (a prediction of) these phases. The lower phase, as Marx explain, is where "the same amount of labor which he has given to society in one form, he receives back in another"--in particular, using labour vouchers; for the higher phase, the famous "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" applies. In this sense, one can see that these mantras, while simplified, talk about how *different* outcomes are determined. Therefore, here at least, Marxists *aren't* supporters of equality of outcome, because different people have different needs; Marxists are, however, supporters of equality of opportunity, to use the terms that conservatives so frequently use.

His last point, on the "strangest part of the Communist Manifesto", Peterson talks about Marx and Engels admitting that capitalism is the best economic system to date, or at least at time of writing in 1848, at producing commodities. This, in a way, ties together a number of earlier issues, about unbridled profit and history. The first part is regarding the commodity. Not everything, for starters, should be a commodity. Commodification of everything--such as labour, art, etc.--oughtn't be strived for at the very least. Even then, for Marxists, need-based distribution is preferable over a market, certainly where there is the ability. Now here's the real issue: communism, assuming the world isn't destroyed or whatnot by that point, is inevitable due to capitalism's internal contradictions. This misreading is the most frustrating because, due to his lack of understanding and insight, he doesn't understand that internal contradiction necessitates negation; capitalism must be negated, there's no two ways about it. This isn't a

matter of what we want, it's a matter of what will happen (although Marxists do want it as well, but even if they didn't it'd be inevitable). The most we can do is manipulate or speed up the process; the world is the beaker, the classes are the reactants and we are the catalysts.

To conclude, Peterson has misread Marx so sincerely that his opening remarks about about people being trained to think are quite ironic because these principles don't seem properly applied to his own thought. In truth, every criticism of Marxism that Peterson has proposed has turned up to be false.