

A Marxist Theory of Freedom of Expression

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Capitalism has an inherent conflict between its need to raise productivity and its need to control workers and ideas. Direct control over scientists and social theorists and their proletarianisation tends to reduce their ability to come up with new ideas. Furthermore, capital prefers not to bear the cost of fundamental research. On the other hand, it does not want the public sector to grow and demand higher taxes. The effect has been increased marketisation, short-term type research, and increased irrationalism. The right to be confused is the Orwellian result for the time being together with a small band of genuine intellectuals and self-sacrificing workers.

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Introduction

The term ‘freedom of expression’ can be understood as the expression of the full potential of the talents and abilities of the individual. It is clear, that in this sense, it can only be expressed in a socialist society. It is, in fact, one definition of a socialist society. The lack of freedom of expression is coterminous with a critique of hitherto existing social formations.

However, there is a narrower sense that is behind the original conception of the special issue of *Critique*. It concerns the ability of individuals to be able to express their social critique, whether through analysis, through art or through their personal lives, and whether it is public or limited to a few individuals. The suppression of non-‘socialist-realist’ art in the USSR led artists to demand the right to be non-political and non-engaged, as well as to be genuinely critical.¹ In fact, non-political art was a critique of the existing society, whatever the artists’ intentions. In other words, freedom of expression is necessarily social but it is not necessarily conscious or intended to change society, even if it may do so.

In a capitalist or Stalinist society, where the state plays a key controlling role, and where the ruling class extracts surplus product from the majority, freedom of speech and hence organisation is crucial to change. For that reason freedom of speech itself, in

¹ Chris Boyd discusses the question of rights in some depth in his article this issue.

part through intellectual or academic freedom, is itself critical. Intellectual or artistic freedom is one form of freedom of expression, which would be greatly enhanced in a socialist society but which is also distorted and controlled in a capitalist society.

Marxists have discussed the question of freedom of speech and expression along four axes.

The first concerns the nature of Stalinism and the significance of the almost total absence of freedom of speech and means of expression in the USSR. It is useful to make a comparison with Stalinism in order to understand the real effects of limitations on freedom of speech. The destruction of thought, and hence understanding of alternatives, which follows from the absence of discussion, is still not fully appreciated within the left. As a result of support for Stalinist or former Stalinist regimes like Cuba or China, some on the left take a negative view of the importance of freedom of speech. In this article, I shall take the view that such people should not be properly regarded as Marxists.

The second is the question of the limits to freedom of speech in the case of a beleaguered but genuinely transitional regime, transitional to the building of socialism. This remains an ongoing debate, even though it remains at a superficial level. This debate often takes the form of justifying or rejecting the actual limitations that did exist in the time of Lenin and Trotsky. This is an important but separate issue and it will not be discussed here.

The third issue concerns the nature of socialism. As is well known, Marx endorsed full freedom of expression, as indicated in the next paragraph, and in principle any genuine Marxist would support such a viewpoint as a goal for humanity and hence for a socialist society. For that reason, there is no debate on the existence of the fullest freedom of expression within a socialist society, as opposed to transitional regimes. There is, obviously, a series of questions on how to achieve a society where everyone can contribute to the fullest of their abilities, where that includes their ability to criticize, lampoon, deride and make fun of policies, writings and speeches. As authority and society would be closely inter-related, criticism would be often, though not always, self-criticism. In a socialist society, there would be no division between art and society. The society itself would be art. The division between art for itself and for society would not exist. Indeed, I do not think it is real in any case, if we understand art properly. I discuss this below. As this aspect of socialism contrasts with modern capitalist society, it provides the groundwork for understanding the restrictions on freedom of expression today.

I have been discussing the debate among Marxists, not that between Marxists and non-Marxists. In that regard, the standard attack on Marx and so Marxism holds that he was against democracy and personal freedom. If the former is understood as meaning the fullest expression of control from below in the society, with maximum opportunity for the individuals to express themselves, then the attack on Marx can only be called superficial at best and illiterate at worst. The discussion between Andrzej Walicki and Loyd Easton in the *New York Review of Books*² shows the differences clearly. Easton

² Loyd D. Easton, 'Marxism and Freedom', Reply by Andrzej Walicki, *New York Review of Books*, 32:19, 5 December 1985, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/5271>.

points to Marx's numerous statements in the early writings 1842–1844: 'He particularly condemned censorship, holding that without diversity of opinion and parties "there is no development, without division, no progress"'. Walicki in reply quotes Engels' article, 'Progress of Social Reform on the Continent':

The French revolution was the rise of democracy in Europe. Democracy is, as I take all forms of government to be, a contradiction in itself, an untruth, nothing but hypocrisy. . . . Political democracy is sham liberty, the worst possible slavery; the appearance of liberty and therefore the reality of servitude. Political equality is the same; therefore democracy, as well as every other form of government, must ultimately break to pieces.³

Anyone who understood Marxism, even if they rejected it, would know that Marx and Engels were arguing that a ruling class who exercise their power through capital control capitalist society. All substantial organs of the state, bureaucracy, means of communication, etc. and economic entities owe their allegiance directly or indirectly to capital. In orthodox terms, the market is crucial to capitalist society and those who are critical of it, fall foul of it. For that reason, formal democratic forms are not enough to ensure that the majority of society can express and exercise their will. One can, of course, use the word democracy in different ways, but Engels is using the word as popularly used at the time. Walicki was writing from Poland and much of the discussion was based on the individual's real or imagined view of Stalinism as Marxism. There can be no question that the removal of the police state, the ending of atomisation and the removal of the control over communications improved the lives of all, even if in other respects many people suffered, upon the overthrow of Stalinism. However, there is no reason to identify the negation of civil rights or freedom of expression with Marxism. Nor is there any reason to assume that Marxists, as opposed to Stalinists, would not rejoice at the restoration or introduction of such civil rights as were implemented.

The fourth, which follows from the above, is the analysis of the various subtle and less subtle political economic forms of control over modes of expression and of criticism within capitalism and of capitalism. This article concentrates on this fourth aspect and its effects. What I have to say is necessarily sketchy. The question of academic freedom is separately discussed by another author in this collection.⁴ Furthermore, the whole issue is closely bound up with the nature of alienation, exploitation and oppression and I will not duplicate those aspects here. Instead, I am confining myself to the particular dynamic of the need for freedom of expression under capitalism and the form of its limits, under conditions where direct repression is limited.

³ F. Engels, 'Progress of Social Reform on the Continent' in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975/London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975) p. 393.

⁴ See the article by Geraldine Thorpe in this issue of *Critique*.

Capitalism—Theses

There are two basic theses presented here. The first is that there is a necessary conflict in capitalism between the need for freedom of expression for the purposes of accumulation and the need to maintain control over the same process of accumulation both for the individual capitalist and for the class as a whole. Accumulation is to be understood in terms of all aspects required to ensure that value produces more value, including the necessary social and political conditions. As a result, capitalism has evolved a series of mediations which allow and encourage a limited freedom of expression. The second thesis is that declining capitalism has lost its previous advantages, particularly with its ideology, commodity fetishism, in decline, and has relied, in the developed countries at the present time, instead on sophisticated form of apparent free speech, which can only be described as forms of confusion or irrationalism.

Just as Marx pointed to capitalism as necessary in order to raise productivity⁵ to the point where humanity could move to socialism, so one can argue that capitalism has provided the necessary tools for the true understanding of the nature of the 'human condition' and so the real alternatives possible. For capitalism to mature it had to overcome the limits placed on capital by the social order and its thinkers, like Adam Smith, were not shy in calling certain practices unproductive. The French Revolution, the bourgeois revolution, par excellence, placed the question of the rights of man on the agenda. It is probably impossible to indoctrinate the population to the point where they accept their own subordination, though it is sometimes possible to convince the population that an alternative order is impossible at a particular time.

In principle, a rising and expanding capitalism needs to understand both nature and society in order to develop its products using raw materials from nature and the skills of the workforce in order to develop the necessary technology. The organisational methods and forms of the capitalist economy require an understanding of society and its political economy, while technology demands the development of the physical sciences. Since accumulation under mature capitalism constantly drives towards expansion, there is a permanent need to understand nature and society to the fullest. Forces hindering such expansion are opposed. We get some feeling of this view in Adam Smith. Marx, himself, was employed as an editor and journalist for exactly this reason by German capitalists. The Russian bourgeoisie opposed the Tsarist autocracy for the same reasons.

On the other hand, capitalism needs to maintain control over the society and in particular over the working class. Individual capitalists also do not want to lose their hard-won advantages in new products or new techniques and so attempt to maintain control over them through secrecy and through legal rules establishing patents. In the

⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 'Appendix: The Results of the Immediate Process of Production', p. 990. 'Viewed historically, this inversion is the indispensable transition without which wealth as such i.e., the relentless productive forces of social labour, which alone can form the material basis of a free human society, could not possibly be created by force at the expense of the majority.'

early stages of industrialisation these concerns were important but caused less disquiet. The word 'control' has to be understood as both collective bourgeois control and individual capitalist's control. Competition among capitals demands secrecy, and exploitation needs to be covered up. Expression is therefore limited, adapted and distorted to conform to what is possible and is necessary for capital of the time. Every period has its own particular mediations, some of which are more dysfunctional than others, even if they allow the system to survive and develop. As the system declines the mediations function less well and become more difficult to establish. The ultimate problem, in this instance, is that full freedom of expression would bring the system to an end, while suppression would lead to stagnation and disintegration. In previous modes of production, as in the Asiatic Mode of Production, in China, the suppression of freedom of expression did prevent change to a new mode of production, but that was only possible in a mode of production which lacked the fluidity and dynamism of capitalism.

Looked at from the point of view of value we have capitalism driving towards the production of use-values but being confined to the form of exchange values. At first, given the backwardness of society and the utopian nature of change in social relations in the absence of a developed working class, there is little conflict between the two. The contradiction is fruitful with the development of both poles, through their interaction. In the early stages of capitalism with the relatively small size of each capital, and the undeveloped nature of the division of labour capital can absorb whatever knowledge exists in other parts of the world or has historically existed in the past. Its problem lies much more in its need to fight the political remnants of previous social formations.

However, the development of knowledge for the purpose of subjecting nature to mankind requires a long-term commitment from intellectuals, who derive their primary reward from the nature of their creative labour. In other words, the actual scientific discoveries are not part of the process of capital accumulation itself, even if they are subsumed under it. Self-expanding value or capital necessarily demands scientific advances in order to improve technology in order to sell its commodities. However, the process of scientific discovery does not fit easily into the process of accumulation. Isolated theorists like Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Einstein, and modern physicists like Hawking or Turok could never be part of the process of accumulation, even if they are financed by it. The problem is that the progress of ideas cannot be predicted and thinkers have to be given a lifetime to produce, if they produce anything at all. The problem for capital is that it has to have both paradigmatic thinkers, like the above, as well as less exalted discoverers, who also suffer from the same problems. They can, however, be controlled to a greater or lesser degree but that is usually at a cost to the quality and extent of the research.

The process of the discovery of knowledge has changed over time in that research requires both more sustained effort and more tools for the purpose, depending on the discipline. Even where the only tools could at worst be pen and paper, libraries and forms of communication are required. In modern terms, computers,

telecommunications travel and habitable space are necessary. This creates a greater dependence, within capitalism, on money and capital. On the other hand, the development of knowledge creates an increasing community of scholars, journalists, artists and scientists, who identify with their own work and its creativity in so far as it applies to them. Whereas capital wants them for its own purposes, either for accumulation directly or for the defence of capital itself, conflict becomes endemic. The tension has increased with the substantial and rising demands for money from educational and particularly higher educational institutions. Such teachers and researchers can be driven to become critical of the society and pose their solution by positing an independence for their societal layer, a technological elite, or by demanding autonomy for their sector, as for the universities. Alternatively, the more courageous link their struggle with the rest of society and turn to the working class.

The relative independence of such professions as lawyers, doctors and teachers/academics, which flourished particularly before the 20th century, continues to be diminished today, and abolished in favour of increased proletarianisation. This goes along with the increased role of societal administration, the state, and of the dominance of big firms and large agglomerations of capital. The process is most advanced in the case of physical scientists working in industry but the same overall process is part of the nature of scientific research in that the latter requires teamwork under the direction of a leader, who often has to raise the money required.⁶

Such scientific researchers look for the opportunity to be left alone with their research, but to be financed at a reasonably high standard of living, while they are so doing. They often go further and project their own internal forms of reasoning and control onto society as a whole and propose a technocratic utopia. Historically, various anarchist critics of the left have seen Marxists as the party of such an elite. The argument is based on the view that a planned society would necessarily favour the planners and so those most involved in the direction and research required for the building up of a developed economy. In fact, there is little reason to support this view but the proponents are pointing to a real layer in the society and real viewpoint.

The attitudes, doctrines and theories propounded by the capitalist 'intelligentsia' reflect their contradictory situation. On the one hand, as we illustrate below with the case of the invention of the personal computer and its software, the 'intelligentsia' is driven to a social solution, free at the point of appropriation, but, on the other, the utopian element involved and their own relative isolation pushes them towards the separatist solutions of autonomy and free speech.

Autonomy

It is worthwhile at this point taking some time to consider the demand for autonomy and what it means. In the universities this is a standard slogan, usually

⁶ Geraldine Thorpe explores the whole question of academic freedom in an important article in this issue.

accepted by the authorities in word if not in deed. As we have already pointed out, researchers, lecturers and academics in general do indeed need a high degree of independence of capital and the state in order to function at their best, or at all in some instances. However, universities which discriminate against ethnic minorities or majorities, most obviously in the case of South Africa before 1994, cannot be allowed to continue with these policies, under the slogan of university autonomy. In a capitalist society, the rich are able to ensure that their children pass the necessary entrance qualifications whether by ensuring that they go to the best schools, by getting extra-school tuition, by using entrance examiners for the purpose of coaching, through contacts or through bribery. On the other hand, the ordinary working class child is additionally held back by the absence of an educationally supportive home environment, class solidarity against the rich, and lack of incentive, etc. Society has a duty to change this situation. Ultimately only a socialist society can remove these forms and it would be compelled to force the universities to find ways of improving working class access, beyond the particular forms that exist today. Then, too, universities have historically taught those subjects which were required of them by capital and the state and this too has to be called in question. In other words, the demand for autonomy is a defensive reflex by those within the university structure but it ignores the reality that universities are not autonomous and their structure reflects that fact. A society controlled from below would have to radically restructure higher education, rejecting autonomy in the first instance, in order to allow a new more genuine autonomy within a socialist framework, where all institutions would be both autonomous and responsible to society as a whole.

However, this does mean that at the present time, institutional autonomy cannot be a left-wing demand. On the other hand the right to free speech and the right to pursue research wherever it leads remains, with all the consequences that follow from the above discussion—i.e., the necessary long-term support and finance required. Clearly there are the usual limits to free speech i.e., no one has the right to advocate the murder of individuals or ethnic or other groups. Research of a Nazi or racist type is not acceptable both because it is anti-human and because it is not genuine research. Research has to be for the betterment of all mankind, in however a complex form and it does require high standards to be maintained.

Needs Replacing Value

The invention of the personal computer, the software that went with it and the internet almost brought down the previously established computer companies. Although the invention of the personal computer itself was partially driven by a desire to make money, the progress of the software and the spread of the personal computer owed much to a shared compulsion among enthusiasts to make computing and the internet a shared collective entity. It remains the case that much of the internet

remains free, something which cannot last as *The Economist* has pointed out.⁷ Clearly neither Apple nor IBM were interested in producing the kind of very cheap personal computers now available to the population, roughly equal to around a week's wages in developed countries. For those who cannot afford Microsoft's products, comparable software can be obtained free. The remarkable progress of Linux, as a free operating system, is a tribute to the freely available creative labour of many. The fact that it is supported by Microsoft's competitors does not alter the point.

While Bill Gates harnessed the computer software skills of the community and was regarded as something of a Trojan horse, their drive has remained, even if most are subjected to the needs of capital. The creative impulse cannot be contained within capital itself, although from time to time it can be harnessed. We can speculate whether the personal computer and the internet would not have been much further advanced in a society based on needs rather than on value.

In other words, the physical and social sciences and the arts have their own needs and forms of development which can only be partially subjected to the needs of capital. For that reason, a vibrant emerging capital has every reason to support their development as independent entities, from which it can absorb its results, often without immediate cost to itself. In the early years of capital, it was the autonomous universities, aristocratic patrons and children of the wealthy who were the sources of the ideas required. Over time, governments and society as a whole had to provide the environment required and this institutionalised the conflict between the needs of capital and the needs of science and arts. If Marxism has any truth to it at all, it has to argue that knowledge will tend to move in its direction, increasingly criticising the commodity form and the rule of capital, in however a subtle a form. In that case also, one would expect an increasing conflict between the development of knowledge and the needs of capital.

The Market and Freedom—An Excursus

The media and orthodox economics proclaims that the market functions best in a democracy and hence the introduction of the market leads to democracy. The argument made hitherto might give some weight to that viewpoint were it not utopian. Modern apologetics argues that the market is separable from really existing capitalism in all its forms. This ideal form where there were a large number of (small) competing firms none of which can influence the price, where rents would tend to zero, and where workers could not form unions has probably never existed but early forms of industrialising capitalism might have had a resemblance. Really existing capitalism is effectively governed by finance capital and large firms, and monopoly/oligopoly plays a crucial role in the economy. The market is limited, or in Marxist terms, the law of value is itself in decline.

⁷ 'The end of the free lunch—again: The demise of a popular but unsustainable business model now seems inevitable', *The Economist*, 19 March 2009, http://www.economist.com/opinion/displaystory.cfm?story_id=13326158 (accessed 20 August 2009).

It is probably truer today to argue that the market-capitalism needs dictatorial forms in countries where the basic premises of capitalism are not accepted. The countries of the former Soviet bloc and the former Stalinist countries of Asia have caricature forms of democracy, if they have any semblance at all to democracy. The two crucial countries—China and Russia—obviously run a police state and the rule of law is a distant objective.

However, the questions raised here are not ones of democracy and dictatorship. It is evident that when capitalism is threatened it resorts to repression. Furthermore, in its decline, capital can lose control, leading to an irrational repression far worse than capital needs or wants.

The Underlying Basis of the Conflict

The polarisation of capital on one side and the creative intellectual on the other has led to an increasing degree of interaction combined with repulsion. Capital requires abstract labour, homogenous flexible interchangeable labour time. The concrete labourer may have a high degree of skill but the labourer remains within this context, even if in a complex framework. In other words, the skilled worker remains proletarianised, subject to work within certain hours, working to a particular pattern within the enterprise. The intellectual providing the new framework of thought cannot be contained in that fashion without a loss of creativity. There is no division between work time and non-work time for creative thought, nor is there a set pattern of hours which can control the theorist. Capital, however, requires results and it needs profits. It cannot wait for its solutions. The result, in the contemporary world, has been an increasing degree of proletarianisation of academia and of science.

In a declining capitalism, such proletarianisation is also subject to other factors. There is an increasing fusion between white collar and blue collar workers as proletarians. At the same time, the higher degree of skill required and the increasing complexity of tasks, which can combine a series of actions governed by computers, means that mistakes can cause considerable losses. The mistakes need not be subjectively caused but rather a result of poor design. As a result, capital needs feedback from its abstract labourers to an increasing degree. The failure to achieve a modicum of interchange within an enterprise can be very costly over the medium to long term but not show itself in the short term.

The highly skilled white collar worker and the intellectual would tend to merge at this point, where the skilled worker is consulted and the academic is subjected to proletarianisation. However, this is a tendency rather than a full reality. At the present time, in a declining capitalism, subject to finance capital, short-termism is the name of the game, so consultation of this kind is less used, as opposed to a form of brutal managerialism.

Put another way, the relative independence or isolation of the intellectuals from the overall division of labour was brought to an end with the development of capitalism. However, creative labour cannot be subjected to the same process of homogenisation

and control as abstract labour, without destroying its creativity. At the same time, the needs of accumulation require that creativity. Worse still for capital, the very form of the development of the division of labour tends to prevent feedback from the shop floor itself, at the same time as that interaction has become essential to the reliability, quality and progress of what is produced. Recognition of this situation led to various experiments within a number of large and small companies but they have not led anywhere. The reality is that there is no possible solution within capitalism without threatening authority and so capitalism itself.

Bureaucracy

In principle, the bourgeoisie needs the intellectuals to be independent, working at their own pace in order to produce the necessary creative output. However to add to the other problems, the growth of large-scale production and monopoly has involved an increasing absorption of one-time academics, both in situ but also doing research for capital in their own academic institutions. The logic of this process is part of the increasing socialisation of labour, which necessarily also spawns an ever-increasing bureaucratic apparatus necessary to administer the economy, which in its turn absorbs the same intelligentsia.

They, however, are subject to analogous pressures. On the one hand, they have to conform to their political masters, which are officially the government of the day, and unofficially the ruling class itself. Given the nature of the recruitment process, they are specially selected for the particular aspect of conformity in which the particular ruling class in a particular country specialises.

The essential underlying point is that the independence of the intellectual is both maintained and undermined particularly under finance capital. The bourgeoisie needs freedom of expression but it also destroys it in the name of capital itself.

The conflict between modern managerialism and the long term needs of capital on the one hand and between managerialism and the highly skilled white collar workers/ academics has been discussed in the literature though often under other headings, and is discussed again below. As the state and governments have succumbed to the managerialist formula demanded by finance capital, institutions governed by or financed by the governmental administrations have conformed. The result has been a combination of conformism, irrationalism and formal submission.

In this context, the conflict expresses itself in a number of forms, reflecting the degradation of modern society.

Commodity Fetishism and its Decline

In the first place there is the role of role of commodity fetishism in controlling freedom of expression. Commodity fetishism refers to the apparently impersonal role of capital as the systemic force controlling society, apparently independent of humanity. The market is the central mechanism of modern society and individual

attempts to ignore its rules generally fail. The market and so capital sustain the ideology of capitalism that commodity production is necessary, eternal and universal, standing apparently above humanity, as effectively a force of nature.

Commodity fetishism, however, is not simply the controlling ideology, all the more powerful for being implicit in all aspects of the society, but the very stuff of capitalism itself. Marx argues that capital only exists to the extent that it dominates conditions of production and so labour surplus value is not capital in itself, it has to be self-expanding value. This implies the total subordination of the economy and so society both ideologically and in reality. The result is that the process of production itself is subject to commodity fetishism, not simply the act of exchange in which labour power is exchanged for its value, the subsistence minimum of the time and place. Contrary to viewpoints that abstract labour only exists at the point of exchange, Marx insists in his discussion on 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production' on the domination of the worker by capital in production itself. The worker becomes the abstract labourer with all that entails.⁸ The division of labour then comes to conform to what is required both vertically and horizontally. Horizontally it has required a minute division of tasks and skills among workers. The effect on the understanding of the whole process of production is devastating.

One of the consequences is that the division of labour proper gave rise, particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries, to an empiricist approach. As a result, knowledge is so sub-divided that it is hard to know anything but a tiny corner and there is a tendency to make all disciplines functionalist i.e., self-justifying. As a result people do not perceive there to be one method with which to study reality, but many methods, depending on the discipline.

Why is this a result? That is because it is necessary to divert attention away from the total control already existing in society. This is true both at the level of production and in society as a whole. It is, therefore, preferable to avoid large-scale concerns with an integrated division of labour, and therefore have small firms specialising in minute aspects of the economy, competing with each other. This, of course, was the situation at the dawn of capitalism but a declining capitalism has found it necessary to imitate it by elevating the argument that small and medium size firms are the backbone of the economy to a fetish. At the level of production, it, therefore, becomes more difficult for workers to achieve their demands, or even articulate them.

With the evolution of capitalism, commodity fetishism loses its omnipotence as an ideology because opposition politically, industrially and socially has successfully limited its operations. Indeed at various points, capitalism has been overthrown, and hence, ideologically, it has been claimed to be a man-made system, amenable to change, the least worst system possible, as one politician claimed. As a result, capitalism is left with little defence other than the dubious argument that Stalinism and so, by implication, socialism cannot work. It is dubious because most serious

⁸ Marx, *Capital*, op. cit., p. 1013. The whole of this fragment, 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production', is devoted to showing how capital dominates the process of production.

intellectuals agree that Stalinism is not socialism. However, during the period of the Cold War, anti-communist ideology served its purpose in inducing a feeling of a possible threat to existence induced by a power-hungry and oppressive bureaucracy, possessing nuclear power. In a sense, the Cold Warriors were able to use the real forms of oppression and exploitation in the USSR in order to deny the reality of capital itself.

Orwellian Confusion and Its Objective Basis

This is the Orwellian moment in history. Politics, political ideas and ideology are not what they seem and confusion rules. Where ruling ideas are internally conflicted, as they are put forward in the media and through education, free speech takes on a new dimension.⁹ It becomes particularly important for intellectuals to clear the fog of confusion and sort out a way through the complexity of the present. Given the difficulty of the task, few want to do so and few are prepared to take the consequences. In a sense the issue of whether it is freedom from restrictions or freedom to have the capability of expression is a secondary issue.

The confusion itself is partly due to the complexity of the forces operating today and partly due to the deliberate deceit exercised in a Machiavellian world. Someone who wishes to express the truth has to carefully pick and choose words so as to make the critique clear, and not appear as just one more statement made for personal or party gain. The culture, under finance capital, becomes one of increasing uncertainty, lies and dishonesty. Under these circumstances everything is turned on its head and we have to turn to the age of Machiavelli to understand the present. In the age of decline, we have to look at the early period of capitalism to understand the nature of transition.

As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁰ the objective basis for the complexity and so confusion lies in the fact that we live in a world in which capitalism is in declining and in the process of transition towards capitalism. Hence the objective basis for commodity fetishism itself is objectively limited, precisely because there are three different sets of laws or principles operating. The societal forms have been unpredictable and often hard to understand, not least when they have been regressive.

⁹ The overall bias in the media is so obvious, and has been so extensively discussed, as not to require more than the following illustration. Speaking of Walter Cronkite, Harold Jackson writes: 'As one of the founding fathers of America's network television news and as managing editor of the CBS evening news for 19 years, his evaluation of world events helped shape his country's electronic reporting into the extraordinarily insular and inadequate chronicle it has become. That, in turn, opened the door to Rupert Murdoch's current brand of unashamedly partisan news coverage . . . For all Cronkite's insistence that he was a reporter rather than a front man, there was little evidence that he tried to inculcate a mission to inform at CBS. The prevailing philosophy was, and remains, to offer all the news that fits. With no national press to fill the gap, it has meant that for generations of Americans the broad sweep of foreign policy has wavered on tides of popular ignorance.' Harold Jackson, 'Obituary: Walter Cronkite', *The Guardian*, 19 July 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jul/18/walter-cronkite-obituary> (accessed 23 July 2009).

¹⁰ Hillel Ticktin, 'Political Consciousness and Its Conditions at the Present Time', *Critique* 38, 34:1 (April 2006), pp. 9–26.

Nor can the left, those critical of existing society, be said to be free of this confusion. On the contrary one of the main reasons why there is no substantial left is precisely that it is trapped within it. The very concept of supporting the lesser evil, which is common among social democrats and centrists, shows a level of despair and confusion that is typical of the epoch. A version of this pernicious doctrine, supporting the lesser evil, is held on the far left when it supports known megalomaniacs and supreme leaders for life, on the ground that they are better than the other side, as if one always has to support one's enemy's enemy. Opposition to invasion by an imperial power, for instance, does not require support for the regime being invaded, and yet much of the left has tended to go overboard in supporting Stalinist and nationalist-type regimes, which they have condemned in earlier periods, or in their saner moments.

What then is the nature of freedom of expression under conditions where much of the allowed and common discourse is little more than deceit, craftsmanship of ever more trivial issues, or nonsense?

The apparent fog in which we live is reproduced in the social sciences, where they do their best to avoid reality. Economics does not discuss the real world. The consistent failure of economists to predict the real development of the economy and their persistent defence of capitalist forms provides no enlightenment.¹¹ Sociology has only a few discussions or treatises on the nature of the ruling class, nor has politics any explanation on how they rule. This is not surprising, as orthodox political science does not have the concept of ruling class.

Art

It is no accident that art is able to express the nature of the ruling class more clearly, if it is allowed to do so. In this respect Bernard Shaw's characterisation of the ruling class is a classic.¹² The reason why the graphic arts and literature can be more truthful, though this is not necessarily the case, as shown has two aspects. Firstly, it is less direct, relying on effect rather than an implied intellectual injunction. This makes it less immediately subversive and so permissible in many regimes, though not all. Indeed the ruling class, itself, can appreciate the reality it is portraying and even the

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of this question see the article by Jack Rasmus in this issue.

¹² 'UNDERSHAFT [with a touch of brutality]: The government of your country! _I_ am the government of your country: I, and Lazarus. Do you suppose that you and half a dozen amateurs like you, sitting in a row in that foolish gabble shop, can govern Undershaft and Lazarus? No, my friend: you will do what pays US. You will make war when it suits us, and keep peace when it doesn't. You will find out that trade requires certain measures when we have decided on those measures. When I want anything to keep my dividends up, you will discover that my want is a national need. When other people want something to keep my dividends down, you will call out the police and military. And in return you shall have the support and applause of my newspapers, and the delight of imagining that you are a great statesman Government of your country! Be off with you, my boy, and play with your caucuses and leading articles and historic parties and great leaders and burning questions and the rest of your toys. _I_ am going back to my counting house to pay the piper and call the tune.' George Bernard Shaw, *Major Barbara*, Act 3, <http://www.mirrorsservice.org/sites/ftp.ibiblio.org/pub/docs/books/gutenberg/3/7/9/3790/3790-h/3790-h.htm>

critique involved. Secondly, it paints an overall picture whether graphically or through literature, which allows many interpretations, and shows many sides of the same phenomenon, without the abstraction necessary for analysis.

A regime which is highly unstable usually cannot tolerate any genuine art at all, it has to be said, and consequently it bans, suppresses distorts or even imprisons and kills genuine artists. To the extent that capital is in decline, and hence unstable it has had to find ways of controlling and distorting culture.¹³ Freedom of expression or of speech in which the individual has a choice of expression of confused views or of an acceptance of a carefully arranged deception is obviously no freedom at all. While this is an extreme version of the choice in so-called Western democracies, it illustrates the point that the question is not either one of freedom from restrictions or of the acquisition of the necessary education and information in order to develop a full understanding of the problem. At the present time, it goes beyond either. In order for individuals to have full freedom to express themselves they have to have the opportunity to do so. This requires that a series of conditions have to be present, which are seldom met. Those who insist that freedom of expression is simply the absence of restrictions fail to understand that the usual heavy restrictions are only introduced when the system itself is in danger. At that point, practically any criticism can be dangerous to the system so it uses maximum force to ensure its survival. At other times, it makes no sense to have such restrictions. Yet freedom of political and social expression requires a critique of the system itself. Odd critiques of a stable system can be tolerated. When, however, that critique is well based and fundamental in its nature, it encounters obstacles.

Vertical Division of Labour

The vertical division of labour ensures that information and knowledge is open to the upper strata of society, but only limited aspects are available to the workers themselves. This is partly a question of access to education, partly a question of everyday contact with the power/political economic structure in operation. Capital itself establishes a hierarchy of control, which is seldom described except in the most general terms. The hierarchy of the market comes to be expressed in bourgeois intellectual and cultural institutions.

The exact form of this hierarchy depends on the particular social relations in the different national states that exist. In the UK, the oldest developed capitalist country, the relationship is usually hidden and exercised in subtle ways, often in forms impenetrable to foreign eyes. The public i.e., private school system in the UK has assisted in achieving a remarkable degree of class solidarity, which few other ruling classes are able to emulate. It is hard, under these circumstances, for those engaged in intellectual labour to break from what appears to be the consensus. Such people, as do break, pay a price, which serves to warn others to remain within the fold. While

¹³ See Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt's important article in this issue to see the forms of contemporary control.

the UK is extreme, the ruling class in other countries uses other means to achieve the same end. In the USA, the greater openness and regular replacement of top bureaucrats has provided a higher degree of social mobility at that level.

There is a need to continue to produce articles, theatre, pictorial art, literature, in order to establish a kind of therapy with the present, to permit it to glide by. The honest artist or scholar understands the parameters of success and decides which way to go: a future of relative or absolute poverty, with constant rejection and insults, or one in which he accepts the terms of engagement. He adapts the truth to what is needed up to a point. The whole difference between disguised propaganda and hence betrayal and superficial or good but mediocre work lies in allowing honesty and truth a modicum of a role within a shell of conformism.

The problem, at this level, is that it tends towards the ossification of outlook and understanding of the society or of a scepticism towards science in general. An obvious instance here is that of climate change, where the science is crystal clear in forecasting relatively rapid global warming. Sections of the ruling class were in denial and this came to be expressed in a rejection of the Kyoto agreement, in the eight years of the Bush administration. The restrictions on the use of stem cells on religious grounds showed the relative backwardness and primitivism of sections of a ruling class. Religion might be believed by poorer sections of the society for whatever reason, but the ruling class has no excuse, given its education, security and high standard of living, other than a refusal to accept reality.

The Role of Intellectuals within Capitalism Further Examined

Intellectuals may be defined as those who pursue the study and furtherance of the truth irrespective of the obstacles in their paths. They are, therefore, to be distinguished from those who are part of an 'intelligentsia', those who are engaged in 'intellectual labour' i.e., in a job which requires the use of mental skills, and others who are effectively in highly skilled white collar jobs.

Long-term research has become a necessary feature of modern production. The development of modern knowledge requires both high levels of skill and huge sums of money. At one extreme, there are the experiments around elementary particles and also those around the building of a fusion reactor, which requires billions both for the engineering involved and for the employment of teams of scientists. These experiments are hugely risky, in that science learns through failure, but private firms cannot operate in that way, particularly if success is predicted to be 100 years hence, as in the case of the production of power through fusion. Only governments, and in fact the combined resources of many governments, can afford to take such projects on board. They are nonetheless essential to ensure economic growth.

At the other extreme, the individual social scientists necessary to support changes in the direction of governments and of social control both globally and within institutions need to work with libraries, computer networks, and both large and small-scale conferences. Clearly small and medium enterprises, much lauded by

market fundamentalists, cannot support those same theorists. Big capital and the state are required to fund academic institutions and think tanks of various kinds.

The consequence is that intellectuals increasingly function within a collectivist environment, which has all the disadvantages of collectivism without control from below. The market is based on hierarchical control within the bureaucratic structures of its enterprises and the public sector is compelled to copy the nature of market-type enterprises. In addition, the huge levels of government expenditure involved and the cost in terms of taxation lead to demands from capital for proof of productivity. Forms of pressure introduced to prove productivity have been counterproductive in that intellectuals are discarded in favour of conformist or highly skilled operatives. Those disciplines, like philosophy and disciplinary histories, which may take time to add to knowledge and the theoretical aspects of disciplines, tend to lose out. Genuine intellectuals, as opposed to those writing for money and prestige, find the stress of producing to order impossible to maintain and prefer to retire or change professions.

Industry is well aware of the negative results of such pressures. It is caught between the immediate need for profits and the long-term requirements for research. The dilemma exists within modern bureaucratised capital as a whole, between management adopting a hands-on so-called efficient stress-filled approach and a more benevolent helpful if still controlling method of supervision. Finance capital, being short-termist, has adopted the first viewpoint. Looking at modern capital and its relationship to intellectuals, it is clear that there is permanent conflict between capital's need for long-term research and its short-termist goals of maintaining and raising profit levels. The actual policy adopted has depended on the dominant paradigm. However, the long-term movement of capital and of capitalism is towards increasing integration of all aspects of the economy, including research, furtherance of knowledge and of understanding in the broadest sense. Above we pointed to the increased resources required for this purpose, but it also needs ever greater levels of education, skill and dedication. Such people, who are developing the crucial ideas of science, society and art, are themselves in a conflictual situation in that they are both within the system and outside it. They are compelled to be within it, but they have to resist the controls to maintain their integrity and pursue their research and their ideas to the bitter end as true intellectuals. As implied in the previous section, most people find some form of accommodation.

Conclusion

In a sense, we have witnessed a long-run tendency towards the bureaucratisation of education, research and arts, which when combined with the influence of finance capital has led to a form of bureaucratised privatisation. One comment is apposite: 'Marketised education is not even an effective preparation for the workplace because it may not provide the imaginative and critical graduates who are able to deal with

technological and societal change, let alone instigate changes themselves'.¹⁴ This article has not discussed the effect on teaching itself but the result described is a corollary of the demands of a declining capital of value for money. They lead to the opposite of what was intended when imposed on education and thought, as indicated.

A mature capitalism, unthreatened by the working class, needs and develops freedom of expression but it places limits on its extension in time and place, as any system based on exploitation must do. Although capitalism is an all-embracing socio-economic system, it is in the nature of humanity that it cannot be totally controlled. However as the system goes into decline it limits, distorts and tries to increase its controls of both the form and content of human expression. While there has been and continue to be forms of direct repression, contemporary forms are more subtle and pervasive. They include the censorship and dumbing down of education, re-interpretation of immediate reality in the media so as to divert attention from the system, obfuscation to the point of confusion, etc.

However, the most important aspect of the present which prevents understanding of the society and of its environment lies in the misinterpretation of the history of the 20th century as a long war against communism/socialism. The nature of Stalinism is crucial to understanding the political economy, the politics, the arts and even the science of the present time.

The right to be able to express oneself without restriction is very important but it has less meaning if those who have the ability to exercise it to its fullest are unable or unwilling to do so. In the former USSR, the intelligentsia demanded the right to end the atomisation and censorship of Stalinism but most of the intelligentsia wanted only a better deal for themselves, and hence their writing and literature tended to be very limited.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, the works of their writers were lauded in the West in those years, but have receded into the distance with time, precisely because their work was not universal. Had this not been the case, one might have expected an extensive and vibrant literature, not to speak of theoretical analyses coming from the states of the former Soviet Union. In fact, the situation could hardly be more dismal. The problem is a compound of the long-term effects of a draconian regime and the nature of the intelligentsia itself.

Such an extreme does not exist today, although it is not easy for people in China, and various underdeveloped countries. For the world as a whole, the objective basis of the problem lies in the complex political economy of the present. Whereas it is easy for workers, once they seen through the idea that capital is permanent, to understand that they are exploited in capitalism, it is not easy to understand a society in which its

¹⁴ Melanie Newman, 'Market Values Dominate Sector', *Times Higher Education*, 2 July 2009, p. 13. Newman is quoting a paper in the journal *Teaching in Higher Education* by Mike Molesworth, Elizabeth Nixon and Richard Scullion: 'Having, being, and higher education: the marketisation of the university and the transformation of the student into the consumer' 14: 3, June 2009, pp. 277–287.

¹⁵ See Michael Cox, 'The Politics of the Dissenting Intellectual', *Critique* 5, Vol. 5, 1975, pp. 5–34, and Hillel Ticktin, 'Political Economy of the Soviet Intellectual', *Critique* 2, Vol. 2, 1974, pp. 5–21.

features are in transition away from its basic form, or a society in which its fundamental laws are in decline. Since both features are true of modern societies, any theory of the present has to be complex and nuanced. It, therefore, becomes easy to argue that grand theories are inadequate, and only a pragmatic method can yield results. For those who are suffering, pragmatism is not good enough, as they need a solution today. As a result, some adopt a blend of pragmatism and spurious universalism. When Stalinism failed to deliver, it was succeeded by nationalism and when that failed, religion, the universalism of fantasy took over.

The debates which have taken place over nationalism, religion and Marxism made sense in the period 1917–1921 but thereafter progressively lost all purchase on reality, particularly with the domination of Stalinism over the left. Today, most intellectuals, who are true to their calling, are forced into a choice of separation from society, where they can write for their cupboards or for a select few, or an engagement on particular burning issues. In either case, they reflect a society in process of disintegration. However, the end of Stalinism, the absurdity of phantasmagorical religion and the failure of nationalism, combined with the increasingly patent decline of capitalism, are bringing the day nearer when the unity of intellectual and worker will use the potential for freedom of expression for all to change the world.