

**Grab a friend and  
discussion guides on:**

**\*CLR James**

**\*Council Communism**

**\*Open Marxism**



**[counselingcommunism.com](http://counselingcommunism.com)**

**NO.**

**In the Beginning  
was the Scream**

**John Holloway**

## In the Beginning was the Scream

*John Holloway*

In the beginning was the scream.

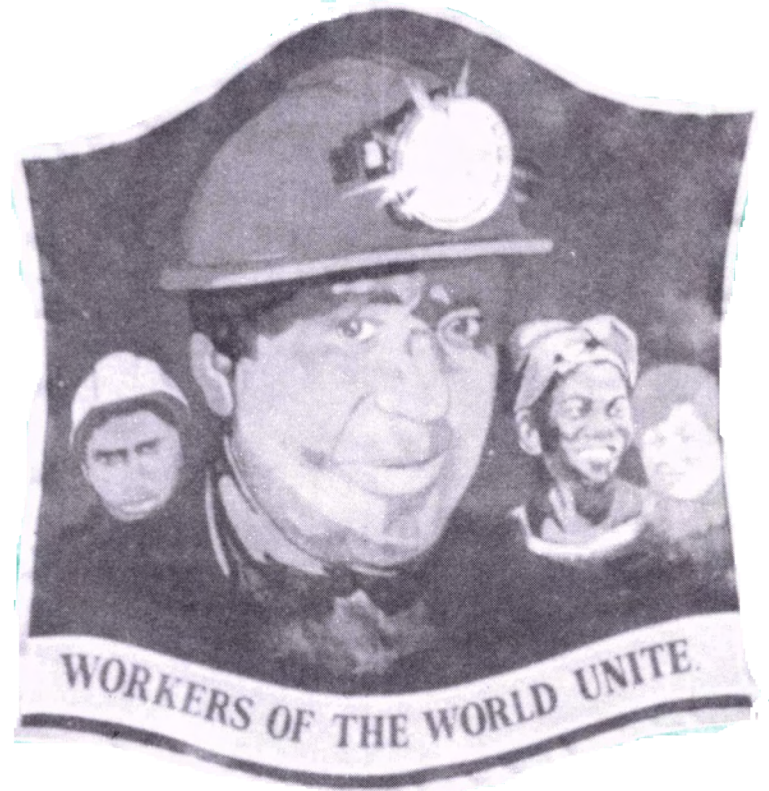
When we talk or write, it is all too easy to forget that the beginning was not the word, but the scream. Faced with the destruction of human lives by capitalism, a scream of sadness, a scream of horror, above all a scream of anger, of refusal: NO. The starting point of theoretical reflection is opposition, negativity, struggle.

The role of theory is to elaborate that scream, to express its trength and to contribute to its power, to show how the sream resonates through society and to contribute to that resonance.

That is the origin of Marxism, not just of Marx's Marxism, but presumably of our own interest in Marxism. The appeal of Marxism lies in its claim to be a theory of struggle, of opposition, of negation. But that is not what Marxism has become.

Today Marxism is probably more discredited than ever, not just in the bourgeois press or in the universities, but also as a theory of struggle. The experience of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has been crucial in this respect; the identification of marxism as the official ideology of the state has meant that the struggles against the state have taken the form not of struggles inspired by a 'truer marxism', as was hoped by many in the west for so long, but of struggles against marxism as such. But it is not only in the East that the statification of Marxism has led to its rejection. In the West too, the surge of marxism into the

# COMMON SENSE



working class. Defetishisation is the opposite movement: the movement by which, through struggle and the theoretical reflection that is part of it, interconnections are established and the working class is recomposed. Fetishisation is the containment of the power of labour, defetishisation is the overflowing of the power of labour, the scream of negativity. Fetishisation is the smothering of the scream, the assurance that "things are so". Defetishisation is the unleashing of the scream, the awareness that the only truth is that things are not so, that truth is not yet, or simply not.

Marxism is defetishisation, the theory of the power of labour in-against-and-beyond capital, the theory of the scream which shows that the scream does not exist only in overt militancy (in what is usually called 'class struggle'), but that it is much, much more powerful than that because it reverberates in the very concepts of capital, because it reverberates in the deepest silence of everyday life. As Linton Kwesi Johnson puts it:

Inside our ears are the many wailing cries of misery,  
 Inside our bodies, the internal bleeding of stifled volcanoes,  
 Inside our heads, the erupting thoughts of rebellion.  
 How can there be calm when the storm is yet to come?  
 ("Two Sides of Silence")

The 'internal bleeding of stifled volcanoes' inside our bodies, the 'erupting thoughts of rebellion' inside our heads, the existence of non-identity under the aspect of identity, the presence of the not-Yet in the Now, the power of labour in-against-and-beyond capital are the instability of capital, its constant tendency to crisis. Crisis is the manifestation of that power and for that reason the central concept of Marxism. Crisis is the eruption of the power of labour.

## References:

- Adorno T.W. (1990), *Negative Dialectics*, Routledge, London.  
 Gunn, R. (1987), *Marxism & Mediation*, Common Sense Issue 2.  
 Hall S. (1985), "Realignment for What?", *Marxism Today*, December.  
 Johnson L.K. (1975), *Dread Beat and Blood*, Bogle L'Ouverture Publications, London.  
 Marx, K. (1965), *Capital (Vol. 1)*, Progress Publishers, Moscow.

universities in the late 1960s and early 1970s has led in some degree to its dessication. Born into the universities on a wave of working class struggle, marxist theory has tended to be sucked into the general separation of theory from practice which characterises the university as an institution. As the wave of struggle which provided the basis of marxism has ebbed, many Marxist academics have completely abandoned Marxism; even worse, perhaps, many have not, but have carried their marxism with them as they adapt to the institutional structures and professional pressures of the university. Often this is not the result of conscious choice, but rather the result of the dynamics of non-choice; work in the university has its own dynamic which constantly tends to separate theoretical work from any political base. The result is often a Marxism which is far more sophisticated but no less determinist than the old 'orthodoxy' of the communist parties.

In both cases, the state ideology of the east and the sophisticated academicism of the West, Marxism has lost its scream. Class struggle remains a category, but the simple statement at the start of the Communist manifesto, that 'the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle' is in fact abandoned. Class struggle in these theories is still seen as being influential, but only within a broader framework, variously interpreted as the conflict between the forces and relations of production or simply as the 'laws of capitalist development'. Class struggle is important - of course (so of course that it can simply be taken for granted) - but it must submit to the 'inescapable lines of tendency and direction established by the real world' (Hall 1985, 15). Struggle is subject to structure, and since structure is the structure of capitalist society ('the real world'), marxism in this version becomes quite simply a theory of capitalist reproduction. The 'inescapable lines of tendency and direction established by the real world' are quite simply the functional requirements of capitalist reproduction, so that these theories are not only structuralist, but functionalist. And then, with all thought of rupture or revolution long forgotten, these theorists move from analysing what is necessary for capitalist reproduction to prescribing what is necessary, to making policy suggestions and advising the state, still, of course, using the language of Marxist theory and making obeisance to the importance of class struggle. It is little wonder that many who are actively involved in anti-capitalist struggle feel little attraction to such Marxism.

And yet a theory of the scream is more urgent than ever. It is more urgent than ever because capitalism is both increasingly fragile and increasingly terroristic. The scream will continue as long as capitalism does, but there is a real danger that marxism as the language of the scream, as the theory of protest could get lost. Marxism as a theory of determinism and as an ideology of the state is discredited, but it is more urgent than ever to develop marxism clearly as a theory of struggle. There is of course a long tradition of emphasising struggle as the central element of marxism, a long tradition of what one might call 'left marxism', but it is a diverse and often subterranean tradition, without very clear continuities. Many of those who politically have insisted on the self-organisation of the working class have retained theoretical concepts that against the articulation of the power of labour (as in Pannekoek's discussion of crisis, for example); and many of those who have made important theoretical contributions to theorising working class power have adopted often ambivalent political positions in practice (Adorno, Bloch, for example). The crisis of the regimes of Eastern Europe is, or can be, a liberation of marxism from much of the baggage acquired over the last century, but it is very important to try to be clear about the foundations of this liberated marxism.

The most obvious point to be made about a theory of struggle is that its basis is uncertainty. If the world is to be understood in terms of struggle, then there is no room for determinism of any kind. Struggle, by definition, is uncertain, open, and the categories which conceptualise it must be understood as open too. The determinism of Marx's more triumphalist moments (such as the end of section 1 of the Communist Manifesto, chapter 32 of Vol. 1 of Capital, or the 1859 preface which is so important for the 'orthodox' Marxist tradition) must go, so must any idea of historical necessity, nor nay suggestion of a final inevitable victory of socialism. As Adorno put it, after the experience of fascism, it is no longer possible (if it ever was) to think of a smooth dialectical progression ending with communism as the resolution of conflict, the inevitable negation of the negation. We can only think of the dialectic as being a negative dialectic, a dialectic of negation with no certain synthesis. In a world of untruth, the only concept of truth that we can have is negative. There is no certainty in Marxism: its only claim to truth is the force of its attack on untruth. This leads perhaps to a dizzy, dizzying vision of the world (cf Adorno 1990, 31), but the dizziness lies not in the vision but in the reality of a world hurtling who knows where.

process, an active process of forming social relations and therefore social struggles in a certain way. It is not just an aspect of fetishism (the neutral state) but, as part of the general struggle of capital against labour, an active process of fetishisation that systematically channels class struggles into non-class forms, into struggles on behalf of citizens, struggles for democracy, for human rights, etc. - forms which systematically deny the existence of class and therefore promote the disarticulation of the power of labour.

Or money, to take another example, is not a fetishised form of social relations. It is a process of monetising life, of subjecting human existence to the command of money, which implies a constant and violent struggle. The intensity of that struggle is reflected, for example, in all the conflicts surrounding the unprecedented expansion of debt throughout the world, and in the equally unprecedented rise in theft and 'crimes' against property.

Or, to make the point more generally, if the dual existence of labour as concrete and abstract labour "is the pivot on which the comprehension of political economy turns", then it is important to see the abstraction of labour (the 'imposition of work' as it is sometimes referred to) as a process, as a struggle which permeates not only the workplace, but the whole of society - a point emphasised but without differentiation in the concept of the 'social factory'.

Capital's reproduction depends on the fetishisation, on the containment of a struggle that always goes beyond it. The relation between labour and capital is neither external nor internal: it is both, but with no clear dividing line. Labour does not simply exist within capital; it exists in-against-and-beyond capital (again with no clear dividing line between in, against and beyond, and therefore no clear distinction between class-in-itself and class-for-itself). Labour overflows from capital. Capital is not simply the form of labour; it is the process of forming labour, it is the constant process of self-reconstitution to contain labour. Class struggle is the movement of the overflowing-and-containment, or, in other words, class struggle is the movement of fetishisation/defetishisation. This is not to say that class struggle is theoretical, although theoretical reflection is clearly part of it. The process of fetishisation/defetishisation is a practical one. Fetishisation is the process by which social interconnections are broken down and become impenetrable. It is the decomposition of the



relations or 'things' (value, money, profit, etc) which appear to be neither class relations nor antagonistic. Class "exists in the mode of being denied" (Gunn). As forms of class struggle which deny their own substance, the social forms of value, money, state, etc. are inevitably characterised by a constant tension between form and content. The content is not contained within the form, but constantly breaks its banks and overflows. To quote Adorno again: "The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy" (1990, 5). The power of labour is not contained within the forms of capital, it constantly overflows and forces these forms to reconstitute themselves, to re-form, in order to contain the uncontainable. Fetishism in other words is not an established fact, but a constant process of fetishisation.

This distinction between fetishism and fetishisation is crucial for the way that we understand society and the way that we understand marxism. If fetishism is total, if class antagonism is completely contained within its forms, then revolution as the self-organisation of the working class becomes theoretically impossible. If fetishism is total and the working class cannot see through the forms in which class struggle presents itself (as neutral things), then there are only two possibilities: either one sees the working class within the structures of capitalism and gives up hope of revolution - the understandable but destructive pessimism of the Frankfurt School - or else one sees the only possibility of revolution as lying in the intervention of a *deus ex machina*, a vanguard party who will come from the outside. But there is no outside, just as there is no inside: there is only an inside-outside, an overflowing, an in-and-against-and-beyond. The only possible way of resolving this dilemma, the dilemma common to Leninism and the Frankfurt School theory, is to see that fetishism is not total. It is not an established fact, but a constant process of fetishisation. Labour does not simply exist in the form of capital: it exists in-and-against-and-beyond those forms of capital. Class struggle does not simply exist in the form of value, money, state, etc. It exists in-and-against-and-beyond those forms. The forms of value, money, state, etc., are better thought of as form-processes, as processes of valorisation, monetisation, statification.

The state, to take an example, is not an institution in the sense of a thing that is outside us, nor is it simply a form of social relations in the sense of a link in the chain of capitalist reproduction: it is rather a form-

The dialectic of negation is the struggle of the working class. In a world of struggle, there is no neutrality. The perspective is the perspective of our struggle. As Tronti put it in an article which provided one of the starting points for the theory of autonomy in Italy: "We too had a conception of capitalism that put capital in first place and the workers in second. That was a mistake. And now we must reverse the polarity and start again from the beginning. And the beginning is the class struggle of the working class". The beginning is the struggle, our struggle, our scream, the scream of negation. As Rosa Luxemburg put it, "The secret of Marx's theory of value ... was that he looked at capitalism from the point of view of its transcendence, from a socialist point of view". It is only from the standpoint of negation that Marx's categories make any sense at all, without that, they are quite literally meaningless. That is why there cannot be any continuity between bourgeois theory and Marxist theory: the basic presuppositions which underlie their categories are totally incompatible. Underlying bourgeois theory is an assumption about the stability of capitalism, the power of capital to retain control of society indefinitely. The basis of marxist theory is just the opposite: the instability of capitalism, the power of labour to overthrow capitalism.

It is essential to retain the idea that the starting point must be the struggle of the working class. Linton Kwesi Johnson has a wonderful expression when he describes the violent reaction of a group of blacks to police harassment: "the bile of oppression was vomited" (Five Nights of Bleeding). If we are to avoid the structural-functionalism that characterises so much of Marxist theory, it is important to think of our work in those terms: as a vomiting of the bile of oppression.

However, there is a difficulty here, and it is a difficulty presented by a lot of left theory. The focus on the struggle of the working class leads very easily to a conception of the working class as purely external to capital. From (correctly) emphasising the subjectivity of labour and the antagonism between labour and capital as the starting point, such approaches easily move to simply counterposing the subjectivity of labour to the objectivity of capital. The one-sided emphasis on subjectivity (voluntarism), although it appears to be the opposite of objectivism (determinism), is actually its logical complement. Both operate with the assumption that there is a distinction between class struggle and the laws of economic development: the difference lies only

in the primacy attached to one or the other. Alternatively, all notion of the 'logic of capital' is abandoned and capital is seen as a purely external subject, manipulating and controlling labour. Class struggle is then seen as the clash of two opposing armies, as a battle that goes back and forth, to and fro. At this level there is no history, or rather history is a formless thing, without shape, without tendency.

Marx's conception is different: in the clash of the two opposing armies of capital and labour, there is something that gives direction and shape to the struggle. That is the fact that the two sides are not in fact external to each other: capital is nothing other than alienated labour, the objectivity of the 'real world' is nothing than our own alienated subjectivity. The basis of both sides of the class struggle is the same: the power of labour. Capital is nothing other than alienated labour. This is the basis of the labour theory of value, which was seen even before Marx, by both the radical Ricardians and their critics, as an assertion of the power of labour. At its most basic, the power of labour is the power to create, and therefore also the power to destroy. When Marx distinguished between the worst architect and the best bee by saying that the former plans the construction before executing it, he might also have added that the architect is also more likely to fail in the construction. The power of labour is the power of uncertain creation, the power of that which is not, the power of non-identity (Adorno), of the Not Yet (Bloch), of the working class No (Tronti).

When labour and capital confront each other, this is not an external confrontation. The power of labour meets the power of labour, but in the form of its antithesis. Contradiction is "non-identity under the aspect of identity" (Adorno), negativity under the aspect of positivity, labour under the aspect of capital. The substance of capital is the power of labour; the power of labour exists under the aspect of capital: it assumes the form of capital, the fetishised form of capital. Once the relation between capital and labour is seen as an internal relation, then the question of form becomes crucial. Unlike the Ricardians, who were content to show that the substance of value was labour, Marx was concerned with the form of value, with the question why the product of labour took the form of value - and indeed he saw the question of form as being the crucial dividing line between his theory and bourgeois theory, for which the question of form is meaningless (*Capital* Vol. 1, 80). The whole of Marx's *Capital* is a study of the (more and more fetishised) forms of the power of labour. The 'pivot' for an understanding of the

different forms of social relations is the dual existence of labour as concrete and abstract labour, the fact that concrete, useful labour takes the form of abstract labour, the fact that useful, creative labour confronts itself in meaningless, alienated form.

If capital cannot be understood as external to labour, it cannot be understood as something economic. The movement of capital can only be understood as the movement of the contradiction (internal to capital itself) between capital and labour, the movement of struggle. The notion of 'Marxist economics', one of the most unfortunate creations of the 'orthodox' Marxist tradition, in so far as it suggests a separation of capital from struggle, must be abandoned. But if the movement of capital can only be understood as the movement of struggle, the movement of struggle can only be understood as a movement in-and-against capital. The notion that you can understand the movement of struggle or of society in abstraction from the particular form which it takes, the notion that underlies the concept of 'Marxist sociology' must also be abandoned. (The absurd notion of a Marxist political science, an idea raised by Poulantzas, need not even be mentioned).

Discussion of form (or form analysis) often appear to be very far removed from any political concern, so it is important to emphasise why the concept of form is important for developing Marxism as a theory of struggle. The central issue is the articulation and recognition of the power of labour. A concept that emphasises struggle, but sees struggle as being external to capital, recognises only one aspect of the power of labour. It hears the scream but is deaf to the resonance of the scream within capital itself. It sees the power of labour in strikes, in demonstrations, in armed struggle, but does not see it in the contradiction between productive and money capital, in the inadequacies of technology or in the internal disorder of the state. IT sees the power of labour in the response of the state to overt struggles, but does not see it in the very existence of value as an uncontrollable chaos at the heart of capital. It is the presence of the power of labour within capital that makes it ineradicably crisis-ridden, and that allows us to speak, not of laws of capitalist development, but of certain rhythms and tendencies in the development of struggle.

It is important, to see that the concept of form here implies contradiction, instability. The power of labour appears in the form of its antithesis, the power of capital. Class struggle takes the form of