AN EVALUATION OF ALEX CALLINICOS’S THEORY OF HISTORY

Introduction

Alex Callinicos is known as the present leader of the Socialist Workers Party, and he is often criticised in this role. However, his reputation is possibly established more significantly in terms of the considerable amount of theoretical work he has developed as a distinguished Marxist intellectual. This work has ranged from issues of philosophy, history, the character of imperialism, and discussion of specific issues like revolutionary activism. The rival Marxist left, possibly out of a sense of envy and respect, has neglected to study his theoretical work. This article will attempt to rectify this neglect, at least in relation to the study of history, and in the process possibly develop an alternative understanding of historical materialism. The purpose of the article is not to comment on the many theorists who Callinicos is engaged in a polemic with, and instead the intention is to concentrate on studying the major ideas of his understanding of history. In developing this critique we will attempt to refrain from comment about Callinicos’s leadership of the SWP. We believe it is perfectly possible to separate these two aspects of his activity. Hence we are more sympathetic towards Callinicos, the serious Marxist theorist, whilst being critical of his authoritarian role as leader of the SWP.

The conception of history that is upheld by the author of this article maintains that the class struggle is the primary dynamic or agency of development within history. In this sense the conception of productive forces determinism is rejected, or the view that social change depends on a certain level of technological development and the onset of frequent economic crisis. Instead the character of history is connected to the importance of political parties, outstanding individuals like Lenin, and the determination of the ruling class to prevent the overthrow of the existing social order. This understanding does not deny the importance of objective conditions and the contradiction between the productive forces and the existing relations of production, but this contradiction is expressed in terms of the role of the struggle between human beings. Hence there is not a teleological essence, or historical necessity, which is expressed in terms of generalised social development. Instead the outcome of the class struggle defines the character of history, and so the defeats of the working class in the 1930’s and 1980’s have led to the continuation of capitalism. Success for the proletariat would have significantly altered historical events.

It could be argued that the approach of Callinicos is sympathetic to this standpoint, but we want to establish whether there are significant differences within what seems to be compatible approaches. It is also important to recognise that my standpoint is based on a critical reading of the latest work of Istvan Meszaros. This represents an understanding that is based on the attempt to renew the approach of Marx, and so is possibly critical of Callinicos’s evaluation of Leninism. However, we share the aim to continue to uphold revolutionary Marxism in a world that is sympathetic to capitalism and so hostile to socialism. Thus the aim of historical materialism is to provide the reasons why proletarian revolution is still credible and the aim of communism is principled. In this context, the critique will not be reluctant to agree with Callinicos if that is called for, but neither will it be reticent to carry out extensive disagreement if that is necessary. One purpose of this article is not to carry out an appraisal of the distinctive SWP theory of the USSR. This evaluation will have to be carried out in a different article. Indeed we can assert with confidence that this task has been carried out by many other authors. However, we would also maintain that the question of the character of history is more important because it ultimately provides the theoretical basis to understand contemporary events and their possibilities.

It has been recently argued that the role of economic crisis is the major motivator of social change within capitalism. Callinicos, himself, seems sympathetic to this argument in a recent work. (1) But the issue that is not effectively addressed by all economic determinist’s is how do economic aspects work themselves out in political terms? Their approach cannot deny the importance of class struggle and the connected combination of economics and politics. Until recently, Callinicos would seem to be someone who understood history in these active terms. In practice, his role as leader of the SWP would also emphasise struggle, and his tradition represents that understanding concerning the character of history.(2) But the pressures of the present situation, which seems to suggest that victory in the class struggle is remote, generates support for catastrophist theories of history. These views are based on economic determinism and often exclude the importance of the class struggle. It is this approach which is primarily rejected in this evaluation of the work of Alex Callinicos.

MAKING HISTORY

Callinicos first major work on history outlines how Edward Thompson has established a perspective for Marxists in relation to understanding the activity of humans: “History is the process through which human beings constantly make and remake their lives. Structures – modes of production – represent limits to human practice, obstacles to be overcome by men and women in their struggle to assume conscious control of the social world.”(3) Callinicos would also suggest that this understanding is imprecise because it cannot establish the situations in which the role of human agency can be counter-productive and therefore generate results that are not intended. This conclusion may be true, but the comment indicates how progress is made because increasingly conscious practice generally results in social improvement. It is the view which rejects passivity, or the standpoint that ‘nothing can be done’, which is most conducive to upholding the status quo. However, it is also voluntarist to one-sidedly define structures as essentially being nothing more than a restraint on the potential of human activity. Instead structures, such as expressed by technology, or the productive forces, may promote the realisation of the aims of humans. What undermines the possibility of emancipation is the reactionary role of the most dominant economic force, which is expressed in terms of inertia and the justification of subordination within the relations of production. This also means the process of exploitation has an ideological element: “To put this in more scientific terms, we shall say that the reproduction of labour power requires not only that its qualifications be reproduced, but that its submission to the rules of respect for the established order be reproduced at the same time. This means, for the workers, reproduction of labour power’s submission to the dominant ideology, and, for the agents of exploitation and repression, reproduction of its capacity to handle the dominant ideology properly, so as to ensure the domination of the dominant class verbally.”(4)

The point is that the very structure that is dynamic and acts to undermine the realisation of the conscious aspirations of the subordinated class is the role of ideology. Whether we call ideology a structure is a matter of debate, but the aim of the ruling ideology is to make the existing system acceptable to all those that are dominated by capital. This means ideology has a function which is to undermine the ability of the exploited classes to be able to organise and act to overthrow the existing system. Under feudalism this ideology was provided by the Church, and the conception of the divine rights of the monarchy, and under capitalism it is mainly the influence of the views of bourgeois political economy. Hence the subordinated have to not only act against the existing order, but they also have to create an ideology that can overcome objections to their collective practice, and primarily provide an ideology that upholds the task of emancipating the dominated class. This standpoint does not mean that we cannot overcome the limitations of ideology which justify the existing system of exploitation, but it does mean that there is no alternative to providing an effective critique of existing dominant ideology in order to be able to uphold the possibility of emancipation. It has possibly been the failure to develop Marxism as an ideology of emancipation that has undermined the progress of developing the potential for emancipation.

Callinicos considers that Marx’s Preface to a Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy is Marx’s most explanatory comment on the character of historical materialism. This is because firstly, exploitation is explained as the surplus labour of the producers. Secondly, exploitation is based on the role of the relations of production. Thirdly, the relations of production are connected to the development of the productive forces. The conclusion that he makes from a complex discussion of the Preface is that relations of production involve exploitation which generates class antagonism and class struggle.(5) This approach could be unsatisfactory because it implies in an automatic manner that the structures of the relations of production represent transforming causes that have given effects. Nor can he define the character of the class struggle with this approach. For example, the feudal system was based on the struggle of the nobility and the peasantry, but the bourgeoisie were the ultimate force that benefitted from this situation. Thus the relations of production are not just defined by the primary form of class struggle, and instead this structure can generate unexpected consequences. For example, the declining petty-bourgeoisie gained from the victories of Fascism, and the very character of Bonapartism represents the ability of the state to acquire an independence from the major social classes. Thus the very outcome of the class struggle is not simply an expression of the character of the relations of production, and instead can have unexpected political results. The bourgeois revolution was the result of the influence of the class that was wealthy, and the peasantry was the anachronistic class that did not benefit from class struggle against the nobility. Olin Wright believes that this situation could be repeated under capitalism in terms of the ultimate success of the intermediate classes.(6) The point is not that class struggle is not important, but rather that is very outcome may be unexpected and result in the victory of classes not involved in the most important form of social conflict. This is because of the very unpredictable character of history and the possible result that does not conform to the situation apparently imposed by the most important class structure. The unexpectedness of history is not undermined by the fact that class struggle between two major classes is intrinsic or integral to the relations of production. Hence class struggle of some kind is the outcome of exploitation within the relations of production, but its outcome is the result of contingent factors, such as the level of political and ideological effectiveness of either the dominating intermediary, or subordinated class.

The history of the 20th century has been characterised by the political capacity of the ruling class to withstand the challenge of the subordinated class despite major economic crisis and decline in the development of the productive forces. This situation has primarily been because of the limitations of the role of the political parties of the oppressed and the flaws in the major ideology of socialism. Consequently, when Callinicos contends that class struggle can occur without the connected consciousness, this is correct, but it has to be qualified because successful struggle can only be realised on the basis of a high level of consciousness. The problem is that there may be a many instances when for whatever reason the major subordinated class is unable to develop a consciousness appropriate to bring about emancipation. This does not mean that class struggle was without historical aims, as Paul Mason argues.(7) Instead the inability to bring about the overthrow of the existing system when the situation was economically favourable, as in the 1930’s, was because the very degeneration of the major revolutionary ideology. In comparison, Callinicos defines the mode of production in the following manner that suggests the likelihood of the victory of the exploited class: “This mode of surplus extraction, or exploitation, in turn determines the class structure so that classes are defined relationally, by their objective relationship both to the means of production and labour power and to other classes. Exploitation in turn gives rise to class struggle.”(8) This implicit perspective of victory is falsified because of the very fact that the mode of production does not simply consist of the structure of exploitation. Instead it also has the dynamic role of politics and ideology. These aspects are crucial for deciding the future of the mode of production which is subject to the subversive role of class struggle. Ruling Ideology has the crucial task of convincing the subordinated that class struggle is not the means to a better future. Instead compromise, or even acquiescence to the system, is considered to be preferable by the exploited class. The high level of support for this view is often crucial in determining whether the mode of production is able to survive. Hence the intensification of contradictions generated by the class struggle may not be sufficient to bring about transforming change. What is important is the level of class consciousness and related support for revolutionary change. This point is very important since the development of capitalism.

Callinicos is opposed to the imposition of the Hegelian and other philosophical systems onto social reality and instead emphasises how the importance of contradiction is defined by the role of structures and class antagonisms. (This issue may be evaluated in more detail in a different article) He outlines in convincing terms how Gerry Cohen’s conception of the primacy of the productive forces does not explain and integrate satisfactorily the role of the class struggle into historical development, and the very experience of capitalism seems to refute this approach. However, Callinicos’s conclusion is problematical: “Even where the exploited class has both an interest in, and the capacity to accomplish social revolution, as is true of the modern proletariat, it does not follow that the overthrow of capitalism is inevitable. To assert otherwise is to ignore the experience of the international workers movement since the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914. The grim succession of defeated revolutions and the lengthy incorporation of the Western proletariat into the capitalist order suggest that the objective interests of the working class are not necessarily translated into the conscious struggle for political power.”(9)

This comment represents an over-simplification of a complex historical situation. On the one hand, Callinicos possibly underestimates the possibilities for the success of the various attempts at revolutionary change. The defeats that occurred were by no means likely, and instead there was a situation of the actual development of genuine world revolution. In this context the reasons for defeat were complex, and what was crucial was the role of politics, and especially the evolution of mass socialist parties of a Social Democratic and Stalinist character. Their role was to undermine the potential for proletarian revolution, and instead they promoted the process of accommodation of the working class with capitalism. Callinicos obviously knows this fact, but he does not seem to recognise its importance for indicating that the complexity of the class struggle, in terms of its actual practice and outcomes, is more significant than any tendency for the realisation of the productive forces. Furthermore, the ruling class does not recognise any historical logic tending to their demise. Instead their most eloquent representatives suggest that liberal capitalism expresses the apex of historical development. (10) It is the very content of bourgeois political economy to suggest that it is capitalist relations of production which have promoted the dynamic development of the productive forces. Only a few Marxists have seriously attempted to challenge this view. (11) Consequently, the very flaws and omissions of Marxism contribute to the sense of ideological superiority of bourgeois ideology. Given the limitations of Marxist theory it is not surprising that the working class only rarely attains the level of class consciousness required in order to promote the realisation of an emancipatory alternative. Indeed, the development of mass communist consciousness has to be achieved despite the opposition of the ruling class, the trade union bureaucracy and Social Democracy. In addition, Marxism is not effective enough to promote the development of revolutionary class consciousness. Consequently, the system continues despite the increasing development of crisis creating objective prospects for its demise. The economic situation may seem favourable for change, and in that sense the primacy of the productive forces seems to be formally vindicated, but the dynamic role of the relations of production constantly undermines the slim possibility of proletarian revolution. However, the principled response to this situation should not be one of despair. Instead what is required is a development of Marxist theory so that it improves the reasons made in favour of proletarian revolution. In that constructive sense, Marxists can contribute to the attempt to develop class consciousness, and so enhance the capacity of the subordinated class to reject that condition and therefore strive for human emancipation.

Callinicos’s response to various analytical Marxist theorists is to deny their view that Marxism has a teleological view of history. This seems a reasonable point but it does not in itself explain the increasing complexity of the prospect of social transformation. The point is that the very development of the productive forces has increased the ability of the existing relations of production to undermine the prospects of revolutionary movements. For example, in the last analysis the military industrial complex of the USA could threaten nuclear destruction in order to undermine an attempt to realise socialism. In contrast, the revolutionary movement should renounce rejection of the use of nuclear weapons, and so accept that the survival of humanity is a greater goal than social change. But, what is more important is that the conception of socialism or barbarism is an increasingly realistic prospect because ecological change is occurring before the possibility of revolutionary transformation. If revolution does occur, the world may not be suitable for the realisation of the aims of socialism such as material prosperity. Tentatively, Callinicos seems to consider that the role of outstanding individuals could be the answer to the dilemmas and complexities of history, as with Lenin’s role in 1917. The repeat of this role cannot be ruled out, it is possible that a brilliant individual could emerge who is able to repeat the activity of Lenin in 1917. But it is also necessary to recognise that this role was connected to the development of Soviet democracy and the emergence of a militant working class. It was the revolutionary impulses of the working class that enabled Lenin’s dedication to the cause to have rewarding results. In contrast, the brilliant individuals of the recent period have often been bourgeois politicians because the balance of class forces has promoted the ideas and policies of the ruling order. This situation has enabled the representatives of the ruling class to articulate the ideas of bourgeois political economy in simple and accessible terms. The political results of this situation has been to their favour, and led to the defeat of the labour movement. In contrary terms, the brilliance of Gorbachev could not ‘save’ socialism.

Callinicos discusses the relationship of structures to agency, but what is omitted from this discussion is a perspective that will bring about structural change. He contends that he agrees with Bhaskar’s understanding of the relationship between structure and agency, but he does not discuss the significance of Bhaskar’s view that our everyday actions generally reproduce existing structures. Bhaskar maintains that: “The conception that I am proposing is that people, in their conscious activity, for the most part unconsciously reproduce (and occasionally transform) the structures governing their substantive activities of production. Thus people do not marry to reproduce the nuclear family or work to sustain the capitalist economy. Yet it is nevertheless the unintended consequence (and inexorable result) of, as it is also a necessary condition for their activity. Moreover when social forms change, the explanation will not normally lie in the desires of agents to change them that way, though as a very important theoretical and political limit it may do so.”(12) Thus Bhaskar is posing a challenge to any theory of emancipation when suggesting that the character of structures resides in their reproduction, and that agents act in this related manner to reinforce this situation, and so the possibility of change is very difficult. Callinicos glosses over this issue, and instead reconciles Bhaskar with Giddens more voluntarist view that structure and agency are in a dynamic relationship. This view only evades the challenge of Bhaskar, and instead seems to justify the view that structure is the expression of agency. Instead of this view, Bhaskar is suggesting that structures act unintentionally in relation to the role of agency, and so implies that change is complicated. The assumption is that the structures of capitalism are difficult to modify and transform. Callinicos has no answer to this point, and instead criticises Bhaskar for conflating philosophical issues with those of the social sciences. However, Bhaskar’s approach is suggesting that only if we establish an open world, which implies theoretical revolution, can praxis become effective. The challenge for Callinicos is whether he is able to outline an ontology of the world that allows for the effectiveness of human agency and praxis. Bhaskar elaborates an open world based on the concept of absence in order to uphold an emancipatory dialectic and praxis. This is because he is not limited to the orthodox approach of Marxism. In contrast, can Callinicos outline a conception of praxis despite what could be considered to be the theoretical restrictions of Orthodox Marxism? This is the issue to be addressed in relation to study of his historical writings.

After his discussion of the various approaches to historical materialism upheld by proponents of Analytical Marxism, Callinicos considers he is able to outline his own distinctive understanding. Firstly, the productive forces develop throughout history, but this is especially true for the most dynamic system of capitalism and less true for feudalism which is often characterised by stagnation. Secondly, even if the restrictions placed on the productive forces by the relations of production do not lead to the transformation of this situation by a new relationship between these two aspects, what does result is a social crisis. Even the most acute crisis need not generate social revolution. However, the social crisis does generate the intensification of the class struggle. What is being claimed is that the structural role of agents within the relations of production generally defines their behaviour, and so the ruling class acts to defend its position and the subordinated class aspires to transform its situation. The motive for revolutionary change is structural capacities and class interests, but the outcome of this impulse is not necessarily progressive: “These three elements – the existence of a weak tendency for the productive forces to develop, the consequent likelihood of organic crisis and the primacy of structural capacities and class interests in explaining social action – make of classical historical materialism a theory of history, a theory that is, which claims to account for the dynamic process through which social systems are transformed.”(13)

This view seems to be plausible. But what needs to be explained is that whilst class struggle may express the ultimate structural dynamic of the requirements of the productive forces this situation is consciously articulated in terms of the role of politics. Thus the bourgeois revolution in Britain took the form of a struggle between Royalty and Parliament, and the French revolution was connected to the pressures expressed by the popular revolt of the sans-culottes. Historical experience has indicated that the possibility of proletarian revolution requires a high level of consciousness, and the outstanding issue of the relationship between party and class has not been resolved. It is also necessary to recognise that the ruling class understands the dynamics of historical materialism and so acts tenaciously to defend the system despite the objective tendencies for its demise. Consequently, the prospect of change in relation to advanced capitalism is the most complex question ‘history’ has ever produced. Social transformation will require the application of the most sophisticated strategy, and the collective willingness of the majority of the working class to bring about this revolutionary change. This situation has only rarely happened in the most developed capitalist countries. The situation is also made more complex by the ability of capitalism to develop the productive forces and therefore the relationship between the productive forces and the relations of production is complicated. Hence the impulse for revolution may depend on the importance of the balance of class forces, or the dynamics of the class struggle. (This may ultimately express the contradiction between the relations of production and the productive forces) Progress in the class struggle will also be connected to the level of class consciousness. Thus bringing about change in conformity with the productive forces will be more complex than the situation of change in the 17th century when the bourgeoisie had amassed considerable economic power, and represented the embryo of the new mode of production within the old. In contrast, the contemporary working class owns no factories and are often unable to establish workers control of production within capitalism. Instead the capitalist class has control of the means of production, and its representatives often form the government, which means they have political legitimacy. Being able to bring about revolution in this situation is virtually impossible. The situation will have to radically change if proletarian revolution is to become feasible.

In other words, Callinicos’s definition of historical materialism is essentially satisfactory, but it has to be elaborated upon if the difficulties of realising proletarian revolution are to be incorporated into his approach. The point is that it is possible to explain history in terms of the dynamics of historical materialism in relation to the period of transition from feudalism to capitalism. It was obvious that the landed aristocracy represented a declining economic force when compared to the assertive capitalist class. Political change was likely to follow the process of economic development in this situation. However, the working class owns no factories, often has little access to the tools its uses, and has only its labour power as a productive asset. In contrast, the capitalist class seems a dynamic class because of its ownership of the means of production and ability to organise production on the basis of the extraction of surplus value. Hence the prospect of proletarian revolution seems to be complicated by the character of the relations of production. The capitalist class is more resourceful and efficient than the feudal landed class of old, and the proletariat seemed to be doomed like the serfs to be militant and yet lacking the economic and political power to transform society. Hence, principled Marxism has to tackle these issues without becoming pessimistic about the prospect of revolutionary change like the supporters of analytical Marxism.(14) Callinicos is aware of these difficulties but the question remains is whether his generalised understanding of historical materialism is able to provide answers.

Callinicos approaches the difficulties described above by assessing whether social changes have undermined the structural capacities of the agency of labour. If his answer was to be affirmative then this would places serious questions against the Marxist project of emancipation. Instead his answer is that organisational changes because of defeats have not irreversibly altered the possibilities connected to structural capacity. He is also confident that class struggle will go beyond minimal class awareness and instead generate class consciousness. However, he recognises that he has to tackle the issue of ideology if the question of why class struggle and collective action does not result in proletarian revolution. He argues extensively that the working class does not necessarily support the dominant values of the ruling class but its perspective is limited to the situation within the workplace and therefore has a pessimistic view that the alternative of socialism is not possible. Hence: “Agents on both sides of the class divide are likely to have many true beliefs concerning the conflictual relationship they find themselves in.”(15) However, he has to conclude that the process of class struggle, for various reasons, does not result in the development of a coherent revolutionary class consciousness based on a consistent analysis of society. Instead it is quite possible that the worker will absorb what Gramsci defined as a contradictory class consciousness, such as a form of bourgeois and proletarian class consciousness and an awareness of being part of the nation.

The problem is that Callinicos seems to evade how is it possible to overcome the limitations of a contradictory class consciousness which adapts to dominant ruling class ideology and so cannot become a consistent revolutionary standpoint. (This point is discussed in more detail in reference to Callinicos’s understanding of the perspective of proletarian revolution) Indeed there is no simple solution because the development of higher types of class consciousness is rare and exceptional within advanced capitalist society. Meszaros would argue that there is no alternative to the process of labour articulating its own form of emancipation. (16) But he is also vague about how this would be realised, even if we can agree with his principles. In contrast, the implicit assumption of Callinicos is that we need a party to facilitate the process of the development of class consciousness, but this standpoint is at the level of historical example and the defence of the validity of principles. (17) This understanding does not explain how the working class can overcome the limitations of commodity fetishism and the influence of ruling class ideology. Indeed, this issue has been complicated by the ideological effects of the ruling class offensive against labour which has discredited even the aspect of collective class action. In this context, Marxism has been marginalised and its standpoint put onto the defensive. Callinicos suggests that the influence of nationalist ideology may be one of the most important factors undermining the development of revolutionary class consciousness.(17) This is undoubtedly an important aspect, but what is possibly more important in the present period has been the adverse effects of the offensive of capital against labour. This situation has resulted not only in the discrediting of the view that the working class is still a viable collective class actor, it has also strengthened the view that there is no alternative to capitalism. The indirect effect of this unfavourable balance of class forces is to marginalise the Marxist perspective of proletarian revolution.

Indeed it could be argued that it is the complexities of the present that result in Callinicos discussing perspectives of proletarian revolution that may seem to have little relevance for the present. Indeed Callinicos contends that Walter Benjamin’s messianic alternative of the ‘revenge for the past’ to the vulgar evolutionism of Social Democracy cannot ultimately provide a viable form of historical materialism despite its strong sense of revolutionary principles. He argues that there is no alternative to the Marxist approach which establishes the structural capacities of agents within the process of production for collective action. He outlines how Marx in his mid-1840’s work outlines the working class as an agency of emancipation: “In these writings the proletariat is increasingly conceived as the class, formed within capitalist relations of production, which has the capacity to replace these with a communist society…..Worker’s position within capitalist production relations gives them the power collectively to challenge these relations.”(18) But this is the very view that has been questioned by the apparently increasing ability of capital to put labour onto the defensive.

The point is that this standpoint of Callinicos cannot merely be asserted without qualification in terms of recognition of the difficulties that have been involved in trying to bring about this perspective. For even if we still uphold its overall validity as an emancipatory project, and suggest that it is the only valid and universal basis to liberate humanity from capitalism, we still have to subject this view to critical consideration. Primarily, we have to address why capital has been so successful in the process of the offensive against labour since the 1980’s. In this context the very conception of collective struggle seems to have become ineffective and discredited. This situation has undermined the view of the working class as a revolutionary subject. Consequently, Callinicos’s effective dismissal of the view of Benjamin is not satisfactory because we need to analyse thoroughly the views of all theorists about the prospects of proletarian revolution. Hence the conception of a ‘messianic break with the present’ may seem to be idealist, and not related to contemporary society, but it could actually represent an alternative to the present strategic limitations of Marxism. For example, the demoralisation of the present could be challenged by the inspiration provided by a perspective for repeating the Russian revolution of 1917. The slogan to: ‘Be Successful this time’ could contrast with the failures of the present. In other words an appeal to the past could undermine the retrogressive ideological effects of recent defeats caused by the continued offensive of capital against labour. What would actually be expressed is a leap in strategic imagination, and the adoption of a strategy of insurrection that has not been envisaged in this present situation of austerity. The objection that this action could only be Blanquist, or organised as an elite action, is wrong because the very success of this action requires the mass participation of the working class and the development of its enthusiasm in order to engage in the revolutionary process. The very novelty of this process, which could take the form of a film, or TY drama, would inspire mass support and develop the capacity for revolutionary popular action.

Instead of engaging in this type of imaginative discussion, Callinicos interprets Marx in order to justify the view that trade union struggle has the inherent potential for proletarian revolution: “It is the class struggle under capitalism, which for Marx, provides the bridge between the ‘continuum of history and ……revolution. It is able to fulfil this role because every strike is simultaneously a struggle within and against capitalism. Workers engaging in strikes and other forms of industrial conflict are typically concerned with such issues as higher wages or better conditions…..they are pursuing the improvement of their condition within the framework of capitalist production relations. At the same time they are compelled in order to achieve this objective to organize collectively against their employer. In other words the methods they use are those of class struggle, rooted in the antagonistic interests of labour and capital…..Marx distinguished himself by his insistence that the trade union struggle was indispensable as a means of transforming the working class into a political force with the capacity to overturn capital and build communism.”(19)

This standpoint is simplified because Callinicos ignores the role of Social Democracy and the trade union bureaucracy. The ideology of Social Democracy advocates reforms as an alternative to revolution, and so this influence suggests that compromise is a more practical resolution of the class struggle than the approach of revolution. This standpoint is presently more popular than revolutionary Marxism, and so the attitude of workers is inclined to achieve compromise with employers rather than consider that strikes are the beginning of a process of social transformation. Furthermore, the dominant role of the trade union bureaucracy also considers that strikes should be for the limited purpose of collective bargaining and negotiation, and this means the rejection of more militant aims. Hence it is necessary to transform the trade unions into organs of rank and file control, as the Transitional Programme outlines: “Therefore the sections of the Fourth International should always strive not only to renew the top leadership of the trade unions, boldly and resolutely in critical moments advancing new militant leaders in place of routine functionaries and careerists, but also to create in all possible instances independent militant organizations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society, and, if necessary, not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the trade unions.”(20) Thus the immensely difficult task of transforming the unions into a suitable expression of the task of proletarian revolution may include the necessity of developing new organs of struggle. This task is immensely complicated given that it has rarely been done in history, and even the syndicalist unions underwent a process of bureaucratic degeneration. In other words, Callinicos underestimates the difficulties involved in creating a situation in which the trade unions could become an expression of the aim of proletarian revolution. Indeed, he has not allowed for the role of bourgeois ideology which also advocates that unions should accommodate to the interests of capital, and nor has he explained that the very effectiveness of union struggle became immensely more complicated in the 1980’s. Indeed, he seems to have forgotten the fact that the SWP actually admitted the difficulties of trade union struggle in the theory of downturn of the mid 1970’s to 1980’s. (21)

But primarily, Callinicos fails to outline a strategy that could promote the development of communist mass consciousness. The suggestion is that the continued generation of trade union struggle is sufficient. Instead we have to develop something more conscious and advanced which Meszaros defines as a socialist offensive. (22) The aim of the mass movement is to connect its immediate demands with the aspiration for socialism. However, this could only become possible if the working class, aligned with the connecting role of Marxism, and is able to achieve an unprecedented development of class consciousness. Hence the priorities of Marxism should be addressed to this task. Instead the complications posed by the recent victories of capital over labour have meant that Marxists have become preoccupied with defensive priorities. Callinicos glosses over the seeming failure of his trade union strategy for proletarian revolution, and instead in order to uphold his perspective he has to gloss over the importance of the process of de-industrialisation, and the reasons for it, such as the defeats of the working class. Instead he complacently refers to a growth of the working class, in terms of all those that sell their labour power, and concludes: “By these criteria, the working class has grown considerably in the present century with the enormous expansion of routine white collar positions whose occupants are, by the above definition, as proletarian as the miner or car worker.”(23) The problem is that he ignores the decline of trade union organisation, and the undermining of class cohesion, that has accompanied this process of de-industrialisation. The very defeat of the miner’s strike in the UK led to the transformation of the British economy, and similar developments have occurred on a world scale. Hence the very collective capacity of the global working class has been placed into question. However, instead of tackling this issue, Callinicos analyses the view of Olin Wright that the social role of managers in contradictory class locations have replaced the working class as a historical alternative to capitalism. The skill-exploitation of the managers becomes the basis of a statist form of society that could replace capitalism. Callinicos is content to outline an alternative in the form of state capitalism, but what he does not do is to try and indicate that the proletariat is not finished as a revolutionary class.

This task he does not consider apart from making dogmatic claims about the numerical size of the global working class. Such dogmatism means that he fails to outline how the ‘new working class’ can develop forms of collective struggle that can match the traditions of the old labour movement. Hence he does not provide a rebuttal to the ruthless conclusion of Paul Mason who claims: “Western capitalism, which had coexisted with organized labour and had been shaped by it for nearly two centuries, could no longer live with a working class culture of solidarity and resistance. Through off-shoring, de-industrialization, anti-union laws and a relentless ideological warfare, it would be destroyed.”(24) The point is that Callinicos cannot seriously study this issue because his conception of historical materialism does not allow for serious reversals in the class struggle, and the impact of important defeats. Instead the ideology of activism that accompanies his conception of the trade union strategy for proletarian revolution means he can only rationalise modest victories as the on-going movement and advance towards victory. Hence he cannot get to the essence of the point made by Olin Wright which was that the influential role of the managers within the relations of production meant they could constitute the only effective alternative to the domination of capital. Thus Callinicos cannot seriously examine the claim that changes within contemporary capitalism may have seriously undermined the prospects of proletarian revolution. Instead he has to minimise the importance of this issue, and instead resolve it by conflating the character of the white collar worker with that of the blue collar. In addition he does not analyse the complicating question of social mobility, and the decline of the welfare state. Instead he has to act as if nothing has changed in order to uphold the role of the proletariat as a collective class actor. This complacent approach is actually reinforced by the evaluation of various examples from theory. An emphasis on theory is able to solve satisfactorily a complex issue that cannot be resolved in practice and by empirical study.

Callinicos engages in a dialogue with the supporters of rational choice theory who had questioned the rationality of class struggle and revolution from the point of view of their standpoint. He is able to utilise examples from history about how the sacrifice of struggle has been beneficial to the actors involved in comparison to passivity and acceptance of the aims of capital. The problem is that all his examples are from the past, notably the miner’s strike of 1984. However he does not tackle the more complex issue as to whether collective struggle is still liberating and effective for those involved in the events of the present. Has the social changes related to the neo-liberal offensive ended the effectiveness of collective struggle as Mason claims? The honest answer to this question is ambiguous. The culture of the working class has been undermined by the offensive of capital, and has led to the very undermining of collective class identity. People are more likely to act as individuals and therefore deny the benefits of collective struggle. Hence it is the vital role of Marxists to actively contribute to the task of promoting the superiority of collective struggle as a pre-requisite for the renewal of the struggle for communism. Unfortunately, Callinicos is not suited to this task because his approach promotes complacency and avoids recognition of the problems of the present situation. Instead his standpoint is to evade the most difficult questions, and instead he recalls inspiring examples from the past in order to vindicate his position of today. This nostalgic approach is not sufficient and instead the dogmatic assurances need to be replaced by a more flexible approach. However, it is not his conception of historical materialism that is most problematical. Instead it is his perspective of proletarian revolution that results in these serious theoretical limitations. It is his strategy that needs to be modified if his approach is to be equal to the tasks of the moment.

The point is that the social character of capitalism means that it is the most difficult system to transform by means of revolution and the promotion of communism. Previous modes of production could be overcome because they were stagnating and therefore undermined by revolutionary discontent, as in relation to the transition from feudalism to capitalism, or else they were subject to external disturbances as with the Barbarian overthrow of the Roman Empire based on slavery. However, what we have learnt from the history of class struggle in the era of capitalism is that the consciousness and practice of the working class has not been sufficient to bring about the demise of capitalism. This situation has been further complicated by the regressive role of Social Democracy, the trade union bureaucracy and Stalinism. The recent offensive of capital against labour has only created new questions about the capacity of the working class to generate emancipatory alternatives. Thus it would seem that the conclusions of historical materialism have actually been refuted by the open-ended and dynamic character of the class struggle. The capitalist class has represented the most capable and determined class in history when it comes to the defence of its hegemony and recognition of the complexity of the class struggle has to be elaborated in terms of any serious development of the conception of historical materialism. For example the perspective of the dynamism of the productive forces as the basis of revolutionary change has been seriously tested by the ability of the existing relations of production to continue to be dominant despite two major world wars and prolonged instances of revolutionary unrest. Furthermore, the dynamism of the USA indicates that the capitalist system is able to overcome crisis in order to develop the productive forces, and support for the socialist alternative has been sporadic and fluctuating.

In contrast, the approach of Callinicos is not equipped to recognise the importance of these setbacks because his methodology is based on the structural capacities of the working class to engage in collective action. This view may not be inaccurate, but it does not explain the fact that the system that is able to withstand mass discontent is capitalism. Indeed, the future of the stability of capitalism seems to be guaranteed by the structural changes that have led to de-industrialisation and the declining social weight of the most militant sections of the working class. In contrast, Callinicos seems to ignore these issues and instead discusses the rationality of strike action in a manner that is abstracted from the wider role of the actual class struggle. He discusses this question of rationality in terms of the British miner’s strike of 1984-85, but glosses over the fact that this impressive militant action was ultimately defeated because of indifferent public opinion, state repression, and the treachery of the leaders of the Labour Party and Trade Union Council. (25) Furthermore, he evades the uncomfortable fact that the very defeat of the miner strike acted to discredit collective militant action in the UK. The defeat of the miners led to a balance of class forces that was favourable to the interests of capital. This situation promoted new realism and the accommodation of the trade unions with the aims of the Tory government.

Instead of discussion of these real questions, Callinicos is more comfortable with theory, and he even considers that Bukharin’s rationalisation of the decline of the productive forces under the Bolshevik regime should not be a disincentive to dissuade workers from supporting socialism. This really is cloud cuckoo land reasoning. The reason that workers do not support socialism is because the recent history of class struggle is one of defeats, and so socialism seems an unobtainable goal. Consequently people prefer the capitalist system and the related attempt to obtain marginal improvements. Possibly victories in the class struggle will change this opinion, but these do not seem likely given the unfavourable balance of class forces. Thus Callinicos is able to outline a conception of the prospect of socialism that ignores the importance of what has recently happened in the class struggle. He contends: “The classical Marxist is committed to two rather different claims, first, that capitalism is prone to regular economic crises, which, unless certain offsetting mechanisms are in operation, give rise to periods of endemic economic stagnation, political conflict, military rivalries and in some parts of the world, famine, and secondly, that the action of nation states is insufficient to prevent such crises.”(26) This perspective is not entirely inaccurate, but it evades the issue of the success of capital in the class struggle, and the fact that inter-imperialist tensions and rivalries have been modified by the role of globalisation. Hence a repeat of the instability generated by two world wars is unlikely.

The ultimate argument of Callinicos is the limited view that if workers make concessions in order to prolong capitalism the result will be an undermining of their interest such as lower wages and worse social conditions. This perspective has some validity, but the point is that the very effectiveness of the offensive of capital over the past thirty years has produced this situation because of defeats in the class struggle and the accommodation of the trade unions with the system. Hence the expectations of workers have become very limited because of the intensification of the domination of capital. This has meant the arguments in favour of austerity have become part of the popular common sense, and any opposition to the economic policy of the ruling class is considered to be eccentric. Thus there is an ideological crisis within the working class, which cannot be overcome without a transformation of class consciousness. The problem is that this very development is restricted and undermined by the restrictions placed on the possibility of militant action by the trade union bureaucracy. Instead of developing this type of analysis, Callinicos outlines how national traditions can undermine the development of the collective struggle of the working class, as in Poland between 1980-82. This is true but he does not comprehend that the major impetus for nationalism is the very demoralisation caused by defeats in the class struggle. Indeed, nationalism can be utilised in order to undermine working class consciousness as in relation to the Falkland’s war of the UK in 1982. Nationalism is an ideology that is utilised in order to eradicate any suggestion of internationalism, which is required in order to promote the struggle for world revolution. Hence it is a reactionary part of the class struggle, and so nationalism has been reinforced by the very victories of capital in the class struggle.

It could be argued in Callinicos’s defence that ‘Making History’ was a book that was written before the completed significance of the offensive of capital against labour. This defence is inadequate because Reaganism and Thatcherism was fully developed by 1987 and was based on a strategy of undermining the gains of the working class and welfare state. Hence an important concern of any Marxist book on history would be about the implications of the offensive of capital or neoliberalism. In an additional discussion of Benjamin’s conception of revolutionary change, he outlines how the view of the tradition of the oppressed can be ideologically related to the dynamics of class struggle. However he does not make any strategic conclusions from this observation. Crucially he defines the contemporary character of the potential of class struggle without any reference to the issues generated by the 1980’s offensive of capital against labour. Hence he justifies a complacent understanding of the development of revolutionary class consciousness|: “It is workers’ collective experience of exploitation which leads them to organize against it, and to develop a consciousness of the antagonism between labour and capital and an awareness of their ‘active strength’. To put it in terms of Gramsci’s concept of contradictory consciousness…..participation in class struggle alters the balance between the ‘two conceptions of the world’ present in that consciousness, increasing the weight of the elements of revolutionary consciousness vis-à-vis those beliefs which bind workers to the status quo. It intensifies the struggle between different identifications, encouraging workers to imagine themselves as part of the international community of class rather than of the narrow fraternities of race, nation, and tribe.”(27)

This may be an adequate definition of the generalised dynamics of class consciousness, but it does not tackle the important specific instances, such as the fact that Polish workers could engage in militant action and yet still be greatly influenced by Polish nationalism. But, primarily, this definition provides no guidelines for us to utilise in relation to the issues and problems created by the recent offensive of capital against labour. Hence Callinicos’s definition is a-historical and is not concrete. In this context it is very optimistic and glosses over the many complex issues that undermine militant activity becoming the development of revolutionary class consciousness. However, in a contradictory and inconsistent manner, Callinicos does qualify his definition, and concedes that revolutionary class consciousness is not an inevitable outcome of militant action, and provides the example of Poland. He also admits that the trade union bureaucracy and social democracy, in contrast to his previous perspective that trade union struggles can result in proletarian revolution, have a reactionary and compromising role that results in struggles leading to accommodation with the system. But the point is that this admission of difficulty does not result in the serious task of developing a strategy that would attempt to tackle these complicated issues of the class struggle. For example, he does not call for rank and file control of the unions as the alternative to the reactionary role of the union bureaucracy. Primarily, he is unable to actually confirm his optimistic conception of the progressive dynamics of the class struggle with a related understanding that labour can develop the consciousness and practice to overcome capital. Hence he outlines how workers have engaged in immense class conflict without being successful. Consequently, the only example he can provide of success in the class struggle is the example of the Russian revolution.

This means he ultimately resolves the strategic and political contradictions of his perspective of class struggle in terms of the crucial role of the revolutionary, or Leninist party. Thus: “The role of Marxist theory is, then, to resolve the conflict which exists within workers’ consciousness, to elicit from within those elements which represent revolutionary consciousness in embryonic form and give them a coherent, articulated expression.”(28) This formulation seems to suggest that the only possibility for the development of revolutionary consciousness is through the interaction of Marxist party with the working class. Hence it would seem logical that the character of the process of transformation is that of party-revolution, or the party leading the working class to victory. The important problem with this type of understanding is that we know that the result of this role of the vanguard party is human emancipation did not result. There is no alternative to the working class developing its own capacity to realise the process of transformation of society. This does not mean the significance of the Marxist party is irrelevant, but it does mean that the task of the party is to promote the aim of the self-emancipation of the working class and not to subordinate the class to the party. Callinicos might object and argue that this elitist justification of the party is not his intention. Instead he contends that the party should act as the collective memory of the class, and therefore transmit the lessons of past struggles in order to enhance the ability of the working class to achieve its emancipation. If this is his intention, all well and good. But he needs to make it apparent by rejecting any suggestion of the subordination of the class to the imperatives of the party.

There is contradictory tension in his approach concerning the relationship of party and class. On the one hand he maintains: “Classical Marxism is the theoretically clarified experience of the international working class movement. What allows it to play this role is the fact that it is more than a phenomenology of the class struggle, that it is historical materialism, an empirical theory which roots the mechanisms of social change in the structural properties of successive modes of production. Without this structural dimension Marxism would lack the means to identify both the possibilities and limits of change in particular circumstances, the powers which individuals and collective actors can invoke.”(29) According to this definition, Marxism is strictly the theory and is not the practice of proletarian revolution. Marxism is primarily historical materialism which outlines the reasons and aims of the process of class struggle. However, the act of emancipation, which also immensely influences theory, is the revolutionary class struggle of the proletariat. Hence the implication is that party should not attempt to dominate the process of class conflict, and instead limit its role to providing the explanatory reasons, in the form of historical materialism and programme, for promoting the goal of the emancipation of labour. However, Callinicos immediately begins to compromise this definition. He qualifies the above by also maintaining that: “For classical Marxism the revolutionary party is the indispensable intermediary between historical materialism and the class struggle.”(30) This view could imply that the party has a crucial importance for promoting the approach of historical materialism in order to facilitate the advance of the class struggle, but it could also imply that the party becomes the exclusive interpreter of interests of the working class. Callinicos denies that this is the aim and he emphatically rejects the Stalinist emphasis on the substitution of the party for the revolutionary role of the class. He argues that his perspective is that the party promotes the possibility for the working class to carry out its self-conscious task of revolutionary transformation. But he also conceives of the organisational independence of the party as the basis of its influence on the class. This relationship could ultimately result in the conception of party revolution, or the party imposing its will on the class. However, Callinicos also seems to defend the view of self-emancipation of labour when he contends that the character of the future society is based on active participation of the people: “Socialist revolution, as the establishment by the direct producers of collective control over the means of production, can only take the form of the mass of the workers dismantling the existing state apparatus and replacing it with their own organs of democratic self-government.”(31)

In other words Callinicos generally seems committed to a relationship between party and class that ultimately enables the establishment of a democratic socialist society. But his model of the relationship between party and class is that of the October revolution, and so he glosses over problems and tensions in this relationship that resulted in the vanguard party imposing its will on the class and so creating a party state. Hence his commitment to a principled conception of the relationship between party and class would be more consistent if he was more critical of the October revolution, and therefore suggested that the Bolsheviks could have been more transparent and aware of the primary goal of overcoming the domination of labour by capital. Despite these criticisms his view of the party as the instrument of historical materialism is a principled starting point for the party being able to influence the practice of the working class. The party should utilise theory in order to enhance the ability of the class to engage in collective class struggle. However, in the last analysis, the working class should be able to engage in its own theoretical reflection and comprehend critically its own practice. The very success of the party is to decrease its role within the context of promoting the conscious practice of the class. In contrast, Callinicos’s formulations could imply a permanent relationship of party and class based on the justification of the leaders and the led. But, to be fair, this aspect is ambiguous and so requires clarification.

In relation to Callinicos overall conception of historical materialism it is possible to criticise his standpoint for underestimating the possibility for structures to act as constraints on action. Instead considering structures in terms of promoting capacities means: “Viewing structures from this perspective involves breaking with the idea of them as limits on individual or collective action, providing a framework within which humans can have free play. In so far as their position in structures delimits the possibilities open to agents, they are also presented with the opportunity to pursue their goals in particular directions.”(32) This effective underestimation of the role of structures as constraints means that the complexities of collective class struggle become ignored, and instead the emphasis is on the possibilities for social transformation. But we have learnt from the historical experience of the recent offensive of capital how difficult it is to develop effective collective action let alone strive for revolutionary transformation. Callinicos denies that he equates structures with action, but he does seem to make this identity with his conception of structural capacities. This view emphasises the abilities of labour to act, but this formulation also ignores the oppressive structures that daily reproduce the existing relations of production and so enable the system to continue. Callinicos contends that his aim is to indicate that: “The most important instance of structural capacity is that possessed by the working class to replace capitalism with communism. Whether or not workers exercise this capacity, cannot be settled by this or any other book.”(34) This comment suggests that the possibility of revolutionary transformation depends on the working class exercising its structural possibilities, but this is only one side of the story. What is also important is the structures of the existing relations of production, both economic and political, which act to ensure the continuation of the system, and therefore means the working class is not able to exercise its structural capacity. Thus if revolutionary change is to occur, there must be a convergence of the role of the structural possibilities of the working class combined with the increasing ineffectiveness of the structures that reproduce capitalist relations of production. This convergence is very rare, which is why the prospect of proletarian revolution is also infrequent. The problem is that the breakdown of the structures of the relations of production may imply economic chaos that would undermine the ability to realise the material interests of society. This is precisely why Bukharin’s conception of proletarian revolution in the context of the decline of the productive forces is unacceptable. On the other hand a situation of economic stability is unlikely to promote the prospect of proletarian revolution. Instead the only principled alternative is to develop a long-term strategy of the socialist offensive. This approach is ambitious, and has not been tried before, but it would connect the situation of immediate demands with a historical goal. In contrast, Callinicos’s complacency about the potential of collective action means that he becomes uncritical of existing practice, and so constantly underestimates the complexities involved in developing the prospects of proletarian revolution.

THEORIES AND NARRATIVES

In a later work on history, Callinicos attempts to address various philosophies of history in order to defend historical materialism. (34) The task is to defend the perspective of proletarian revolution against the various arguments that dismiss this possibility as unrealistic or anachronistic. Hence it is necessary to assess whether Callinicos does develop an effective argument in favour of one of the major aims of historical materialism. The claim of Francis Fukuyama is that events in Eastern Europe and the USSR between 1989-91 represent the end of history and its culmination in liberal capitalism. (35) Callinicos does suggest that historical materialism is a superior method to understand these events than the utilisation of a pessimistic philosophy of history that is a confusing mixture of the views of Hegel, Nietzsche and Kojeve. But he does not utilise this opportunity to outline how the prospect of proletarian revolution is not over. Instead he contends that what was in crisis was Stalinism which was a form of state capitalism, and so what occurred was not the discrediting of socialism. In contrast to that evasion, Ronald Aronson argues that Marxism is over as a project of the unity of theory and practice: “My argument is simply that nowhere in the world does Marxism remain a historical project…..The end of the Second world of communism, combined with events in the First and Third Worlds, leave us with so few and such scattered actors for Marxism’s project that for the first time in its history, the capitalist system is unopposed. In this sense, Marxism is over.”(36)

The point is that it is not the result of Fukuyama’s philosophy of history that results in conclusions about the demise of Marxism. This is a perception that has general acceptance and requires a rebuttal. Instead of upholding a revolutionary perspective, Callinicos outlines the collection of the various Marxists that have accommodated to Fukuyama’s view, but he does he outline an alternative. It may be an easier task to outline the various inconsistencies in Fukuyama’s approach, but this does not tackle the complicated fact as Aronson claims that there is no longer a mass constituency for the aims of Marxism. This is the crucial question to be evaluated, but Callinicos seems to fail. However, he does elaborate what he means by historical materialism. We will have to evaluate whether this conception is able to tackle effectively the issues generated by the events of 1989-91, or whether it is a failure. He argues that historical materialism must be a theory of structures. However, his emphasis is no longer just on the role of structural capacities. Instead he argues that: “These relationships have a number of important properties: their existence does not depend on the participation in them of particular named persons; they are sets of empty places, which can be filled by any suitably trained and motivated individuals. Moreover, structures exist independently of those occupying them being aware of their existence: the more important social relationships are those which as Hegel put it, go on behind the backs of the human beings making up the society in question.”(37) This definition seems to suggest a less optimistic view of history. The emphasis is no longer on the ability of humans to use their structural capacities in order to transform society, and instead what is considered more important is how structures act as restraints that undermine human agency and are continually reproduced. This view would imply that it is difficult to bring about proletarian revolution than previously envisaged.

In other words, the system is very complicated to transform because its primary features are the ability to continue to reproduce the structures that uphold and perpetuate the system. This means even when collective action is developed the structures can maintain themselves despite this challenge to their functioning. Furthermore, Callinicos also suggests that the activity of the structures is different to how they are perceived by their very participants. This complexity also suggests that it is difficult to transform what we do not adequately know and understand. Consequently, it is not surprising given this emphasis on the importance of structures as constraints, that he also indicates the importance of the dominant class of the relations of production to be able to extract a surplus from the producers. It is in this context that we must understand the complexity of class struggle. Implicitly Callinicos is rejecting his previous view that collective class activity can establish a dynamic of transformation. With this new formulation he is accepting the durability of structures to resist opposition and withstand challenges to the existing order. But he also argues that in order not to justify a static conception of society it is necessary to articulate a conception of change. However, what has to be elaborated is how the relationship of the structures of reproduction relates to the process of change. The question that needs to be addressed is whether the existing structures can seriously undermine the possibilities of change? This question is implicit within Callinicos’s new approach, but instead of directly addressing this issue he outlines the conception of change in traditional terms: “These conflicts……are of two kinds: the fettering of the productive forces by the relations of production….and the class struggle between exploiters and exploited.”(38)

What requires direct analysis is the connection of the above approach with the events of the recent period, and the issue of the validity of historical materialism given Aronson’s claim that Marxism has become an unpopular and discredited approach. Can the class struggle continue effectively without the connection to Marxism? The point is that Callinicos’s analysis of the potential for change seems to be abstract and unrealistic given the continuing strength of capitalism. The only aspect of his approach that has validity is the reference to the durability and influence of the structures of capitalism. Hence, the revolutionary claims of historical materialism seem to be becoming an expression of dogma that has little relationship to empirical reality. The answer that Callinicos seems to provide to these awkward questions is that Marxism upholds the view of the progress or directionality of history in the form of the development of the productive forces. However, he does suggest that the outcome of this process is contingent and dependent on the results of class struggle. But even this conclusion seems very optimistic and unrealistic given the unprecedented domination of the world economy by the forces of capital and the related retreat of the working class. Thus the contingency of history has led to what seems to be a definitive victory of the forces of capital, and has led Fukuyama to proclaim the end of history. What is required is not an appeal to the role of history but instead concrete analysis of the contemporary class struggle which can establish some form of understanding of the balance of class forces and the related prospects for the working class in a situation that seems to be based on the overwhelming domination of capital.

Nevertheless despite these criticisms of the apparent limitations in Callinicos reluctance to relate his theoretical approach with empirical events, he does seem to recognise that history does not have a teleological purpose or goal that would mean communism was inevitable. He is aware that the dynamics of the productive forces do not imply the realisation of historical necessity, and instead the outcome of developments is dependent on the role of class struggle: “For his theory of history postulates the existence of two mechanisms of change: the development of systemic contradictions between the forces and relations of production, and the intensification in these conditions, of the class struggle. Now, there is no a priori reason why these mechanisms should necessarily operate in a co-ordinated and synchronized fashion. The relative strength of antagonistic classes is only partly determined by their material bases in the relations of production; it also depends on forms in which subjectivity and agency play an irreducible part – organization, ideology, leadership. Depending, then, on the contingencies of how these are worked up on both sides, the outcome of a historical crisis will vary.”(39) Hence outcomes are not determined or inevitable. But the assumption is that proletarian revolution is still possible. But we have to recognise that even this tentative confidence in the prospect of human emancipation has been called into question by recent events. The hope of the 20th century has been challenged by the durability of capitalism and the apparent inability of the party and class to overcome this tenaciousness of the system. As a result the proletariat is demoralised and defensive and the party is marginalised. Callinicos’s view of the outcome of the class struggle would be valid until the 1990’s, but the continuation of the offensive of capital against labour means that he has to ask serious questions about historical materialism.

However, it is also necessary not to exaggerate these criticisms of Callinicos. He has outlined important aspects of a valid contemporary form of historical materialism, which is not Euro-centric, does not justify historical inevitability or teleology, and recognises the complexity of the class struggle and its contingent outcomes. This standpoint is combined with an understanding of the durability of structures and the likelihood of the reproduction of the system despite challenges to its domination. He also outlines a defence of the project of universal emancipation, and argues that emphases on particular forms of oppression do not in and of themselves result in the realisation of human liberation. Unfortunately his arguments concerning the proletariat as the major universal social force of universal emancipation is under-theorised. He relies on the crude sociological logic that the majority of the global population is becoming proletarian and concludes: “Of course, there is an enormous gap between the objective existence of a world working class and it’s becoming an active political force. All the same, just now would be an odd moment to say farewell to the idea of universal emancipation, and the class that could still be its bearer.”(40) This comment is unsatisfactory. It actually does rely on the assumption of economic determinism, or the historical logic that a growing working class is bound to influence to course of history. In fact this comment is abstracted from the significance of the events of the last thirty years and the conclusions that can be made. Empirical events seem to suggest that it is more difficult than ever before to try and realise revolutionary transformation. This situation has meant Marxism is in a crisis, and its project of historical materialism is seriously being questioned. Callinicos is aware of this situation, and even outlines some of the criticisms of Marxism, but he fails to tackle the most challenging conclusions that Marxism is finished along with its revolutionary project. The point is that instead of effective evasion we need new arguments about the possibilities of proletarian revolution. We need definite and concrete attempts to provide a strategy for success in the most complex period of the class struggle since capitalism began, and we need to elaborate new reasons for the role of the revolutionary party. Ultimately, Callinicos does not answer these questions because he tries to deny their importance. This is why despite his erudition and generally adequate conception of historical materialism he does not tackle the most important problems generated by the class struggle.

SOCIAL THEORY

His book on ‘Social Theory’ enables Callinicos to have another opportunity to tackle the complex issues of the class struggle utilising the methodology of historical materialism. (41) The initial results seem to be promising because he emphasises the importance of the control of the process of exploitation by the dominant economic class: “Exploitation provides the link between minority control and class antagonism. It occurs whenever a group has consolidated a sufficient degree of control over the productive forces to compel the direct producers to labour not simply to meet their own needs, and those of their dependents, but also to support the dominant group. Exploitation thus consists in the appropriation of surplus labour – that is labour over and above the necessary labour required to support the direct producers – by the minority controlling the productive forces. The result is the division of society between exploiters and exploited. It is this necessarily antagonistic relationship which is the basis of class division.”(42) What is significant about this definition of exploitation is the emphasis on the ability of the exploiters to dominate the relations of production through control and often ownership of the resources and means of production. This suggests it is difficult for the subordinated class to be able to oppose and ultimately effectively resist the situation of exploitation. The structures of exploitation are very effective in ensuring the continuation of that situation, and in relation to capitalism the workers lack effective economic power because of the fact that they do not own the means of production. Instead there is an unequal economic relationship in which the worker must sell labour power in order to obtain the means of subsistence. Hence, Callinicos’s analysis suggests that this relation of exploitation and subordination will continue unless something exceptional occurs in economic and political terms. What is actually typical is that the worker creates surplus value for the capitalist, and this is ideologically justified by commodity fetishism or the importance of an autonomous process that is beyond the control of human beings. The political significance of this alienated ideology is that the worker accepts the domination of capital over labour.

However, Callinicos seems to react to the very fact he has outlined how the relations of production mean that it is difficult to generate opposition to exploitation by suggesting that the economic laws of capitalism promote crisis and the possibility of the development of opposition to the system. He describes how the increasing organic composition of capital has a tendency to generate the falling rate of profit. Hence the economic contradictions of the system undermine the tendency to stability caused by the daily reproduction of the process of exploitation: “Economic crises are thus ‘immanent’ to the capitalist mode of production as both a consequence of, and a means of temporarily overcoming the rate of profit to fall. Yet the fact that stable economic growth can only be restored for a while by such disruptive means is a sign of the inherent limits of bourgeois society.”(43) But there is no direct link between economic crisis and political discontent. Instead the intensification of the class struggle is caused by many factors, such as the undermining of the stability of the existing order which may be caused by war, or division within the ruling group. In contrast the causal link between crisis and the promotion of class struggle is problematical, and the development of mass discontent in the 1930’s was because of mass unemployment and the inability of the ruling class to have an answer to this problem. The revolutionary developments in Spain and France were the result of the election of the Popular Front governments, and the economic crisis of the recent period has led to the offensive of capital against labour.

Callinicos considers that there are two tendencies in Marxist historical materialism. Firstly the dynamic of the productive forces which implies the imperative for social transformation, and secondly, the class struggle which has an open-ended outcome: “Two poles can thus be detected in Marx’s thought, each resting on one of the mechanisms of the historical change he posits – the tendency for the productive forces to develop, on the one hand, with the implications of inevitable progress this can be made to carry, and the class struggle on the other, full of contingencies and uncertainties.”(44) Callinicos attempts to resolve the apparent tension in Marx’s standpoint and contends that the crisis in the development of the productive forces is unlikely to result in social transformation, which contradicts the logic of his economic analysis, and instead it is argued that: “Marx’s own expectations for the downfall of capitalism depended crucially on the development of the working class into a self-conscious political subject capable of taking control of society. Socialist revolution is indeed necessarily a process of self-emancipation.”(45) But this development cannot occur autonomously. Instead it is dependent on the ability of the working class to undermine and eventually overcome the difficulties posed by the relations of exploitation. The working class has to develop sufficient class consciousness and the related conception of practice in order to express the capacity to bring about the end to the domination of capital over labour.

Callinicos admits that there is a genuine and complex problem of commodity fetishism to be overcome if the working class is to promote a perspective of emancipation. Hence: “The social relations between producers are mediated by the exchange of their products on the market: it is this real feature of a commodity economy which facilitates the perception of capitalism as a natural phenomenon outside of human control.”(46) We can also suggest that bourgeois political economy ideologically justifies the view that the working class should obey economic laws which effectively means acceptance of the subordination of labour to the imperatives of capital. Furthermore, the very process of the reproduction of the conditions of exploitation means that it seems difficult, if not impossible to envisage an alternative to the existing system.

In other words, Callinicos is aware of the difficulties involved in developing an understanding of alternatives to capitalism. So what is his strategy for proletarian revolution: “The most important function of trade unions for Marx is their role in increasing workers’ self-confidence and strengthening their organization. The experience of class struggle, even over relatively narrow economic issues, helps the workers to transform themselves from mere victims of exploitation into self-conscious subjects increasingly willing to take on the task of social transformation. The latter process must thus be understood as the ‘coincidence of changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change.”(47) This perspective is disappointing, self-limiting and ultimately futile. The lesson of history is that if workers engage in defensive trade union struggles with modest aims they will not become transformed into promoters of the process of social transformation. Instead they will relate their demands to an accommodation to capitalism. Hence the actual and effective process of the development of class consciousness requires something more principled and substantial which is the recognition by labour that their aim is the overcoming of the domination of capital. There is no substitute for this approach, and it is the role of Marxism to strive to influence the working class with this understanding. Instead Callinicos and the SWP accommodate to the limitations of strikes by suggesting that this may be the ‘ideal’ moment for their development into a struggle against capital. This standpoint lacks even the strategic precision of syndicalism which emphasised the necessity of the general strike if capital was to be overthrown. Callinicos assumes that strikes under the influence of the SWP can become the basis of a struggle against capitalism. But he does not describe how defensive struggles can become offensive, and he glosses over the necessity of a socialist consciousness in terms of the adoption of the aim of the overthrow of the dominating power of capital. Instead his economistic approach of accommodating to the limitations of trade unions is no substitute for a genuine offensive for socialism. In a dogmatic manner he argues that: “The trajectory of the working class movement would be from economic issues concerning either individual employers or groups of them to political ones involving confrontation with the state.”(48) This dynamic has only rarely developed in history, exceptions being the miner’s strike of 1984-85, but even in this instance victory could only have been realised in relation to the development of a general strike. But for some dogmatic reason, the SWP make a fetish of the role of the trade unions and yet are reticent to support the demand for a general strike which could actually realise progress in the struggle to overthrow the domination of capital. Hence, in actuality their fetishism of the role of the trade unions means that they support a reformist perspective of achieving modest gains within capitalism. This approach is because they ignore the importance of conscious struggle to end the domination of capital over labour.

Consequently is this effectively defensive approach compatible with Callinicos’s support of the intransigent Marxism of Lukacs? The answer is that there is a contradiction because it is assumed the working class does not need to develop its consciousness in relation to the progressive dynamic of trade union struggle. Instead what is required is increasing levels of militancy which ultimately create the situation of opposition to the role of the bourgeois state. In contrast, Callinicos admits that to Lukacs increasing class consciousness is required if the working class is to challenge capitalism: “The proletariat cannot liberate itself as a class without simultaneously abolishing class society as such. For that reason its consciousness, the last class consciousness in the history of mankind must both lay bare the nature of society and achieve an increasing fusion of theory and practice.”(49) This approach is opposed to that of Callinicos, who argues that the dynamic of trade union militancy establishes an inexorable logic of struggle against capitalism. This standpoint does not suggest the increasing development of class consciousness. To Lukacs, it is only possible to effectively oppose capitalism with the highest levels of consciousness, which is connected to the fusion of theory and practice.

Instead what seems more compatible is the utilisation of Gramsci’s conception of contradictory class consciousness in order to justify the strategy of Callinicos and the SWP. Gramsci is considered to understand consciousness in the following manner: “Bourgeois ideological domination is therefore a consequence not of the indoctrination of a largely passive mass, but of the relative balance of rival conceptions of the world within the composite consciousness of the working class. Similarly, the attainment of revolutionary class consciousness involves strengthening and articulating the socialist conception of the world implicit within workers everyday practice within the process of production.”(50) The complexity of this understanding is vulgarised and instead it is argued that ‘struggle’ can overcome the limitations of contradictory class consciousness: “The development of class consciousness is thus a process, in which workers progress from an instinctive sense of solidarity and of antagonism to the employer to an elaborated understanding of their interests and capacities. This process depends crucially on the relatively spontaneous development of mass struggles in which the underlying conflict between capital and labour comes to the surface. But, to become effective, class consciousness must be institutionalized; its elaboration depends on the construction of forms of organization through which it is distinguished and strengthened.”(51) Hence the logic of trade union struggles, combined with the role of the party, establishes an apparent dynamic resulting in the development of a revolutionary standpoint. The actual possibility that bourgeois consciousness can still be generated in this process is ignored, and so the views of Gramsci become diluted. Also his conception of bourgeois ideological hegemony based on popular common sense is not mentioned in order to deny the enduring nature of the views of the ruling class. Instead ‘struggle’ combined with the role of the party will resolve all these issues.

Ultimately all of these opportunist formulations uphold the view that the class struggle continues despite the restructuring of industry and the offensive of capital. The assumption is that trade union struggle, such as the public sector strikes in France of 1905, will generate an offensive against capital.(52) He argues that the proletarianisation of the service sector, and continued strike actions, do not mean the end of the social role of the working class. But he ignores the fact that the ruling class has been dominant in the process of the offensive of capital against labour. He concludes that the present situation is complex: “This suggests that historical materialism is not required to guarantee that socialist revolution will necessarily happen, but rather to show that it is practically feasible and politically desirable.(53) The problem is that in order to undermine challenges to historical materialism Callinicos has accommodated to the view that revolution represents an irrepressible evolutionary dynamic, in terms of the numerical growth of the world working class, and so he has glossed over the practical problems involved in the overthrow of capitalism. However, his overall approach is a generally adequate basis for the study of society.

CONCLUSION

The most detailed discussion of the issue of de-industrialisation occurs in Callinicos’s book: ‘Against Post-modernism’, and so it is necessary to evaluate the views in this book.(54) He does outline the relative decline of manufacturing in the most advanced capitalist countries made possible by increases in productivity and the rise of a low wage service and retail sector. But he ultimately does not discuss the significance of the development of these changes in terms of an offensive against labour by the representatives of capital. He also dismisses the importance of structural changes like the development of Post-Fordism and the differentiation of the workforce into a ‘core’ and periphery. Thus it is not surprising that he outlines the rise of unemployment in the USA and UK as a result of slump, which is then alleviated by a partial return to Keynesian measures. In other words the situation is not analysed or described in relation to the attempt to uphold profitability by undermining the conditions and organisation of the working class. The nearest we come to a class analysis is reference to the tax policies of Reagan and Thatcher, who distributed the tax burden from rich to poor. In contrast various important events in the class struggle of the 1970’s are outlined, but there is an effective silence about the significance of class conflict in the 1980’s. This silence is surprising given that it is this decade that brings about crucial changes in the balance of class forces. But possibly it is for this very reason that Callinicos is reluctant to discuss its implications. Primarily he is reluctant to confront the failure of trade union struggle and the necessity to re-elaborate the strategy of class struggle.

However, he admits the importance of some of the social changes in this period and comments that the managers who occupy a contradictory class location between capital and labour have acquired unprecedented importance: “Nevertheless, both because of the social power its members exercise, and because of the cultural influence it exerts on other white collar workers who aspire to promotion into its ranks, the new middle class is a force to be reckoned with in every major Western society.”(55) This comment represents Callinicos’s most pessimistic view that the development of social conflict might not have the outcome of proletarian revolution. Instead a new social force may be able to influence events and so be able to impose itself on historical developments. But, primarily he implies that the postmodern era is the expression of the demoralisation of the former revolutionary left about the prospects of social transformation: “The political odyssey of the 1968 generation is, in my view, crucial to the widespread acceptance of the idea of a postmodern epoch in the 1980’s. This was the decade when those radicalized in the 1960s and early 1970s began to enter middle age. Usually they did so with all hope of socialist revolution gone – indeed they ceased to believe in the desirability of any such revolution.”(56) Hence Callinicos can write a book replying to these demoralised intellectuals but the issue of the class struggle of the 1980’s is effectively considered to be too complicated and implicitly to awkward for the world view of the SWP to explain. Unlike other commentators they were unable to explain the offensive of capital against labour, and lacked any strategic imagination to oppose this development such as their reluctance to call for a general strike during the miner’s strike. The SWP was full of admiration for the miners but could provide them with no principled advice. Crucially they could not come to terms with the implications of the polarisation of the class struggle. That is why they could not explain the 1980’s and instead welcomed the 1990’s with relief. But what had been indicated was that the strategy of the SWP was in crisis. Consequently, Callinicos can outline in theory an adequate form of historical materialism, but he cannot articulate what it meant for the actual period of the class struggle in the 1980s.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Alex Callinicos: Deciphering Capital, Bookmarks, London, 2014

(2)Chris Harman: A Peoples History of the World, Bookmarks, London, 1999

(3)Alex Callinicos, Making History, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987 p10

(4)Louis Althusser: On the reproduction of Capitalism, Verso, London, 2014 p51

(5)Callinicos, 1987 p51

(6)Erik Olin Wright: Envisioning Real Utopias, Verso, London 2009 p123-133

(7)Paul Mason: Post-Capitalism, Allen Lane, London, 2015 p181-207

(8)Callinicos, 1987 p52

(9) ibid p64

(10Francis Fukuyama: The End of History, Hamish Hamilton, London 1992

(11)Istvan Meszaros: Beyond Capital, Merlin Press, London 1995

(12)Roy Bhaskar: Possibilities of Naturalism, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London 1989, p35

(13)Callinicos 1987 op cit p94-95

(14)John E. Roemer: Free to Lose, Harvard University Press, 1988

(15)Callinicos, 1987 op cit p149

(16)Istvan Meszaros: 1995 op cit

(17)Callinicos 1987 p172 and p217

(18) ibid p185

(19Ibid p187

(20)Leon Trotsky: The Transitional Programme of Socialist Revolution, Pathfinder Press, 1974 p118

(21)Tony Cliff: A World to Win, Bookmarks, London 2000 p171

(22)Meszaros op cit p673-738

(23)Callinicos op cit p188

(24)Mason Op cit p207

(25)Callinicos 1987 op cit p199-200

(26) ibid p204

(27) ibid p223

(28) ibid p226

(29)Ibid p227

(30) ibid p227

(31) ibid p232

(32) ibid p235

(33) ibid p238

(34)Alex Callinicos: Theories and Narratives: Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995

(35)Fukuyama op cit

(36)Ronald Aronson: After Marxism, The Guildford Press, New York, 1995 p55

(37)Callinicos 1995 p98

(38) ibid p102

(39Ibid p161

(40) ibid p203

(41)Alex Callinicos: Social Theory, Polity Press, Cambridge 1999

(42)Callinicos 1999 p86

(43) ibid p92

(44) ibid p94

(45) ibid p94

(46) ibid p95

(47) ibid p96

(48) ibid p96

(49Ibid p208

(50) ibid p211

(51) ibid p212

(52) ibid p303-304

(53) ibid p318

(54)Alex Callinicos: Against Post-modernism, Polity Press, Cambridge 1989

(55) ibid p162

(56) ibid p168