EVALUATING A POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY OF KARL MARX

Professor Terrell Carver has written a book about Marx which attempts to connect his emphasis on political issues with the concerns of the present. (1) The aim of the author is to outline that all of the articles and books by Marx are defined by a political sensitivity which is attempting to outline the ability of oppressed and exploited groups to reject and oppose the development of a situation of poverty and misery. For example the Communist Manifesto outlines how the advance of the productive power of society was connected to the possibility for action by the working class to act in order to overcome the domination of capital. What Marx and Engels were trying to outline was how an analysis of the role of history and economic developments had created the conditions for the possibility of working class action against capitalism. This also indicated the necessity of strategy if this action was to be successful: “Marx and Engels rhetorical call to working class action against economic oppression, to democratizing politics against authoritarianism, and to a definitive resolution of the social question has been underplayed – and undermined – by reading strategies that reduce their Manifesto argument to conclusions. Presented then as descriptive statements, commentators have de-politicised the meanings in the text, since the original rhetorical force is displaced into empirical judgements of fact. The claim in the text that modern industries simplify and intensify class struggles, is undoubtedly reductive, but it is nonetheless more in the service of rhetoric of action than of a sociological or economic generalization then or now.”(2)

This comment indicates that the aims of Marx and Engels in the writing of the Communist Manifesto was to indicate that the role of class struggle had become a practical possibility, but what did this mean in terms of strategy? Carver does not seem to answer this question. Instead he is content to outline the importance of class, and the role of the proletariat, for the possibility of revolutionary transformation of capitalism. But how is this to be realised? Indeed it can be argued that Marx is unsure about his strategy because whilst he is emphatic about the importance of revolutionary change based on the role of the working class, he is not sure how this is realised. Instead he contends in the Manifesto that the 'first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the working class to the position of ruling class, to win the battle for democracy?'(3) What does this mean in terms of strategy? What is the relationship between reform and revolution? How will the working class organise in order to transform society? A list of demands is outlined as to some of the actions which will be take in order to transform the economy by a working class government, but these are not defined in terms of what Trotsky would define as transitional demands that would involve the workers mobilising against capitalism. Hence most importantly there is no perspective of workers control, or an understanding that the generation of class struggle will result in the balance of forces becoming more favourable to the possibility of the formation of a workers government. Instead of the question of strategy is defined in terms of a principle: “If, the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by the force of circumstances, to organise itself as a class, if, by means of a revolution, it makes itself the ruling class, and then as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class.”(4) Hence what Marx and Engels have outlined was the importance of the role of class struggle, which Carver emphasises in his work. But whilst it may have not been understandable that Marx did not consolidate his perspective in terms of a strategy there is no excuse for Carver. He has available to him practical strategies that have been developed by Kautsky, Lenin. Luxemburg and Trotsky, and the monumental approach of Gramsci. He could have commentated on the merits of their approaches. Instead of this there is silence. Hence what is being assumed is that only Marx is worth studying as opposed to the apparent limitations of Marxists. What is not admitted is that the apparent limitations of the Communist Manifesto concerning issues like strategy were tackled by a generation of Marxists. Instead of this Carver seems to consider that the only credible interpreters of Marx have been academics who have not recognised the emphasis made on practical action. This view is a travesty of the fact that the very aim of many Marxists has been to translate the principles established by Marx into strategies for proletarian revolution.

Carver outlines how Marx's Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association begins to address issues of strategy, and so outlines how reforms such as the ten hours bill can strengthen the power of the working class and so enhance its ability to change society. The same point can be made about the co-operative movement which implies the creation of a form of working class economy within capitalism, and so the latter is being undermined by the increasing influence of the principles of socialism. But Carver is wrong to conclude that these views implies that he is justifying a social democratic strategy of change via the role of reforms.(5) What does Marx actually define as successes for the working class in his 'Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association'. He observes that “Hence the Ten Hour Bill was not only a great practical success, it was the victory of a principle, it was the first time in broad daylight the political economy of the middle class succumbed to the political economy of the working class.”(6) In this comment Marx is actually developing a strategy for change. He is indicating that the concession of the Ten Hour Bill has actually enhanced the ability and strength of the working class to challenge the power and domination of capital within the relations of production. The point being made is such concessions to the working class cannot merely represent economic reforms of the system but instead must express the modification of the balance of economic power which can only enhance the ability of the working class to overcome the domination of capital. The assumption being made is that the workers should strive for similar measures in order to promote their power within the relations of production, and so bring about the effective transformation of the economic situation in favour of the interests of labour. In this context what is being prepared is a process of transition to socialism, but this perspective does not mean that revolution is no longer the ultimate act that is still required in order to realise socialism.

Marx emphasises his evolving strategy in relation to the importance of the co-operatives: “But there was in store a still greater victory of the political economy of labour over the political economy of property. We speak of the co-operative movement, especially the co-operative factories raised by the unassisted efforts of a few bold “hands”. The value of these great social experiments cannot be overrated. By deed, instead of argument, they have shown that production on a large scale, and in accord with the behests of modern science, may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands; that to bear fruit, the means of labour need not be monopolized as a means of dominion over, and of extortion against, the labouring man himself, and that like slave labour, like serf labour, hired labour is but a transitory and inferior form, destined to disappear before associated labour plying its toil with a willing hand, a ready mind, and joyous heart.”(7) In this comment, Marx makes its explicit that the development of co-operative forms of production and distribution represent an expression of workers control of economic activity which is generating the promotion of transitional forms that can be realised in terms of socialism. The strategic assumption is that if the formation of co-operatives is encouraged then the balance of power in both economic and political terms will favour the interests of the working class and so generate the possibility of revolutionary change. Hence what is being advocated is support for changes within capitalism that can also advance the possibilities of socialism. Thus it would be a caricature to merely describe this standpoint as support for reformism. Instead what is being developed is a coherent strategy of proletarian revolution. Indeed Marx is aware that the capitalist class are completely aware of the possibilities of co-operative production and so denigrate the potential of this type of economic activity. But Marx is also aware that co-operative production could be undermined in terms of becoming adapted to the interests of capital, and so its development is not a substitute for the necessity of revolution. Marx emphasises that: “To conquer political power has, therefore, become the great duty of the working classes.”(8) Marx also maintains that this task is international, and that only with the advance of world revolution can the interests of the working class be truly promoted. Hence what he is outlining is the connection of the progress made by the workers in relation to the development of cooperatives with the task of the revolutionary transformation of capitalism. The point he is making is that the promotion of the economic and political power of the working class will create a more favourable possibility for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. Hence the strategic omissions of the Communist Manifesto are being rectified. This point is not satisfactorily appreciated by Professor Carver.

In a detailed and useful analysis of what he considers to be Marx's approach for understanding the class struggle, Carver maintains that the very importance of this aspect in history means that the outcome cannot be pre-determined by any inherent logic of primary aspect, but instead can only be the uncertain expression of what happens to be the dominant balance of class forces at any given moment in time. This does not mean that there is merely the role of contingency because there will be tendencies and influences that indicate the importance of possibilities, but the outcome of these aspects has an open-ended character which is dependent on the role of political action: “Marx and Engels political deductions from this picture had a rhetorical import at the time, and were performative in character rather than strictly descriptive. If and when people believe in this picture, then so runs the narrative thrust of the Manifesto – they will make their politics one of class struggle....Class struggle is thus a practice – which might -or might not take place, rather than a 'thing' or 'factor' or 'force' that could always and anywhere be identified descriptively and isolated for observation. After all, if class struggle were something that operated independently of politics, there would be no need of such a rousing Manifesto to get people on side and in tune.”(9) In this context the development of capitalism is the objective aspect of the possibility for socialism, but this does not mean that this situation means that the victory of the working class is certain. Instead the assumption is that the question of whether advance is made in the class struggle, and the realisation of the political victory of the proletariat is vital. Hence there is no inherent logic to history that will enable this possibility to be realised. Thus the development of the productive forces does not overcome the contingency of history or overcome the issue that advance can only occur through the role of class struggle. This point is made eloquently by Carver, but what he evades is the uncomfortable fact that if history does not express certain progress the possibility of success for the identified progressive class requires the development of the highest level of class consciousness, which implies the role of the party. This aspect is surely the conclusion of the very emphasis on contingency in the standpoint of Marx, but it is evaded by Carver. Instead he seems to imply that the propaganda of Marx will somehow generate the formation of a form of conscious leadership, but the problems of today are not those of Marx, and the class struggle has undergone many forms of development which pose increasing new challenges. The only apparent conclusion to this complex situation is that an effective revolutionary party is vital if the task of generating the sufficient class consciousness for transforming change to occur. But this aspect is what is omitted by Carver. The problem is that he fails to connect the significance of the role of Marx as a political activist with even rudimentary discussion of the role of Marxism. Was Bolshevism a distortion of the aims of Marx? There is no answer to this question. But it surely a vital aspect of how we understand Marx. Hence this omission means that there is no discussion as to whether it is necessary to differentiate between Marx and Marxism. Instead we only have criticism of the dogmatism of Engels and Plekhanov. This point being made is very serious because the obviously logical connection between n the political activism of Marx concerns the role of party. We have some brief references to Marx's relationship to the First International, but these are merely descriptive and express no criteria by which we can evaluate the character and issues of Marxism. Instead in some arbitrary manner Carver connects the concerns of Marx with those of the political activism of various protest groups. But this reference ignores the fact that what is being ignored is the importance of evaluating the legacy of Marxism. Not even the Second International is mentioned. Nor is there any analysis of the situation of the class struggle in the recent conditions of crisis and austerity. Hence he does not provide any analysis of whether the contemporary working class is still a valid revolutionary agency. Therefore the analysis of Marx lacks any genuine contemporary connections and reference points. This means that Carvers intentions that we should discuss Marx in contemporary terms seems to be a failure.

FOOTNOTES:

(1) Terrell Carver: Marx Polity Press, London 2018 p5-6

(2) ibid p47

(3) Marx and Engels Manifesto of the Communist Party, Collected Works 1845-1848 Volume 6 Lawrence and Wishart 1976 p504

(4) ibid p505-506

(5) Carver op cit p59

(6) Karl Marx Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association, in Marxist Internet Archive p6

(7) ibid p6

(8) ibid p7

(9) Carver op cit p78