ANALYSIS OF THE VIEWS OF COOPER AND HARDY CONCERNING THE CHALLENGES FACING MARXISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY BY PHIL SHARPE AND PHIL WALDEN

Simon Hardy and Luke Cooper have written an important book about the challenges confronting Marxism in the contemporary era. (1) They reject any illusions about Marxism being a credible doctrine with popular mass support and instead are aware of its present marginalisation: “The gap between where we are now and where we want to be is the basic problematic of left politics today. Once you get past the optimistic rhetoric of the left, the fear that lingers behind the scenes is whether we can overcome the radical disjuncture between our political aspirations and the degree of support in the working class that genuine revolutionary change requires.”(2) This comment is praiseworthy in terms of its sober realism and recognition of the isolation of Marxism within society. However what is assumed is the traditional view that the task of Marxism is to provide the working class with the theory that will then become translated into mass practice. It could be argued that this approach is still elitist and implies that the role of the working class is to carry out the mission supplied by Marxist doctrine.

In contrast to what seems to be suggested by the authors, Michael Lebowitz maintains that the involvement of the working class in struggle creates the possibility for them to aspire to new horizons. The effective rejection of the imperatives of capital creates the possibility for labour to become new subjects with increasingly ambitious goals: “In struggling against capital, accordingly workers produce themselves differently. Ridding themselves in this way of the ‘muck of ages’, in short, they produce themselves no longer as results of capital but as presuppositions of a new society.”(3) This view is not meant to suggest that every struggle will automatically result in the generation of a different society. Most struggles are defeated or result in partial victories. But the task of Marxism is not to impose itself as an elite force that effectively dictates how the struggle should proceed and instead it should propose strategies that enhance the very possibility for labour to struggle against capital as a collective social force. In other words, the role of Marxism is to contribute to the development of the capacity of labour to generate an alternative to the domination of capital.

In this sense the crisis of Marxism is not merely about its isolation and marginalisation and in order to make this point precise we would argue that Marxism has become differentiated from the working class and other oppressed forces. The ideas of Marxism no longer provide inspiration for working people and instead Marxism is isolated in this sense. This situation is recognised by Hardy and Cooper, but what they do not seem to be suggesting is that the answer to the problem is that the forces of Marxism become more inventive and imaginative. Instead their standpoint is still an elitist rejection of the major task which is that the role of Marxism should be to encourage the creativity and capacity of working people to change society. Hence the crisis of Marxism is that it is unable to develop powerful ideas that would promote the aspirations of working people to change society. Hence the central issue is not actually about the marginalisation of Marxism and is instead about how this isolation is realised and perceived. The point is that Marxism lacks inspiring ideas that would encourage people to consciously struggle against the domination of capital and for the formation of an alternative society.

Marxism has become a social commentator that is still anti-capitalist, but it has begun to question its own credentials about having a political relation with working people. Instead as Frederick Jameson argues capitalism seems to have become invincible and therefore not receptive to revolutionary change: “In other words, what is open about capitalism is its dynamic of expansion (of accumulation, of appropriation, of imperialism). But this dynamic is also a doom and a necessity: the system cannot not expand; if it remains stable it stagnates and dies; it must continue to absorb everything in its path, to interiorize everything that was hitherto exterior to it….Capitalism is thus what has been called an infernal machine, a perpetuum mobile or unnatural miracle, whose strengths turn out to be what is most intolerable about it.”(4) If capitalism is effectively invincible the strategic importance of promoting the perspective of revolutionary change by working people becomes meaningless. We have to rely upon illusions that the crisis of capitalism will advance automatic change, and the role of conscious action by working people becomes superseded.

In other words, some of the most influential supporters of Marxism have become affected by the apparent invincibility of capitalism. This standpoint is over-compensated by the approach of the various Marxist groups that is to justify optimistic predictions of the imminent struggles against capitalism and to predict the prospect of its overthrow. Thus Alex Callinicos claims: “If neither side holds back then, sooner or later, a decisive test of strength is strength is unavoidable. To undertake a revolutionary project today, at the beginning of the 21st century, is an awesome task, particularly given the destructive power that the lords of capital now command. It is, however, the path on which the anti-capitalist movement has embarked – not as the result of a conscious strategy but through the logic of the struggles in which it is engaged.”(6) Consequently the apparent tendency within Marxism is to either adapt to the apparent strength of capitalism, or to uphold an objectivist view that suggests the logic of mass struggle will somehow result in the development of a dynamic of revolutionary change despite the fact that the participants of these struggles are not actually supporters of the overthrow of capitalism. The problem with both these perspectives is that it is not possible to articulate a credible agency of change, and nor is it possible to indicate that the various struggles that are occurring are connected to the aim of the replacement of capitalism with an alternative society. What is being glossed over is the complete absence of any connection between working people and the programme of communism. Instead of this sober recognition of the immensity of the tasks confronting Marxism the approach is to either accommodate to the power of capitalism, or else subjectively define present struggles in anti-capitalist terms. The result is pessimism or the one-sided alternative of optimism. What is not admitted is that the most important reason why working people are reticent to support Marxism is because of the inability of Marxism to develop inspiring reasons as to why the struggle for communism is possible and credible.

In this context, it is actually questionable whether Hardy and Cooper come to terms with the full extent of the crisis of Marxism. They situate this crisis in terms of the inability of the Marxist groups to become relevant to the struggles that have developed against capitalism in the recent period. They explain this in terms of the apparent organisational limitations of the Bolshevik model and the detrimental impact of the divisions within the Marxist left, and argue that Marxists should relate more seriously to the ideas about democracy generated by the mass struggles. This view has elements of truth but their answer is that Marxism should become practical in order to relate to the mass struggles generated by the crisis. But how is it possible to become practical without addressing outstanding theoretical questions? Possibly the most outstanding question created by the demise of Stalinism was the view that what was defined as socialism was a failed society. This is precisely why the various participants in the mass struggles reject any perspective that the alternative to the domination of global capitalism is socialism and communism. The influence of this view means that the relevance of Marxism is reduced to being the most ardent supporters of the protest movement and strikes. Marxism has effectively accepted that their role is limited to agitating to what is possible within capitalism. Consequently the very call for the overthrow of capitalism lacks any credibility. This point was put very forcefully by Robert Kurz, who recognised that activism cannot by itself project revolutionary aspirations onto struggles that lack conscious expression of a communist perspective: “The leftist tail-end worshippers of each and every visible social manifestation on the streets would have loved just to wallow in the blossoming landscape of 2011, the year of revolution. Quite apart from the shamelessness of digging up and gnawing hectically at the buried and forgotten ‘r’ word in such an activist-opportunistic way, they do no favours to the cause of social liberation with their bare adulation of diverse social protests and uprisings. As Marx rightly pointed out, real revolutionary upheaval only proceeds to the extent that its beginnings and intermediate stages are criticised, and ruthlessly so, in order to push them on beyond their half-measures, wrong conclusions and errors. Otherwise the whole enterprise can tip over into its opposite. What is decisive here is the status of theoretical reflexion. That is particularly true in a situation such as today’s in which there is no idea at all of the idea of a revolutionary break with the ruling order.”(6)

This point may be exaggerated but it does insist that the role and task of Marxism is not to become uncritical supporters of the various protests that occur because this results in ideological accommodation to the various illusions generated by these struggles. Instead it is necessary to understand that these struggles are characterised by the lack of the vision of Marxism. The result is that the struggles are not inspired by the goals and aims of Marxism. Hence the actual practical involvement of Marxism means the dilution of its goals in order to make Marxism seem relevant and credible. We could also suggest that this situation was because Marxism could not provide a credible vision of the future that was able to rival the inspiration provided by ideas like democracy and freedom. Hardy and Cooper are also aware that the various upheavals of 2011 lacked the inspiration and influence of Marxism, and they reject any complacency that implies the economic crisis will result in the automatic development of its importance. They recognise that despite increasing problems there is no effective ideological challenge to the domination of capitalism. However their response does not call for the self-critical re-assessment of the theory of Marxism. Instead they call for: “A reflective and critical evaluation of long held orthodoxies and traditions is needed which can help foster new avenues for unity. A resolute focus on the conjuncture and its practical demands, a willingness to fraternally discuss ‘old disagreements’ in the context of on-going collaboration must become the norm and not the exception.”(7)

Thus, the crucial question of the re-evaluation of Marxism as part of this process of the creation of a new political practice is actually glossed over. It is assumed that Marxism is in a healthy condition and the problem is with the various organisational traditions. But, as Kurz has pointed out, the problem of activism and opportunism is the expression of limitations at the level of Marxist theory. This means we cannot avoid tackling the theory of Marxism if more imaginative expressions of practice are to be developed. In other words it is one sided to suggest that the only real problem is the lack of influence of Marxism within the various struggles that are developing because of its crisis. Consequently, the answer is not to develop a practical response that avoids issues of theory. Instead we have to acknowledge that Marxism has oscillated between pessimism and false optimism and has refused to discuss its inability to inspire the struggles of the working class. Hardy and Cooper recognise the problem to some extent and locate it with the marginalisation and apparent lack of relevance of Marxism. This is true but it could also be argued that Marxism has failed to respond imaginatively and creatively to this situation. Consequently what is at stake is not just the credibility of Marxism in organisational terms but also the question of the role of Marxism as a theory that can inspire and influence the working class. Marxism has failed to provide a strategy that can express the aspirations of a mass movement against austerity, and it has lacked a vision of the alternative to capitalism. Instead of confronting these issues, the authors imply that organisational renewal is the crucial aspect of constructing the credibility of Marxism. They do not necessarily reject issues like strategy and the question of communism but what is primary to them is the party question.

In other words the implicit assumption of the authors is that the organisational progress of the various Marxist groups in terms of the development of unity will promote the resolution of the problem of relevance of Marxism for the working class. However, this standpoint can only be viable if Marxism is able to develop policies and principles that relate imaginatively to the concerns of working people. If this unity is achieved in minimal terms because the old dogmas have not been rejected, the prospect of relating to working people will still be remote. Crucially, Marxism has to reject the traditional doctrine of the rejection of utopian imagination in the name of realism and opposition to blueprints and acknowledge that an important reason that people cannot envisage an alternative to capitalism is because of the scepticism about the claims for communism. This question is not a diversion from the practical aspects of the class struggle and is instead connected to the development of consciousness and action in the present that can enhance the prospect of the realisation of a better future. As Martin Buber commentated: “As against this the “utopian” or non-Marxist socialist desires a means commensurate with his ends; he refuses to believe that in our reliance on the future “leap” we have to do now the direct opposite of what we are striving for; for he believes that we must create here and now the space now possible for the thing for which we are striving, so that it may come to fulfilment then; he does not believe in the post-revolutionary leap, but he does believe in revolutionary continuity. To put it more precisely: he believes in a continuity within which the revolution is only the accomplishment, the setting free and extension of a reality that has already grown to its true possibilities.”(8)

The apparent reluctance of Cooper and Hardy to conceive of an alternative future except as the goal of struggle means that they are vulnerable to tendencies towards the promotion of activism and the related emphasis on the possibilities of the present. This means, despite their revolutionary intentions, the future becomes an unobtainable ideal that has little relation to the importance of the present and its practical tasks. In this sense Marxism becomes a form of militancy and not the articulation of a utopian vision that is connected to the possibilities of struggle in the present. If Marxism is to be both distinctive and relevant to struggles it should be developing creative ideas about how the various struggles of the present can promote the alternatives of the future. Failure to recognise the importance of this task means that Marxism becomes a variety of reformism that in a critical manner has accepted the imperatives of capital. This point connects with the view that it is not sufficient to know what we are against and instead we have to articulate an alternative.

To Slavoj Zizek Marxists should be concerned with developing principled arguments that indicate the popular character of the dictatorship of the proletariat.(9) But this task will surely end in failure because of the apparent identification of this regime with the domination of the party-state elite. Instead we have to imagine different types of socialism and communism that can exist without the ascendency of the monolithic party. Cooper and Hardy are against Stalinism, but what are they in favour of? Apart from being against capitalism we do not know how they would tackle the problems of poverty, famine and ecological crisis. We should not expect a detailed programme of how they conceive of socialism but the outline of some sense of the future would mean that their concerns are not merely to build a successful movement against capitalism. Unless they become future orientated we can only conclude that their aims are immersed in the present and the goal of building the latest form of the revolutionary party. But it is this very aim which has been brought into question by the very character of the struggles that have taken place in the recent period. Possibly our aims should be more modest and yet also very ambitious in that the tasks of revolutionary Marxism should be about trying to influence the strategic conceptions of the mass movement and indicating that the logic of present developments can express the possibilities of the future. In other words the aim should not be to build a mass revolutionary party that will lead the working class to victory. Cooper and Hardy have not rejected this approach and this is very problematical because it is the party form that is in crisis. Their identification of the crisis of Marxism with the failures of the party model do not express the essence of the real crisis of Marxism which is the rejection of the role of utopian imagination and adaptation to the demands of the present.

These limitations are perplexing in some senses because Cooper and Hardy are aware that struggle can pose the question of an alternative future: “And our practical activity in the here and now looks towards a future that is necessarily uncertain, but also the subject of our aspirations.”(10) They are also aware that an important problem is backward looking nostalgia for the past or adaptation to capitalism in the present and belief that there is no alternative to the capitalist system: “So, the challenge we face today can be summarised as the need to build political organisations that reclaim the idea of progress, promote resistance that makes incursions on the power of capital and also have credibility in the eyes of large numbers of working people.”(11) They do suggest that there is presently no coherent alternative to capitalism and that this alternative may be communism, but this understanding has only an abstract meaning because they do not suggest how communism can become the aspiration of the mass struggles that are occurring against austerity. Instead their aim seems to be to reclaim communism from its discrediting by Stalinism, but the sense of communism as the utopian focus of struggle is not articulated. Hence the question of the spirit of the new is not concretised, and the character of the new is instead defined in a vague manner of being the alternative to adaptation to the present. The relation of the present to the future is not elaborated in the systematic manner that is developed by Martin Buber. Consequently the question of the importance of the future does become secondary to the task of building a revolutionary party in the present. The problem is that this approach no longer seems to inspire those that become involved in struggle. Hence the tasks of Marxism may have to become modified in order to accommodate this new reality, but this does not mean that the aim of the revolutionary transformation of society and the realisation of communism should be compromised.

Cooper and Hardy reject the argument that the structural changes within the working class have undermined the possibility of collective class actions. Instead they maintain that the intensely exploited service workers of the present era could become new layers of opposition to the actions of the capitalist class in the period of austerity. But they also recognise that the trade unions act to undermine militant actions and so they call for the development of rank and file organisation. This is a principled approach but it seems to suggest that the major aim of the militant activity should be limited to defence of the public sector. The potential social power of the unions is mentioned but the question of how this power could be developed and realised is not mentioned. There is no conception of the strategy by which the austerity measures could be defeated. Instead it would seem that the aim of building rank and file organisation is sufficient in and of itself. Consequently the failure to advance an offensive strategy for opposing the austerity measures means that the authors adapt to the present defensive strategy of the trade union leadership. This standpoint is inadequate. Instead we must connect the limited aim of opposing the public expenditure cuts with the tasks of a socialist offensive. The struggle to defend immediate objectives should become the basis for Marxists to present imaginative ideas as to why this struggle should become part of a socialist offensive. Meszaros explains why the socialist offensive has become necessary because capital can no longer afford to make concessions to the working class. The situation is urgent about why the defensive struggles of the past have to be replaced by an offensive struggle against the domination of capital: “It must be emphasised…the historical actuality of the socialist offensive – due to exhaustion of the self-serving concessions which capital could make in the past to a defensively articulated labour movement - does not means that success is assured and its realisation is in our immediate vicinity. Being “historical “ here indicates, on the one hand, that the necessity of instituting some fundamental changes in the orientation and organisation of the socialist movement has appeared on the historical agenda; and on the other that the process in question unfolds under the pressure of powerful historical determinations, pushing the social agency of labour in the direction of a sustained strategic offensive if it wants to realise not only its potentially all-embracing transformatory objectives but even its most limited ones.”(12)

Consequently, the task of Marxists is to develop a strategy that connects the present to the future, and this task is represented by the perspective of the socialist offensive because it is based on the acknowledgement that the period of the successful struggles of a defensive character are over. Instead of the limited objectives of the past, which were made possible by the period of boom and general prosperity, the extent of the crisis of capitalism means that the actual defence of material gains poses the prospect of the transformation of society in favour of the interests of labour. This is a vital task of Marxism because of the very ideological domination of the view that alternatives to capitalism are not possible in the present. If Marxism does not outline and defend a conception of the socialist offensive no one else will because of the extent of the continued ideological hegemony of capital despite the situation of crisis. Cooper and Hardy advocate the trade unions become organs of struggle and yet do not suggest what should be the political basis of this process of transformation. It could be implied that the trade unions should actually realise defensive tasks such as protection of the public sector in more militant terms. This is an inadequate approach that does not address the actual enormity of the tasks that have been created by the character of the present situation. This is because the point being made by Meszaros is that defensive struggle, however militant, is increasingly unlikely to obtain its objectives in the present situation. Instead the prospect of making limited gains is actually based on the development of an offensive strategy that will pose the questions of economic and political power within society.

Mezsaros does not outline what could be the content of this socialist offensive. The Democratic Socialist Alliance believes that it is possible to obtain mass popular support for a European general strike against austerity. This process has already begun with a successful international day of action in Southern Europe, and the potential is specifically expressed by the intense discontent in Greece. Instead of this strategic clarity, Cooper and Hardy provide important information about the social role of the working class but they do not connect this empirical data to the issue of how mass militant struggle against the austerity measures could be realised. It is also necessary to recognise that the very possibility for Marxism to become influential in this context of arguing for strategy is connected to the credibility of its vision for the future. Furthermore, the mass actions involved in the general strike will enhance belief in and expression of alternatives to capitalism. The very conception of communism will be the outcome of struggle as well as theoretical reflection. These types of possibilities do not seem to be recognised by Cooper and Hardy who differentiate between the defensive struggles of the trade unions when compared to the more radical struggles of the present. The praise for the imaginative and radical character of the recent protest movement contrasts with the apparent indifference to outlining how struggles of labour can advance the cause of the realisation of an alternative future. In practice if not in theory, the conception of the socialist offensive is replaced by an adaptation to the struggles of the present. The question that arises is whether this creates a dilution of the objectives of Marxism.

Cooper and Hardy are primarily concerned with the lessons of the struggles of 2011. They suggest that the various protest movements are very important but that the Marxist left was apparently unable to influence them because of their rigid practices and the limitations of dogma and authoritarianism. Marxists have not been able to translate the success of their role in single issue campaigns into becoming the ideological influence of the various protest movements: “But the same problem still presents itself to the radical left; of how to move from social movement agitation to making radical left wing and anti-capitalist politics a credible force.”(12) The issue of the challenges for Marxism is outlined in terms of the question of obtaining influence for the organisations of the left. The implied suggestion is that the maximum potential of the various struggles will be greater if the Marxist left becomes a hegemonic force. The question of the relevance of Marxism is defined in terms of the prospects of leadership of mass movements. Only in this context will anti-capitalist politics become decisive and the basis of political practice, and in this manner the limitations of protest will be overcome. This approach is a myth and is still based on the elitist view that the role of the party is dynamic whilst the mass movement should follow its dictates. It is questionable whether Marxism has some exclusive understanding of how a struggle should occur and realise its potential. The role of Marxism should not be as an instructor to various struggles, and instead it should be the theoretical inspiration that can provide creative ideas about developing the inner potential of any mass movement. Hence the aim of Marxism should not be about realising leadership and hegemonic influence. Instead it should act as the critic of any illusions about how political progress can be realised, and also offer strategic advice that can become the conscious perspectives of the mass movement.

The role of Marxism is not to pose as an alternative to the leadership that is created by the mass movement. Instead Marxism should act as the advisor to the spontaneously constituted leadership of the mass movements. In this sense the differences between Marxism and the mass movement will be narrowed but Marxism will retain its independent voice as the theoretical expression of the struggle. In this context, Marxism will not merge with the movement and instead retain its role as the generator of ideas about the character of the struggle. Marxism will truly realise its role when the mass movement achieves a sense of self reliance that is able to develop strategy independently, and therefore able to reflect on its own mistakes and problems. In comparison Cooper and Hardy envisage the concept of party revolution because of the inherent limitations of the spontaneous character of mass struggles: “The moment of mass mobilisation cannot last forever at which point the masses will fall back on their existing institutions. The political lesson lies in….trying to build over the long term, durable political organisations that have deep roots in society, so that when the moment of crisis and mass mobilisation emerges, they are in a position to make what once appeared to be politically impossible become the politically inevitable.”(14) The concern of Cooper and Hardy is that the mass movement cannot sustain itself and therefore requires the leadership of the Marxist party if victory is be realised. It is this conception of revolution that is no longer credible. People no longer want to follow the leadership of the Marxist party because they increasingly have become confident in their own leadership and practice. This does not mean that illusions in capitalism are overcome by struggle. People gravitate towards adaptation to capitalism because of the influence of popular scepticism about communism. This is precisely why an important role of Marxism is to argue for the communist alternative to capitalism and carry out ideologically struggle within the mass movement in favour of the aim of communism.

 However adhering to this theoretical and ideological task does not mean the Marxist party should try to become the leadership of the mass movement. Instead the aim is about developing influence and not about trying to realise hegemonic organisational power. It has been the very preoccupation of Marxism with political power that has repelled people, and this is why the only principled task is to reject the narrow aim of achieving domination within mass movements and instead be content with the role of theoretical advisor. In this manner the true test of success will be that people voluntarily accept the objective of communism without the intervention of the party. Furthermore, the mass struggle will develop the organisations, methods and consciousness of struggle that can advance the realisation of an alternative to capitalism without the role of a party. In other words, the dialectical relation between the party and class is based on the attainment of the highest levels of theoretical integrity so that the theory of the party can influence the development of the struggle. Hence the criterion of success is about the mass movement being influenced by Marxism in order to make advances on the basis of its own impulses and strengths. This means that the party does not compromise its theory and programme but its motivations are based on promoting the self-activity of working people and all protest groups.

In contrast, Cooper and Hardy only occasionally mention the theory of Marxism because their concern is with the very organisational model of the party that is repelling the new activists from Marxism. They are prepared to undertake both organisational and ideological revision if it advances the prospect of accommodation with the new activists: “For the “old left” far less dogmatism in their organisational and ideological assumptions coupled with genuine attempts to build organic unity would go a long way to reach a situation where we treated “old” and “new” as dichotomies.”(14) Consequently an important aspect of the apparent inability to realise unity with the new protest movements is the theory of Marxism and so this should be diluted and revised in order to promote the relevance of the party model. The ultimate aim of realising hegemonic power within the protest movements is not rejected and instead this aim is advanced in the form of considerable theoretical concessions and pragmatic adjustments of what is meant by Marxism. In this manner the role of the protest movements is not criticised, but it is also implied that they would be more effective with the leadership of Marxism. The result of this standpoint is that the requirements of practice are upheld at the expense of theory, even if formally the principles of Marxism are still asserted. Hence: ‘but by adopting an open-minded disposition, one that recognises that practice is the main criteria for truth, and finding points of agreement with the best “libertarian” activists we can begin the process of renewal.”(15) The problem with this standpoint is that it considers that the problem is with Marxist theory and not the organisational model of the party. The result is theoretical dilution that is not actually called for combined with the continued adherence to the rigidity of the party model which is what the activists really object to. Consequently the acceptance of theoretical dilution together with inflexible adherence to the party model will not actually result in the progress of Marxism and the development of fruitful alliances with the activists of the various protest movements.

A different approach has been advocated by a supporter of left communism. He suggests that the actually alternative to the organisational inflexibility of the Leninist party model is the emphasis on the role of theory: “If left communists have allowed themselves no authority as directors or representatives of the people, they have frequently appealed to the authority of theory in their attempts to develop socialist consciousness. The left communist tradition is characterized by various attempts at theoretical construction or philosophical shift in the face of the political bankruptcy of social democracy and Leninism. Confronted by immense historical difficulties and anxious to differentiate itself from the socialist orthodoxy’s attempt to lead the working class, left communists have sought to arm the movement with theory.”(16) The point being made is that the issue of the elitism of the role of Marxism is generally located in the role of the party model, and so the answer to this problem is addressed with the importance of theory. Theory does not have to be contemplative and separate from the actions of the masses in struggle and instead it can be an indispensable influence concerning how this struggle develops, and in relation to what should be the aims and objectives of mass actions. In contrast to this understanding Hardy and Cooper seem to suggest that theory is not important and instead Marxism should adopt the objectives defined by the various protest movements. The result of this process is considerable theoretical dilution and the loss of programmatic independence but the apparent gain would be the realisation of the relevance of the forces of Marxism. However what has actually occurred is that the acceptance of theoretical compromise has not resulted in political advances because of the limitations imposed on the struggle by the continuation of the role of the party model. Activists will still object to the role of Marxism because of their concerns with the continuing status of the party model. Hence the process of theoretical dilution will represent a compromise that has not achieved any gains and yet the socialist objectives of the forces of Marxism will have been undermined by the attempt to establish coalition with the activists. Marxism should be trying to persuade the activists about the superiority of their theoretical objectives in terms of the prospects for socialism and communism. Instead what could occur is that the forces of Marxism have adopted the vague democratic platform of the activists.

Hardy and Cooper would argue that they are not engaging in a process of theoretical compromise and instead they want to relate to the democratic programme of the Occupy movement with socialist objectives: “In this spirit, Occupiers have put forward a new popular minimum programme pushing in the direction of a different type of society. Using situations wracked with social crisis, such as we have seen in Greece over the last five years as a testing ground, we need to push these movements in the direction of radical forms of workplace democracy, co-ordinating new forms of collective democratic and participatory working class organisation, that challenges the power of the capitalist state and can ultimately provide the basis of a new society.”(17) In other words, in an ad hoc and expedient manner the various democratic objectives of the Occupy movement are connected to the socialist objectives of Marxism. The possibility that these objectives may be contradictory and opposed is not discussed by the authors because they assume that the democratic demands that have been made will logically and naturally connect with the aims of socialism. Furthermore, the fact that the Occupy movement does not articulate its aspirations in terms of socialism, and their conception of democracy assumes the continuation of capitalism, does not concern the authors. Instead by glossing over these tensions they can connect the vague conception of democracy outlined by the Occupy movement with the perspective of socialism. What is not being considered is that the issue of democracy is actually being articulated by the activists in a manner that avoids elaborating its relation to socialism. Consequently, if democracy is to be connected to socialism this will require ideological struggle by Marxism and the development of the conception of the relation of democracy to socialism. It is admitted by various Marxist theorists that the relation of democracy to socialism has not been elaborated, and instead the critique made of liberal democracy is not accompanied by a conception of what is socialist democracy. (18) Cooper and Hardy also make some critical comments about the limitations of liberal democracy but fail to address the aspect of what is meant by socialist democracy except to vaguely imply that it relates to a society that is not capitalist. Issues like the relation of liberal democracy to socialist democracy are not elaborated and instead the assertion being made is that the Occupy’s conception of democracy should be connected to an explicit anti-capitalist programme. What is not discussed is the issue of how the type of democracy being advocated by Occupy represents the reluctance to advocate socialism. It is actually assumed by the activists that socialism has the potential to be anti-democratic. It is this objection that needs to be addressed by Marxists instead of effectively being ignored.

Hardy and Cooper briefly recognise that socialism has to be related to democracy, but this observation is not given concrete content. They are aware of the failures of liberal democracy to be responsive to the popular aspirations of people, but they fail to recognise that the central problem of the lack of democracy within so-called socialist societies is the role of the monolithic party regime. How it is possible to reconcile multi-party democracy with the successful realisation of the objectives of socialism is not addressed by them because of the very assumption that socialism requires the domination of the party model. It is these very concerns that mean the May Day manifesto effectively argues that a democratic world can be realised without the necessity of socialism. Cooper and Hardy accommodate to that view in terms of emphasising the democratic content of the struggle against capitalism and yet being effectively silent about how democracy can be established within a socialist society. In this context the limitations of liberal democracy are outlined and yet what is not recognised is that liberal democracy may be a necessary part of the democracy of socialism. This point is made by Andrew Levine who argues that liberal democracy is part of a continuity with the socialist project. (19)

In other words, the problem with Hardy and Cooper approach is that they consider the question of the relation between socialism and democracy as if it is not problematical. Hence they suggest that all that is required is that the democratic approach of the May Day manifesto of the Occupy movement be improved by the additions of some expressions of socialism. The result is an effective conciliation of the view that socialism is a peripheral and not important part of the struggle for a better world. But what is more important is that the authors do not recognise the complex relation between democracy and socialism and instead assume that democracy can be compatible with the continuation of the party model within a socialist society. Thus they do not actually recognise the reluctance of the activists to support socialism because of its anti-democratic implications. Brief reference by the authors to the limitations of Stalinism does not address this concern. What is required is the elaboration of the relation of liberal democracy to socialism, and some details about the how the role of democracy may function within socialism. Instead of this elaboration the emphasis on the anti-democratic character of capitalism represents the dogmatic and inflexible reasoning that becomes the justification of democracy within a socialist society.

Cooper and Hardy argue convincingly that the problem of overcoming the isolation and marginalisation of Marxism is connected to the issues of developing unity and a credible strategy for change: “The change we seek should not be limited to finding new avenues to overcome disunity, but also starting to develop strategies that are simultaneously able to disrupt capital and appear to represent a credible alternative to the system. If left unity is one dimension of this credibility, the other is being able to articulate a strategy that is both revolutionary and concrete – no easy thing.”(20) They suggest the Left should overcome the limitation of conservatism and modesty and instead become equal to the challenges posed by the situation of crisis. The problem is that they are reluctant to outline the type of strategy that would support. They know what they are against, which is over-optimistic and abstract propaganda for socialism combined with union activism, but their central concern seems to be with the transformation of the left so that the conditions for transforming reality will be created: “It is a left which is as committed to changing itself, its practice and its outlook, as well as changing the world.”(21) The suggestion is that a united and democratically transformed Marxist left is crucial to the possibility of transforming capitalism into socialism. The problem with this perspective is that it does not break with the orthodox conception of the process of revolutionary change based on the dominant role of a party. This means the authors actually fail to recognise the majority character of struggles of the recent period.

What has occurred in the contemporary era is that activists are rejecting the importance of the party model. The failure of Marxism to respond to this situation is an important reason why Marxism is in crisis. It is entirely possible that the renewal of the epoch of the role of the revolutionary party is over. This does not mean that Marxists should not try to develop unity initiatives and democratic organisational change but it suggests the necessity of strategic modification of the orthodox conception of party led revolution. It is this challenge that Hardy and Cooper fail to realise because they still conceive of the class struggle in terms of the leading role of the party. However, Marxism has a possibly more modest role, and yet one that is vitally important, which is to develop strategies that can influence the promotion of a mass movement against austerity. The starting point should be as Zizek argues which is to reinvent the popularity of the communist idea: “Today our message should be the same…..to know and to fully engage in communism, to again act in full fidelity with the communist idea.”(22) The challenge for Marxism is not crude interest in organisational influence and instead it should be concerned with the promotion of support for communism. One of the reasons that the various struggles are limited to what the authors call capitalist realism is because of mistrust in a social alternative. Hence an important but neglected task for Marxism is consideration of how we can generate popular interest and support for communism. This is not just a propaganda task but is connected to the realisation of strategic aims.

In other words, as long as people limit themselves to what is possible within capitalism they will be concerned with the defensive aims of maintaining social gains and rejecting the possibility of connecting their struggles to a better and alternative future: “However, utopians must not be afraid to posit the possibilities of a better life, away from those institutions – particularly the state and capital – that are seldom questioned, and much worse still, appear today as unquestionable. As Laclau and Mouffe….have put it, each radical emancipatory project must seek a path between the coercive myth of the ideal city and the positivist pragmatism of a reformism without a project.”(23) The problem with Marxism is that it has been dedicated to the aims of power without the connection of this aim to a vision of a better future. Marxism has contributed to the scepticism about the future and accommodated to an emphasis on the present. However, Marxism should accept that its task is to make propaganda for communism and in this context connect this task to the role of strategy. Hence the question that must be addressed by Marxists is what strategy would be most effective in promoting support for the communist alternative. In this context we would argue that strategic focus on the possibility of a European general strike would connect the development of international class struggle against the austerity measures with the generation of the conditions to realise a better society. But this development is not dependent on Marxism becoming the leadership of the mass movement in the classic sense of the creation of a party revolution. Instead the role of Marxism is to act as an influential and vital aspect of the generation of communist mass consciousness. This means the dynamic and active aspect of the revolutionary process is the mass movement. Consequently it is entirely possible that this type of change could occur without Marxism evolving into the creation of hegemonic revolutionary parties that instruct working people as to how revolutionary change should occur. Instead the strategy of Marxism acts as a flexible guide for the class struggle but the process of decision making and tactical turns resides with working people and their popular organisations.

In contrast to this strategic standpoint, Cooper and Hardy are still located in the past. They do not reject the Bolshevik model of revolution, and so do not want to consider that this event may belong to the past and is not integral to the possibilities of the present. Hence their central aim seems to be the re-creation of the Bolshevik organisation and to this end they aim for the unity of Marxism. But what is apparent in terms of the development of recent mass struggles in the present is that organisation is secondary to ideas. (24) Thus the idea of democracy influenced the Arab Spring even if the question of what was democracy was never sufficiently addressed by the mass struggles. The task of Marxism is not to be pre-occupied with its organisational strength. Instead it is necessary to develop ideas that promote the utopian attractiveness of communism, and to connect this utopian vision to the immediate concerns of the mass movement against austerity. It is in this sense that we can evaluate the feasibility and credibility of strategy and therefore be able to evaluate whether Marxism is becoming able to renew itself and become relevant to working people. But if Marxism is only concerned with its popularity via the continuation of illusions in the importance of the party model, the result will only be future splits and internal disputes. Instead of this potential sectarianism what should be developed is a Marxism that is out-going and preoccupied with the tasks of the mass movement.

In a cynical and sceptical manner, Paul Mason has outlined important reasons why the traditional concerns of Marxism cannot be sustained. But the answer to this scepticism is not the acceptance of a demise of Marxism and instead what is necessary is a new type of Marxism. In this context a new dialectic is being generated, if the Marxist left is to be relevant to the aspirations of the mass movement it needs to become more like academic Marxism. It needs to discuss communism and reject its narrow activism and effective acceptance of the situation of the poverty of ideas. Unfortunately, Hardy and Cooper are not able to rise to this challenge because they do not overcome the illusions of the past. Their attempt to establish a Marxism for the present and future is a failure because they cannot accept that the actual problem is the party model and the existing practices of the various Marxist groups. Thus, the failures of practice are because of the increasing anachronism of the party model. To really make an intellectual breakthrough is to strive to replace the present conception of Marxist organisation with an alternative that is more receptive to the requirements of the impulses of mass struggle. This approach does not mean being over-optimistic about the prospects of mass struggle in the present. Instead what is crucial is that Marxism becomes effective in propagating the importance of communism for the prospects of progress and development of opposition to the austerity measures.

The problems with the Cooper and Hardy approach are summed up in the following comment: “Ultimately we need effective anti-capitalist organisation that can come to be recognised as a serious threat to the ruling class, which can act as a real leadership within the social movements, not by imposition but by a genuine unity of interests between revolutionaries and the people.”(25) It is assumed that the flexible character of the organisation that is being proposed will mean that the leadership of the revolutionary forces will be accepted by the mass movement of the activists and the trade unions. But it is this assumption that is problematical and open to question because the very character of recent mass unrest has been opposed to the role of the party. However, this does not mean that Marxism has become superfluous because these various struggles are self-limiting and have illusions that their aims can be realised within capitalism. Hence the very importance of Marxism is to try and influence the strategic vision of the mass movement and to outline creative arguments about why the goals of the struggles can be most effectively realised in relation to the tasks of the social transformation of society and the construction of communism. In contrast to this modest but important role for Marxism, Cooper and Hardy assume that alongside a process of organisational renewal the leadership of Marxism will be accepted by the activists and the mass movement. It is assumed by them that the only political basis for the success of the mass movement is with the leadership of Marxism. However, this approach results in a political impasse because the forces of the various struggles reject any leading role for Marxism and are sceptical about the necessity of the party model. The logic of this standpoint is that either Marxism compromises its political aims in order to become organisationally relevant, or else it rejects the importance of the struggles. Both of these stances cannot bring about the influence of Marxism within the mass movement.

In opposition to this political and organisational dogmatism, Marxism should consider that the period of the party led revolution is possibly over. The issue is not the revival of some acceptable form of Bolshevism as Hardy and Cooper propose, and instead we should consider a different role for Marxism that continues its role as a theoretical guide to struggle but which is without organisational pretensions of the necessity of leadership. The point is that the aim of leadership can actually result in pessimism and doubt about the importance of Marxism because it becomes the rigid criteria of what constitutes political success. The growth of an organisation becomes the definitive expression of the importance of Marxism. Instead of this organisationally defined approach we should develop more flexible and imaginative criteria about the success of Marxism. Rather than being preoccupied with the question of leadership we should outline what is meant by the development of mass communist consciousness. The task of Marxism is to seek influence that is disinterested about its own importance and is instead concerned with how the struggle should advance and progress. This is why it should develop a strategy that can inspire the workers to go from immediate preoccupations to the more ambitious task of establishing the collective prospect of the formation of a society based on the concerns of working people.

This situation would not mean that Marxism had become self-effacing and based on the denial of its significance. Instead it would truly be based on the approach that the self-emancipation of the working class is based on the actions of self-agency rather than expressing the imperatives of the party. This point is made by Ronald Munck: “There is no hint of substitutionism in Marx’s conception of communist politics, which is also quite non-sectarian. His emphasis on the creativity and self-organizing capacity of the working class inspired labour activists for over 150 years. It was Marx’s Soviet followers, though, who went furthest in creating a new agency, the Party which would substitute itself for the self-activity of the masses and become the arbiter of truth and error among the Marxist clergy.”(26) This elitist development of the understanding of the emerging new forms of the prospects for socialism has been related to the degeneration of the party model, and this situation has influenced the views of the activists in the new struggles. They do not want to become foot soldiers of the party and instead cherish their organisational and political independence. This point can be made about the supporters of the trade unions as well as the adherents of the activist’s movements. In this situation should Marxism uphold its organisational conceptions despite their unpopularity, or can it evolve new forms of relations to the mass movement? Hardy and Cooper recognise that Marxism has to change but they still retain what are becoming outmoded conceptions of the leadership of the party organisation and the Bolshevik conception of revolution.

Despite the formal advocacy of developing imaginative conceptions of the socialist alternative to capitalism, Hardy and Cooper often reduce the issue of alternatives to the development of the organisational influence of the Marxist left. This is why they criticise the various left projects in Europe for failing to become popular and influential. Furthermore, they argue that the Marxist left should become an organisational pressure point within Syriza and argue for a workers government: “There is the potential for a workers government which bases its rule not on the institutions of the bourgeois state, even though it will come into being through the mainstream election process, but seeks to establish forms of direct democracy based on the working class.”(27) This is a voluntarist perspective that ignores the importance of material circumstances. The formation of a national workers government would not be an automatic advance for the Greek working class and instead the economic isolation would increase the hardship and problems of the people. The regime would have to impose autarchy and other forms of national economic activity in order to try and survive in a world that is based on the logic of capital accumulation. The result of this situation would be demoralisation and not the creation of the necessary inspiration to advance the development of a socialist society. It is because of these problems it is necessary to advocate the perspective of an international general strike in order to develop the prospects for a European socialist state. This approach is both more principled and realistic. However Hardy and Cooper reject the importance of internationalism in order to project a scenario of Marxist influence over Syriza. But the result of this projection is the dilution of the Marxist programme of revolution and internationalism.

The authors suggest that Gramsci’s approach of a war on position could be combined with Trotsky’s approach of the transitional method in order to develop a socialist politics that would inspire the struggle for socialism via workplace democracy. The problem is that this perspective is based on the assumption of the leading role of the party. For example, the Transitional Programme maintains: “Workers - men and women – of all countries, place yourselves under the banner of the Fourth International. It is the banner of your forthcoming victory.”(28) This approach is not only based on the illusion of inevitable victory but it also assumes that the central task is to develop working class support for the leadership of the Fourth International. Historical experience has generated many problems for the credibility of this perspective, and instead we should argue that the party model has to be replaced by a different role for Marxism. Zizek would argue that Marxism cannot rely on some-one who is the instrument of complete knowledge and can provide certainty about the role of theory. Instead he maintains: “That is to say, the certainty on which an act relies is not a matter of knowledge, but a matter of belief: a true act is never a strategic intervention in a transparent situation of which we have full knowledge.”(29) Marxists do not have to support the aspect of scepticism in Zizek’s standpoint but we can affirm the problems generated by any illusions in omnipotent knowledge. Hence we have to recognise that historical uncertainty rather than certainty is part of the character of social reality, and so the party cannot act as if it is able to understand and transform reality because of its relation to knowledge about the world. Instead there will be aspects of knowledge that are untested and fallible because of changing circumstances. In this context, the role of the party is not to try and defend its knowledge as a collection of immutable truths and instead it should suggest forms of action that can advance the class struggle. However, the question of whether the activists will support this advice cannot be determined in advance. In this sense, history ‘is not on our side’. Events will not justify Marxism because of our grasp of sophisticated theory. Instead the credibility of our theory will be decided by whether it becomes part of the common sense of the various struggles. This possibility is not guaranteed by the role of the party model and is instead an expression of the coherence of the theory, and its ability to relate to the aspirations of the mass struggles. However, we should remember that this theory will remain static and unfilled if it does not become part of the imagination of the struggles that are taking place.

In the concluding section, Hardy and Cooper envisage the development of programme and strategy as an interactive relation between the various movements and activists with the Marxist organisations. This standpoint seems to be credible, but it cannot be realised if Marxism still assumes that it has the prerogative of leadership. The claims of Marxism to leadership will always suggest an unequal relation to the various mass organisations and so suggest an unequal process of dialogue. Instead the possibility of an interactive dialogue is premised upon the rejection of the claims to leadership by the Marxist groups, and instead they should have the central concern of how to promote the creative possibilities of the various struggles. But the authors effectively uphold the leading role of the Marxist organisations with a pragmatic conception of theory as constantly changing and adapting to the struggle. This emphasis on flexibility is understandable and necessary but it should not be at the expense of principles. For example a principled Marxism would not be expected to adapt to reformist illusions generated by the various struggles and would attempt to defend a revolutionary approach. In other words, Marxism would have to continually attempt to relate and reconcile its principles with the more limited and less ambitious standpoint of the participants in the various struggles.

Hardy and Cooper suggest that the documents developed in response to struggle should be continually tested by practice and so open to revision and improvement. But what does this mean? What are the limits that would make some compromises unacceptable? We can only arrive at coherent answers to these questions if we elaborate principles and a strategy by which Marxism can evaluate the ideas and actions of the various struggles. Failure to carry out these theoretical tasks will either mean unprincipled adaptation of Marxism to the illusions generated by the struggles or else an intransigent inflexibility that is unable to influence the development of mass struggles. There are no guarantees that Marxism can avoid either of these limitations but it will be the very development of theory that generates the possibility to relate to mass movements in a principled manner. However, it is necessary to recognise that the organisational imposition of Marxist ideas does not represent revolutionary politics. The point that needs establishing is that we are talking of a voluntary relationship between Marxism and the organisations of the mass movement. Marxism cannot act as a philosopher king that is trying to remind the working class about its historical mission. Instead there is a tense dialectical relationship between Marxism continuing to reaffirm its principles and being the advisor of struggles. Hardy and Cooper have not worked out this relation and instead tend to uphold the party model and yet advocate pragmatic conciliation of the struggle. This point can be made about their conception of democracy.

Cooper and Hardy outline the challenges posed by the conception of democracy in the following manner: “If there is a lesson of 2011 it is that the left will fail to answer the challenges of our century unless it can show that democracy is a thoroughly left-wing idea. On the one hand, this must mean promoting the radical extension of democracy into the workplace and civic community and so counterpose direct, active living democratic structure to the dry and alienating bureaucratism of its liberal so-called representative incarnation. On the other hand, the left needs to cease seeing the struggle for individual freedoms and the right of self-expression as somehow alien to its collectivist ideals, and instead recognise that a living and dynamic collective can only come into being if in a constant process of reciprocal dialogue with the struggle for free individuality.”(31) This approach does not seem to be contentious in terms of its flexible recognition of the importance of the interaction of the rights of liberal democracy and the alternative of direct democracy. But the problem is that it underestimates the vagueness of the aspiration for democracy which results in ideological confusion. As the authors outline in relation to the Occupy movement the question of what is democracy is conceived in terms of an extension of the democracy that already exists. This standpoint glosses over the crucial relation between Parliament and the issue of what is constituted by socialist democracy. Meszaros is emphatic that when limited to the restrictions of Parliament the working class cannot develop its emancipation which requires greater participation in the organisations of society: “The necessary alternative to parliamentarism is closely linked to the question of real participation, defined as the fully autonomous self-management of their society by the freely associated producers in every domain, well beyond the…mediatory constraints of the modern political state.”(31)

The argument of Marxism is that the imperatives of capital undermine the possibility of the realisation of satisfactory democracy based on the role of the self-management of the producers. Only the overthrow of the domination of capital can prepare the conditions for the realisation of a type of democracy that is authentically participatory. At present the activists do not support this standpoint and instead aim to express the possibilities of democracy within the limitations of capitalism. Thus the Marxist standpoint is not popular because it envisages the flourishing of democracy in the context of the creation of an alternative society. This means the activists envisage that the issue is a reformist question of trying to improve the democratic character of capitalism. But this is the very approach that Meszaros would argue has failed and has instead led Social Democracy to adapt to the requirements of capital. Consequently if the various activists are to support the Marxist standpoint ideological struggle is required that would attempt to convince people of the superiority of a socialist type of democracy.

 In contrast to this awareness, Cooper and Hardy seem to suggest that Marxism already has a cogent understanding of how to argue for socialist democracy. But it can be argued more convincingly that Marxism has not come to terms with the role of modern democracy which is to provide political justification for the class compromise between the working class and the ruling class. Marxism has not been able to develop an alternative that is able to combine the advances of liberal democracy with the potentially higher form of socialist democracy. Instead of this synthesis, Joseph Schumpeter is able to argue that the practice of socialism can result in the denial of democracy: “After all, effective management of the socialist economy means dictatorship not of but over the proletarian in the factory…..As a matter of practical necessity, socialist democracy may eventually turn out to be a greater sham than capitalist democracy ever was”. (32) This type of criticism is shared by the activists of the various protest movements. The challenge for Marxism is to develop a conception of democracy that fulfils the criteria outlined by Meszaros and is able to reconcile autonomy, participation and the rights of the individual. This means that the role of individual rights is actually assimilated into a programme of socialist democracy. In this context the aim is not conciliation of progressive public opinion and instead an attempt is seriously made to connect the rights of the individual with the aims of class struggle. Thus the aim of realising participation is connected to the de-centralisation of the process of decision making to the extent that the interests of the individual are acknowledged. (33) In other words, the most progressive part of the democratic programme of the bourgeois revolution is incorporated into the socialist tasks of the modern era. But we should be aware that this task has not yet been completed and instead the various activists are mistrustful of the democratic claims of Marxism because of historical experience.

Consequently the task for Marxism is not the relatively easy one of trying to reconcile liberal democracy with socialist democracy. Instead what is required is an understanding of the tensions and contradictions that have created the apparent dichotomy between liberal democracy and socialist democracy. Socialism is based on adherence to collective rights that seem to contradict the individual emphasis of capitalist society. It is also argued by Schumpeter that the Marxist conception of dictatorship is opposed to the standpoint of democracy. The compromise of democracy in favour of other political arrangements will undermine the development of a regime based on popular consent: “In any case however it is obvious that any argument in favour of shelving democracy for the transitional period affords an excellent opportunity to evade all responsibility for it. Such provisional arrangements may last for a century or more and means are available for a ruling group installed by a victorious revolution to prolong them indefinitely or to adopt the forms of democracy without substance.”(34) The suggestion is that the Marxist support for a regime that undermines the prospect of the continuation of liberal democracy is hypocritical because it advocates a democratic regime under capitalism that it would not contemplate within socialism when the aim becomes the continuation of political power. It could be argued that the practice of Marxist inspired regimes seems to support this contention and therefore Marxism has comprehensive and detailed theoretical work to elaborate before it is able to establish the compatibility of liberal democracy with socialist democracy. The task is to prove that socialist democracy is not unobtainable, or a disposable principle sacrificed to the imperatives of power, and is instead something that is crucial to the success of the realisation of communism and which is also compatible with liberal democracy. An important theoretical task for Marxism is to develop ideas about the type of institutional mechanisms that can function on the basis of popular and democratic consent. In this context the acceptance of socialism by those that originally opposed this perspective is crucial. The role of democracy is an important part of the answer, but what this means in terms of the character of socialist society is yet to be articulated.

In other words given the various omissions in the theory of Marxism the theory of democracy is still very rudimentary. Many Marxists are committed to the rights of liberal democracy but what relation this has to the class struggle or the political character of communism has not been elaborated outside of repetition of Marx’s assessment of the Paris Commune. Andrew Levine was able to write a book about the limitations of liberal democracy from the standpoint of socialism but what this meant about the political character of socialist democracy he was unable to articulate. (35) Thus the issue of the relation of democracy to the programme of communism is still complex and underdeveloped. It is possible to outline honourable intentions in the manner of Hardy and Cooper but these are not satisfactory in order to realise the necessary theoretical tasks. This inadequacy means that activists are aware of the tensions within Marxism concerning democracy. The very awareness by the activists of this problem means that they prefer to try and reform capitalism in a democratic manner and reject the possibility of a different society that actually undermined democratic freedoms. Cooper and Hardy will not be able to provide an alternative to this type of reasoning until they go beyond formal good intentions and instead elaborate a democratic platform for Marxism. This will have to be detailed in assessing both liberal democracy and the role of democracy within communism.

In the concluding points the authors make welcome comments about the necessity of Marxism to learn constructively from the various struggles and the importance of developing strategy. They also suggest that the forces of Marxism should aim for unity and establish pluralistic relations. Furthermore, they argue in favour of struggle from below and the necessity of extra-parliamentary politics. And they call for a common sense that rejects the domination of the market: “The appeal to common sense is crucial to break down doctrinaire assumptions on the radical left and try to overcome divisions between the “old” and “new”. It also emphasises the need to regroup the left in new political formations that provide a space for strategic thinking, that allow different strategies to co-exist in a certain tension, while also creating the conditions for unity and action.”(36)

The issue of establishing a new common sense is problematical because one of the most important aims of the Marxist project is to oppose the common sense of social reality that upholds the domination of the existing social relations. John Searle has outlined the importance of an institutional reality which in terms of language and other aspects of culture and activity tends to reinforce the status quo. (37) The aim of Marxism should be to promote an alternative that is able to undermine the common sense of the present and instead create the vision of a future that is possible without capitalism. This process will require an immense leap in consciousness, and it is questionable whether the party model is still the appropriate instrument of this development. In the past people considered the party to be the vital aspect of the class struggle because of the example of the October revolution. However with the demise of the Soviet Union, and the increasing distance of new generations from the event of October 1917, the importance of the party form for socialism has also diminished. We do not have to agree with the sceptical claims of post-modernism to recognise that we are in a different period from that which emerged from the period of the apparent success of the Soviet Union and the intensification of the class struggle. (38) Instead of this apparent optimism about the prospects for socialism we are in a world of economic crisis but the domination of capital is still not being questioned. Increasingly there is militancy and even the onset of limited general strikes in Greece and Spain, but the mood is one of desperation rather than of hope about the prospects of an alternative future.

In other words the common sense that is popular is based on the acceptance of capitalism because of scepticism about the future. The alternative of Cooper and Hardy is to try and establish a form of Marxism that is united, contemporary and relevant for the development of struggle. However, this will not overcome the marginalisation of Marxism because this approach does not tackle the causes of the problem which is expressed by the scepticism about the possibility of establishing an alternative society. Ralph Miliband, in his last work, argued that the very character of globalisation would promote discontent and the struggle for alternatives: “It makes no sense to believe that men and women who know, because of the revolution in communications, that there is a different life to be lived will not in time seek to achieve a different and better life.”(39) The truth of this perspective has already been shown by the events of the Arab Spring. The problem is that the unrest connected to the lack of democracy can still be absorbed within capitalism because the opposition to the domination of power is not the same as the socialist project, as Frederick Jameson explains: “But as the radical disjunction between politics and economics I have proposed here suggests, the outcome of an emphasis on exploitation is a socialist program, while that of an emphasis on domination is a democratic one, a program and language only too easily co-opted by the capitalist state.”(40) The point is that it is possible for people to be discontented and yet not support the socialist alternative for various reasons. Hardy and Cooper do not recognise that an important reason for this situation is that the alternative of communism is not imagined and made into a popular utopian vision of the future.

Unfortunately the authors are reluctant to discuss the future because they still share Marx’s reluctance to outline a detailed conception of the alternative to capitalism. Consequently the emphasis of their book because of this limitation is on the importance of struggle and the development of the influence of Marxism. Thus Marxism is reduced to the politics of protest and the emphasis is on the present but still at the expense of the relation of the present to the future. Hence the type of Marxism being advocated by Hardy and Cooper does not go beyond the militant Marxism being supported by Zizek: “A true Left takes a crisis seriously, without illusions, but as inevitable, as a chance to be fully exploited. The basic insight of the radical Left is that although crises are painful and dangerous they are ineluctable, and they are the terrain on which battles have to be waged and won.”(41) This comment has truth but the logic of this view is that Marxism would become the party of struggle at the expense of the issue of what is primarily at stake. The aim of Marxism is not to be merely audacious and intransigent but to be also imaginative and creative. Marxism should be relevant to working people not primarily because it is resolute and uncompromising and instead its banner should be about the future and how it is to be realised. In contrast, the authors do argue for the importance of strategy but do not connect this with goals and the issue of the alternative to capitalism. Hence, they remain a party of protest and not the party of communism.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Luke Cooper and Simon Hardy: Beyond Capitalism? Winchester, Zero Books 2012

(2) ibid p4

(3)Michael A Lebowitz: Beyond Capital, Second edition, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire 2003 p182

(4)Frederick Jameson: representing Capital Verso, London 2011 p146

(5)Alex Callinicos: Anti-Capitalist Manifesto Polity Press, Cambridge, 2004 p142

(6)Robert Kurz No Revolution Anywhere, Chronos Publications, London 2012

(7)Cooper and Hardy op cit p19

(8)Martin Buber: Paths in Utopia, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1949 p13

(9)Slavoj Zizek, First as Tragedy, Then as Farce, Verso, London, 2009 p128-129

(10)Cooper and Hardy op cit p23

(11) ibid p35

(12)Istvan Meszaros p139Historical Actuality of the Socialist Offensive Bookmarks, London2010

(13)Cooper and Hardy op cit p89

(14) ibid p91

(15) ibid p97

(16) Chamsy El-Ojeji from Left Communism to Post-Modernism University Press of America Oxford 2003 p 49 -50

(17)Cooper and Hardy op cit p100

(18)Andrew Levine Liberal Democracy Columbia University Press New York 1981 p203-206

(19) ibid p200-201

(20)Cooper and Levine op cit p120

(21) ibid p133

(22)Zizek op cit p7

(23)El-Oleji op cit p247

(24)Paul Mason: Why it is Kicking Off Everywhere Verso, London 2012 p149-152

(25)Cooper and Hardy op cit p133

(26)Ronaldo Munck: Marx “000: Zed Books, London, 2000 p64

(27)Cooper and Hardy op cit p152

(28)Leon Trotsky: The Death Agony of capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International IN: The Transitional Programme for Socialist revolution Pathfinder Press, New York 1972 p152

(29)Zizek op cit p149

(30)Cooper and Hardy op cit p157-158

(31)Meszaros op cit p10

(32)Joseph Schumpeter: capitalism, Socialism and Democracy Fifth edition, George Allen and Unwin, London p302

(33)Meszaros op cit p85-86

(34)Schumpeter op cit p237

(35)Levine op cit

(36)Cooper and Hardy op cit p160

(37)John Searle: Making the Social World, Oxford University Press, 2010 p92-120

(38)Munck op cit p142-152

(39)Ralph Miliband: Socialism for a Sceptical Age, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994 p194

(40)Frederick Jameson: Representing Capital, Verso London, 2011 p150

(41)Zizek op cit p75