

Lecture notes on Marxist Theory by Tony Cliff (1961)

Introduction

Marxism sees capitalism as a total system in which all the parts are interlinked. So its critique covers all levels of analysis, and tries to link them together. Therefore it is important, even in a basic programme, not to neglect any level, to try to have some discussion on each topic from every aspect in turn. This means that the question of the state is not to be treated just as a political question, the question of production as simply an economic question, the class struggle as simply a social level etc.

Every topic should be looked at from every aspect-the historical, social, economic, political, philosophical, ideological, empirical, etc., - in order to see how they link up, and in the end how capitalism functions as a total system and how it can be overthrown.

Finally knowledge of basic Marxism is only part of what any member of a revolutionary party needs to have. It provides a framework which can help make sense of the world, but needs to be applied to every concrete situation. This can only be learnt in one's day to day practice, discussion and debate and in the real battles of the class struggle. Without this application, the most elegant educational programme becomes meaningless.

Why the working class?

The central principal of Marxism is that the working class is the only social group capable, by its self- activity, of bringing about the advent of socialism. This was written into the statement of the First International and has been the basis of all serious socialist activity since then.

What is a social class?

In any society the first necessity is that "man" produces and reproduces the means of their existence. Inevitably therefore their relationship to the means of production is crucial, and determines every aspect of their life. In production people relate to each other in one of two ways – co-operation or conflict.

People who stand in the same relationship to the means of production share interests in common and are said to form an class which is the basis of collective organisation to safeguard and further their interests. In doing so they come into conflict with other groups with other interests, and hence arises class struggle. "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle."

Patricians and plebeians in Ancient Rome, lords and serfs in medieval Europe, slaves and slave owners etc., form such classes. In capitalist society the two classes upon whose struggle the development of society depends are the bourgeoisie (the capitalist class) and the proletariat (the working class).

There are also other classes in capitalist society (eg peasants, the middle class) but in the end their importance depends on how they stand in relation to the two fundamental classes.

The problem of Change

Some people see history as the product of the actions of great people. Others see it for instance as people becoming progressively more enlightened. However, real history, the history of "mankind", can only be understood as the activity of real people struggling collectively to realise their interests.

So revolutionary change in society can only be the product of a social class whose interests are objectively opposed to the present organisation of society.

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