

MARXIAN TOOLS AND CONSERVATIVE CATERPILLARS

May 5 was the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx' birth, and Jonathan Chait decided to take a slap at him in a piece titled *Trump Handed the Agenda to Conservatives and They Blew It*. The title concept was addressed several weeks ago by Mike Konczal in a smart essay. Konczal asks why the Republicans who control all branches of government haven't accomplished more, gives several examples of legislation that never moved, and asks why there is no discussion of these failures by conservative theorists.

Chait begins with an attack on an op-ed in the New York Times by Jason Barker, an associate professor of philosophy at Kyung Hee University in South Korea, titled *Happy Birthday Karl Marx. You Were Right!*. What was the point of attacking the birthday boy? Chait writes:

It is philosophically irrelevant that every nation-state founded on Marxist philosophy almost immediately metastasized into a repressive tyranny, [Barker] breezily insists. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that the parties that ruled them all shared a common philosophy, and that this philosophy identified within their society an oppressor class whose political rights could and should be eliminated? No, no, reply the Marxists. All these real-world examples of governments attempting to actualize Marxist principles tell us nothing about Marxism.

Is Chait saying that Leninism is the same as Stalinism is the same as Marxist philosophy? Does he think the capitalists of Marx' day didn't oppress the workers? Does he think that

early capitalists were tender shepherds to their employee sheep, or that the current billionaire class is the apex of Christian love and respect for their independent contractors? Who knows? This is just trite rhetoric, so he can ignore the thrust of Barker's discussion of the obvious fact that efforts to put dialectical materialism into practice have failed. Barker says there's a good reason for this. Marx was first and foremost a philosopher. He was a follower of Hegel, developing Hegel's ideas of dialectical materialism into a broader theory of society. Barker explains:

... let's be clear: Marx arrives at no magic formula for exiting the enormous social and economic contradictions that global capitalism entails (according to Oxfam, 82 percent of the global wealth generated in 2017 went to the world's richest 1 percent). What Marx did achieve, however, through his self-styled materialist thought, were the critical weapons for undermining capitalism's ideological claim to be the only game in town.

Chait suggests that conservatives will blame their leaders, especially Trump, when the actual problem lies with Conservatism. The parallel is supposed to be that this is just the same as Marxists blaming the failure of all Marxist regimes on evil leaders and not the "philosophy" itself. But that's just not Barker's position, or anyone's, for that matter. Scholars, mostly European but a few Americans too, argue about Marxian philosophy, and about his criticisms of capitalism, but never in favor of the dictatorial regimes that attempted to put it into practice.

On the other hand conservatism and its triumphant successor neoliberalism were constructed by their founders and other cultural workers to be a theory of government. They have a theory of the person, an economic theory, and a rough program for transformation of democracy

into a form suited to their flourishing. Their failures, including not least the failure to deliver a decent life to the vast bulk of society, are part of their program.

Chait doesn't take up the issue of the destruction of conservatism and its replacement by full-blown neoliberalism. He thinks neoliberalism is nothing but a slur directed at real liberals by disgruntled leftists. He takes full advantage of the fact that neoliberalism is a denied structure, or at least a deniable structure.

The Conservative Movement, from its formation by William Buckley to its disappearance in 2016, was always a project funded by the rich. It was marketed with whispers of racism, xenophobia, religious fundamentalism, misogyny, patriarchy, anti-intellectualism and boundless militarism abroad and at home. The Conservative Movement was just a Trojan Horse for neoliberalism, when those whispers turned into roars. Think of conservatism as caterpillars spontaneously generated by the John Birch Society, the White Citizens Council and any number of grifting self-titled Religious Ministers until one day new Leaders burst forth in all their neoliberal putrescence and all the Republicans fall in behind them dancing, playing timbrels and chanting MAGA.

And that's why the few remaining movement Conservative writers are bewildered into silence. They are stunned that their patrons no longer applaud their finely spun theories and their sharply honed plans. They thought they were relevant, when they were, as Konczal puts it, just the entertainment.