

May Day 2018: A Rising Tide Of Worker Militancy And Creative Uses Of Marx



Prof.dr. Jayati Ghosh - Photo:
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International Workers' Day grew out of 19th century working-class struggles in the United States for better working conditions and the establishment of an eight-hour workday. May 1 was chosen by the international labor movement as the day to commemorate the Haymarket massacre in May 1886. Ever since, May 1 has been a day of working-class marches and demonstrations throughout the world, although state apparatuses in the United States do their best to erase the day from public awareness.

In the interview below, one of the world's leading radical economists, Jawaharlal Nehru University Professor *Jayati Ghosh*, who is also an activist closely involved with a range of progressive and radical social movements, discusses the significance of May Day with C.J. Polychroniou for Truthout. She also analyzes how different and challenging the contemporary economic and political landscape has become in the age of global neoliberalism, examining the new forms of class struggle that have surfaced in recent years and what may be needed for the re-emergence of a new international working-class movement.

C.J. Polychroniou: Jayati, each year, people all over the world march to commemorate International Worker's Day, or May 1. In your view, how does the economic and political landscape on May Day, 2018, compare to those on past May Days?

Jayati Ghosh: Ever since the eruption of workers' struggles on May 1, 1886, commemorating May Day each year reminds us of what organized workers' movements can achieve. Over more than a century, these struggles progressively won better conditions for labor in many countries. But such victories — and even such struggles — have now become much harder than they were. Globalization of trade, capital mobility and financial deregulation have weakened dramatically the bargaining power of labor vis-à-vis capital. Perversely, this very success of global capitalism has weakened its ability to provide more rapid or widespread income expansion. As capitalism breeds and results in greater inequality, it loses sources of demand to provide stimulus for accumulation, and it also generates greater public resentment against the system.

The trouble is that, instead of workers everywhere uniting against the common enemy/oppressor, they are turned against one another. Workers are told that mobilizing and organizing for better conditions will simply reduce jobs because capital will move elsewhere; local residents are led to resent migrants; people are persuaded that their problems are not the result of the unjust system but are because of the "other" — defined by nationality, race, gender, religion, ethnic or linguistic identity. So this is a particularly challenging time for workers everywhere in the world. Confronting this challenge requires more than marches to commemorate May Day; it requires a complete reimagining of the idea of workers unity and reinvention of forms of struggle.

There is a rising tide of worker militancy in many parts of the world, including the US, which is the capital of neoliberalism, although labor unions seem to be on the decline. Do you think that we are in the midst of new forms of class struggle in the 21st century?

I believe that everywhere the neoliberal economic model has lost popular legitimacy, and the rise of worker militancy in many parts of the world reflects this. But there are simultaneously many other conflicting strands emerging that seek to divert public discontent into other avenues, such as extreme nationalist positions that blame foreigners for many social ills. Mass media (including new social media) have to take a very large share of the blame for this: They feed into systems of resentment that are directed against other people rather than against capital or against systemic injustice.

But also, while there is no doubt that the decline of labor unions has had

devastating effects on both societies and possibilities of inclusive economies, there was much that was wrong with the traditional unions — which may explain why they find relatively little traction today. Typical unions in much of the world tended to be male-centric and oblivious to other forms of social discrimination. They focused on men working in defined workplaces and rarely took up the issues and concerns of more casual workers who did not have clearly defined work locations or employers. They did not even recognize the crucial economic activities performed by (unpaid) women within households and communities as work. They rarely bothered about differentials in wages and working conditions for different social categories, and therefore often accentuated these differences across workers.

Reviving such unions would hardly be in the interest of the mass of workers today. Indeed, such unions are even now far more likely to fall into the trap of socially revanchist, nationalist and regressive political forces that generate more unpleasant and more unequal societies. The progressive associations of workers that are necessary in the contemporary world must be quite different: They must recognize, appreciate and value social and cultural differences across workers without allowing those differences to feed into economic inequalities; they must oppose the gender construction of societies and economies by recognizing all those who work to be workers, whether or not they get paid in monetary terms; they must operate in more democratic and accountable ways to keep the trust of their membership; they must take note of inter-generational inequalities in order to attract the youth and respond to their concerns.

This is the context in which the recent eruption of often spontaneous and wildcat strikes in the US and parts of Europe — as well as farmers movements and other mass protests in many parts of the developing world — provides a source of optimism. What is even more encouraging is that often these protests are finding wider social resonance, as public sympathy shifts increasingly in favor of the valid demands of protesters. While all of this is still very incipient, these could be straws in the wind for broader movements for progressive economic and social change.

Is Marxism still relevant in understanding and explaining global economic developments in the 21st century?

Some concepts developed by Marx are more relevant than ever in understanding

contemporary capitalism. The most significant may be commodity fetishism: the idea that under capitalism, relations between people become mediated by relations between things — that is commodities and money. The overwhelming focus on exchange value (rather than use value) means that exchange value gets seen as intrinsic to commodities rather than being the result of labor. Market-based interaction becomes the “natural” way of dealing with all objects, rather than a historically specific set of social relations. This is what creates commodity fetishism, which is an illusion emerging from the centrality of private property that determines not only how people work and interact, but even how they perceive reality and understand social change. The urge to acquire, the obsession with material gratification of wants and the ordering of human well-being in terms of the ability to command different commodities can all be described as forms of commodity fetishism. The obsession with GDP growth *per se* among policy makers and the general public, independent of the pattern or quality of such growth, is an extreme but widespread example of commodity fetishism today.

In terms of geopolitics, several Marxist notions are still hugely insightful. Marx spoke of the creation of the world market, which we now call globalization, as the natural result of the tendency of the capitalist system to spread and aggrandize itself, to destroy and incorporate earlier forms of production, and to transform technology and institutions constantly. Uneven development persists, even though the locations of such development may have changed. Similarly, “primitive accumulation” is a hugely useful concept, not just for understanding the past, but for interpreting the present.

The tendencies for the concentration and centralization of production have very strong contemporary resonance, even when such centralization and concentration is expressed through the geographical fragmentation of production (as in global value chains driven by large multinational companies) or in the sphere of non-material service delivery, or even through the commodification of knowledge and control of personal data for purposes of making profits.

Another concept that is still relevant is that of “alienation.” For Marx, this was not an isolated experience of an individual person’s feeling of estrangement from society or community, but a generalized state of the broad mass of wage workers. It can be expressed as the loss of control by workers over their own work, which means that they effectively cease to be autonomous human beings because they

cannot control their workplace, the products they produce or even the way they relate to each other. Because this fundamentally defines their conditions of existence, this means that workers can never become autonomous and self-realized human and social beings under capitalism. Such alienation is blatantly obvious in factory work, but it also describes work that is apparently more independent, such as activities in the emerging “gig economy” that still deny workers effective control despite the illusion of autonomy.

How do you explain the decline of Marxism as an ideology?

It’s interesting that you use the word “ideology” for Marxism, as this is quite different from the way Marx himself used the word — he saw ideology as “false consciousness” in contrast to the objectively true “science” that he felt was embodied in his own work. Whatever one may think of that particular position, it is unfortunately the case that for some time Marxism also became an ideology in the Marxian sense, with quasi-religious overtones and an emphasis on canonical interpretations.

The decline of Marxism as a framework of thought and even belief is the result of a long process. Some factors are the result of the way Marxism itself evolved. For example, there was the reification of Marxist positions, the conversion of Marxist writing into a “canon” around which there have been endless often very esoteric (though no less passionate) debates about precise meanings of terms. In the English-speaking world, such hair-splitting has been all the more bizarre because the arguments were based on English translations from the German original, which was itself often prone to multiple interpretations. This overly scholastic approach made the ideas very rigid and therefore less interesting. It also possibly dampened the intellectual creativity that characterized so much of Marx’s own work.

Another — possibly more powerful — reason, was the very political use of Marx to justify particular strategies by those ruling different countries. This meant that particularly over the course of the 20th century, major political movements, dramatic changes in economic strategy, massive socio-political upheavals and drastic attempts at social engineering were all carried out in the name of Marx. As a result, both good and bad elements of such strategies all became identified with Marxism. Many people across the world who had little or no knowledge of Marx or his writing nevertheless associated him with not just revolutions but also

their aftermath, and with particular social and political systems that operated in his name.

This tendency to pay lip service to a particular iconic figure or a set of well-known ideas is scarcely new or unusual. In India, for example, political parties and leaders of all persuasions routinely invoke the name of Mahatma Gandhi even when they indulge in activities that he would have abhorred and condemned. But because so many states in the second half of the 20th century defined themselves as Marxist, all their actions (and particularly their mistakes) then tainted the public image of Marxism. The invocation of his name still continues in some countries like China and Vietnam today, where officials and some scholars refer constantly to Marx without really using his concepts, and declare that because of their adherence to Marxist thought, socialism is inevitable — even as they put in place the most blatantly neoliberal economic policies.

This use of the label of Marxism is hardly designed to attract the intellectually curious, the progressively-minded person in search of radical change or even the young. But what I find interesting is that — despite such misappropriation — the interest in Marx and his work has not completely died down or disappeared. *Das Kapital* (a huge, fiendishly difficult and often barely readable tome) is still in print almost everywhere in the world more than 150 years after its first volume was published. Generations of young people have picked up and still continue to pick up *The Communist Manifesto* and find arguments that appeal to them. The point is to stop thinking of Marxism as equivalent to a religion with irrefutable truths, and instead allow some of the more insightful concepts to inform our thought and analysis in creative ways.

The latest wave of resistance against capitalist globalization seems to be coming from the forces of the right and extreme nationalism. Why did the anti-globalization left movement fail, and should the left fear nationalism?

I hope that it is too early to say that the progressive/left anti-globalization movement has failed. It is true that currently, the forces ranged against globalization are dominated by unpleasant, divisive, extreme right movements that bring to mind (and typically celebrate) the fascist movements of interwar Europe. But they are not the only social/political forces around, and many people flock to these not because they inherently support them but because social democracy has failed so spectacularly in protecting people against the

depredations of unregulated capital. History moves in cunning and complicated ways, so we may not always see other, more progressive forces beyond the bend in the river. This makes it easy to despair, but that is neither productive nor necessarily accurate.

One important aspect for progressives to bear in mind is that, while internationalism is essential, nationalism cannot be wished away. Most importantly, the nation-state is still the terrain on which citizenship is defined, which in turn determines the fights for all kinds of rights, including workers' rights, and the possibility of success in realizing such rights. Nation-states must also be the bulwark of the fight against imperialism, which remains as strong as ever despite its predicted demise. Nation-states allowed, enabled and drove neoliberal globalization, and gave greater power especially to large capital; nation-states must be used to claw back the rights of people, and be made more democratic and accountable to the citizenry. Workers of the world (of all kinds: paid and unpaid, recognized and unrecognized) must still unite, but they must first unite within the spaces (the nations) within which they can hope to achieve their rights. The basis for proletarian internationalism therefore has to be progressive and democratic nationalism.

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