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Tarique Niazi Ph.D.

University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire, niazit@uwec.edu

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Marxian class theory, as the world knows it, has long been declared dead. Its obituary, although premature, was written both inside and outside of Marxism. Those in denial of class-divided capitalist society have triumphantly heralded the 'end of history.' But those who still clung to class theory and its explanatory potential forged new ways to understand social reality. They, however, refused to accept the proletariat as the historical agent of revolutionary reconstitution of society. As a result, different variants of Marxism have sprung up that challenge traditional Marxism and its putative fixation on class. Of these, analytical Marxism and post-structuralist Marxism are the most prominent. Both questioned the foundational concepts of classical Marxism, and attempted to bring it into alignment with the contemporary human condition.

The challenge to traditional Marxism also produced its stout defenders. Among them Raju Das, a professor of Geography at York University, Canada, is a leading thinker of class. He has written a magnum opus in defense of classical Marxism. His work is a critique of different versions of contemporary Marxism that tore themselves away from original Marxian theory. While critiquing growing neo-Marxist traditions, which tend to draw less and less upon classical Marxism, Das's approach has been that of a sympathetic scholar and a dispassionate social scientist who drinks deep at the scientific theory of class as conceived by Marx. He productively engages with analytical Marxism and post-structural Marxism. He faithfully describes the basic tenets of each, and diligently identifies key figures and their major contributions to these traditions. How carefully he treads this path is evident from the fact that he waits almost 200 pages, detailing key ideas and key disagreements of analytical and postmodern Marxisms, before he offers their critical evaluation.

Das is unfailingly generous in acknowledging many worthwhile contributions that these traditions and their key figures make. Sometimes he digs deeper into the neo-Marxist literature to uncover the obscure insights that even their authors might not have thought much of, or failed to recognize their significance in a given argument. Nuanced clarity is a hallmark of Das's splendid writing style. Also, he dutifully presents his interlocutors' ideas with the same clarity that they themselves could not have mustered. This meticulous and methodical approach further lends credibility to Das's monumental work, and opens up productive space for an engaged dialogue with his interlocutors on the other side of the debate. Sometimes he pithily makes declarative statements to undo what he sees 'conflation' of divergent ideas by contemporary Marxists: neoliberalism is not capitalism as Marxist geographer David Harvey would have us believe; class is not a set of monopolizable skills as analytical Marxist Erik Wright would argue; or class is not reducible to 'positionality' as anti-essentialist post-modern Marxism deems.

Das applauds Wright for getting it right that "the explanatory capacity of the theories we construct depends to an important extent on the coherence of concepts we deploy within them" (p. 162). Yet, he argues, Wright's own intellectual practice, especially his methodological thinking does not "cohere with his class theory thinking" (p. 162). Despite denunciation of skill and organizational exploitation in his work, Das thinks, Wright still deploys these ideas in his class theory. Similarly, in spite of various problems with Wright's concept of middle class, some of which Wright himself recognizes, Das argues, he still continues to use them and indeed thinks that we need not wait until we have completely coherent concepts.

While furthering his critique, Das raises a polemical but significant question about ideas and interests, arguing that the former reflect the latter. Quoting Lenin, he writes, if geometrical axioms affected human interests, they should be refuted. Which class interests, he asks, might the revisions to Marxist class theory objectively reflect? Das leaves analytical Marxism with his rhetorical question, but he is more direct on post-structural Marxism that, he thinks, seems to echo the interests of certain sections of the propertied class, including “the philanthropic capitalists, small-scale producers, entrepreneurial women as well as interests of middle class intellectuals” (p. 163).

Citing J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006), a key theorist of feminist political economy, Das writes, the aim of post-structural Marxism is deconstructing the hegemony of capitalism to open up a discursive space for the prevalence and diversity of non-capitalist economic activity worldwide. Their intent, he believes, is to help create the discursive conditions under which socialist or other non-capitalist construction becomes a “realistic” present activity rather than a Utopian¹ future goal. Such an approach is enabled by post-structuralism’s idea that “economy is only discursively colonized by capitalist rhetoric” (p. 107). In conclusion, Das sums up the postmodern-Marxist project in terms of its core elements that he identifies as a politics of language, a politics of the subject, and a politics of collective action. The politics of language is meant to develop ‘new richer local languages of economy and of economic possibility’ (p. 109). A politics of the subject is aimed at cultivating ourselves and others as subjects of non-capitalist development; and a politics of collective action strives for working collaboratively to produce alternative economic organizations and spaces in place.

Besides, Das articulates three major disagreements with analytical Marxism and post-structural Marxism. These disagreements are over what he deems the divergence of the two versions from Marxian construction of class, although both adhere to the concept of class. Marx described class in terms of those who own the means of production (i.e., the bourgeoisie) and those who work for those who own the means of production (i.e., the proletariat). So, the means of production and access (or absence of access) to the means of production is what defines class. A class-divided society is thus one that possesses the bourgeois minority and the proletarian majority.

Analytical Marxists, to a lesser degree, and post-structural Marxists, more so, disagree with Das’s evaluation. They redefine class to account for the contemporary capitalist condition. Das argues their redefinition dilutes Marxian construction of class without telling much about the contemporary capitalist condition. The major issue he takes with analytical Marxists, especially Erik Wright, is that they decentered class by replacing it with ‘monopolizable skills,’ and the industrial working class with ‘service sector employees.’ Wright, while building on Marxian two-class model, expands it to include the middling classes of managers and petite bourgeoisie. Wright claims it is not capitalism that creates inequality between the haves and have-nots, but the monopoly of skills. Similarly, post-structuralists further dilute class into ‘positionality.’ Das argues all these reconstructions of Marxian original theory of class are actually its distortions. He insists that monopolizable skills or positionality do not substitute the means of production. What creates inequality and exploitation, he emphatically declares, is control of the means of production.

Das detects another ambiguity in the ways both versions of Marxism define class. They each define it on the basis of processes (i.e., control over assets or appropriation of surplus labor), which in their iteration cut across class societies. Das argues that such a position is

‘ahistorical’ and far from the very core assumption of classical Marxism. As well, he finds the concept of ‘surplus’ inadequately conceptualized in both versions. He recounts that surplus, in each version, is merely a matter of exchange relations or a matter of fixing meaning or political power relations between surplus appropriators and surplus producers.

Das also remains unpersuaded by the solutions each version offers to reduce surplus appropriation. Analytical and post-modern Marxisms, Das skeptically notes, see surplus appropriation drop dramatically, if only there is enough pressure built on surplus appropriators. In his view, post-structural Marxism assumes that surplus labor performed at home is equal to surplus labor performed in a factory. It also assumes that surplus in a slave society equals surplus in capitalism, and surplus in capitalism equals surplus in communism. In analytical Marxism too, the mechanisms of surplus appropriation are basically the same across class societies: unequal distribution of assets. Das argues there is little attention paid to the production of surplus itself in both versions of Marxism. They each take ahistorical view of surplus and concomitant exploitation and class. To sum it up, Das writes, surplus remains a distributive category in both versions.

Das’s second major disagreement has to do with the neo-Marxists’ denial of the material basis of class. He argues that “class theory,” in both versions, “is divorced from its materiality and reduced to sociologisms (merely relations between social groups)” (p.165). Although, in his view, both analytical Marxism and post-structural Marxism have abandoned the materiality of class, post-structural Marxism has reduced it to ether. Post-structural Marxists, for instance, perceive discursive capitalism and discursive rhetoric that prop up capitalism as the hegemon. These immaterial bases of class, in Das’s reckoning, are further afield from Marxian classical theory of class. Marx thought of the working classes as those who are denied the means of production, and those who are forced to sell their muscular power for self-reproduction as the proletariat. Classes, Das argues, are thus built on an undeniable material basis, which cannot be drained off into monopolizable skills or discursive strategies.

Das’s third major disagreement has to do with the supposed place of the proletariat as the historical revolutionary subject. He fervently argues for the agentic power of the proletariat, leading to the revolutionary reconstitution of society. He embeds his argument in classical Marxism that regards the proletarian revolution as the harbinger of an egalitarian society. Analytical Marxism and post-structural Marxism, on the other hand, reject this argument as ‘path-dependency’ that is no longer relevant to the contemporary human condition. The rejectionist view of the proletariat’s subjectivity has a long intellectual pedigree though. The disillusionment with the working class and its historical subjectivity began with the founding of the Frankfurt School and its turn away from historical materialism (classical Marxism) to critical theory. Both versions of Marxism that Das scrutinizes are wittingly or unwittingly inspired by critical theory.

Once its leading light, Jurgen Habermas has now parted ways with even the Frankfurt School. It is his second intellectual migration since he first broke with Marxism. He presents his thesis of New Social Movements (NSMs) as a substitute for the historical subjectivity of the proletariat. He sees these movements as bearers of social change that will incrementally grow into macro-sociological change. Das, of course, stands light years apart from Habermas or his NSMs thesis, of which he is not offhandedly dismissive either. Yet he does not think much of it. Ironically, Francis Fukuyama, author of the anti-Marxist treatise *The End of History*,² in his forthcoming book entitled *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*² makes a case against the NSMs that he sees as a hindrance to the building of a national

democratic movement for social change. Most classical Marxists, too, perceive the NSMs as a subversion of the proletarian revolutionary movement for social change. Although Das does not reject the NSMs outright, he continues to be deeply invested in the proletarian revolutionary movement, and keeps faith with the industrial working class.

Das is not as persuasive on the historical subjectivity of the proletariat as he is on class theory and its relevance to contemporary society. The rightward lurch of the industrial working class that began in Nazi Germany and that cleaved Frankfurt School from classical Marxism, many argue, has taken a turn for the worse. Today, alt-right movements in Europe or North America have been largely built on the mass base of the working classes. Das is, however, right that massive deindustrialization and the triumph of neoliberalism have bred the conditions for the rise of alt-right movements. Yet the question remains: why the proletariat are drawn to right-wing extremist ideologies. Given his intellectual prowess, Das may someday pen another masterpiece addressing these concerns. In the present work, he has already established himself as a leading thinker of Marxism and class theory. *Marxist Class Theory for a Skeptical World* is the first persuasive defense of classical Marxism since the turn of the millennium, which Milton Friedman and Eric Hobsbawm would have equally admired for its intellectual merits.

Tarique Niazi PhD
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
NIAZIT@uwec.edu

Notes

¹ Although post-structuralists (or postmodernists) appear dismissive of Utopia as unreal, the analytical Marxist Erik Wright is a fervent advocate of it.

² Also, see Fukuyama's article: "Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy," which he published in the September-October, 2018, issue of *Foreign Affairs* (pp. 90-114).