

Meszaros and "Beyond Capital"

5 November 1998

To the WSW

I have two questions.

1. Could you give me a political evaluation of Istvan Meszaros and his works, especially *Beyond Capital*?

2. What is decisive for someone belonging to the working class and producing surplus value, i.e. being productive, or not? Do e.g. taxi drivers, nurses or teachers belong to the working class?

Thank you,

GK

Dear GK,

It is not possible in the space of one e-mail reply to go into all the positions advanced by Istvan Meszaros in *Beyond Capital* and his earlier writings. But we can set out the basic foundations of his politics. Politically Meszaros is an apologist for the betrayals of the working class by the social democratic and Stalinist bureaucracies. His essential thesis is that capitalism has been able to survive throughout this century, despite two world wars, fascism, mass unemployment and other forms of barbarism because it still has not exhausted its historical potential.

Marxism of course seeks the objective causes for social processes and historical developments. But Marxism has nothing in common with that kind of objectivist fatalism which seeks to provide a rationalisation for the present order and shift responsibility from parties, programs and individuals onto the 'historical process'.

One of Meszaros' central arguments is that the degeneration of the Russian Revolution was inevitable. Early on in the book, after criticising Lukacs he writes: 'To be fair, though, given the ebbing away of the revolutionary wave in Europe and the material backwardness of Russia, the Marxian program of overcoming in socioeconomic terms the rule of capital as the globally dominant metabolic mode of control could not be on the historical agenda at the time of writing *History and Class Consciousness* either in Russia or anywhere else.' [p. 29]

Lukacs' book was written in the early 1920s and published in 1923. If there was no possibility of overthrowing capitalism then, it was not possible in 1917 either. In other words, the Russian Revolution was doomed from the outset - the betrayals of social democracy and then later on Stalinism had nothing to do with it.

Once this position is taken, the terrible events of the 20th century proceed almost automatically.

Thus we find the following analysis of the events of the 1930s:

'The world of capital weathered also the storm of its 'Great Economic Crisis' of 1929-33 with relative ease, without having to face a major hegemonic confrontation from socialist forces despite the mass suffering caused by this crisis. For the fact is that 'Great' as this crisis was, it was very far from being a *structural* crisis, leaving an ample number of options open for capital's continued survival, recovery and stronger than ever reconstitution on an economically sounder and broader basis. Retrospective political reconstructions tend to blame personalities and organisational forces for such recovery, particularly with respect to the success of Fascism. Yet, whatever the relative weight of such political factors, one should not forget that they must be assessed against the background of an essentially defensive historical phase. It is pointless to rewrite history with the help of counter-factual conditions, whether they concern the rise of Fascism or anything else. For the fact that really matters is that at the time of the crisis of 1929-33 capital actually did have the *option of Fascism* (and similar solutions) which it no longer possesses today. And objectively that makes a world of difference as far as the possibilities of defensive and offensive action are concerned.' [p. 678]

In other words, according to Meszaros there is no point in studying the role of parties and their programs because what happened had to happen anyway, and was an expression of the possibilities open to capitalism. In fact, there was nothing inevitable about the conquest of power by fascism in Germany. Had a different policy been pursued by the German Communist Party leading to the formation of a united front of working class organisations against fascism, as advocated by Trotsky, then a very different outcome could have developed. [To further study this question I urge that you read, if you have not already done so, the lecture delivered by David North, *Leon Trotsky and the Fate of Socialism in the 20th Century*, which is available on the *World Socialist Web Site*.]

Meszaros' objectivism leads him on the one hand to provide a rationalisation for the past defeats of the working class and on the other to lay the basis for new ones with his assertion that capitalism no longer possesses the 'option' of fascism today.

Throughout his book, Meszaros presents old errors in high-sounding language. For example, Chapter 16 is entitled 'The Decreasing Rate of Utilization and the Capitalist State: Crisis-

management and Capital's Destructive Self-Reproduction.'

There he tells us that: 'The decreasing rate of utilization happens to be one of the most important and far-reaching tendential laws of capitalistic developments.' But what exactly is this law, which appears to have remained undiscovered until Meszaros arrived on the scene? What is its relationship to the tendency of the rate of profit to decline which Marx called the 'most important law of political economy', above all from the historical point of view.

Meszaros' discovery turns out to be nothing more than a regurgitation of the thesis advanced by the proponents of the 'permanent arms economy' who maintained that military spending by the state, above all the United States in the period after World War II, prevented the return of depression and overcame the contradictions of the capitalist economy.

According to Meszaros: 'Evidently, Marx could not even dream about the emergence of the military/industrial complex as an all-powerful and effective agent for displacing capital's inner contradictions.' [p. 580]

And on the following page:

'The problem is, though, that capital in its unbridled form-that is, under the conditions of generalized commodity production which define, and circumscribe the limits of, capitalism-sets into motion not only great productive potentials, but simultaneously also massive diversionary as well as destructive forces. Consequently, disturbing as this must sound to socialists, such diversionary and destructive forces provide capital in crisis with new margins of expansion and new ways of overcoming the barriers which it encounters.' [p. 581]

In fact, contrary to Meszaros, Marxists have always explained that socialism is necessary precisely because of the destruction unleashed by capitalism. The very development of the productive forces comes into conflict with social relations based on private ownership of the means of production and the nation-state.

At the heart of Meszaros' objectivist positions on political economy is his hostility to Lenin-Trotsky theory of the revolutionary party. Meszaros asserts that Lenin's thesis that socialist consciousness had to be brought into the working class from outside has proved historically unviable in the course of the twentieth century and counterposes to it what he calls 'Marx's original formulations' which spoke of the necessity of developing 'communist mass consciousness' and which envisaged 'a very different solution.'

This contraposition of Lenin and Marx is completely false. How does a mass socialist consciousness develop other than through the efforts of the revolutionary party to develop a socialist culture and outlook in the working class? The history of the 20th century attests to the fact that no matter how deep the economic, social and political crisis arising from the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, the working class does not spontaneously develop a socialist outlook and advance a program for the taking of power and the

reconstruction of society. The overthrow of capitalism requires the intervention of the masses into the historical process. But the masses become politically conscious through the struggle for a socialist perspective waged by the revolutionary party. The party is, as Trotsky explained, the organ through which the class itself becomes conscious.

One final point on Meszaros, which reveals how far he is from a Marxist analysis. He maintains that 'the class of women cuts across all social class boundaries.' [p. 149] In other words, there is a common 'class interest' between the women who belong to the property-owning classes and women who make up the working class.

This issue brings us to your second question. The working class can be broadly defined as that class which has nothing to sell but its labour power, and which lives by the sale of that commodity. The production of surplus value is not the decisive question, nor is the type of labour that is carried out. Take a teacher for example. A teacher who sold his or her labour power to the owner of a private school is a productive labourer-he or she produces surplus value. But one who is paid by the state to teach in a public school is not. Both, are members of the working class, or proletariat, as they have nothing to sell but their labour power. Their class status is not determined by who happens to buy this labour power and utilise it.

Contrary to those who maintain that the working class is 'disappearing' the class which has nothing to sell but its labour power is growing on a world scale. In the whole regions of the world large peasant populations have become wage workers and in the major capitalist countries whole sections of the population, who at one point enjoyed certain privileges have become proletarianised and have discovered that, as far as capital is concerned, they will be hired and fired in accordance with the needs of profit.

You might like to look up a related question we answered on white-collar workers.

Yours fraternally,

Nick Beams

See:

A reader asks: are white-collar workers a part of the working class?

[2 April 1998]



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