

Peter Hudis, *Marx's Concept Of The Alternative To Capitalism*, Haymarket Books: Chicago 2013; 241 pp.; 978-1-60846-275-9 £16,88 (paperback).

Reviewed by Steven Colatrella, *Capital & Class*, Vol 38:2 (June 2014)

Living in Southern Europe during capitalist-imposed austerity made reading Peter Hudis' book even more relevant than it already is in itself. That the left and working class movements' weaknesses are due to the lack of a plausible alternative to free market global capitalism would be an exaggeration. But this perceived lack is a major obstacle in going beyond protest, damage control or at best the most modest of proposals for ameliorating the worst effects of the present system. And if the need for an alternative is critical, even a matter of life or death for millions and perhaps for the biosphere itself, an explicitly Marxist approach has been largely missing from the attempts to either practice or articulate a way out, even from those claiming to be moving towards a "21st Century Socialism" in parts of Latin America. Here in Italy where I live one could almost parody that famous old question about the US and ask "Why is there no socialism in Europe?".

Peter Hudis, with patience and clear prose, if by a largely philosophical discussion, retraces Karl Marx's steps and shows us that Marx always knew what he wanted: a world in which nothing was not under the control of the individuals collectively making up human society except for the inevitable contingencies that arise from being part of nature itself. Everything else becomes a source of oppression and exploitation, and in particular everything that is the product of human activity, should these become a force controlling the fate of living human beings. Under capitalism, such a reversal of subject-predicate relations (to use the phrase Hudis shows was at the center of Marx's concerns from an early date), becomes simplified into the dominance of abstract labor as a form of social power. Not the actual, human, activity of labor, but the transformation of labor-power, the capacity to work, into an alien force, as an abstraction that is measured by socially necessary labor-time becomes the basis for the capitalist organization of society. Through this dominance of abstract labor and the use of socially necessary labor time, measured by the average time that is socially necessary (now worldwide for the most part) to produce a commodity, labor is made to produce not primarily useful products to make life more enjoyable as a result of the satisfying activity of creative work, but rather value, and surplus value.

Hudis makes clear that this rule of the abstract has real world effects, which leads me back to Europe: an hour of work in Greece does not produce the same value as an hour in Germany. An hour in Italy is now of less value than an hour in England. As a result, the work of millions in entire national communities produces at below the socially necessary average level of value in the same time, or requires greater than the average socially necessary labor time to produce the same value of commodities. Thus their work, their remuneration, their employment, even their lives and existence become of no use to the capitalist system and are punished, or even left to implode. This relationship of course is reproduced within every national community and also globally in the North-South relations. This alienation of human work from the human beings carrying it out is the capitalist system, enforced by the law of value system-wide. The production of surplus value, through reducing socially necessary labor time to a minimum and increasing the time and intensity of labor time in every workplace and worldwide, the process of self-valorisation of capital, is the entire *raison d'être* of the social organization of life under capitalism, as Hudis shows. Marx's understanding of what would constitute an alternative way of life follows logically and indeed is far less difficult to uncover or understand than generations of Marxists with their own agendas thought or preached.

In contrast to the dominance of abstract labor, concrete labor, the free human activity done for its own sake and in order to produce useful and enjoyable goods and experiences is a goal in itself. But since any interaction with nature to shape it, even labor freely engaged in (Marx used the example of composing music) is a realm of necessity, hard work in other words, too much of even this good thing would leave humans under the dominance of forces outside their control. Therefore, a radical reduction of labor time and expansion of free time for all activities engaged in for the purpose of happiness itself are the preconditions for a non-capitalist life. As Hudis argues throughout, Marx made clear what those who claimed to construct regimes in his name ignored: that the transformation of distribution in itself cannot end the capitalist relation, but only the transformation of production, of work. Thus, self-managed cooperatives, although not sufficient in themselves if the rest of the society remains under the sway of abstract labor, money, corporation, market, and state, are nevertheless for Marx a basic unit for a post capitalist society. The *ejidos* in the Zapatista juntas of good government, where decisions are made by assembly of the whole community and work kept to a minimum, seem to at least move in the direction Marx indicated.

Finally, and here the radical simplicity of Marx's project and Hudis' elucidation are at their best, it is direct hours of work, rather than abstract labor and socially necessary labor time that are used to measure an individual's contribution to the social whole and in the immediate aftermath of capitalism (today in other words) determine one's share of total social wealth. An hour of work in Nigeria, the US, Greece or Germany, washing the dishes or writing software is an hour, and so money and exchange are made redundant, rather than people. What portion should go to surgeons? Let the people decide. Peter Hudis' book, and Marx's alternative, are important and timely.

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