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## Yes, There is an Alternative!

— **Sam Friedman**

Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism

By Peter Hudis

Brill, 2012: Historical Materialism Book Series.

Haymarket Books, 2013, \$28 paperback.

PETER HUDIS HAS written a valuable analysis of what Marx said on a critical issue. In this sense it reminds me of Hal Draper's volumes on Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution.

Hudis's subject matter differs from Draper's in that it deals with what comes after the revolution, rather than with how we get there. It also differs in method: While Draper was centrally concerned with Marx's politics, Hudis, writing in what's called the Marxist-Humanist tradition, sees engagement with Hegel's dialectic as an essential part of creating a Marxism adequate to ever-changing times.

In reviewing this book, I will both lay out what Hudis says and engage it in a friendly debate for not following the logic of dialectics far enough and thus (like Marx) saying less than should be said about what follows the revolution, while also failing to take what seems to me an obvious approach to thinking about the problems we (hopefully) will face and how we might deal with them.

Hudis discusses (and in my opinion routs) the argument that Marx opposed discussing the goals and nature of the new society. He agrees that Marx opposes any effort to project a vision of the new society that "comes out of the theoretician's own head, independent of the actual struggles of the proletariat" — so that they end up "posing the results of their thinking as the subject of history" (84, 85) — but he presents examples, including many from Capital, where Marx discusses the new society.

This should show that Marx was quite open to such discussions. Hudis also adds a point that I think all readers of this magazine should agree with — that the history of the last century and of what some call "really existing socialism" means that socialists must discuss why our view of what we are trying to create is totally different from what goes by the name of "Communism" in common discourse. As Hudis phrases it:

"The tragedy of 'Marxism' is that a philosophy that originated (at least in Marx's hands) with the aim of abolishing any social powers that operate behind the backs of the producers ended up creating dictatorial regimes that imposed their will on individuals without even a minimal degree of public accountability. Nor was this only a political problem: the economic plans of the state-controlled economies operated no less outside the control of the producers, who were reduced to wage-slavery . . . . Indeed, it can be argued that the greatest barrier in the way of a

revolutionary challenge to capitalism today is not the material or ideological power of capital but rather the memory of the innumerable flawed and failed efforts to overcome it in the not-so-distant past.“ (213)

## **Inversion, Alienation and Workers' Creation**

Most of the book consists of a chronological tour through Marx's writings looking at continuities and changes in Marx's views of alternatives to capitalism. Hudis finds many continuities: most strikingly, perhaps, in that Marx consistently poses “inversion” where the objects (including social objects) that people create become their masters as the aspect of capitalism that it is essential to negate. In discussing labour under capitalism in his 1844 Manuscripts, Hudis points to Marx saying that the worker's own activity “is turned against him, [becomes] independent of him.” (61)

Hudis goes on: “By reducing labour to a mere means to earn a living in which all joy and satisfaction is banished, the workers no longer feel at home in their own labour. This necessitates the existence of an alien-class which extracts forced labour from the worker.”<sup>(1)</sup> Hudis then goes on to show how this understanding — that alienated labour necessitates the existence of a class to force workers to produce — underlies Marx's opposition to Proudhon's and others' proposals that equality of wages is part of the solution to capitalism.

Hudis later discusses places where Marx discusses the new society in the various volumes of Capital. I will present one such instance, from Capital, Volume I.<sup>(2)</sup> On pages 156 and following pages, Hudis discusses at some length the following quotation:<sup>(3)</sup>

“Let us now picture to ourselves, by way of change, a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour power of the community. All the characteristics of Robinson [Crusoe]'s labour are here repeated, but with this difference, that they are social, instead of individual. Everything produced by him was exclusively the result of his own personal labour, and therefore simply an object of use for himself. The total product of our community is a social product. One portion serves as fresh means of production and remains social. But another portion is consumed by the members as means of subsistence. A distribution of this portion amongst them is consequently necessary. The mode of this distribution will vary with the productive organisation of the community, and the degree of historical development attained by the producers.

“We will assume, but merely for the sake of a parallel with the production of commodities, that the share of each individual producer in the means of subsistence is determined by his labour time. Labour time would, in that case, play a double part. Its apportionment in accordance with a definite social plan maintains the proper proportion between the different kinds of work to be done and the various wants of the community. On the other hand, it also serves as a measure of the portion of the common labour borne by each individual, and of his share in the part of the total product destined for individual consumption. The social relations of the individual producers, with regard both to their labour and to its products, are in this case perfectly simple and intelligible, and that with regard not only to production but also to distribution.

Here, then, Marx is clearly discussing the new society, and positing that freely-associated human beings decide what they want to do during their working hours (within the constraints of what is possible) and how they will organize themselves to do it. Hudis points out that “Marx appears reticent about going into too many details about this new society. This is because of his emphasis on the freely-associated character of such a society.... Marx is wary of suggesting any mechanism or formula that operates irrespective of what the freely-associated individuals decide to do based upon their specific level of social development.” (157)

Hudis then discusses at length the fact that in Marx's conception, goods will be allocated to individuals in proportion of their share in the socially-conducted actual labor-time. He contrasts this to the “socially-necessary” labor time that capitalism uses as its measure of value.

This difference is fundamental, since the concept of socially-necessary labor time holds within itself the entirety of the capitalist system (which Marx spent decades analyzing and writing about) that produces exchange value as its fundamental unit and money (and socially-necessary labor time) as its measure. Actual labor time, on the other hand, is something the workers themselves decide on, with no inversion in which the product becomes the subject that dominates life.

Marx continued to think about what the post-capitalist society might look like throughout his life. Hudis spends considerable space on *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*, which Marx sent to some of the leaders of a German party that saw him as its inspiration at the time when they were merging with another working-class oriented party.

Marx wrote this letter to point out major flaws in the draft program for the merged party. Perhaps the greatest of these flaws was that the draft proposed the equal distribution of the products of society, but failed to discuss production relationships and their transformation. (188, 189)

In contrast, Marx writes (as quoted by Hudis, 189-90):

“Within the collective society based on common ownership of the means of production, the producers do not exchange their products; just as little does the labour employed on the product appear here as the value of these products, as a material quality possessed by them, since now, in contrast to capitalist society, individual labour no longer exists in an indirect fashion but directly as a component part of the total labour.”

In his next, frequently quoted paragraph Marx writes:

“What we are dealing with here is a communist society, not as it has developed on its own foundations, but on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society, which is thus in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birth-marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.”

Hudis goes on to discuss how Marx saw this society as ending the subject/object inversion that Marx had so long opposed. In terms of distribution of the products, as Marx describes it, individuals receive vouchers that they have labored for so many hours — and then can go to places where products are distributed and receive products that required an equivalent number of labor hours to produce (after adjustments for various openly discussed social expenditures in the time it takes to produce a given output.)

## **Critical Remarks on Distribution**

I learned a lot from Hudis’s argument that Marx meant that the replacement of socially necessary labor time by actual labor time would be the basis of a new form of production relation, which secondarily would serve as the basis for a different mode of distributing goods; and that this would mean the end of exchange value as a real category in the world.

Nonetheless, I think that both Hudis and Marx cross over the line to utopianism in this discussion — and that Marx seems to have done so more later in life (in *Critique of the Gotha Programme*) than he had done in *Capital*.

Why do I say this? It seems to me that the essence of the society we will begin to build, “stamped with the birth-marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges,” will be that we will take over workplaces and neighborhoods and create a society based on freely associated labor. That means that at that time we will decide through discussions, debates, and perhaps struggles how we will organize our working time and what products we will produce how.

As we do so, I strongly suspect that Marx’s (implicit) proposal that goods be made available to workers in proportion to the time they work will receive serious discussion and perhaps can be implemented in many workplaces and/or communities. But I also strongly suspect that there will be other workplaces or communities

where people will decide on different ways to distribute what they produce.

It is this ability to make such collective decisions that defines the new society — not the specific formula for allocation. And as I will point out below, I think that the failure of Hudis (and Marx) to see this fully is emblematic of a failure to see the new society as one of development and struggle in a new dialectic.

## **Statism, Socialism, Cooperatives**

Before turning to this critique, I want to add that on pages 164-68 Hudis clearly establishes that Marx did not take socialism to mean “statification” or “nationalization” of the means of production. Since many on the left grew up thinking that socialism = nationalization, it is wonderful to have available a well-framed statement of the fact that this is not at all what Marx said.

I suspect that this confusion grew out of our history in which both social democrats and “Communists” became statist in their orientation (alongside their coming to see work as remaining a place where bosses and a “Plan” tell workers what to do and how to do it), together with the mass media accepting such perspectives as equal to Marxism because the various socialist parties said that this was so. The fact that such views de-fanged the revolutionary thrust of Marxism certainly helped make this statist presentation of it amenable to mass media and to educational institutions.

Hudis also makes a solid contribution in his discussion of Marx’s views on workers’ cooperatives (179-81). I learned a lot from this. A critical element is that Marx sees cooperatives, to the extent they are freely-associated labor, as potentially part of the movement for a new world; but he also sees them as constrained and potentially inverted to the extent that they produce commodities that have to compete in capitalist markets.

## **New Society and the Old Muck**

Hudis ends his book with some deep and inspiring remarks:

“Precisely because we cannot do without the labour of thinking out and working out in everyday life an alternative to capitalism, we cannot do without rediscovering the invaluable insights that Marx left us as to how to surmount the capital-relation.

This is most of all needed because the lack of a viable alternative to both ‘free-market’ capitalism and what has called itself ‘socialism’ has acted as a serious impediment to social transformation over the past three decades. The barriers to generating mass opposition to capitalism surely cannot be explained by it having become a ‘kinder and gentler’ system over the past several decades: on the contrary, its drive for profit at the expense of human needs has only become more accentuated.

“So why have so many movements stopped short of challenging capital itself, in favour of instead emphasizing relatively restricted social reforms and self-limiting revolutions? I would argue that given the absence of a viable alternative to capitalism, discontent with the many ills of existing society risks falling short of a serious challenge to the system as a whole. In this sense, a philosophically grounded alternative to capitalism is not only needed to further develop mass opposition; it is needed to actually inspire it.

“... We do the most justice to a thinker like Marx, not by repeating what he said and did, but by rethinking the meaning of his legacy for the realities of our times.” (215)

I am in 99% or more agreement with this long quotation from Hudis. This is why, at this point, I am going to argue that both Hudis and Marx have fallen short in their attempts to say what the new society will look like.

Here, I propose that we go back to their Hegelian roots: that change comes about through contradiction and

struggle. What this implies is that we need to think about the problems the working class will face when it takes over the direction of the world and the struggles we will have to undergo to resolve these problems.[\(4\)](#)

What we will face is a world that is physically in disarray, with global warming, pollution, production equipment and urban residential patterns that were designed in order to produce profit regardless of human consequences, and all the other “old muck” that capitalism has produced.

We will face a world of massive inequality in which large proportions of people think that men should be more privileged than women, that people of certain religions or race/ethnicities are genetically or culturally less-deserving than others, and that it is natural for people in “less developed” localities to live more poorly than those in “more developed” places.

We will face a world in which we have been trained to obey those with money and power, and where it seems natural to spend many hours a day being bossed around while doing labor that others have defined as necessary (for profits).

Luckily, we will also be blessed with the movements we will have created that will have taken over workplaces and neighborhoods and, in one way or another, will have dispersed the power of the capitalist state(s). These movements, and the working population on which they are based, will at that time be the (primary) Subjects of the new history.

What does that mean? That all the problems of the world will need to be solved, and it will be the working people of the world who will have to develop ways to make decisions, ways to work together, and ways to protect ourselves and everyone from the damages that capitalism will have created.

Given our different histories in different geographical areas and in different subsets of the working class, we will have different conceptions of our immediate needs and interests, and of which problems it is most urgent to solve. We will also disagree over the best ways to organize decision-making at workplaces, in localities, and globally.

All these disagreements will lead to struggles (and thus politics) within the working-class-in-dissolution that we hope and expect will become the solidaristic and united people of the world through these struggles. If successful, we will create a world of freely associated labor where we decide what use values need to be produced, make them available to those who need or want them, and do this in an environmentally sustainable way in which we find ways to enjoy our lives and fulfill our potentials through actions that are sociable and helpful to ourselves and others as well.

I have written several papers and reviews that bear on what this will mean, and it makes no sense to try to repeat them here.[\(5\)](#) What does make sense is to say that I hope Hudis will take up these ideas in his future work. He has the background and the inspiration to make further enormous contributions to thinking through what problems we will face, and how we will stumble and at times succeed in facing them.

His excellent grounding in both Hegel and Marx, and his wonderful work in Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism, provide an excellent basis for thinking through — and acting upon — what aspects of the dialectic of the new society can be foreseen and why understanding these in advance can give us the hope and ideas we need in our struggles for a human future.

## Notes

1. Page references, unless otherwise specified, refer to page numbers in the Brill edition. When quoting, I use “labour” rather than “labor” because the Brill edition, which I used for this review, does so.

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2. Hudis's references to Capital Vol. I are to the Vintage (1976) edition, which I do not have. The quote below is thus taken on March 17, 2013, from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm> and may differ from the version Hudis is using. I have done my best to assure that what I quote does not differ from what Hudis presents.

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3. The first sentence is taken from Hudis's quotation of the Fowkes translation. They are clearly different and clearer than those in the web-based translation, which reads: "Let us finally imagine, for a change, an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour." The rest of the paragraph is from the web version.

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4. For discussion of what I mean by "working class," see Friedman, Sam. "What is the 'working class'?" Against the Current, 163 (March/April 2013), pages 36, 40. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/3813>.

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5. These are as follows, with the warning that the first one listed is both the fullest presentation of these ideas and also the hardest to read due to its subject matter:

Friedman, Samuel R. "Making the World Anew in a Period of Workers' Council Rule." We! Magazine #63, Volume 2, Number 16 Wednesday, 2 April 2008. <http://mytown.ca/friedman/> or <http://thelunaticgazette.com/friedman/>.

Friedman, Samuel R.. "What Might Socialism Look Like?" Critical Sociology, first published on November 30, 2011, <http://crs.sagepub.com/content/38/4/599.abstract>.

Friedman, Samuel R. "Sociopolitical and philosophical questions of organization in making a human society." Interface: a journal for and about social movements Essay. Volume 2 (1): 144-153 (May 2010). <http://www.interfacejournal.net/> or [http://interface-articles.googlegroups.com/web/3Friedman.pdf?gda=3T8rLz8AAACYyjGsjeTfccAd9zHifrDtT32Q0Nw1KwkUY1D2Ejb\\_Oj7uyK3hkD-JAIC5G79quCqccyFKn-rNKC-d1pM\\_IdV0](http://interface-articles.googlegroups.com/web/3Friedman.pdf?gda=3T8rLz8AAACYyjGsjeTfccAd9zHifrDtT32Q0Nw1KwkUY1D2Ejb_Oj7uyK3hkD-JAIC5G79quCqccyFKn-rNKC-d1pM_IdV0).

Friedman, Samuel R. "Review of Religion and the Human Prospect, by Alexander Saxton." (2008). Historical Materialism 16:219-226.

Friedman, Samuel R. "Review of Philosophy and Revolution: From Hegel to Sartre, and from Marx to Mao, by Raya Dunayevskaya." (2005.) Contemporary Sociology 34(1): 77-78.

Friedman, Samuel R. "On Darren Webb's Marx, Marxism and Utopia." (2004) Historical Materialism 12;2:269-280.

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