

Intersectional Marxism and the Dialectic

written by Lilia Monzo, Cristal B. Flores | August 14, 2024



Many on the radical left are increasingly seeking a humanist alternative to the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that has produced immeasurable suffering and destruction. Amidst the fascism ignited within this era's supra-conservatism, many of us turned to the Democratic Party to ensure Trump's defeat only to be reminded that both major political parties in the United States have always moved to the tune of capitalist interests.¹ Thus, at this time, especially, we must remain hopeful in order to continue our struggle to develop a viable alternative to the current system.

This new PM Press edition of Karl Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* offers such a vision and with it the hope for change that we crave. The book contains (1) a new introduction by Peter Hudis; (2) the first-ever English translation of the version of the Gotha Program that was the object of Marx's critique; (3) a personal letter Marx wrote to Wilhelm Bracke wherein he indicates that he and Engels "completely disassociate"² themselves from the principles presented in the Gotha Program, which are in their view "completely objectionable";³ (4) a revised English translation of the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, and an afterword by Peter Linebaugh. Taken in its totality, the book provides the context and critical analysis that allow readers to engage with a much more dialectical and humanist Marx than has typically been represented. Crucially, it also links Marx's vision with today's sociopolitical and economic contexts.

Critique of the Gotha Program (hereafter referred to as *Critique*) is Marx's response to the Gotha Program (Program of the Worker's Socialist Party), which articulated a set of principles, characterized as Marxist, of the then newly-formed Socialist Workers Party of Germany. In *Critique*, Marx lays out a scathing challenge to what he regards as misconceptions (perhaps deliberate) of his philosophy. Here, Hudis points out that as much as Marx resisted providing a blueprint for his vision of communism, the dialectical analysis that he employed reveals the positives within the negatives, offering us the opportunity to capture aspects of Marx's vision of an alternative to capitalism that we might build upon and to shed light on the processes that contributed to the development of the so-called communisms that Marx would have repudiated for having turned "into its opposite."⁴

Challenging Misconceptions and Recapturing the Dialectic

Hudis's incisive analysis of Marx's critique, written from a Marxist-humanist perspective is also an articulation of the dialectic. Hudis not only points out the relevancy and importance of Karl Marx's work, he also examines the consequences of developing an inadequate understanding of capital.

In his introduction, Hudis clarifies some of the most difficult concepts that Marx developed, including Marx's articulation of value as the product of abstract labor and the development of an

abstract global socially necessary labor time that determines the value of the commodity and that becomes a force that controls us. He points out that a major source of misunderstanding of Marx's philosophy is equating capitalism with private property. Hudis acknowledges that Marx opposed private property, but he explains that focusing on private property alone as the defining characteristic of capitalism has led to the nationalized property and planned economies that have given way to dictatorships with almost complete control at the hands of a vanguard party. This, as Hudis points out, does not reflect Marx's vision of freely associated labor, democratic control of the means of production, or an exchange process based on *actual* labor time.

Another important idea that Hudis clarifies is the distinction between wealth and value and the misconception that "labor is the source of all wealth."⁵ Marx criticizes the Gotha Program's attribution of all wealth to labor, noting that nature is just as much a source of wealth and this false attribution, Marx states, renders abstract labor trans-historical and therefore a permanent aspect of life.⁶ Because the Gotha Program conflates wealth with value, its proponents assume that abolishing surplus value will mean that individual workers will receive "the full fruits of their labor—even though this is clearly a completely impractical perspective."⁷ As Hudis points out, this faulty reasoning has led to a continued focus on wealth redistribution, which leaves the social relations of production, that is, the process of value production, intact. This makes redistribution impossible and fails to challenge the alienation that is inherent to value production. Moreover, it allows us to accept the atrocities against life and dignity that the system creates. As Hudis explains, this approach leads to "Humanism, at least in Marx's sense of the word, vanish[ing] from view."⁸

Marx's indignation at the Gotha Program is evident especially in his repudiation of its adoption of the Lassallian "iron law of wages," which rendered the self-activity of the workers, through trade union collective bargaining, superfluous. This was just one example of Lassalle's betrayal of revolutionary goals in favor of reformism, along with his inability to recognize the agency and capacity of self-activity of the working classes. Indeed, this elitist assumption of the superiority of a vanguard party of intellectuals has been a critical aspect of the one-party dictatorships that have defined twentieth-century socialisms.⁹

Two other important points of the Gotha Program that Marx critiques and that Hudis highlights are the focus on nationalism rather than the internationalism that Marx supported and the false distinction between socialism and communism as distinguishable modes of production, which has been used to justify a statist-command economy and which Raya Dunayevskaya identified as state capitalism.¹⁰ This state-command economy has been falsely presented as a necessary first historical stage in the development of communism. In this false distinction, socialism, as opposed to communism, has been perceived to retain the law of value, thereby, pushing off freedom to an indeterminate future.

Hudis points out that Marx only differentiated communism from socialism in the 1840s in order to distinguish his ideas of communism from the reformist tendencies within the "socialism" of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Louis Blanc. Once these tendencies were no longer prominent, however, Marx begins to use the terms interchangeably. Marx does distinguish between an initial and higher phase of communism/socialism, but these are not two distinguishable historical stages or modes of production. Rather they express the reality that socialism/communism is a system that is birthed from capitalism and, thus, necessarily emerges flawed and thus requires the development of particular social conditions that will allow for the development of a greater human society ready to embrace new social relations. A state controlled economy has no place within communism/socialism because the key defining feature of the initial phase of communism/socialism is the abolition of the state as the producers take collective control of the means of production.

In the *Critique*, Marx points out that in abolishing private property while maintaining abstract labor,

the Gotha Program egregiously misrepresents his ideas. Elsewhere, Hudis has argued that Marx's greatest revolutionary goal was the elimination of the alienation that deforms our species being.¹¹ In particular, Marx writes about the "metabolic rift" that has occurred through the separation of humanity from nature, specifically through land enclosures but more broadly through a process of production that ignores the dialectical relations between our human selves and nature. As Marx writes in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*: "Nature is man's *inorganic* body—nature, that is, insofar as it is not itself human body. Man *lives on nature*—means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous intercourse if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature."¹²

Through abstract labor, the commodity, or the product of our human activity, turns against us to control us, thereby turning us into play things of capitalist relations. This is why, for Marx, any revolutionary struggle that sought to reclaim people's dignity and self-determination as human beings was worthy in and of itself regardless of whether the movement declared itself anti-capitalist.¹³ Thus, the abolition of private property alone could not represent Marx's vision but was, rather, merely one step in a broader process of transforming "alienated human relations—in the workplace, between men and women, among different races and ethnicities, and in how we treat the natural environment."¹⁴ Thus, the abstract labor that produces alienation would have no place in Marx's socialism/communism.

While within Marx's vision, abstract labor ceases within the first phase of communism, this does not mean that labor ceases. Indeed Marx argues that labor, based on use values, may actually increase in order to provide for the social fund that secures the needs of children, seniors, the ill, and others who may not be able to contribute. Indeed, as Marx states in the *Critique*, "in a higher phase of communist society . . . labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime desire and necessity."¹⁵

An Intersectional Marxism

Peter Linebaugh, in the afterword, hones in beautifully on the need and fruitfulness of reading Marx's works and in particular his *Critique* in light of today's concrete struggles, not because it is timeless but because it provides a stepping stone to build upon. As Linebaugh notes, "we look back to select what is useful from Marx's *Critique*, bearing in mind, so to speak, that Marx looks to us!"¹⁶ Following Marx's emphasis on the self-activity of the working classes, it is critical to recognize that today's revolutionary subjects do not define themselves by class alone, nor even primarily. Linebaugh cites numerous historical struggles, from the American Civil War and the Paris Commune to more contemporary movements such as the Extinction Rebellion, Black Lives Matter, and #Me Too, demonstrating that revolutionary struggles develop in the context of particular social conditions. His point is that although we can point to capitalist social relations as a global system within which particular oppressive conditions predominate, the "real movement" of the people cannot be predetermined. Rather it develops in response to a host of particularities that include the specific goals, desires, limitations, and collective activity of the people in any given context. As Marx points out in the *Critique* and Linebaugh emphasizes, "Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programs."¹⁷ It is thus crucial, as Linebaugh insists, that we fully understand today's real movements—who comprises them? how and with what goals?

Linebaugh points out that while Marx's revolutionary subject was the proletariat, we must consider how today's sociopolitical and economic contexts have developed a revolutionary subject that defines itself differently. It is thus especially noteworthy that the struggles Linebaugh mentions are focused on specific forms of oppression that have not always centered class relations or have an

intersectional quality. Recent labor strikes that seek to improve wages and working conditions for predominantly Black and Brown peoples give credence to his argument.¹⁸ That said, Marxist-humanism recognizes multiple structures of oppression to be co-constitutive, which means that the struggle to end any one oppression will ultimately require that we struggle against all oppressions, including class relations. The dialectic for today allows us to recognize that people experience oppressive conditions differently, depending on their particular social positionings, but intersectional movements can create a collective consciousness among people that have been historically divided. Indeed today's social movements, often founded or led by women of color, attempt to address intersectionality and thus have garnered support across multiple forms of oppression.¹⁹ Black Lives Matter, founded by three self-identified Queer Black women has been especially successful in this approach, attending to the diverse social realities of Black men, Black women, Queer Blacks, and also to some extent recognizing the social conditions among Black communities as dialectically related to the capitalist state.²⁰ Black Lives Matter, as the largest historical movement in the United States, garnering support across multiple forms of oppression and growing into an international movement, has taught us that an intersectional approach has great potential to garner the "revolutionary force and Reason" of today's masses.²¹ Indeed, Dunayevskaya's research into the concrete struggles of the twentieth century led her to the conclusion that the Black masses would be the next vanguard of the revolution.²² Elsewhere, one of us has argued that today's intersectional movements and women's important roles in these suggest women of color as key revolutionary subjects.²³

An important caveat to the intersectional dimension of revolution is that we must not fall into the class reductionist assumption that smashing capitalist social relations will automatically end racism, sexism, or other oppressions. As Marx articulated, communism will not develop fully overnight but will require an initial phase that would slowly develop into a higher phase. Given that communism would emerge from a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the initial phase would necessarily be stamped with the flawed social relations that have sustained a system of overlapping human hierarchies and relations of domination for over 500 years. Thus, it is crucial to recognize that a contemporary vision for a viable alternative to capitalism will require that we work simultaneously to end all forms of oppression. So long as white patriarchal domination persists it will continue to perpetuate an ideology of human hierarchy that will lead us back to some form of racial-colonial capitalism. The alternative to capitalism will require that we continually dissolve the prejudices that have defined our current system such that we can begin to recognize the beauty, worthiness, and interconnectedness of all life. In our view this is a truly laudable goal—one worth fighting for no matter how long it takes.

Notes

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3. Karl Marx, Letter by Karl Marx to Wilhelm Bracke, 48.
4. Peter Hudis, Introduction to *Critique of the Gotha Program* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2023), 5.
5. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2023), 51.
6. Hudis, Introduction.

7. Hudis, Introduction, 10
8. Hudis, Introduction, 11
9. Lilia D. Monzó, "The Dialectic in *Marxism and Freedom* for Today: The Unity of Theory and Practice and the Movement of Today's Concrete Struggles," in K. Anderson, K. Durkin, and H. Brown, eds. *Raya Dunayevskaya's Intersectional Marxism: Race, Gender, and the Dialectics of Liberation* (New York: Springer, 2021).
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11. Peter Hudis, *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013).
12. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Trans. Martin Milligan. (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1961), 74.
13. Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
14. Hudis, Introduction, 25
15. Marx, *Critique*, 59.
16. Linebaugh, Afterword to *Critique of the Gotha Program* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2023), 80.
17. Linebaugh, Afterword, 81.
18. Erin Aubry Kaplan, "Labor Politics in Black and Brown," *Truthdig*, Oct. 30, 2023.
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23. Monzó, *A Revolutionary Subject*.