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Jeffrey C. Alexander

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THE 'MARXISM PROJECT' IN THE HISTORY OF ITS TIMES

Jeffrey C. Alexander

This essay on the 'spirit of socialism' dates from more than a quarter-century ago. The manuscript has never been published, nor was it intended to be in its present form. I prepared it in 1982, as a blue print for a book project – hence the division of the essay into 'chapters', not sections. I had completed writing the multi-volume *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* in 1980, and one of the empirical projects I turned to in the aftermath of that long exercise in abstraction was investigating Marxism as a cultural order (another was 'Watergate and the Crisis of Civil Society', which was also left unfinished).

During those early days of the 1980s, the outlook for democratic reformist politics looked bleak. Inside the US, Reagan was becoming a popular president, and the world outside seemed increasingly, if not fatally, endangered by a Cold War between an anti-social capitalism in the West and a totalitarian Marxism in the East. The Marxism that was becoming a major theoretical force on my home turf, among the university disciplines, was setting itself up as an aggressive antagonist to the classical tradition of sociology that I was myself struggling to revise and sustain.

This environment set the conditions of my 'Marxism project', as I was calling it. I wished to show that the Marxist tradition had no monopoly on fundamental criticism or egalitarian social reform. In the broad sweep of religious history I document below, I read Weber's sociology as laying out the cultural origins of an egalitarian and critical project. Religious rationalization allows community membership to be extended to lower classes; criticism to be applied to corrupt and undeserving authority; and unhappy fate to be challenged by world-mastering reason.

This radical and egalitarian promise of Weberian theory is submerged because of Weber's darkly pessimistic conviction that culture stopped mattering after the Puritans created the spirit of capitalism. 'The Puritans wanted to

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work in a calling,' Weber famously writes, but 'we are forced to do so.' After early entrepreneurial capitalism, Weber believes, modernity becomes so rationalized – bureaucratized, industrialized, secularized – that religious possibilities simply disappear. So does the possibility for sustaining any 'religious-like' belief, even if it is not ontologically metaphysical but teleological, thus mythic in the 'merely' cultural, epistemological sense.

I argue against this thesis. I show that the organizing power of metaphysical religion – religion with a big 'R' – extends well into the later period of capitalism, into the industrial phase that creates the proletariat and the proletariat creates itself. This new class is deeply involved with Christian religious belief. Just as the commercial gentry and rising middle classes had connected with Puritan divines to understand and control their place in the newly emerging modern order, so does religious belief later filter and canalize the experiences and hopes of the new class that emerges in industrial society. It allows them to make fundamental criticisms of capitalist authority, to envision economic and political justice and cross-class communities, to demand that this-worldly action more closely approximate the perfection of God.

Different versions of this religiously inspired working class ideology emerge depending on time and place. It becomes more and less radical, more and less secular depending on the effectiveness of anti-capitalist ideology and agitation vis-à-vis conservative elites. Marxism represents the more radical and the more secular version of this-worldly proletarian asceticism, with the Social Democratic version of Marxist politics being much less radical and secular than its Bolshevized form. If the moral and political-economic reconstruction of industrial capitalism could be achieved without Marxism, it certainly would be. The 'spirit of socialism' is much bigger than Marxism. It is fundamental to the religious developments that underpin modernity and to the Western culture of individuality, community, and civil repair.

If I had gone on to write this book, I intended to develop case studies exploring the range of reform and radicalism, religion and secularity, stretching from the reformism and religiosity of American 'economic' unionism to revolutionary Marxism. In so doing, I would confront the orientalism distorting Weber's vision, blinders that were just coming into intellectual focus around that time. Any effort to extend the Weberian project to industrial modernity and beyond must deal with parallel processes in non-Western religious and institutional life, probably through some combination of Eisenstadt's multiple modernities and postcolonial theory.

Rather than extending the Weberian project, however, my work from this point onward took a rather decided turn away from it. My problem has remained the same: how to challenge the idea that industrialization, secularism, and modernity make myth and symbolic thinking obsolete. Instead of extending big 'R' religion, however, I pursued religion with a small 'r', a path first laid out in classical theory by what I came to call 'late-Durkheim'. Combining ideas of ritual, symbolic classification, and performance, I cooked

up a brew that – mixed with the recipes of many others – became cultural sociology in the present day.

Yet, the path not taken – the first steps of which are laid out in the essay below – still seems fruitful to me. How the cultural sociology that has been cooked up since then might affect these ruminations would be a story well worth exploring. Certainly it would suggest examining cultural themes outside of big 'R' religion, e.g. the secular codes and narratives, along with traditional religion, forming the motives, relations, and institutions of a 'secular' civil sphere. (For a recent effort along these lines see Michael Davis, 2008.)

But I would still insist that proletarian agitation for economic equality and class inclusion was stimulated by more than economic pain, rational interest, and utilitarian reasoning. It was also centrally concerned with meaning. The new working class wanted to explain their suffering and to transcend it. They developed a new spirit, one that allowed them to make sense of the alien, tragically combustive industrial world, to bring it to moral judgment, and to reconstruct it in a more coherent and ethical way. From the 19th to the middle of the 20th century, these concerns were perhaps best captured by the 'spirit of socialism'. No matter how they are now named, urgent demands for justice, the need to explain suffering and transcend it, remain compelling in meaningful terms today.

Jeffrey C. Alexander, Yale's Center for Cultural Sociology, Yale University
[email: jeffrey.alexander@yale.edu]

Reference

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