



M&S 2023: “Marxism in the Age of the Total Crisis”

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M*arxism & Sciences* held its first symposium titled “Marxism in the Age of Total Crisis” from September 14 to 17 at the *Bilimler Köyü* (Village of Sciences), Foça İzmir.

The primary goal of this initiative, as outlined in the journal’s aims and scope, is to rebuild “the Marxist concept of totality on the basis of a materialist conception of history and materialist dialectics” (as of 9 October 9, 2023, Journal’s web page listed). Not only culture and society, but also nature was considered as elements of this totality. As a result, these fields were viewed as arenas of class struggle and thus subject to interference.

In this context, the first symposium was crucial to achieving its objective. It investigated the Marxist theory’s totality and emphasized that comprehending capitalism’s total crises is achievable only from this perspective, both in theory and in practice.

The symposium’s call for contributions underscored the idea that the ongoing crises form a multifaceted totality. The crises humanity experiences are indicative of the crisis-ridden nature of capitalism. Capitalism was identified as a contributing factor in crises at multiple levels. “Capitalism appears to be a factor in crises at various levels” (as of 9 October 9, 2023, Symposium’s web page listed). Therefore, the examination of both these levels and their interconnections was a crucial objective of the Symposium.

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As will be demonstrated in this review, the program's contents and schedule both encouraged participants to establish links between arguments and thesis from various fields, which, ideally, results in a broad understanding of capitalism's total crises and subsequent Marxist criticisms.

The organizers of the Symposium originally planned for all presentations to be delivered in person. However, due to unforeseen circumstances, some contributors participated online, while four others were not able to present their contributions in either way. Therefore, the Symposium ultimately took a hybrid form. The audience for the event was relatively small, comprising only about ten individuals, but they were highly engaged. The presentations, which lasted approximately 45 minutes each and were followed by an additional 45 minutes for Q&A, were more intense and effective due to the nature of the situation. Instead of briefly summarizing their thesis, presenters provided lengthy and detailed inquiries. This process was followed by intense debates, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of the thesis.

The opening speech of the symposium was given by Siyaves Azeri. According to Azeri, Marx's critique of religion as an expression of the immiserating effects of capitalist social relations can be broadened to include criticism of conspiracy theories, which appear to impact both social and political spheres of contemporary life. The underlying message and impact of these theories suggests that human beings lack agency and are therefore only seen as subject to capitalism rather than capable of dismantling it. This perspective reduces them to mere producers and consumers of commodities rather than autonomous individuals.

This approach to international politics has ties to right-wing populism, which appears to be on the rise globally. Like conspiracy theories, right-wing populism portrays human beings as subjects controlled by external forces. However, in this case, these forces are not hidden but instead attributed to immigrants and other groups—a process of pseudo-concretization of the “abstract” nature of capitalism.

The second presentation, delivered by Yoav Peled, focused precisely on this subject, drawing from the evaluation of the most recent elections conducted in Israel in 2022.

Peled presented right-wing populism not as an ideology but as “a rhetorical device for political mobilization in formally democratic societies that can adapt to different ideologies.” Therefore, Peled examined how the rhetorical tools utilized by right-wing populism vary according to the social and political circumstances of each country, focusing on the case of Israel.

Peled argued that in Israel, unlike in the US and Europe, right-wing populism did not stem from the fear of the immigrants or economic deprivation. Rather, it was fueled by resentment towards the Labor Zionist Movement, the existential insecurity among the common people, which is a phenomenon prevalent in governments worldwide, and competition over resources with the Palestinians. Peled emphasized that right-wing populism is a political outcome, existing in addition to capitalism in general, although it arises from diverse socioeconomic conditions specific to each country.

On the second day of the Symposium, Dang Tuan Dung, and Pham Minh Duc delivered a presentation titled “Dehumanization and Techno-Fetishism: A Marxist Critique of Transhumanism.” Dung and Duc first explored the growing trend of dehumanization in various industrial and economic sectors, leading to the emergence of transhumanism in the academic realm. They argued that transhumanism represents an ideology that motivates individuals to exceed human limitations, thereby implicitly promoting human enhancement. However, this mindset devalues humans as valuable entities in their own right. Dung and Duc argued that this approach to human beings is a manifestation of human alienation from their species in the Marxist sense of the term. This is a result and actuality of other alienation processes, as alienation from the labor process, other workers, and their products.

The subsequent presentation was delivered by Bruce Robinson. Robinson’s research aimed to establish a connection between Turing Machines, regarded as the origins of artificial intelligence, and Marxism.

Robinson attempted to redefine and re-conceptualize computer science concepts from a Marxist perspective; he began by highlighting the limitations of formal logic which led to its inability to conceptualize Turing Machines. Based on this conclusion, he examined Turing machines on a theoretical level, exploring their connection to the labor process. An important focus at this stage was the mediation between these two elements. The author continued his line of reasoning by analyzing how Turing’s ideas were used to explain the relationship between computing and capitalism, which raised the question of whether machines can produce value. This topic was also discussed in the presentation.

The next day began with Joos Kircz’s presentation on “Function and Totality: The Methodological Confrontation of Historical Materialism and Holism” in which he explored the underlying intersecting theme of all the aforementioned presentations.

As implied by the title of his presentation, Kircs aimed to explore the concept of holistic materialism from a methodological perspective. He argued that while formal logic performs adequately for everyday purposes even in basic physics, accepting this logic imposes limitations. In other words, in a similar vein to Robinson, Kircz underlined the limitations of formal logic but from a different perspective.

Kircs linked the dominant effect of formal logic in science with the power of the hegemonic culture for pure science, which conceptualizes the objects as an externality that is alien to us. This is followed by the underlying criticism of positivism and its logic. Hence, the question: "What is the object we aim to describe?" He further inquired, "Do we discuss structure or well-defined objects?" These questions lead to an immanent aspect. From this point of view, although the objects or the objectivity in itself is not specific yet, they are not evaluated as alien to subjects; moreover, the structure seems to be the same as the one we as subjects (of knowledge) form. Undoubtedly, this structure reflects the capitalist mode of production. Therefore, the definition and critique of capitalism were connected to the critique of science's well-established concept of objectivity, creating a compelling starting point for a new comprehension of holistic materialism.

The subsequent presentation of the day, titled "Reducing Uncertainty by Marxist Abstractions in a Time of Total Crisis," was delivered by Erzebet Pasztor, where she delved into a related subject in a more tangible manner.

Pasztor commenced her presentation with a discussion of climate change, which is widely regarded as one of the most pressing crises and threats to not only humanity but also the planet as a whole.

Pasztor examined this issue by using the Galapagos as an example. Her approach involved two essential elements. First and foremost, she brought attention to the concept of "resilience" which is gaining popularity in various research fields, including ecology.

According to Pasztor, this concept highlights the inclination to accept that "any change can be technically managed and assimilated while maintaining the ongoing survival of the system," which can lead to the destruction of certain components as well as the species (Chatzarakis, 2022). She asserted that this concept suggests the inefficacy of the methodology adopted to evaluate the current situation in ecology generally, and hence in the Galapagos. The determining concept of this method seems to function only to perpetuate the current crises. Building upon this determination and Ollman's Marxist dialectical methodology, the author defined a

suitable approach that not only comprehends but also can prevent the current devastating situation in the Galapagos Islands. According to her, adopting the Marxist dialectical perspective compels us to analyze the capital dynamics of Galapagos for achieving a comprehensive understanding of the area.

This approach to the environment views it as a part of the dynamic process of production and reproduction within the capitalist system, rather than a separate or foreign one. It is reasonable to argue that no method can be detached from its object and process. Therefore, an immanent approach is appropriate for theorizing the environment under capitalism. At this point, Pasztor once again recalled Ollman's analysis of Marxist dialectics, identifying three key aspects of abstraction that one must always reflect on: "extension, generality, and the standpoints of abstractions."

The final presentation of the day, titled "Symptoms of Asymptotic Knowledge: An Ecological Leninist Critique of the Mechanistic Worldview," was presented by Kenny Knowlton Jr. and Cameron Gamble. Knowlton and Gamble presented their initial argument by establishing a connection between "the historical realization of capitalist accumulation and the generation of time and space". They argued that the predominant conceptions of time and space in science and philosophy, largely established by the works of Kant and Newton, cannot be dissociated from the capitalist mode of production and should therefore not be examined in isolation. This is because they are "developed through the complex formation of a specific form and structure of knowledge, expressed in and through the worldview of capital's representative class." Drawing on Lenin's studies, this deduction was supported by the contradictions found in the mechanistic worldview. Knowlton and Gamble evaluated this as "asymptotic knowledge" and argued that it only results in reproducing the current status of both capitalism and epistemology. In other words, Knowlton and Gamble concluded that the crises in the mechanical worldview were a manifestation and symptom of the crises in capitalism. Concordantly, they proposed adopting an "Ecological-Leninist perspective" characterized by the concept of metabolism, which enables to place contradictions in their proper context - nature itself. Accordingly, this perspective could potentially offer the essential tools to firstly differentiate between the contradictions in nature and those in capitalist society, and secondly, facilitating the identification of the relation between these contradictions in a correct manner.

The Symposium's final day opened with a presentation by Ali C. Gedik entitled "Music in Crisis and the Crises in Ethnomusicology: Towards a Marxist Theoretical Framework for the Holistic Study of Music in the Age of Total Crises." Gedik initially explained the correlation between the crises in music and those in ethnomusicology. Then he assessed that ethnomusicology is the only branch of musicology that has a holistic approach. Apart from that, drawing from the studies of Blacking, he evaluates music as a "species-specific trait of man [sic]." Hence, all the limitations of making or listening to music, including the division between talent and audience, are a result of historical division of labor and, as Gedik mentioned, significant obstacles for human actualization. In my view this deduction can be regarded as another definition of crisis.

Gedik suggested that the crises and the difficulties associated with defining or rejecting them in the field of musicology should be considered as a result of estrangement from a holistic approach. In this regard, postmodernism and globalization theories had taken over these fields. In contrast to these perspectives, Gedik proposed that "ethnomusicology should be the study of music in crisis to apprehend the crises in humanity." Finally, Gedik proposed that a thorough re-evaluation of the concept of culture, drawing from the ideas of Benjamin, Adorno, Williams, Ilyenkov, and Stuart Hall, is necessary to solve or even define these crises objectively.

The final presentation at the Symposium was on the topic of John Akomfra's multichannel installations, presented by Peter Lesnik. Lesnik opened his presentation by referring to climate change, one of the most significant modern crises, which had been discussed in former presentations of the symposium, as observed. Based on Ollman's research, he contended that the impact of the heating-related aspects of the climate crisis constrains our imagination, leading to political inaction. The solution, he proposes, is to liberate our imagination in a sustainable and efficacious way to ensure systemic political engagement.

Lesnik argued that in order to achieve this objective, we as agents must alter our thinking habits regarding the future, which is related to but not determined by the past and present. This linear thought process restricts us from perceiving the potential of the present and thus, the future. Conversely, Lesnik suggested that prioritizing the present by assessing both its positive and negative potentials can result in shaping the future. In other words, we must approach the present from an imagined future rather than a predetermined one. To systemically accomplish this objective, Lesnik proposes utilizing the Marxist dialectics, which Ollman elaborated. In this

context, he found an actualization of such dialectics and politics in the work of John Akomfra.

Akomfra employed three screens simultaneously in his work, each displaying a different moving image from a distinct time period. Despite all the visuals depicting the same ocean, they concentrated on different manifestations and periods; for instance using the ocean as an immigration route over the years, or ocean as a landscape. Lesnik examined Akomfra's work by connecting it with the Soviet director Sergey Eisenstein's concept of dialectics in cinema, which emphasized the relationship between images rather than the images themselves. Lesnik argued that by using different screens at the same time and voice-over narration during the screening, Akomfra forced the audience to see the potential of the ocean in the present. Subverting the linear understanding of time and space, as Eisenstein did, seemed to be the key element at this point. In this regard, Lesnik evaluated the installation not only as a call for a political action, but also as an act in itself.

As a whole, the Symposium, which began with the discussions of the concrete and methodological problems of Marxism, ended with analyzing and proposing an example of a political act.

To wrap it up, I would like to share my observations on the atmosphere at the Symposium. As I mentioned above, the conference took place at the Village of Sciences, which was established by Turkish academics. The founders of Village of Sciences aimed to create a conducive environment for academics, undergraduate, and graduate students to pursue teaching and learning in a more liberal and constructive manner. Two events, ranging from physics to sociology and philosophy, were held in a week such as "Reconstructing Gender: Digitality, Posthumanism, and the Feminist Perspective," and "Building Human Tissues: Tissue Engineering and Regenerative Medicine" (As of 9 October 9, 2023, The Village of Sciences web page listed). The objective of these adjustments was to challenge the hierarchical structure that could hinder individuals from understanding their relationship with others and reaching a holistic perspective, as proposed by Marxist theory. I propose that a wide social hierarchy presents an obstacle to reaching this goal too. Harmonically all needs for the organization were efficiently fulfilled by all the participants; professors and volunteers. Moreover, both the enjoyment and responsibilities were evenly distributed by the collective. The meals were prepared collaboratively and also the responsibility of washing dishes were shared. Undoubtedly, staying in tents together was an essential element of this communal spirit. The Village of

Sciences is also characterized by gatherings in the evenings after the lectures or workshops, with songs and sometimes even musical instruments, and by trips to the seashore on free days. The Symposium was the final event hosted this summer, and selecting The Village of Sciences as the venue for the Symposium is fitting, given the aims of the Journal and the Symposium.

During the evaluation meeting with all the participants, it became apparent that the Symposium did not fully convey Marxist theory's entirety, its potential to depict capitalism's crises and define total crises in capitalism. However, it would be erroneous to assume such objectives could be achieved quickly or easily. Nonetheless, a step forward has been made. I assert that the Journal and Symposium are progressing slowly but surely, similar to the Zapatistas.

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