Book Review: 'Krisis - Contributions To The Critique of Commodity Society'


This pamphlet is a collection of essays from the German-based Krisis group, which has been developing its own take on Marx’s critique of capitalism since the mid-1980s. Articles in various languages can be found at: www.krisis.org and may be of great interest to readers of the Socialist Standard.

In the essay Realists And Fundamentalists, Robert Kurz reminds us that:

“In 1992, the US economist Gary S. Becker was awarded the Nobel Prize for the theorem that even outside of the market, all human behaviour is aligned with cost-benefit viewpoints and can be mathematically depicted, even love” (P.15).

How have we come to a point where such unscientific and deeply alienated nonsense is given “intellectual” house-room; and what does this tell us about contemporary society? The answer of the authors of this pamphlet is one we would agree with: that this form of society (namely capitalism) is now historically bankrupt. But it is not dead, and in its ongoing, profit-hungry intrusion into every facet of human activity and experience it is dissolving everything, including human relationships, into something it calls “the economy”.

The big problem facing humanity, according to the Krisis group, is that capitalist society has effectively reduced all human activity to the category of “labour”. Or at least all activity that is “marketable”: that can be exploited to yield surplus value. However, with the technological productive powers humanity has produced under capitalism, much of this “labour” (what you and I have to do to make ends meet) is becoming more and more redundant. This creates a crisis for humanity, but only for so long as we continue to live in a society in which access to the means of subsistence is dependent on the sale of our minds and bodies to an employer for a wage. In a society based on a “to each according to their needs” basis, however, this abundance of productive power would be a positive benefit, freeing up human time and creativity in a way which may seem hard for us to imagine in these dark days.

A problem with this pamphlet is its acceptance of the bourgeois/leftist definition of “socialism” as a failed system of state planning. That said, Kurz is on our wavelength when he writes that the only way to stop the 21st-century turning into a bloodbath for humanity is to “formulate socialism anew and no longer in a state-run economic form. Only in this way is it possible that history will open itself again” (P.19).

The other big problem is Krisis's seeming rejection of class struggle, and of the working class as the agent for achieving the new society. They seem to see the class struggle as part of a process which has helped fetishise “labour”, and thus purely as an aspect of capitalist development, rather than the process which will transcend capitalism. We simply cannot accept this. We have to ask who, if not the working class as a conscious movement, is in a position to achieve the abolition of capitalism? If not the class struggle (which we all experience as part of the realities of our lives in a class society), then what process or motive force in the contradictory, conflict-ridden world of capitalism holds the seeds of humanity’s emancipation? The authors seem to take a super-pessimist view of the working class, and it is perhaps this that causes them to dismiss our class as a revolutionary agent as much as any actual theory. In this they very much reflect the “death of the
working class” spirit of the ideological age.

The workers, they argue, are largely enthusiastic participants in capitalism's fetishisation of wage labour:

“. . . in the crises of labour society, ordinary people (i.e. the subjects formed by capitalism) turn out to be the main obstacle for the abolishment of the prevailing fetish system. They do not want to stop working ... The Titanic must not sink; the passengers want the music to keep playing” (P.5).

Oh, really?! We may prefer selling the best part of our days in return for a more or less crappy wage rather than exist on a pittance and see our dependents go without, but this hardly adds up to positive enthusiasm for wage slavery. Utter loathing of the “labour society” is familiar to anyone who has held down a job for any length of time. Even in countries like the UK, which were among the first to be colonised by the capitalist system, the state still has to go to extraordinary lengths to indoctrinate and discipline us into even a superficial acceptance of the capitalist “facts of life”. Alongside Work, School and Prison are still the other two parts of the bosses' holy trinity and always will be, as long as capitalism continues. True, working class resistance in itself is not going to be enough to change the world, as long as we don't consciously work for the revolutionary end of capitalism itself. But the fact that the working class has not at this point in time organised itself for this revolutionary end is no reason to reject “ordinary” people out of hand.

Where we do agree entirely is with the conclusion the Krisis group reaches about the only real solution to the barbarism humanity faces:

“The inescapable historical task is the negation of the negative mode of social reproduction itself, i.e. the liberation of the production of wealth from the restrictions of the modern commodity-producing system” (From article “Marx 2000” on).”

Or: wealth must be produced and distributed to meet our human needs, rather than to perpetuate an outdated capitalist mode of production which now offers nothing but misery and fear to the vast majority.

BM
Sunday, 1 June 2003