

Romantic Anti-Capitalism and Trade Unionism Reviewed

Ely Ould Sneiba

Lecturer at the University of Nouakchott, Mauritania

Abstract: *The Industrial Revolution and the capitalism that came with it benefited the captains of industry and the bourgeoisie. In both urban and rural areas it brought huge inequalities, painful change and above all misery. Romantics and trade unionists, drawing on the pre-capitalist past, sought to offer an alternative to the spirit of profit and dehumanising materialism in response to rampant capitalism. They share a consciousness constructed around radical change even if they differ on the political spectrum.*

Keywords: Capitalism, Romantic anti-capitalism, liberalism, socialism, Marxism, trade unionism, and utopism

Romantic anti-capitalism and trade unionism reviewed

Romantic anti-capitalism is a term coined by the Hungarian Marxist philosopher and sociologist George Lukacs to denote "the set of forms of thought in which the critique of bourgeois society is inspired by a reference to the pre-capitalist past".¹ It was a diverse and sometimes antinomical sensibility built around central ideas like revolution or radical change, reactionary conservatism against all change, realism and idealism, and democracy and oligarchic elitism. According to Ernest Fischer, the most important thing to remember about the Romantics is the energy with which they rejected "the harsh prose of business and profit";² in other words, the literature of the classical school that founded capitalism. Their unanimity on this point is well known, even if they diverge on the political spectrum, some condemning capitalism "from an aristocratic point of view", others "from a plebeian perspective", sometimes looking backwards, sometimes forwards.³

Capitalism

In general terms, capitalism is an economic and social system that is based on private property. It is characterised by seeking individual profit and accumulating capital. It divides industrial society into two classes: on the one hand, the bourgeoisie of the rich owners, the captains of industry, and on the other, the proletarian mass of workers.

The appropriation of land, the means of production and the accumulation of capital are defended by the liberal doctrine which considers that working for one's interest is the best way to serve the general interest, according to Adam Smith's invisible hand theory.

Today, after the collapse of the socialist bloc, the capitalist system dominates the world, but its development is

ambivalent. If capitalism has been a factor of progress and prosperity, if it has considerably improved the standard of living and made possible the emancipation of the individual, it has also been a source of immense inequalities, widespread impoverishment and almost universal malaise. In other words, it has proved beneficial to a small minority of the privileged, the wealthy class, and it has been unforgiving to the vast majority of people who live in crushing poverty, to the point that it is sometimes described as "barbaric".

The grievances in this respect include child labour and long days of hard and poorly paid work leading to perpetual destitution. It can be characterised, therefore, as a frenzied race to get rich while losing humanist and philanthropic ideals.

The most common arguments against capitalism can be summarised in ten points:

- 1) It fosters class relations that perpetuate forms of human suffering that can be eradicated;
- 2) It blocks universal access to human flourishing;
- 3) It perpetuates deficits in individual freedom and independence;
- 4) It violates the principle of equality and social justice;
- 5) It is ineffective under certain conditions;
- 6) It is environmentally destructive;
- 7) It systematically tends towards consumption;
- 8) It threatens fundamental values;
- 9) It destroys the community;
- 10) It limits democracy.⁴

The grip of materialism and the recurrence of socio-economic crises have created a deep sense of unease among the elites in Europe, the cradle of capitalism. The dark side of the picture has frightened many a thinking head. Bernard Shaw, in *Ruskin: Ethical and Religious Teacher*, a study of John Ruskin's moral and religious commitment, reminds us of the nature of the world we face:

¹Sayre Robert, Löwy Michael. "Figures du romantisme anticapitaliste". In: *L'Homme et la société*, N. 69-70, 1983. Actualité des philosophes de l'École de Francfort. (pp. 99-121).P100

² Ernest Peter Fischer. *The necessity of art. A Marxist Approach*. Pelican Publishing; 1963 Penguin Books Translation edition, 1963. P 52-55.

³ Robert Sayr, Michel Lowy. *Figures du romantisme anti-capitaliste*.1983.P102

⁴"What's so Bad about Capitalism". <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/Published%20writing/CHAPTER%202--Whats%20so%20bad%20--%20version%201.1.pdf>

Face to face as we are this day, at the opening of the twentieth century after Christ, in a world more and more dominated by bestial competitive strife and base ideals, with the ignoblest tyranny, the earth has beheld since tyrants were, the overweening, menacing, cruel might of swollen Capitalism.⁵

Shaw, thus, formulates the same idea and the same way of thinking as J.M. Keynes when he argues, in a well-known aphorism, that "Capitalism is the staggering belief that the worst men will do the worst things for the greatest good of all".⁶

There is no shortage of charges against capitalism. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the state of the developing industrial nations was poor, as the gap between rich and poor widened and deepened. The picture was bleak.

The capitalists, on the other hand, reject all these criticisms. In their defence, the fault lies with governments, whose regulation of the economic game has always been the result of heavy taxation policies and highly restrictive legislation.

The more effective way to rectify this, to reduce unemployment and to give capitalism the best chance of guaranteeing general prosperity, would be not to hinder free enterprise and the growth of private property. Capitalists argue that if people are poor, it's because they're lazy, and welfare makes people lazy; the rich have got rich by working.⁷

This means that capitalism is not unanimously accepted and that its negative effects have led intellectuals and men of action to react, driven by the desire to correct the inequalities between the haves and the have-nots. Its emergence and development have fuelled a social debate with global repercussions. It is a confrontation between two very antagonistic worldviews that express a crisis of the socio-economic system and, more generally, of civilisation.

Currents of anti-capitalism

As soon as capitalism, and especially unbridled capitalism, appeared, projects to get out of it multiplied. Such projects aim to neutralise capitalism's negative effects, eliminate or reduce the inequalities and injustices that it has created, and guarantee full employment, general prosperity and economic efficiency. And, above all, they look to humanise the economy and give it acceptable moral content. This is how reformist anti-capitalist currents came into being. They include communism, utopian socialism and Romanticism.

After the First World War, communism was born. It is a form of social organisation that is based on the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production and

exchange in favour of collective ownership. There is a transitional phase between the capitalist system and the classless, stateless communist society. Communism is largely based on the political, economic and social system outlined by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

The *Manifesto of the Communist Party* contains a different concept of the relationship between economy and society, this being a revolutionary anti-capitalist approach. It argues for the reorganisation of society on a different social base. That is, the abolition of private ownership of the means of production and exchange in favour of collective ownership, which, according to the ideology it develops, is the only fair, just and sustainable alternative: "Instead of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all".⁸

The problem of development, from a communist point of view, is based on an argument of social injustice which is the result of the overexploitation of workers, of which Friedrich Engels' study *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) is a perfect illustration.

For Marx and his fellow students, because all capitalist activity is presented as the pure exploitation of workers, the economic game is a duel between the exploiters and the exploited, leading to greater social disorder and economic and multidimensional crises. Profit is made on the backs of the exploited as they are the ones who create value, i.e., wealth, and they are the ones who benefit the least from it because they are underpaid and deprived of the income of capital. Thus, communism has become the political expression of the workers' movement around the world.

To reach their final goal, the communists, led by Lenin, advocated passing through two phases, a "higher phase": a revolutionary struggle waged by the proletariat which should lead to the abolition of capitalism and social classes, especially the bourgeoisie, and the establishment of socialism. And a "lower phase": a process of socialising goods, ultimately leading to the abolition of private ownership of the means of production.

Unlike the utopian socialism of Saint-Simon, Proudhon and Owen, which aims to make the world a happier place, this type of socialism is meant to be scientific. Utopia comes from Thomas More's eponymous text. The utopian idea was inspired by the philosophy of the Enlightenment and its humanism and was based on the example of people of goodwill and the fight against the corruption of wealth. This is a theoretical question. The first socialist ideas remained imaginary constructs, not lacking in generosity, but cut off from social and economic reality. It was only with Marx and Engels, who developed scientific socialism that this situation would change.

⁵Shaw William Hudson. *Ruskin: Ethical and Religious Teacher*. Biblio Life, 2009. P34

⁶ Mario Jodoin. Citations de John Maynard Keynes(2011).<https://jeanneemard.wordpress.com/2011/04/12/citations-de-john-maynard-keynes/>

⁷ "Le clivage droite/gauche est-il encore d'actualité?"

<http://rvvaza.blogspot.com/2014/01/du-capitalisme-narcissique-au.html>

⁸ Karl Marx et F. Engles. *Le Manifeste du Parti communiste Manifeste*, P2.

<https://www.marxists.org/francais/marx/works/1847/00/kmfe1847000.htm>

The three most representative Utopian socialists are Claude-Henri de Rouvroy, comte de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), who was a French philosopher and economist whose ideas influenced most 19th-century philosophers. The historian André Piettre calls him "the first socialist".⁹ Saint-Simon saw social misery but believed that a solution was possible if capitalists listened to reason and engaged in economic planning.

François Marie Charles Fourier, born in Besançon (1772-1837), was a French philosopher regarded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as a figure of "critical utopian socialism".

This forerunner of cooperative socialism was not a revolutionary because he rejected the violence inherent in revolutions and the harshness that they entail. According to him: "The evil is there... [it] destroyed the social bonds by wanting to reconstitute a revolution of free and equal individuals: freedom is only a lure, and the social harmony that comes from diversity is preferable to equality".¹⁰

He reproached the revolutionaries for not being radical enough; in particular, for not having founded a religion, a paradoxically revolutionary concept.

Charles Fourier was also a great critic of the ravages of capitalism and bourgeois ideology, and one of the first to denounce the oppression of women. He advocated the building of communities in which working people could live together in harmony.

Robert Owen (1771-1858) was an English industrialist and philanthropist. He was interested in trade unionism and the revolutionary movement of the Chartists and tried to improve the conditions of his workers by funding model colonies for working people. The socialists considered him one of their theorists. His ideas inspired a 'utopian socialist' movement called 'Owenism' which was influential in the first half of the 19th century. Owen is considered the founder of "cooperativism". He believed that the main cause of poverty was the conflict between the working class and the employers and that the former could only win their rights if they united to control the means of labour.

To combat poverty, Owen advocated the creation of communities of several hundred people, all of whom would be employed, living in a single building with all the necessary comforts. Each family would have a private home and bring up their children until the age of three when the community would take over.

Among those who dreamed were the Romantics, writers and poets who wrote to address the political and moral concerns of their audiences. Romanticism is a broad current of nostalgia for medieval civilisation and, therefore, pre-capitalist and anti-bourgeois in its vision of society. It is

seen as a hostile reaction to the present reality, the capitalist present, whose negative effects are causing modern society to suffer. It is a revolt against capitalism, a strong reaction against the power of money and materialism.

Those who support Romanticism want to re-establish social and cultural forms which are not based on the exploitation of man by man and on the moral and socio-cultural values of the past, of the pre-capitalist era. This "must be understood as a response to that slow and profound change-economic and social - that is the emergence of capitalism".¹¹

Despite this, the Romantic view laments the loss of certain essential values of the human being. So, they look to the past. In fact, by looking to the past, they are looking to the present to better imagine the future. This tradition of protest exists in Carlyle, Dickens, Georges Sorel, and many other Marxist philosophers, such as Bloch and Lukacs, etc.

The Romantic approach to protest is not meant to be rational and Cartesian, to be described by human reason, by scientific argumentation. Romantics see capitalism as a system leading to "the disenchantment of the world, its quantification, mechanisation, as well as rationalist abstraction and dissolution of social bonds".¹² For the Romantics, the attempt to master everything rationally is futile because man is not devoid of feelings and passions. A phenomenon such as the class struggle is due not to reason but to morality, to the indignation and pain that lead to self-sacrifice or even sacrifice.

In this sense, the revolt against capitalism is the result of the uneducated masses weighing up the pros and cons of their action and coming to the conclusion that inertia is counterproductive, but by acting heroically against an order considered unjust, and by having to suffer physically...¹³

Revolutionary unionism

Trade unionism is one of the direct consequences, along with the demographic, political and ideological changes, brought about by the Industrial Revolution.

During the period of upheaval that followed industrialisation, mentalities evolved by multiplying currents of thought which were centred on the worker and encouraged social protest. Proletarian literature, with its wealth of fiction denouncing the misery of the workers and the harsh living conditions of the miners, played an important role in this general awareness of the workers' question. However, the novelists who did have an interest in this were not all of the same opinion regarding its resolution; some were in favour of reform, and others were in favour of revolution. In general terms, the proletarian novel was

¹¹ Robert Sayr, Michel Lowy. *Figures du romantisme anti-capitaliste*. 1983. P 104

¹² Denis Varaschin. *Risques et prises de risques dans les sociétés industrielles*. Peter Lang S.A., Editions Scientifiques Internationales Publication, 2007. P52

¹³ "République & Révolution" - Blog de Galaad Wilgos Chamfort, moraliste populiste ? (2013). http://laicard-belge.blogspot.com/2013_12_01_archive.html

⁹ Jean-Philippe Gaborieau. "Les deux gauches". (2016).

<https://blogs.mediapart.fr/jean-philippe-gaborieau/blog/060416/les-deux-gauches>

¹⁰ Charles Fourier et le phalanstère. "Juste mon opinion"(2013). <http://justemonopinion-jeronimo.blogspot.com/2013/11/charles-fourier-et-le-phalanstere.html>

intended to be a lever for the revolution. Likewise, trade unionists were sometimes reformists and sometimes revolutionaries.

The trade union movement was to take shape in this way with the mechanisation of Western Europe, particularly in Britain. That the new machines had created unemployment and the exploitation of the workers was obvious, hence the clamour for better conditions, the fight for legal recognition and the search for specific and appropriate forms of organisation. The Chartist movement, as we have seen, was one of the pioneers of political agitation seeking to find a solution to the problems of the working class in Britain and thus, from the middle of the nineteenth century, workers began to organise and campaign to improve their lot.

England was to be the cradle of reformist unionism. Workers came together to improve their living and working conditions through negotiation and, if necessary, strike action, as freedom of association is the cornerstone of any democratic society. Their struggle was limited to seeking greater social justice and was not aimed at the defeat or radical overthrow of capitalism, even though, by definition, it was against the concentration of economic power in the hands of a few capitalists.

All trade union action was initially about achieving a few common, strictly occupational, goals, such as fair and secure employment, fair wages, humane working hours, and decent and acceptable working conditions. It was their task to defend the material and moral interests of the workers, and negotiate with the employers to achieve the social welfare of the working class. It was only after many twists and turns that the government finally recognised the legitimacy of trade union struggle and gave it legal status in the Trade Union Act of 1871. This was a serious blow to the Combination Acts of 1799, 1800 and 1825, which had made it a crime for workers to associate although it was perfectly normal for them to do so: "Men who ... have no other property than their manual skill and strength, should be permitted, if they think fit, to confer together to determine the price at which they will sell their property".¹⁴

Conversely, revolutionary syndicalism has always been about the overthrow of the capitalist system and its replacement by self-management. This movement has its roots in England, in the 1820s and 1830s with the Luddite movement, the 'machine-breakers', and the shearers, weavers and knitters who saw themselves threatened by the mechanisation of the looms. Edward Thompson, the author of *The Making of The English Working Class*, describes the revolt of these textile workers against technological change as a violent industrial conflict. In the United States, revolutionary trade unionism also had its activists. They were called the Knights of Labour. The group was characterised by a rejection of 'non-producers', those not physically involved in the production process, such as bankers, lawyers and academics.

¹⁴ Henry Pelling. *A History of British Trade Unionism*. London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd. 2016. P 23

The Knights of Labour's platform for economic and social change was based on demands such as an eight-hour day, the abolition of child labour, equal pay for men and women and compensation for industrial accidents. They also proposed collectively-run workshops and equipment as an alternative to wage labour. To unleash the revolution, defeat capitalism and establish a socialist economy in its place, their strategy included operations against the police and the occupation of some large industrial centres to win the support of all workers for their cause. Radicals were accused of perpetrating the anarchist attacks that shook Chicago in 1881.¹⁵

In France, revolutionary syndicalism took shape following the founding of the Confédération Générale du Travail in Limoges on 23rd of September 1895. It was an anarchist-inspired union, like the Knights of Labour, which refused to join political parties or compromise with capitalism.

Since then, trade unionism has become a universally accepted social fact. The First International (the International Workers' Association) was founded in London in 1864 on the initiative of French and British workers and Karl Marx. The Second International, founded in Paris in 1889 by a congress of socialist representatives from 23 countries, made the class struggle the rallying cry for the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the collectivisation of the means of production and exchange: "Proletarians of all countries, unite!" wrote Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848 in the Communist Party Manifesto.¹⁶

Over time, the working class has developed a militant ideal underpinned by theory. However, reformism through trade unionism has not always been the only way to fight and bring about change. In the preamble to 'One Big Union', those who have chosen the revolutionary road to ending exploitative capitalism say that they are acting to establish a new social order fundamentally different from that established by the capitalists.

The motto of the workers' movement at the time was a call for a greater degree of social justice, "A fair day's pay for a fair day's work", which the revolutionary trade unionists described as conservative and, therefore, far from the radical change they wanted. The movement then decided to change their slogan to "Abolish the wage regime"; that is, fight for the emergence of a new social organisation from the remains of the old:

The Army of Production must be organised, not only to fight capitalism every day but also to continue producing once capitalism has been overthrown. It is through industrial organisation that we are building the structure of the new society in the shell of the old one.¹⁷

¹⁵"Industrialization and the Working Class".

http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3192

¹⁶ Pierre Blaise. "Les structures du syndicalisme international". *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, 1986/21 (n° 1126) 1986. P1-41

¹⁷Gibbs M. Smith. *Joe Hill*. 2009. Layton, UT: November 1st 1969. P4

In a sense, revolutionary syndicalism is a radical strategy, a means of making a total break with capitalism to achieve its goals. It calls for workers' self-organisation and autonomy, backed up by direct action. The latter will be exercised by the workers against the social enemies, which means to confront the violence of the bosses, if necessary by force. The employers, the bankers and the investors who are outside the world of the workers are only working for their interests. The workers must therefore organise themselves and their struggle and define their means of action to "directly attack the capitalist mode of production in order to transform it, eliminate the boss and thus conquer its sovereignty in the workshop, an essential condition for enjoying real freedom".¹⁸

According to the revolutionary syndicalists, direct action means independence and freedom to act in the interests of the workers, who must reject the principle of authority that hinders them and harms their interests. To this end, the strike and other forms of demonstration are no more than vehicles for the expression of the working class. Is that sufficient?

For certain trade union doctrinaires, the development of a political formation of a revolutionary type is an absolute necessity to achieve the desired radical change because a trade union is only a kind of friendship.

¹⁸ Emile Pouget. L'Action directe: Suivi de Le sabotage. Flibustier: 2008. P17