Marxism and the Urban Question
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"The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach"
by Manuel Castells
(translated from the French by Alan Sheridan)
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Readers of Marxism Today over the past five years will have seen editorial comments from time to time concerning various publications on 'urbanism'. These have been for the most part produced by French scholars, some of whose work owes much to recent interpreters of Marxism such as Althusser and Lelebvre. A parallel development has been the recent work by North American social scientists on urban questions.

In a pioneering effort to open up a new area of Marxist endeavour, Manuel Castells' book brings these two tendencies together, and we should perhaps not complain if he consequently finds it necessary to write in a language made doubly obscure by what it has borrowed from both. But to extract what is worthwhile from his 500 pages will need much patience—especially if (in our rough native way) we are used to calling a spade a spade.
and not (if he will pardon the parody) a simplistic concretisation of those productive forces which are situated dialectically at the conjecture of the psychical and the psychical praxis.

Castells’ Conclusions

Any summary must be unfair to a writer who covers so wide a field, and who hedges almost every statement with conditions. Castells himself modestly declares his work no more than an interim statement, and in an afterword (1975) amends some of his earlier (1971) formulations. Sooner than follow him in every detail, it will be more in keeping with his own approach if we explore his subject generally as it affects our understanding and activity in Britain today.

Castells’ principal conclusions appear to be as follows. The distinction between urban and rural no longer exists in its pre-capitalist form, and capitalist production now operates at a scale which, economically at least, transcends the difference between them. Urban areas are nowadays to be understood primarily as places where labour power is reproduced, mainly through the processes of individual and collective consumption which they facilitate. Town planning is the means by which state monopoly capitalism organises the urban environment in its own interests. Urban social movements (and the ‘environmental movement’ in general) are manifestations of the revolt of the oppressed classes against capitalist conditions (especially as these adversely affect ‘collective consumption’ and the social services). Such movements tend indirectly but none the less ultimately towards political revolution.

It is perhaps not without significance for these conclusions that they have been reached mainly in the light of recent debate in France and in North and South America, where, until comparatively recently, big-city living as a proletarian was not the dominant experience. Whereas in Britain the large industrial conurbation has long been regarded as typical of capitalism, and its evils have been understood as the most concentrated manifestation of the evils of capitalism in general, those living in places more recently experiencing rapid urbanisation might be excused if they saw the peculiar evils of the modern city as the consequence of urbanisation itself. Thus instead of capitalist crisis, they see an urban crisis, and instead of questions concerning the nature of capitalism in general, an urban question.

There are, it is true, in Britain also those who tend to see things in this way. But in no political party—least of all in those of the working class—do they any longer find any significant following. And here our attention is drawn to another feature of Castells’ study: its lack of historical perspective. In one revealing reference he calls 1959 ‘a long time ago’ and while he touches on problems of urban history, he does not sufficiently explore the lessons learned by the European working class—both before (as Engels put it) it cast its swaddling clothes, and over the long years which it has played an active role in municipal affairs.

Some Urban Problems

Castells himself is aware of the confused thinking which underpins what he analyses as the ‘urban ideology’, and there is much sense in what he has to say here. Perhaps, however, he too easily dismisses current concern for ‘the environment’ as an attempt to establish a false antagonism between human culture and nature, and to blame technology for pollution, etc. He is right in principle, of course, but is that all there is to be said?

Again, one feels the lack of historical perspective. Had he relied more on Marx and less on recent interpreters of him (he refers on p. 244 to ‘the classics of historical materialism from Lenin to Mao, by way of Gramsci’: hardly classics, surely?) he would show more understanding of Marxism as the consummation of previous humanist thought with, as one of its key themes, the relationship of man to nature. In this relationship, technical procedures have always been specifically significant, and they are today becoming in themselves political issues of the first importance: witness the debate over nuclear power.

There are, furthermore, issues of a more-or-less technical nature which are directly relevant to the city: the organisation of transport; reconstruction versus rehabilitation; salvage, etc., which daily demand political decision. Involved with these, and with wider socio-economic issues, are questions concerning the viable size of urban units and their appropriate arrangements. And we need constantly nowadays to be aware that (as Ivor Montagu in these columns some ten years ago reminded us) we shall shortly as a species probably reach the limit possible with established agricultural technique of the carrying capacity of the earth—a prospect first and foremost demanding socio-political action, certainly, but socio-political action allied to an adequate technology.

The characterisation of town and regional planning as an instrument of the monopolists is again correct, but we should not lose sight of contrary tendencies within town planning itself, where the working class movement has, as a necessary part of its day-to-day campaigning, long been an advocate of the humanist traditions now entirely abandoned by the bourgeoisie.

Does it, as Castells believes, really help our understanding of urban affairs to characterise the town as the place where, above all, labour power is reproduced? This fits well enough with current bourgeois notions of the residential area as supermarket sur-
rounded by family homes. It acknowledges correctly the fact that nowadays units of the productive economy may encompass numerous locations. But is not the city equally involved in all aspects of production? Certainly, again from the point of view of the working class, the maintenance of adequate employment within a locality is a more fundamental issue than the provision of adequate shops, and issues such as the closing down of shipbuilding on Clydeside and motorcycle manufacture at Meriden have prompted local mass actions on a scale and of a breadth far greater than those relating to the defence of the social services. The whole popular town planning movement of the inter-war and immediate post-war years in Britain was linked to the campaign for a better distribution of industry to do away with the one-industry town and the depressed areas.

Academic Detachment?

In the section on research, there is some useful discussion of local activities around urban issues, from which some useful lessons may be drawn. Of particular interest is the analysis of recent urban renewal, and the plight of citizens in some ‘third world’ countries where urban growth far outstrips industrial development. But the most general weakness, for a work which proclaims itself Marxist, is precisely the failure to pursue its themes from the point of view of the organised working class movement, which Marxism from the outset has identified as the key to political change. The experience, practical and theoretical, which the movement has gained over more than a century of struggle, is lightly touched on in favour of recent sporadic outbursts of activity—mostly outside the mainstream of working-class politics—around squatting and other ‘spontaneous’ forms of ‘urban protest’.

Why is this so? Partly, no doubt, because in pursuing his subject through territory familiar to bourgeois ideologists, Castells has perforce to tread the same ground. Partly, perhaps, because like many of us active in these fields he feels the movement generally pays them insufficient attention as new and potentially fruitful areas of class struggle. But fundamentally, one suspects, because his brand of Marxism has not yet descended from the academic plane to the level of immersion in sustained political practice. The underlying outlook is that of academic detachment, viewing the struggle from above, recording one’s views for debate among fellow academics in an esoteric language only they are clever enough to understand.

What urban issues confront the working class and its allies today in their political struggles against capitalism? Shortage of cheap decent housing; high fares; high rates; poor social services; erosion of local political control; factory closures and all the local consequences of monopoly capitalism ruthlessly seeking its own way out of persistent crisis.

What policies should the working class adopt? Low rents, low mortgage rates and fares, subsidised from public funds financed out of taxation on the rich; free public services similarly paid for; the restitution of local control over every aspect of local affairs; nationalisation of industry . . . etc. These are not in essence new policies, but they are precisely those which the working class in every urbanised society has, through its own political experience, come to adopt. True, squatting and similar ‘direct action’ has a role—but in general only as a campaigning tactic to be used in a disciplined way, not as long-term policy.

Character of the Struggle

It may be unfair to Castells to say he is not aware of this, but for his readers at least the point might be lost. From his characterisation of planning as capitalist state control, and of urban protest movements as revolutionary action, an attitude too readily emerges which sees any planned amelioration of bad conditions as sterile reformism and any spontaneous outburst on the streets as potential revolution. This is, of course, the classic position of the petty-bourgeois rebel, whose ‘Marxism’ never progresses beyond the understanding that the overthrow of capitalism is necessary if we care to cure our present ills, and who mistakenly understands by the overthrow of capitalism, the destruction of more-or-less everything it has created—towns, factories and (especially!) universities included. What he most fails to understand is that the political movement for this overthrow has to be built out of the struggles of the oppressed classes, and the working class in particular, around the numerous immediate issues with which capitalism confronts us. Certainly there is the danger here of reformist ideology, and the British labour movement exemplifies how, without Marxism, this can prosper. But any other course is political adventurism which leads to certain disillusion and disaster.

In the forefront of present issues, there are many affecting the town, town planning, and the control of both the artificial and the natural environment. We need constantly to improve our understanding, our policies and our campaigns, here as everywhere. We shall gain something from reading Castells’ book, but look forward to another in which he sets himself the task of explaining what the working class movement should do to answer its urban questions.

That we shall unhesitatingly accept as a Marxist approach.