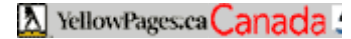




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Lost without Marx

Economics was once the left's favourite subject, but today leftist critics have little in the way of positive suggestions on how to run an economy

Mark F. Proudman

National Post

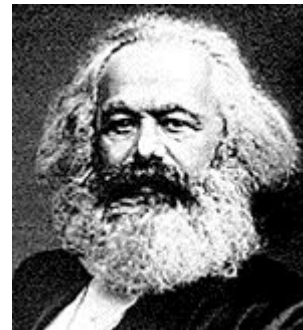
Saturday, December 28, 2002

The Kyoto Accord was passed Dec. 10 by the Liberal majority in the House of Commons, with help from fellow leftists in the NDP and the Bloc Québécois. The Kyoto accord, and the environmental ideology behind it, provides the left with what they have lacked for the past couple of decades: a powerful and comprehensive rationale for doing what leftist governments most like, which is intervening in the private economy.

Socialists no longer have to make an economic case for intervention in private affairs. The advocates of an intrusive state can now appeal instead to a complex international treaty, incomprehensible to the citizenry and immune to the pressures of local and national governments -- but subject to the large and growing body of left-wing interest and identity groups that called themselves "Non-governmental organizations."

The left has been without any coherent economic doctrine for the last 20 years; green ideology does not supply the theoretical need, but it does fill the political function once performed by socialist economics: It justifies attacks on the private sector.

Marxists often describe themselves as "historical materialists," and by this they mean to argue that material or economic interests drive politics and hence history. John Ralston Saul, that most omnipresent of statist ideologues, has remarked that the free-enterprise economist Milton Friedman and his acolytes are the only Marxists left: He means that the right now likes to talk about economics; the left, as epitomized by Dr. Saul himself, disdains the subject. Left-wing critics like to talk about sea turtles or about multicultural genders or similar identity-driven trivialities; very few of them know



KARL MARX: overtaken by Kyoto

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anything about economics.

Marx, by contrast, was primarily an economist: His magnum opus, *Capital*, consists of three volumes of economic argument in the closely reasoned mathematical style of the founder of modern economics, David Ricardo. Marx wanted to refute traditional market economics, but he knew that an effective revolutionary had to know orthodoxy better than the orthodox. Today, though the world is awash in Marxist literary critics, there are very few Marxist economists.

This is one of the most fascinating -- and also one of the least remarked -- reversals of polarity in recent political discourse: Not so long ago, economics was the left's favourite subject. The right wanted to talk about traditional values or national defence -- or else, it just promised, like so many old Progressive Conservatives, that it could run a better welfare state than the left.

Today, when faced with questions of economic efficiency, the left will change the topic, arguing (in the words of one who is claimed by all sides) that man does not live by bread alone, and that human or environmental or communitarian values must prevail over mere economic considerations.

In this lack of interest in economics, today's left echoes that icon of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke, whose great polemic *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (which was not reflective at all) raged against "political economists and economical politicians," and argued that there were communal values not reducible to the abstract propositions of economic or political theorists. Much of today's left, especially those in the anti-globalization movement concerned with genetic engineering and organic agriculture, shares Burke's concern for traditional ways of life, his disdain for the abstractions of economic theory -- and his essentially reactionary frame of mind.

Today, leftist critics damn free market economics for the unequal outcomes it produces, but have little in the way of positive suggestions as to how to run an economy. They of course have plenty of negative suggestions: Enron should have been better regulated; toxic sludge should not be pumped into Lake Erie, and so forth. But these are ideas about how to make capitalism work better, not about how to replace capitalism. Compelling political ideologies must advance positive and programmatic ideas -- not just suggestions as to how to administer the other side's devices.

We easily forget how recently the claim that the state could manage the economy better than private enterprise was taken seriously. In 1956, when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev insisted "time is on our side, we will bury you!" he meant primarily that the Soviet Union's centrally managed economy would outproduce the free world in heavy industrial goods. Three years later, in the famous "kitchen debate" with then U.S. vice-president Richard Nixon, Khrushchev seriously maintained that the inmates of the Soviet Union had better access to consumer goods than did Americans.

Even in the democratic world, Socialists like Harold Wilson in Britain and Willy Brandt in Germany claimed not merely that they would distribute wealth more evenly but that bureaucratic, ostensibly rational, centralized economic management would produce

absolutely more wealth than could the alleged inefficiencies of "wasteful competition."

We Canadians should not laugh too hard: Our great national hero Pierre Elliot Trudeau thought that his National Energy Program would offer a better solution to problems of supply and demand for oil and gas than could the workings of markets.

But today, the left rarely says "our nostrums will make the economy produce more." They can say only that some specific problem whose solution claims priority over mere economic considerations will be addressed. This is one reason why the left likes the "green" ideology of the environmental movement so much: It makes supervening and universal claims that provide central planners in Ottawa and elsewhere with a dispensation from having to address that ugly and unfamiliar subject, economics.

Until socialists can come up with a coherent and systematic account of how they want to run an advanced economy, they will be reduced to claiming that they can run a better market than fusty old Tories: In other words, they will be Blairites, albeit with a green tinge.

Socialism without economics is like a burger without the beef: The most important part is missing. Until the left can again talk about economics, they'll be feeding us veggie burgers.

Mark F. Proudman is a doctoral student in modern history at New College, Oxford.

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