

Where Now For “Marxism”?

Reading Marx Creatively

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“Marxism”, if there is such a thing, given the diversity of perspectives which are subsumed under the label, has been beset by a series of crises almost from its conception: hardly a year goes by without someone declaring it “dead”. It is difficult, however, to put nails in the coffin of something one cannot define very precisely to begin with.

What exactly is “Marxism”? The only common reference point for people who call themselves, or get called, “Marxists” is the works of Marx. But these works are sizeable and fragmentary, consisting of a huge volume of books, pamphlets, letters and essays written over the course of Marx’s life, and not always consistent across the entire period. For instance, which is Marx’s “real” account of class: the two-class model predominant in *Capital*, the three classes (landlords, industrialists, workers) of his other economic works, or the indefinitely expanding list of classes and class-fragments found in works such as the *Eighteenth Brumaire*? Further, Marx never conceived his doctrine (to the extent that he even conceived a doctrine) as a fixed religious faith: one of the few consistent themes in Marx’s work is the need to analyse specific historical contexts and to emphasise activity and practice. This openness raises further problems. Which of the many themes derived from Marx are “Marxists” to apply and use today; which are specific to Marx’s context and outdated now; and which are plain wrong?

Too often, Marxists have tried to resolve resulting dilemmas by seeking some kind of purity: a perfect application of “Marxism”, or a “Marxism” perfectly modified for the present. An attachment to “roots” is both theoretically problematic and practically debilitating, because it cuts off the possibility of engaging with living, changing social movements. *Lutte Ouvrière*, for instance, have denounced Seattle and subsequent anti-capitalist protests for being insufficiently “proletarian”, because they were organised on a network basis instead of through workplace-based structures. But from where can they, or others, derive the guarantee

that social change for the better will come from a pre-fixed form? And from where, for that matter, do those who use analyses of Marx’s work to engage with contemporary problems derive the guarantee that Marx was always right? There are no crystal balls, and no oracles to tell us the answers. History involves movement, struggle and change; it does not conform to fixed schemas, because human creative activity is a major factor in its movement. (People change circumstances transmitted from the past, but what we do with these circumstances is a result of activity today.)

Marx is not Christ; Marxism is not, or rather should not be, a religion. Marx’s work should be used creatively, along with other texts and discourses and with a constant view to ensuring that theory and practice are both relevant and transformative. Too often, however, Marxism overflows with a cult of purity and authenticity. Instead of asking whether a practice is revolutionary, emancipatory, justified, or even effective, many Marxists ask whether it fits a predetermined model, whether it goes through the “correct” predetermined structures or stages and whether it realises the kind of “pure” proletarian movement they have constructed on paper. By thinking in this way, they repeat precisely the mistake for which Marx criticised the “utopians”. And, I would argue, they make a deeper mistake also.

Capitalist society functions in a reified way; it relies on what I would call discourses in alterity. In other words, people are not expected to engage with actual needs and desires in active and creative ways, but rather are expected to fit into predetermined models. The world of work is constructed around “roles”. Workers are expected to fit into particular “jobs” which are constructed in advance, and their creative activity is reduced to the level of a sacrifice made to obtain necessary and desirable objects. Consumption, too, is structured around the idea that happiness can be pre-packaged, sold, and passively consumed. People are not supposed to become actively involved in

politics, and direct action is criminalised; rather, capitalism constructs a spectacle of politics carried on between distant elites and transmitted through the mass media. An occasional “X” is the only link between these elites and the rest of the population. “Rights” and “security” are treated as something to be delivered by packaged “laws”, which are imposed in bulldozer fashion on everyday life. Education is reduced to “core skills”, “modules” and exams, instead of being about active exploration and becoming. Unions have become bureaucratised, with right-wing leaders preferring to negotiate “on behalf of” workers rather than see workers take action for themselves. Organised in alterity, these activities can be appropriated by elites as a source of power and profit. Furthermore, as long as the packages remain intact, the elites can insulate themselves from the need to question whether anything is being delivered on the level of the actual.

Marx’s contribution to analysing and fighting this regime has come through, for instance, his critique of commodity fetishism and his critical analysis of the existing form of the state. He is by no means the only author to deal with the issue; Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, Baudrillard’s *The Consumer Society*, Vaneigem’s *Revolution of Everyday Life*, and a string of other texts deal with the same issue. Related issues arise in Marxist politics; in particular, Marxists have put up an intense struggle (sometimes successfully) to prevent the trade unions from being reduced to the status of financial-service and management-consultation institutions and to keep them as, or turn them into, a framework for progressive activity by workers.

Despite such exceptions, however, it is often not this aspect of Marx’s work which is used by “Marxists”. As a result, many fall into the traps laid through discourses-in-alterity: Marxist “parties” become sects organised *on behalf of* workers; social democracy became simply one party among the others; Leninism quickly changed from workers’ management to one-man management. Instead of encouraging self-activity and active thought by workers, Marxists often merely try to recruit them into pre-formulated parties and campaigns, and try to direct new struggles along predetermined lines. As a result, they fail to provide a consistent alternative, on the level of “forms of life”, to the capitalist society they oppose.

My aim in this essay is to challenge this development in Marxism and to encourage a different way of engaging with the works of Marx, a way which is perhaps less “Marx-ist” than creative engagement with Marx, and which points away from the futile and reactionary pursuit of “purity” and “tradition” and towards a creative praxis which would emphasise the best in Marx and Marxism and turn it into something more multivocal, capable

of becoming part of a multivocal emancipation of the repressed voices and desires of the oppressed. I attempt this by taking a string of issues in Marxism, posing them in terms of alternative readings, and indicating how the repressed meaning within Marxism would point towards a better approach than the more widely-used meaning.

For Or Against Common Sense?

The meaning of terms such as “orientation to the working class” is often unclear. Is Marxism supposed to be an expression of the existing working class, coextensive with the “common sense” of ordinary workers? Or is it an alternative perspective which, precisely because it values the transformative potential of ordinary workers, campaigns to overcome this “common sense” and replace it with a new conception of the world? The most common reading among Marxist activists has been the former. Edward Conze’s recently republished essay on dialectics claims that Marxism is nothing more nor less than workers’ common sense. Recent discussions of “anti-social behaviour” have suggested that workers’ “communities” are in some sense already progressive, even when workers engage in witch-hunts against outsiders. Many Marxists pursue a primarily *representative* politics, attempting to mobilise workers’ votes and activity within their existing way of thinking. In practice, such approaches lead to an activity of *coding*: they re-interpret, express and channel existing beliefs, making them appear to be “Marxist”. They interpret the world, instead of changing it.

But Marxism has also always been an “educative” movement, and not only in terms of the disastrous idea that a theoretically equipped leadership can “educate” workers by bossing them around. In Marx, the theme of education is pursued through the idea of “consciousness” (something which the working class did not necessarily already have). It is further developed in the work of Gramsci. For Gramsci, the working class, in order to become “hegemonic” and capable of transforming society, must overcome common sense, which he sees as an incoherent philosophical conception tying workers to the bourgeoisie. Overcoming common sense requires an “intense critical activity” directed towards “raising the intellectual level” of workers. Workers must learn to think logically, to construct their own arguments without relying on leaders, to “think well, whatever they think”, and to conceptualise the world in terms other than those laid down by the bourgeoisie. This is a prerequisite to overcoming common sense; if it fails, workers will not be able to supersede the bourgeoisie and construct a new society.

Similar themes arise in a different way in the work of Wilhelm Reich. For Reich, deprivation and authoritarian parenting tend to produce a particular

kind of “character-structure”: a set of psychological and physiological blockages and stereotyped reactions which serve to constrain and repress desire and to control each person’s interaction with the world. In this way, the “little man” learns to have small aspirations, and to seek external guarantees in various kinds of authority. Many people turn, for instance, to authoritarian political movements, seeking to compensate for their own sense of inadequacy by identifying with a Hitler or a Stalin. Since people’s sense of security becomes dependent on their submission to authority and their repression of autonomous desires, they feel threatened by anything which could trigger the repressed desires and undermine their equilibrium and resultant ability to tolerate capitalism. Reich proposed to overcome this character-structure through a combination of social and sexual freedom, criticism of existing prejudices, and psychoanalysis.

It is approaches such as those of Gramsci and Reich which offer a way forward today. Ordinary people are still often prone to submit to “strong” leaders, afraid of emancipatory movements, and vulnerable to appeals based on anti-“crime” and prejudiced rhetoric. Marxists and other radicals cannot deal with this problem by pretending it does not exist. Worse still, the more Marxists encourage such ideas by pretending they are compatible with Marxism or by restricting themselves to demands and tactics which existing workers support, the stronger such tendencies will become. The possibility of a better world depends on our developing a theory and practice which can encourage workers and others to move away from their existing “common sense” and to think in increasingly critical and reflexive ways.

Conceiving Social Groups

The usual way Marxists conceive of social groups is fixed and teleological. “Classes” are often treated as if they are fixed entities which have a definite essential identity. Further, it is implicitly assumed that this identity will evolve in a particular way over time – for instance, that the labour movement will progress rather than moving backwards. There is often very little real basis for such claims. Marxists make claims about “workers’ experience” and “workers’ interests” which very few workers would recognise. They often imagine that there is some kind of privileged standpoint from which social movements can be assessed, identified supposedly with workers but in fact with their own party or faction.

The alternative possibility here is twofold. Firstly, social forces should be conceived in a more open way. Marx’s predictions of the expansion of the industrial working class have not been confirmed, and other subaltern classes such as the

peasantry remain important in many parts of the world. Struggles of the oppressed do not necessarily fall into neat class categories. The Zapatistas, for instance, are involved in perhaps the most important struggle for emancipation from capitalism today, but their supporters are peasants and indigenous people rather than urban workers. Sometimes workers are at the forefront of revolutionary struggles; sometimes they are not. (Sometimes they are involved, but not in their capacity as “workers”; and why, in these cases, is it important whether they identify as such?) The relevant Marx here is the Marx of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* and other specific texts, who did not allow his understanding of specific commitments to be impeded by even the most brilliant of his own formulations.

Secondly, “class” and other concepts can be reconceived in more active ways, emphasising how class is formed through class struggle rather than the determinism into which Marx sometimes slipped. Historical movements do not occur as a mechanical unfolding of class essences. Rather, they occur when particular groups become actively involved in movements to change their conditions of life. These movements are motivated by what Gramsci calls a “conception of the world and of life” or a “mode of thought and action” – a way of thinking, speaking, acting and being which puts the group in question outside the existing social system and which creates the possibility of social transformation. Rather than moving through a series of predetermined stages, history occurs through conflict between different groups of this kind, on a model closer to that proposed by Foucault: many different lines of development, some of which split, some of which reach dead-ends. If a better society comes into being, this will be the result of a particular discourse which is actually able to construct a better world, and not because some preselected agent merely matures into its role.

A new society does not occur like the “laws” of economics (which, anyway, are internal to capitalist discourse, i.e. the so-called capitalist “stage”); as long as it has support through authoritarian character-structures and as long as it retains hegemony and dominance in the “trenches and fieldworks” of civil society, capitalism can ride its crises. It is only when a new conception of the world, based on a new mode of thought and action and a character-structure freed from authoritarian armouring and repression, comes into being as a result of an active and creative transformative praxis that capitalism may come under threat. It is for this reason that capitalists fear any tendencies towards autonomy on the part of workers, and also why they fear peasant movements, cultural deviance, and anything else which overflows the capitalist system of control and repression.

Conceiving Society

Surprising numbers of accounts by Marxists still assume the existence of something called “society” or “the community”, despite Marx’s warnings that “society” is riven with class struggles and therefore is not a unitary entity. As a result, one finds appeals to “society” against capitalism’s “excesses”, as if socialists were the dominant group and capitalists the criminals. Thatcher is condemned for saying that society does not exist, rather than for her far more insidious references to “national interest” and “public order” (which clearly assume that it *does* exist and that Thatcher represents it). Chris Harman of the Socialist Workers Party has written a pamphlet entitled *The Madness of the Market*, oblivious to the fact that the logic of the market is precisely what constructs images of sanity in contemporary society. The illusion of a united “society” causes the same problems as the illusion of a Marxist “common sense”: if Marxists claim to stand for what “society” really involves today, they cannot overcome the capitalist and authoritarian structures which contemporary society involves; they succumb either to illusions that the world is already socialist or to supporting capitalist ideas.

Rather, one should recognise that capitalism has constructed the dominant images of what “society” is. As Marx put it, the ruling ideas of any epoch are the ideas of the ruling class. “Society” as perceived by most people today is a product of such “ruling ideas”. Marxists and other radicals, far from standing for this “society”, are outsiders excluded by it. The task of achieving social change is a task of overthrowing, not standing up for, existing society. To the extent that workers and others identify with “society” against outsiders, they identify with the dominant groups. The word “society” is often used interchangeably with “nation”; it is an exclusionary and bourgeois concept. It implies that people should be forced into a predetermined model and that we should be subordinate to an imagined entity supposed to be greater than ourselves – a substitute God just as hell-bent on subordination and sacrifice as its theological predecessor. Anyone who resists the dominance of existing elites also resists “society”, since this is a discursive construct under the control of these elites and used by them to pursue their projects.

Furthermore, the idea of a “society” and an excluded “criminal” group is itself a reactionary fantasmatic construction. So-called “social problems” are themselves a result of the structure of a particular social form. Capitalists (and, for that matter, “criminals”) are not enemies of “society” but outgrowths of it; they express a particular form of society, and punishing them as individuals is an excuse for refusing to engage with the social structures which generate their ways of thinking

and acting. Our alternative should therefore not be a new “society” but what Deleuze and Guattari call a “rhizomatic” system, where different people act differently and come together only on a voluntary basis, not in conformity to an imagined essence called “society”. This should also express itself in activity today: a construction, not of a centralised hierarchy to represent “society”, but of a multitude of diverse resistances and struggles against the centralisation and control involved in “society” today. Instead of reactive struggles directed at suppressing an adversary conceived as an excluded outside, we should construct active struggles based on self-activity and the direct positing of a new way of thinking and acting. As Marx puts it, the free development of each is the precondition for the free development of all.

Reading Marx

Too often, Marxist approaches have treated Marx’s works, and those of other leading Marxists such as Lenin, as something akin to a holy text. They are invoked as if they provide final answers to present questions, with deviation from their “line” dismissed as “revisionism”. For instance, analyses of wars often follow a simplified version of Lenin’s critique of imperialism which is repeated in each case. The complexities of each situation are overlooked, as are changes in the world economy since Lenin’s day and the complexities of contemporary postcolonial power relations. For instance, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan is usually portrayed as a simple war for oil. While oil and other economic issues are certainly among U.S. motives, the war also involved attempts to ensure that no part of the globe is outside the reach of U.S. power and attempts to exorcise the bogeyman of “Islam”. Furthermore, the Taliban and al-Qaeda are not so much anti-imperialists as renegade henchmen of the U.S., and there is little inherent reason to support them against America given their viciously misogynistic, anti-left and tyrannical structures. Uncritical use of theories inherited from the past leads to theoretical inflexibility and an inability to deal with new and changing situations.

The alternative here is to use Marxist theory in a more “writerly” way. The semiotician Roland Barthes draws a distinction between two ways of reading a text: a “readerly” way, in which the reader is a passive consumer of a pre-constructed text, and a “writerly” way, in which the reader interprets the text and in a sense re-writes it for new social circumstances. Also, Marxist theory could be combined productively with newer radical approaches. In the case of “anti-imperialism”, authors such as Chomsky, Saïd and Fanon have contributed interesting and radical analyses of imperialism and the west’s role in the world which could add new subtleties to radical discourse and

practice in relation to imperialist wars. Since these theories are radical, this could be done without moderating the critical edge provided by a more traditionalist Marxism, while offering a better understanding of, and therefore more opportunities to challenge, the existing dominant logic. Crucially, the first question should not be, "What would Marx have said about this?" but "What, given the evidence and the theories available today, should I say about this?".

Down With Legislators!

Another problem, resulting from a tension in Marx's own work, concerns the question of what standpoint a theorist should take. Should one adopt a position of authority (for instance, of supposed scientific truth or political leadership) and dictate to the world from this position? Or should one adopt the position of someone oppressed by the existing system, and use theory to struggle for a space for freedom, beyond the grip of positions of authority? The former position – the role of the legislator – is still very common among Marxists, as regards issues as diverse as the dozens of versions of the "one correct method" of party-building, the attitude to science (usually anti-relativist and pro-essentialist), and the insistence on having a "line" on every issue under the sun. This is another version of the search for a nonexistent foundation in classical texts and external structures. With all the years of failure, surely someone has figured out that the "one true method" does not guarantee the growth of one's "party"?

An alternative to the figure of the legislator would be the figure of the resister. The relevant Marx here is the one who says that "the educator must also be educated", and who therefore refuses the role of guru. Instead of trying to replace one form of hierarchic reasoning with another, one could try to break down this type of reasoning and replace it with a more open way of engaging with social issues. Once the standpoint of the legislator has been renounced, one can begin to expose the fallacy of capitalism's own reliance on this standpoint. Deleuze and Guattari argue for a position of "becoming minoritarian", refusing to identify with any dominant standpoint and opting instead for the pursuit of an irreducible specificity. In this way, one could enter into specific struggles without reaffirming the idea of a last-instance authority. Thus, one could support and take part in a range of social struggles, without these having to conform to any single fixed project. Furthermore, this kind of approach does not preclude revolutionary resistances to capitalism itself, since the capitalist system is strongly hierarchic and subordinates specificity to a universalising logic. In place of the legislator, one could counterpose the resister: someone who claims sufficient ground to oppose

dominant power-structures, but who could never be established as another Stalin.

Conclusion: Opening Marxism

I have presented the above discussion rather summarily, and there are other areas of Marxist theory where the same approach could be used. The theme running through the various sections has been an attempt to *open up* Marxism. As should be apparent, I am not aiming either for a return to a "pure" Marx or what "Marx really meant", even though Marx is at times in support of most of what I say; nor am I pursuing a "revisionist" rejection of Marx, even though the Marxism I criticise often draws on things Marx said and believed. As a reader of Marx, I demand more than the empty freedom to accept or reject the Marxian text. At present, Marxism tends to be an enclosed space, insulated from other social movements; some Marxists are also drawn into fatalistic and conformist ways of thinking and acting in an attempt to identify their own insulated group with the working class. In place of this approach, I am proposing an open approach.

Whether this is a Marx-*ism* is open to debate. The problem with an "ism" is precisely that it tends to construct the theory in question in isolation from other fields of thought. In contrast, what I am proposing is an active and creative attitude to the work of Marx and of Marxists, and equally to the work of others outside the "Marxist" tradition. The supposedly unbridgeable division between Marxism and anarchism has been greatly exaggerated, and there is also a great deal to be learnt from post-structuralist authors if their work is treated critically. There are also many unconventional Marxist and radical authors (such as Gramsci, Reich, Marcuse and the Situationists) whose theories would be of great use in constructing emancipatory movements.

However, the most important thing is not the theory one uses, but one's attitude to it. God is dead. There is no need for holy texts, for guarantees of correctness or for privileged standpoints – and there is no possibility of having these anyway. One's attitude to texts should be "writerly", open and creative, and directed at all times to thinking outside capitalism. *What* one thinks is certainly important, but nowhere near as important as *how* one thinks. Those who think within the parameters of capitalism and the normalising "common sense" it encourages are doomed to repeat the social system it constructs, even in the unlikely event that they succeed in instituting "revolutionary" change. As Gramsci rightly argues, a new society must first of all be "ideally active" in the minds of those fighting for change. The role of theory should not be to repeat the same formulae over and over, but to begin to construct a new world in how its advocates think, speak, and act. ■