

# A Reply to Andrew Robinson

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ANDREW ROBINSON'S article ('Where Now for "Marxism"? Reading Marx Creatively', *What Next?* No.25) needs to be thought about because many of us share one of Robinson's concerns: "Marxist 'parties' become sects", he says, "organised *on behalf of* workers.... 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".

This very mistake is rampant in the Socialist Alliance (SA) in England. The first part of the mistake was to think that "the socialists" had first of all to get together as a group and then present themselves to workers as a finished article, all its main features already fixed, which only needs then to grow through recruitment. Matters then became worse with the arrival of the Socialist Workers Party. They dived into the SA like an elephant into a bathtub and changed it entirely to fit the needs of their already-existing party. They assume that they represent the needs and future of the working class. In the process they wall off the working class from putting its needs into words and creating the organisations through which it can shape its own future.

Quite correctly, Robinson shows this process as part of the way in which the masses in capitalism are deprived of the right to act, or even imagine acting, in their own interests: "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."

Unfortunately Robinson does not understand this process as the effect of capitalist social relations but on an individual basis. He sees it in terms of "discourses". He says it is a problem between "elites" and "the rest of the population" suspended in mid-air. He does not see it in connection with any essential social relations at a given time in history.

Like a used-car salesman, Robinson carefully offers the reader only two alternatives: either buy the "dogmatic" model, where you will spend hours in a darkened room arguing about Marxist texts,

or you build a party based on whatever views are strongest in the working class at any given time (what Robinson sneers at as "common sense"). These views are as likely as not to be reactionary, racist, "authoritarian", etc. However, Marxists can propose a third alternative: building a party to pioneer the historical interests of the working class as expressed by class-conscious workers.

Such workers already organise and mobilise on the following demands:

- Restore trade union rights such as the right to strike without going through a long and complex process, the right to take solidarity action with other workers on strike, the right to strike on social and political issues which affect the working class.

- Ensure real health and safety conditions at work. Take effective steps to make employers responsible for the health and safety of workers and the public.

- Stop hospital closures which rob working-class districts of the standard of health care which they deserve.

- Stop the privatisation of publicly-owned industries and public services. Stop the creeping privatisation of education, local authority services and health. People before profits.

- Take the railways and the London Underground back into full public ownership.

- Provide adequate social housing at prices workers and the unemployed can afford.

- Give local authorities adequate funds to provide services for the vulnerable: the very young, the sick and the old and families living in poverty due to inadequate wages.

- Restore welfare benefits to levels which can secure a full life.

- No imperialist wars!

- Stop the racists. Stop prejudice and violence against religious and ethnic minorities. Dismantle institutional racism.

- Stop social dumping! Break the vicious circle where workers in different countries undercut and underbid each other on the labour market. Organise solidarity between workers of every country to ensure a fair rate for the job.

The struggles for all these demands are made harder because there is not a united party which

embodies the working class in political action (and not just in each single country but internationally). Such a party cannot arise by bolting on an organisation from the outside. It must come from real political steps forward by groups of workers themselves. Our responsibility is to encourage and strengthen every such move. So when great political issues arise, such as imperialist war, we do emphasise that the aims of the whole movement are best achieved when the working class can deploy its specific methods, because these are the most effective means of direct action ever invented. The ruling class uses every resource to do the exact opposite, to reduce the working class to a collection of individual "citizens", confronting the power of the state and of capital as human dust.

Robinson has a puzzling attitude to society. Because it is a unity of contradictory parts, he finds it difficult to picture society at all as a whole. It is much easier for him to see only the parts, and ignore the relations between them. But he goes on to dissolve the individual parts ("classes") as well. Actually he does talk about classes when it serves his purpose to deny that the working class has any special role to play compared, say, with Mexican farmers. But later he denies that any of these classes has a real concrete existence. He seizes upon interesting struggles (and the struggle of farmers and indigenous people in Chiapas province in Mexico is extremely interesting) but he refuses to see their struggle as part of a whole either in place or in time. Instead of seeing it as part of a social development, he contrasts it as an opposite to working class struggles. The Mexican revolution has a long and important past, but the most important factor conditioning it has been the development of capitalist society in Europe and the US.

At the heart of capitalist society is the relation between the working class and the ruling class. The work done by the working class is still the major source from which the ruling class extracts surplus value. This can only happen because society as a whole has "invented" a category – "value" – which arose over a long historical development and which is so thoroughly anchored in all human activities that only a revolution can dislodge it. The working class is central to that revolution because of its role in modern production and because it owns no property. This is the point about Marx's political economy and his studies of commodity fetishism. Very little of what has been written by Sartre, Foucault and the rest comes near to discussing it. (Scoffing at Marxists for seeking "purity" is besides the point when you show little familiarity with what Marx actually wrote and no grasp at all of the main conceptions he held.) It is all very well for Robinson to say: "People change circumstances transmitted from the past, but what we do with these circumstances is a result of activity today." Actually you have to

recognise exactly what those "circumstances" are. Otherwise you may merely reproduce them, for all your good intentions.

Robinson assumes that society as an organised form of exploitation and repression is timeless. That is why he favours the "resister" over the "legislator". But that is the counsel of despair. Like Orwell, all he can see in the future is a boot stamping on a human face. A good liberal economist, he thinks every action the state and society takes diminishes the individual. How can any steps be taken to assure decent health, education, care of the very young and the old, or even sewerage and street-lighting with such an attitude? Robinson cannot imagine that the path to truly human individuals can lie through the achievement of a truly human society.

That "truly human society" is the key to understanding Marxism, which is why Robinson finds the whole enterprise so difficult and questionable. Marxism undergoes endless controversy precisely because essential class interests are involved. Marx and Marxism are a standing reproach to a mode of production and a system of class relations which have outlived their historical usefulness and tie, bind and imprison human society. It is a theoretical stake in the class struggle, in which the main actors are capitalist class and working class. No wonder it has "been beset by a series of crises almost from its conception". The capitalist class has a vital interest in distorting and discrediting it. They know the more they can do that the easier it is for them to demoralise and control the working class.

Capitalist society has created the conditions for a truly human society. It is forces and conceptions forged within capitalist society itself which open the road to its overthrow. But Robinson will not or cannot see this. He seeks a moral standpoint outside of present day society from which to criticise it. And he accuses Marxists of denigrating relativism!

There are two possible ways to legitimate a moral system. Either you root it in the material facts of human existence and explain your moral stances on the basis of material interests, as arising out of a specific historical process (the conception of "society" is very important in this respect), or you make "conscience" an ideal absolute, and ultimately that is always based on accepting a supernatural being. Robinson has chosen the latter path. He regards certain political actions as desirable in and of themselves ("liberation") and certain ones as undesirable ("oppression"). However, we have a right to ask, who is to be liberated, and from what? The slightest reflection on particular examples will make it clear that not all liberation is good and that not all oppression is unjustified. Perhaps there are real issues of method lurking under our differences over the way forward. ■