

Between Marxism and Populism: Working Class Identity and Bourgeois Ideology

Andrew Robinson

THE PROBLEM of so-called “class consciousness” is not a new one. It has plagued theorists and organisers in the Marxist tradition from the days of Marx onwards. Much of this discussion has been trapped in a flawed problematic which relies on the idea of an essential being or nature of a class which it must realise in a more-or-less positivistic way. This assumption depends on inaccurate assumptions about social activity. Even in a society based on coercion, the social system depends on generalised activity, and this activity arises from the identities of social agents. The ideational factor is not as easy to coerce as (for instance) labour, and it is of great significance how far people identify with the roles they are assigned in a particular system. A group which identifies positively with its officially-sanctioned role cannot become a revolutionary force, because this role presupposes the existing system. In this sense at least, social change is not about the realisation (becoming-conscious) of an existing identity, but about the construction of new forms of identity (or of non-identity) which break with the entrapment of the self within the existing system. Shlomo Avineri puts it as follows: “If the proletariat has self-consciousness, it will sustain the revolution. Its self-consciousness is already a major component of the revolutionary situation. If, however, the proletariat is still unaware of its own historical position, if it does not possess an adequate world view, then the objective conditions by themselves will not create the revolution until and unless the proletariat grasps that by shaping its own view of the world it also changes it.”¹

Capitalism operates as a system of class control, through both domination and hegemony. The capitalist class has a more-or-less integral world-view through which it posits the preconditions for its own existence as universal necessities or as universal goods. Historically, this system was – and is – produced by a process of the violent subordination of other groups to this so-called

necessity. Although the focus of this article is on the western working class, it should not be forgotten that capitalism and colonialism arose as a single system, and that colonial forms of subordination remain the norm for large sections of the world’s population. Workers and other subordinate groups are entrapped/coerced into the capitalist system through a process Marx refers to as “real sublation”. This process of domination may be experienced as a form of violence, but it is important to realise that it may also frame the limits of a worker’s life-world in such a way as to make other ways of life unthinkable. As Gramsci astutely observes, the conglomeration of inconsistent and supposedly “obvious” beliefs which make up “common sense” (the philosophy/ies operative in everyday life) is heavily influenced by bourgeois ideology. This influence is often conscious (for instance, nationalist ideology), yet it can also include unreflexive and unconscious ideas which workers barely realise they have or which they do not question. Even when the bourgeoisie cannot win hegemony in the full sense, achieving active support of subordinate groups, it usually succeeds in keeping workers and others in a condition of passivity, by preventing the emergence of alternative conceptions of the world.²

In order to achieve this passivity, it is necessary for capitalism to stunt the intellectual development of workers in various ways. In Britain, a leaked report from the Department of Education in 1983 reveals the significance of keeping workers as stupid as possible. “We are in a period of considerable social change. There will be unrest, but we can cope with the Toxteths ... but if we have a highly educated and idle population we may possibly anticipate more serious conflict. People must be educated once more to know their place.”³ It is in the context of this ruling-class project to impede the intellectual development of workers that one must locate the problem of class identity. If revolutionary ideas stemmed directly

from the experience of being oppressed, or if they occurred as a by-product of everyday empathy, there would be no advantage for the bosses in such manoeuvres.

In this article, I shall discuss a particular problem which I repeatedly see arising in relation to working-class identity, both within and outside the political left. It strikes me that working-class identity as it actually arises in everyday life is to say the least ambiguous in its political overtones. Because social effects of capitalist oppression, elements of capitalist ideology and valuations of intellectual underdevelopment have become part of the positive identity of some people who identify as working-class, a confusion often emerges as to exactly what such an identity and its consequences (such as workers' power and a workers' political programme) involve. A conception of the working class as conceived by Marx becomes contaminated by and confused with a populist and sometimes even reactionary structure of identity which positively values the status of "decent hard-working" people.⁴ This problem is no doubt more widespread in the class at large than on the left, but at times it filters across into left discourse. I suspect that there are many people active in Trotskyist, post-Trotskyist, communist, class-struggle anarchist, socialist and Labour left factions whose own identity oscillates between these two poles and who have yet to make a clear choice between them.⁵ Furthermore, a failure clearly to define the problem of the two varieties of class identity means that leftists often end up taking a "tailist" position whenever the majority of the wider class adopt a populist identity.

I shall explore the problem in general terms here, but the concern has arisen partly because of two debates in which I have recently been involved: with Martin Sullivan on the subject of so-called "rioting" (see *What Next?* Nos.17-21), and with the Alliance for Workers' Liberty on the subject of so-called "anti-social behaviour". In my view, I was faced in both of these cases with a reluctance to question the prejudices of actually-existing workers, a reluctance which was articulated to a Marxist class agenda. It is also, however, a crucial concern for much wider reasons, both in specifying Marxist theory so as to render it independent of bourgeois hegemony, and in engaging tactically with a complex situation of ruling-class influence and control.⁶ Those who see the working class as the bearer of a future socialist society have to deal with the fact that the present working class can be shown statistically to have a tendency towards linguistic simplicity, a preference for authoritarian parenting and a tendency to read reactionary newspapers. A case involving a Marxist standing in an election in a deprived Birmingham ward recently demonstrated the extent of the problem. "I stress that I am standing on a platform of defending human rights, the right

to health, housing and education, and in total opposition to privatisation. Then the Conservative candidate begins: '*the main problem in this area is litter*'. It feels quite surreal!" Especially when it emerges that the audience are also more interested in litter (and crime) than in substantial issues of class politics.⁷ Perhaps the problem is less that Marxists are out of touch with the working class, and more that large sections of the working class are out of touch with any kind of radical or progressive politics.

The bourgeois state is moving in increasingly authoritarian directions which prefigure a fascistic reconstruction of "liberal-democratic" societies, ostensibly in response to threats such as "terrorism" and "crime". The contemporary city is being turned into an Orwellian hell with cameras on every corner, backstreets closed off and armies of police carrying out periodic terroristic incursions. More and more acts are being criminalised – from begging and even standing in the street, to engaging in any act banned under an "anti-social behaviour order", which can cover almost anything (past examples include bans on drinking, living in one's home, entering car parks, buying glue, visiting one's girlfriend with her consent, and even swearing – so much for free speech!), to singing in public, to "harassing" corporations by protesting outside their offices (as has recently been alleged of members of Stop Huntington Animal Cruelty, who have been banned from holding regular vigils outside laboratories under a "harassment" injunction). On the one hand, there is a vicious and violent extension of state intrusion into everyday life; a recent case in Milton Keynes saw people prosecuted for feeding pigeons, and a magistrate trying to persuade shops to refuse to sell these people bread. On the other, there is the growing raft of institutions and laws used to suppress dissent: a good example is the persecution of protesters at RAF Fairford under a catch-all "terrorism" exclusion-zone spuriously declared during the bombing of Iraq. There is an ever-expanding crisis of rightslessness in Britain, yet most people see only the "crime crisis" manufactured by the media. The failure of the working class and the left to break with populist identities increases the likelihood that such rhetoric will be able to win sufficient mass support to render the project of overt domination viable, bringing into being a horrific nightmare world of total control. It may well, therefore, prove to be a life-or-death issue for the future of the left.

The Formation of Social Identities

To understand the distinction I am trying to draw, it is necessary to break with the image of identity as a construct internal to a particular object (e.g. to a person or a class). Although language is used to refer to particular situations, its internal structure is differential. Each word has a meaning

only in relation to other words within the language. For instance, the word “table” is used to refer to any one of a whole number of possible objects, some of which are quite different from each other (e.g. a small three-legged circular coffee table and a large four-legged rectangular table in a castle dining room). The identity of the concept is not constructed by the objects which make it up, but at least partly by its differentiation from other objects. A desk, a stool and an altar would all in this sense be “others” of the word “table”: they are things which a table itself could not be, and which delimit the series of objects to which this word can be applied. This division is not a characteristic of the objects which are included in the label “table”, but rather it is a characteristic of the language which contains all these words. (A small coffee table may have more positive features in common with some stools than with the castle table.) The differential structure of language – the series of oppositions and differences it constructs between objects listed under different labels – is a crucial characteristic for understanding its social operation. (This is the case regardless of the position one takes on whether the table “really exists” externally to language.)

If such differences are important in constructing the concept of a “table”, they are even more important in constructing comparatively more intangible entities such as the “working class”. The meaning of this term varies depending on which other groups are constructed as its others. In other words, its identity varies depending on the other entities to which it is counterposed. Marx’s use of the word “class” is very eclectic, but it seems to have at least two core features: it is related to one’s position in the process of production, and it is defined primarily through oppositions in terms of domination and subordination. The main other of the working class is the ruling class or bourgeoisie, and it is differentiated from this enemy class by occupying a different place in the process of production and by being subordinate in terms of power relations.

The conception I fear is undermining Marxism may well use similar terms to describe the working class, but it has a different structure. Instead of identifying the working class in relation to its social-structural differences with the bourgeoisie, it constructs its in-group by reference to moral beliefs and character-traits. For instance, workers may be identified by having the characteristics of being “decent” and “hard-working”. They are then differentiated from others who lack these character-traits. The bourgeoisie, as a group with a role in the production process, would not arise, although greedy fat cats might. On the other hand, those who fall outside the boundaries of “decency” would cease to be part of the class. This completely changes the social meaning of the concept of class: whereas a Marxist analysis is a social analysis

which emphasises the material and discursive origins of social structures and which advocates radical transformation as the solution to social problems, a populist conception emphasises individual attributes as if these arise from thin air.

Crucially, the populist version of “class” tends to carry aspects derived from the present, subordinated position of the working class. For instance, workers who develop metaphorical thick skins as a result of repeated setbacks and frustrations may turn this into a positive attribute – for instance, a characteristic of “decency”. Once the ability to cope with adversity is elevated into an ethical good, such workers become separated from those who are unable to, or who refuse to, develop the same “toughness”. On a political level, this “toughness” may be a barrier to revolutionary developments: it dulls the sharpness of one’s anger at capitalism and it blocks the positive emotions which would be important in building a radically different world. At the same time, it leads to a callousness towards those who snap under the strain of capitalist oppression, especially if they cause harm to “decent” people in the process. Instead of blaming the system, they become tempted to blame its victims for having the misfortune (if such it is) of not being “tough” enough. This in turn feeds implicitly into appeals by right-wingers and populists. On the one hand, the people who are no longer “decent” are placed outside the class and so denied the protection of class solidarity; on the other hand, the agents of repression (e.g. police officers), and even some of the bosses themselves, may seem “decent” on the level of their character and their actions.

This kind of “toughness” is just one of the examples of a characteristic which might be emphasised within the populist version of “class”. Crucially, this version of “class” involves a perpetual continuity of the system of oppression, either in its present form or something similar. The characteristics workers develop as a result of being exploited and oppressed are, of course, also features they are assumed to have in any desirable society, since the characteristics are elevated into ethical attributes. However, this assumes the necessity or desirability of the form of society which renders these characteristics necessary. The result is that class identity, far from providing possibilities for revolutionary transformation, becomes a bulwark against such change. Marx supposedly once remarked that there could never be a revolution in Germany, because to have one, people would have to walk on the grass. This is precisely the problem with the identity of “decent” workers. One also finds this form of identity coalescing into a complacent sense of superiority. The historian Richard Hoggart calls this “inverse snobbery”. The characteristics which render one “decent” are taken to be “obvious”, and this obviousness is taken to be all one really need know. As a result, people

become uncritical: uncritical of whether their actions and alignments contribute to the survival of the status quo, uncritical of the ways in which their beliefs are constructed by social circumstances, uncritical of their ignorance in theoretical matters. This in turn prevents the development of positive and active alternatives to the present system, and contributes to passivity. Anything which is complex and/or critical, which threatens to shake this passivity, becomes a source of fear and is dismissed as either conspiracy or absurdity. Furthermore, “inverse snobbery” easily passes over into various insidious prejudices: racism, sexism, homophobia, petty snobbery against worse-off workers, and so on.

Worse still, this “class” identity does not arise from within the class itself. It is carefully constructed through a string of institutions. As I have already suggested, it is not possible to simply impose ideas. It is, however, possible to infiltrate them insidiously into a group whose resistances are broken down in various ways. The working class traditionally developed its own signifiers and symbolism (e.g. dialects, accents, idioms, turns of phrase, varieties of humour, simplified or concretised language ...) which differentiated it from the ruling class. However, the ruling class has discovered how to use these symbols as a Trojan horse. Hoggart – himself from a working-class background – says that workers can be vulnerable to such manipulation. “Working-class people can make quick impressionistic judgements of great skill in certain fields; outside them, or if they are deceptively approached under the correct flags, they can be as babies.”⁸ The tabloid press are particularly effective at manipulating workers’ views, because they have mastered the art of using the “correct flags”. (In other national contexts, the same role is played by populist politicians.) It is of great significance that workers read such newspapers, because they play a central role in constructing the populist version of class identity. Newspapers do not simply transmit ideas; they operate as the focal point for an imagined community of like-minded people.

Thus, there is no such thing as an idea which is a simple result of experience. The experiences people have are always-already mediated by the concepts they have in their language. Whenever someone sees something and has an “obvious” reaction, the reaction is not in fact obvious: it involves what Gramsci terms “primitive historical acquisitions”.⁹ The immediacy of an experience (or reaction) and the honesty of its recounting are no guarantee against its carrying bourgeois ideological assumptions. For instance, the bourgeois media is very willing to use victims of crime, including working-class people, to perform a typical ideological role. They present the victims’ self-conception – which usually involves the decent/criminal binary and some version of a drive

for retribution – as if it were an immediate outgrowth of a simple act, and they try to transmit this reaction to the audience via emotions of outrage and empathy. However, ideological (and non-immediate) themes are operative both in the victim’s reaction and the viewer’s conclusion. These themes are not logical outgrowths of the event which is labelled as a “crime”. They arise from the framework of ideas and concepts through which this event is experienced or viewed. They are not necessarily valid on an ethical level, and they should not be above criticism.

One should realise that the ideological operations of the media are not necessarily consciously perceived by those on whom they operate. The work of Roland Barthes clearly shows that ideological meanings can be infiltrated into language without its users being consciously aware of it. An already meaningful sign – for instance, a phrase or an image – can be associated with a second meaning which is connoted by it, and which it does not directly portray or declare. (For instance, in a classic example of Barthes’s, a black soldier saluting a French flag can be used as a symbol of the multicultural greatness of the French empire, although it does not contain any explicit reference to this.) In this way, messages can be transmitted in such a way that they are “received”, instead of being “read”. The reader ceases to be an active agent in the process of communication, and the result is a subtle form of ideological control by the transmitter of mythical messages. The populist variety of class identity is constructed in precisely this way: it is connoted by a series of mythical signifiers and thereby rendered insular. Because it is not derived from a conscious reading of social reality, it is mistakenly perceived as “obvious”.

A good example of an area of discourse in which immediate “experience” is taken as direct proof is in the rhetoric of anti-“crime” crusaders. Rosie Kane MSP, summarising a recent debate on young offenders in Scotland, notes that she did not so much lose the debate as never face a debate in the first place. “Much of the debate, if it could be called that, has focused on reciting a catalogue of criminality as experienced by individuals within communities.”¹⁰ The belief that one can somehow read off an interpretation and a set of responses from such instances of individual experience is naive to the point of absurdity. Of course, it only leads to particular responses because it is located within a structure of meanings. However, the litany of emotive examples is used to cover up this structure and present it as a natural outgrowth of “experience”. In fact, it is simply an ideology too flimsy to show itself to the light of critique.

The crucial difference between the two types of class identity is that, whereas the Marxist version involves an identity as one of the excluded and oppressed, the populist version involves an

identity as one of the already-constituted inside, as one of the included, defending the inside against menaces from beyond it. Marx's proletariat have nothing to lose but their chains, precisely because they are defined as the group oppressed by the social system. Workers therefore become the very "threat from outside" – the "spectre" haunting the ruling class – which makes the defenders of order tremble. In the populist version, however, workers become part of the in-group of bourgeois society, seeking protection from such spectres. They become, so to speak, a component in the "Party of Order", the logic of place which sustains the status quo. In contrast, Marx's proletariat are the "Party of Anarchy"¹¹ who threaten to put this logic of place to the torch. The social significance of the two kinds of identity could not be more different. One should also emphasise that Marx wishes for the working class to become increasingly "conscious" and thereby to set in motion a social process which overcomes its own class character, as well as the capitalist system which produces it. This is very different from the idea that working-class people somehow have an intuitive or experiential awareness of complex realities, aside from theory and thought.

This division gives a new, more precise meaning to the well-established Marxist theme of "class consciousness". The purpose of revolutionary activists and theorists in dealing with workers is, therefore, to encourage a "conscious" and self-critical variety of class identity and to problematise and undermine the already-active populist varieties. (However much one sympathises with the problems of working-class peoples, one should resist sympathising also with the ideological means whereby they conceive and construct these problems as part of their discourse.) How, then, does one ensure that the class identity one encourages is of the Marxist and not the populist kind? I have already suggested two important steps: to reject the naive celebration of character-traits or tailing of immediate experiences, and to encourage rather than denounce efforts at critical thought. I shall now outline some other differences between the two conceptions, which will make it easier to determine in practice whether a particular instance of identification is of one kind or the other.

Work: Ethical Good or System of Oppression? The working class is, of course, linked by definition to "work". However, the Marxist and populist articulations of this link are very different. The version advocated by Marx is in fact based on two different conceptions of work, and Marx's failure to distinguish the two in a systematic way is the source of a great deal of confusion. On the one hand, he writes of "production" and "productive" or "creative activity". This refers to any kind of activity which transforms the world. This type of "work" is central to Marx's ethics; it

is part of humanity's so-called "species-being".¹² It has no specific class identity, although it can be realised in many different ways (which produce the different modes of production in history). The capitalist variety of productive activity is characterised by its alienation.

On the other hand, "work" as a social institution is a product of capitalism as a specific mode of production. Capitalist work is the source of the very process of alienation Marx attacks. Indeed, his tendency is to denounce capitalist work as a system of control and repression. It is constructed through what he terms "real subsumption", the violent restriction of possible life-worlds through the imposition of the capitalist system. "Real subsumption" occurs when the "mystification implicit in the relations of capital" is embedded in real social practices. It involves normalisation into and repression by a set of social forms independent of workers' will and choice. "Subsumed under capital the workers become components of these social formations, but these social formations do not belong to them and so rise up against them as the forms of capital itself ... in opposition to the isolated labour-power of the workers." Within the work system, work is not a source of dignity, but the badge of the inferiority of the proletarian: the worker "is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but – a tanning". Marx explicitly declares his opposition to any view which sees the production process as a value outside and above human problems, and he wants the "economy" as a system of sacrifice turned instead into a system of creating and satisfying enjoyment.¹³ *Work is not the source of proletarian dignity, but rather, is a source of desperation.* It is because work is nothing more than a source of indignity that the proletarian "has nothing to lose except her/his chains": the work system is a system of enslavement, and submission to it is a form of self-subordination and alienation.

In other words, a worker defined positively as "hard-working", as an active and well-behaved participant in the work process, is no part of a Marxian schema; anyone with such an identity has a variety of bourgeois consciousness. By pretending that capitalist control is somehow a form of freedom, and that self-abasement is a means to achieving dignity, holders of this identity refuse to admit their own position as enslaved subordinates of a dominant power-system. Thus, the schemas which contrast "hard-working" workers to "lazy" scroungers, criminals or students have nothing in common with Marxism. They are the products of those who would mislead the workers into identifying positively with the capitalist system. One might say that, beyond formal and real subsumption, there is a third type of subordination: ideological subsumption, in which the external domination over workers is internal-

ised through a blunting of desires and an identification with degraded, officially-sanctioned identities.

The ideal of work – the “work ethic” – is a capitalist ideal, identifiable in the work of bourgeois ideologues from Herbert Spencer to Martin Luther, and its infiltration into the working class is part of the construction of bourgeois hegemony. It is unsurprising that those who are subjected to indignity by the social system should try to construct ethical props to convince themselves that the existing system is of value, but this gesture is destructive of revolutionary potential. A positive identification with the work system (as opposed, for instance, to a pride in a particular skill, or in activity broadly defined) can only occur through, and at the expense of, a self-denial which is simultaneously a denial of others. If value is enshrined in an external system controlled by the bourgeoisie, this implies that oneself and others are valueless except as adjuncts of this system. One’s identity thereby becomes minimal and reactive, simply responding to external imperatives. Such an identity can only express its “dignity” in upside-down ways, such as through the demeaning of others who do not work.

It should always be kept in mind that work (especially the present work system) is a systemic, social-relational phenomenon, not an act by the self in relation to a prior nature or a moralised world. Its significance is social, not ethical. It is not, therefore, a valid source of any kind of ontological or ethical privilege. (Why, for instance, should police violence be somehow mitigated by the “fact” that police happen to be “doing their jobs” – jobs which involve using violence to repress dissent?) The capitalist work-system, including such ideas as the assumption that everyone who can work in a profitable way should work, is systemically irrational. It is also unsustainable. With developments in technology, there is simply not the work left for people to do. Hence, one finds pervasive unemployment and underemployment, and the structural absurdity of people fighting to “save” or “create jobs” – in other words, fighting to achieve the existence of roles which do not need performing, which those who hold them have no desire to perform, and yet which they have to acquire because of the irrational logic of the system! The work system is only held in place by the ideological and material commitments of capitalists, and by widespread attachment to identities as “hard-working” people. Furthermore, struggles against the unemployed are counter-productive for workers who have jobs. Attacks on what *Aufheben* term “dole autonomy” are also attacks on autonomous social spaces more broadly, and extend capitalist control. Furthermore, such attacks increase the competition for jobs, which leads to less job security, lower wages and reduced bargaining power for workers. It is not even in

workers’ interest to make sure that the unemployed are actively seeking work. (In a sense, it is better to have enough “lazy scroungers” to make sure that workers are scarce, and therefore strong!)

There is No Such Thing as “The Community” As with work, so with “community”, one finds a tendency in working-class ideology for external entities to be turned into imaginary values. One finds, for instance, in relation to so-called “anti-social behaviour”, an extra-relational kind of analysis which suggests that such acts are not simply harmful to individuals but are a threat to some abstraction called “the community”. This abstraction is then supposed to be transcendent over “individuals”, and to have overarching claims on everybody. In fact, there is never any such thing as “the community”, so these claims are only the ideological cover for a self-privileging by one concrete group of people in relation to another. The violence conceived as an act by “the community” against an “individual” is in fact simply the act of one individual (or rather, or one socially-located person) against another. The only function of the idea of “community” is to operate as an ideological cover for interpersonal domination. As Iris Marion Young puts it, “the ideal of community denies the difference between subjects and the social differentiation of temporal and spatial distancing. The most serious political consequence of the desire for community... is that it often operates to exclude or oppress those experienced as different. Commitment to an ideal of community tends to value and enforce homogeneity”. The idea of community “often occurs as an oppositional differentiation from other groups”, and it “validates and reinforces the fear and aversion some groups exhibit towards others”. Most often, people believe themselves to be part of a homogeneous community of similar people when, in fact, the area where they live contains a lot of diversity. The inaccurate image is politically harmful because it leads to “defensive exclusionary behaviour”, often of a racist or sectional character.¹⁴

Marx is, of course, an advocate of certain kinds of sociality. He celebrates the formation of workers’ clubs and the emergence of everyday interaction as possible sources of a new socialist society. However, he is bitterly opposed to the idea of submission to an overarching “community”. Indeed, he explicitly associates this with pre-capitalist modes of production, portraying it as ideologically reactionary.¹⁵ Rather, Marx conceives society in relational terms, as a set of relations between people and not as an overarching “community”. As Shlomo Avineri puts it, “Marx’s way to socialism is not a collectivism which subsumes the individual under an abstract whole; it is rather an attempt to break down the barriers

between the individual and society and to try to find the key to the reunion of these two aspects of human existence".¹⁶ Social relations conceived as something lived and actual are very different from the idea that there is something called "the community" to which all must submit. Solidarity is not a relation of submission but a relation of mutual self-activity.

It does not take much to see that the construction of exclusive "community" identities is a barrier to the construction of solidarity in a Marxian sense. It is also an anti-relational concept, barring the way to a relational understanding of social issues. Alongside the idea of a "community", one finds a string of moral and characterological concepts which mistakenly account for a whole string of phenomena by reference to individual traits. The idea that "crime" is a result of the individual degeneracy of a group of people called "criminals" is utterly reactionary and misleading. The system of social relations produces the actions within it. The more the working-class becomes caught up in infighting around moral standards, the less it is able to construct a new society based on open and solidaristic social relations. The "decent" working-class people who blame problems on "the criminals" and whose social activity takes an exclusionary form are as guilty in this respect as the so-called "criminals" themselves in terms of constructing the present plight of the working class. In acting in vindictive, punitive and characterologically-drive ways, they contribute to the existence of atomised and conflictual social relations. Even when this alignment is a reaction to violence by others, its structure is reactive and tends to reinforce rather than undermine the overall system of social relations. Rosa Luxemburg denounces the insidious effect of crackdowns in her pamphlet on the Russian Revolution. "[T]error is a dull, nay, a two-edged sword. The harshest measures of martial law are impotent against outbreaks of [crime].... Indeed, every persistent regime of martial law leads inevitably to arbitrariness, and every form of arbitrariness tends to deprave society. In this regard also, the only effective measures in the hands of the proletarian revolution are: radical measures of a political and social character, the speediest possible transformation of the social guarantees of the life of the masses – the kindling of revolutionary idealism."¹⁷

The idea of the "anti-social" is a contradiction in terms, and the very term expresses a reactionary position of belief in a social totality. In other words, against Marx's claim that the history of all societies is the history of class struggle, those who use the concept of the "anti-social" assume that there is a social unity which is prior to all classes and groups. Divisions therefore occur, not within a set of social relations, but between this unity and its outside. The idea of the "anti-social" (as

opposed, for instance, to harmful or oppressive social relations) is literally unthinkable within Marxism. It expresses a populist conception of "society" which implicitly identifies with the ideological self-presentation of the existing social system, i.e. an overarching state as the supposed core of a singular system run for the "general good".

"The community" is also a myth in other regards. The fact that some working-class people engage in forms of speech which fuse the self with others and which avoid self-differentiation¹⁸ is a product of workers' social subordination and lack of individuality as sources of social praxis. The more workers become able to think for themselves, without the backdrop of an imaginary "we" as a prop, the more able the working class will become to break free of ruling-class hegemony and to construct a new philosophy and a new society.

For Good, Not Decency!

Another aspect of intellectual subordination is the idea of decency. Basically, I would define decency as a minimal conception of good. Someone who identifies as a "decent" person most likely believes her or himself to be above criticism so long as she or he refrains from a few "obvious" kinds of "evil" or deviance. These are often identified with the norms of the existing social system and with the other categories discussed here (i.e. obeying the law, working, and so on). It is typically an uncritical conception which makes for working-class passivity, for the following reasons. Firstly, the ideal of decency, once achieved, leads to a self-satisfied attitude of immunity to criticism. This in turn provides the fuel for inverted snobbery and a thousand forms of righteous outrage. It leads to a self-imposed immunity from critical thought, and a blunting of any impulse to understand the world any better than one already does. Secondly, it disconnects the person from the world: it is as if, once this minimal ideal is attained, any intrusion from the world and any problem elsewhere suddenly becomes someone else's crime or someone else's problem. It is as if passivity equals innocence. This fuels reactionary positions in relation to social problems. Thirdly, since the espoused values are affirmed naively, and since they are often the values of the status quo, there is a tendency for "decency" to end in disavowed complicity. "Decent" people end up immunising themselves from critique, even while their own activity does in fact sustain capitalism and/or harms others. It is a way of deproblematising everyday life so as to hide it from ethics and therefore so as to render critique superfluous, a veritable force of ideological conservatism. Furthermore, it carries a tendency towards the misconception of the "indecent" or "evil" as a radical outside, when it often has interior relations with one's own activity and/or ideology, and it also compounds the problem of

affect-blocking since its structure is primarily negative (i.e. it is first of all directed against an external evil).

Implicitly, the idea of “decency” may well be responsive to social pressures. The capitalist system varies its actions towards workers depending on their conformity to its values, thereby constructing stratifications regarding its use of repression, violence and impoverishment. The full weight of capitalism’s police-state apparatuses is not brought to bear on the entire class at once, but is concentrated on its most dangerous segments or on those who are otherwise beyond its remit. Sociologists such as Robert Reiner and David Matza note the existence of a stratum of those, held on police files and associated (individually or collectively) with social deviance, who are particular and systematic targets of forms of state repression and violence which are intolerable in the wider society, and which would lead to generalised discontent if used pervasively. (Reiner, following the police’s own language, refers to these groups as “police property”.) One sociological implication of the idea of “decency” is that it identifies one with the safe and useful sections of the working class, thereby involving a differentiation from those deemed “police property”. One can connect this implication to the sense of immunity it involves: whereas “decent” workers do not condemn police violence outright (which would require a revolutionary stance), they try to immunise themselves from this violence by identifying with a subcategory who are relatively free from it. In this way, they can retain their sense of dignity if directly attacked, without having to take a revolutionary position in solidarity with others under attack. It is, therefore, significant that “decency” correlates with capitalistic values; it signifies precisely that one is not a revolutionary worker and that one is well-adjusted to capitalism. (It is, I suspect, because of this model of decency that some workers and even some socialists are reluctant to support anti-capitalist direct action, even in principle.)

The biggest problem with “decency” is that it is hopelessly minimal. It assigns the working class an ethical position which is strictly subordinate. Workers do not formulate ethics through an understanding of capitalism. Rather, the “big” questions are left to someone else (i.e. the bosses), and political demands are limited to a resistance to direct threats (i.e. “we the decent people” are not to be harmed; beyond that, anything goes). Therefore, working-class thought is unable to separate itself from bourgeois ideology, on which it remains dependent. If the working class is unable to construct its own autonomous conception of the world, it is also unable to achieve social revolution; even if workers overthrew the bosses, they could only reconstruct society along the same lines.

There is a need, instead, for an autonomous conception of the world, in the sense used by Gramsci, i.e. a conception of the world constructed without reliance on bourgeois ethical categories. This should concentrate, not on a minimal conception which serves mainly to insulate oneself from any need to engage in ethical or critical thought, but on a positive and expansive conception which constructs an idea of good beyond capitalism. A Marxist ethics would not stop with so-called “experience”, but would always inquire into the forces and relations operative beyond the schemas which capitalism makes seem “obvious”. (This “obviousness” is itself part of the process of ideological subsumption.) It would never stop at an initial gut reaction, but would always explore the underlying basis for ethical reactions. (For this reason, there is a need to consider the importance for Marxism of the work of psychoanalysts such as Wilhelm Reich.) Such an autonomous conception would necessarily have to be constructed in opposition to existing “decency”. This means that radicals face a harder task than if we could simply appeal directly and in a populist way to existing beliefs and identities. If the point is to change it, however, it is in this direction that activity must move. As Gramsci puts it, “every revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of criticism”, including “the spread of ideas among masses of men who are at first resistant”. This is necessary because the working class is not yet free of the bourgeoisie even in its own beliefs. “The first step in emancipating oneself from political and social slavery is ... freeing the mind.”¹⁹ First of all, this must involve activists being prepared to think beyond the schemas derived from bourgeois thought, and being prepared to challenge dogmas and presuppositions in increasingly radical ways. Secondly, it must involve an educational effort to transform workers’ beliefs. Populist slogans and “sympathy” with existing beliefs may seem an easy short-cut, but in fact it is a dead end.

Against “Law-Abiding” Conformism!

The idea that it is somehow good to be “law-abiding” is perhaps the most insidious of the various false beliefs encouraged by “decent” identities. The law is a tool of the ruling class, as has long been recognised by Marxists. However, these same Marxists do not always draw the logical conclusion that they should therefore oppose all identities constructed positively around the law and around “law-abiding” activity (often mistakenly termed “behaviour”). If the law is a tool of the bourgeoisie, how can it be good to obey it? The problem touches the heart of the issue of which other group is the main “other” of the working class, because, if the “other” is defined as “criminal”, the law becomes a positive feature of the working class and the working class therefore becomes part of the bourgeoisie’s political sphere.

If, on the other hand, the ruling class is the primary “other”, the working class can no longer define itself positively as “law-abiding”, and it must rid itself of every last residue of trust in and positive valuation of the institutions of state power.

One of the main problems is that some types of harmful social activity are easily categorised in the language of anti-“crime” discourse. In this way, the bourgeois state can colonise working-class identity under the guise of opposing certain actions. Some of these actions are not in fact harmful at all, or rather, are harmful only to the ruling class and the bourgeois state. However, the state has also incorporated into its list of taboos a string of other acts which are harmful to one extent or another (while excluding, or failing to prohibit in effective ways, those harmful acts which are committed by the bourgeoisie, the state, and selected other groups, or which are necessary to maintain the capitalist system). Phenomena need not be categorised in any one particular way, and the idea of “crime” is no more meaningful as a way of understanding social activities and problems than is the idea of “acts of God” in understanding natural disasters. If one removes this misleading category, one may also end up removing its correlates, such as the idiotic faith in punishment which is so pervasive today. However, the very gesture of redefining experiences and phenomena in ways which resist pervasive discourses, let alone the specific “languages” which might enable one to reconceive phenomena in more valid terms, requires a significant degree of critical ability. Not only is this ability insufficiently widespread among those who fall prey to anti-“crime” ideologies, but the insistence on the foolish idea that direct reference to “experience” can bypass discourse operates as a block on its development.

To identify positively as “law-abiding” is to identify positively with a position of subordination. It also involves alienation: one posits one’s own value, not directly, but in relation to an external agency (the state) to which one cedes the power to affirm or deny one’s value. This is fundamentally self-denying and necessarily involves some degree of self-hate. It also involves a gesture of privileging an in-group, simply because this group has gained the nod of this external agency. This gesture implies an endorsement of violence against outsiders. It should be remembered that the agency of the bourgeois state is not the agency of the working class. The representatives of the state might say that those who do not break the law have nothing to fear from its creeping extension of its own power or from the violence it metes out (as they said, for instance, after they murdered Blair Peach for fighting back against the Nazis). However, it is they, not we, who pick and choose what specific acts happen to be “against the law”. The state can decide at any moment that any particular,

contingent activity should be banned; it can decide to rescind any right it has established or tolerated. The only constraint on its capacity to do this is the possibility of mass resistance. Effective mass resistance (whether in the form of a political general strike, an insurrection, non-violent direct action, etc.) is, of course, illegal. The state can therefore be no guarantee of any specific good; furthermore, it can be a threat to anyone’s way of life at any time (no matter how “law-abiding” the individual’s identity). What is a “law-abiding citizen” to do when faced with the choice between obedience and everything else she or he holds dear? When the moment of choice comes, such “citizens” might well regret their complacency in earlier corrosion of liberties and in the spread of crackdowns.

In part, anti-“crime” discourse reflects a confusion of two different social phenomena: the law, as the will or whim of the state, and custom, as a set of ethical standards accepted as widespread by a particular social group. Those who describe themselves as “law-abiding” often identify in fact with custom, not with law; they may be quite happy to break an “unjust” law not condoned by the customs of their group. However, they confuse custom with law, and therefore confuse their own social group with the existing state. This confusion means that they trust the state to enforce the customs of their own group. A distancing of law from custom would be a step towards ideational autonomy, although it is only the beginning of effective social transformation. Customary ethical standards can themselves be oppressive and arbitrary, or they can condone existing institutions of oppression. Ethical positions should not be decided by an impulse to be part of a herd. They should involve an expansive and consistent concern which does not stop at a border between “us and them” and which resists the construction of any kind of closed system of control. The present structure of everyday customs reflects the ill-informed and contradictory philosophy on which these customs are based, i.e. so-called “common sense”. An ethics aiming to overcome oppressive social relations must ultimately break with custom as well as law.

Against the Idea of Individual Character
Beneath ideas of “decency”, “hard-working people”, “law-abiding citizens” and so on, one often finds implicit beliefs in an entire pseudo-scientific account of the causes of actions which differentiates people into, so to speak, superior and inferior “races” or groups (an account I term “characterology”). For instance, a refusal to work is taken as evidence of a characteristic of “laziness”, an outburst of anger might be taken to show someone to be inherently aggressive, and so on. “Criminals” and other folk devils are constructed in this way, as an image of an essential being

which can be deduced from particular actions. This account may appear to be a causal analysis, but in fact it is not. Since the statement that someone “has committed a crime” and the statement that someone “is a criminal” can be deduced directly from each other, they lack the distinction between a cause and an effect. Instead, they are logically a tautology, which is to say, they involve “explaining” a fact by reference to itself. There is, however, an important difference in the two concepts. Whereas the statement that someone “has committed a crime” may on a certain level be factual, the statement that the person “is a criminal” involves a claim about their essential (and possibly unchangeable) nature or character. Those who use this kind of discourse derive from a series of actions a series of images of what people are. These images are in turn placed into other narratives and ethical principles (for example, that criminals should be punished, that lazy people should be forced to work, and so on) which make sense only because the act is assumed to express an essential nature or character. Indeed, the whole logic of “condoning” and “condemning” (rather than simply analysing, or politically supporting or opposing) actions depends on a characterological backdrop. (It is therefore indicative that most of the left still feels a need to “condone” and “condemn”.) Reactions based on empathy also have such a backdrop, since they depend on a division between the same (with whom one empathises) and the different (with whom one does not). This division is only ethically relevant if it is assumed to rest on characteristics of superiority and inferiority. (Also, the idea of “greedy” individuals is characterological. Capitalists do not oppress workers because they are “greedy”; they do so because of their commitment to a particular social system. If they therefore commit “greedy” acts, this is a result of their ideological and material commitments, not some supposed essence of these particular individuals.)

Beneath this illogical gesture, there is a fear of difference. Suppose for the sake of argument that two people react to the same situation in different ways, and that one of these reactions is socially deviant (e.g. illegal). They may do this for all kinds of reasons, which may include what psychoanalysts term “character-structures” (though they do not accept the naive account of individual character). Characterology would assume the person who reacts in a deviant way to be inherently inferior to the person who does not. This is not, however, a logical conclusion. It depends on the assumption that the situation itself is somehow natural, just, acceptable, or some such. Otherwise, one could just as easily say that, by prompting one of the people to act in a deviant way and then punishing her/him for this action, the situation discriminates against this person. One might say that, by failing to take into account the situation,

the punishing agent discriminates against the person who is unlucky enough to be pushed into deviant action. (Suppose, for instance, that those who commit school shootings in America are mostly those who are bullied by others. The discourse which says they are “criminals”, or which uses the differences which cause the bullying as “causes of criminality” in these individuals, is in effect on the same side as the bullies. By its predictable “siding with the victims” whenever a shooting occurs, this discourse not only strengthens the oppression of an oppressed group; it also strengthens the conditions which cause the shootings.)

In this way, it becomes clear that characterology is a discourse of insiders, i.e. of those who on some level benefit from the existing system. Because they themselves are not (for instance) criminalised, and because they are not put in a situation where they engage in acts of deviance, they are permitted to assert their own superiority over other people. It is important to realise that this imagined superiority is a result of their compatibility with the existing situation, i.e. their (relative) conformity to capitalist society. Others who do not cope as well, or who are placed under more pressure by the system (perhaps because it cannot deal with the particular kinds of difference they express), are stigmatised by this discourse. In a sense, it blames the oppressed for being oppressed.

Characterology is not a causal account, so it cannot be compared to accounts which are, in fact, causal. There are a great many causal accounts of phenomena which are usually treated characterologically. For instance, Matza discusses “juvenile delinquency” in terms of a “mood of fatalism”: people act in particular ways in order to gain a sense of agency, when subject to pressures which they feel dehumanise them.²⁰ This explanation accounts for actions, not by a supposed essence inherent in particular actors, but by reference to a set of beliefs they hold (beliefs which, incidentally, are by no means as unusual as is usually assumed). The problem is that such explanations are prevented from entering people’s everyday awareness because they are blocked out by characterology. Someone who provides such explanations is liable to be accused of “condoning” or “supporting criminals”, of showing insufficient empathy with victims, or of being too intellectual (for instance, “airy fairy”, “not living in the real world”, “not dealing with real problems”, “having one’s head up one’s arse”, etc.). Such explanations do, indeed, show greater understanding than the usual naive reactions. Nevertheless, they are quite compatible with a political will to resolve some kind of social problem, or to prevent a particular kind of action.

The point is that, as long as the working class remains attached to characterological “explanations” and the naive ethics they generate, it will

remain complicit in existing systems of inclusion and exclusion. Working-class people will therefore be unable to liberate their minds from capitalist ideology. Even in the unlikely event that they become sufficiently disillusioned with present leaders to revolt, any future system will reproduce the inclusion-exclusion patterns implicit in characterological discourse. In other words, it will not be an emancipation, but a new system of oppression of one form or another (quite probably, a new variety of capitalism, since the ideology of capitalism has generated existing characterological categories). Activists must, therefore, resist the discourse of characterology, even (indeed, especially) when it is mobilised around problems which cause real suffering. This does not only apply to issues such as so-called “crime”, but also to the ethical critique of capitalism. It is simply not enough to see capitalism as the result of the actions of a small group of character-flawed individuals. It is a social system which maintains itself partly because of its pervasiveness in everyday discourse (including the discourse of those who think they have fully rejected it). It is only with an intellectual development beyond “commonsensical” categories that one can become sufficiently aware to become an effective revolutionary.

Towards Critical Awareness

Every way of relating to the world is expressed through a different language. I can't understand physics because I don't speak the language of physics. (I don't understand physics simply because I am surrounded by the phenomena it discusses.) Therefore, I can't accomplish the actions associated with physics, and a physicist would probably conclude that I have many naive ideas about the kind of issues physicists investigate.²¹ If I wanted to learn to do physics, I would have to learn its language (probably on a physics course). I don't need to do any of the things that physicists do, so my ignorance of physics is not of much significance in my life. However, with the language of critical awareness – for instance, Marxist theory – the issues are slightly different. Again, a critical awareness of the world involves the acquisition of a language, and does not simply come from experience. Again, an absence of such a language leads to an inability to accomplish – or even to understand – the kind of actions which such an awareness makes possible (such as social revolution). As someone with some degree of critical awareness, I am able to state that those who lack this awareness – who do not speak its language – hold many naive and foolish beliefs. This article has run through a number of these beliefs, and explained as clearly as possible why they are naive and foolish. The difference, however, arises in the significance of ignorance. Whereas I can leave physics to the physicists, the people who lack critical awareness cannot leave social life to

those of us who have it. It is therefore of enormous political importance that people who lack critical awareness, who do not speak the language of critical awareness, learn it as soon and as quickly as possible.

The people whom Marxists conventionally term “working-class” do not at present have enough of the language of critical awareness to be a revolutionary force. Whatever the populist manoeuvres of Marxists who are prepared to use their existing beliefs towards various political ends, they will not become a revolutionary force until and unless they learn to speak a language of critical awareness (which means, not only to learn new concepts, but to learn new ways of using language, and to “unlearn” old, unreflexive ways of using it). Working-class “common sense”, the equivalent to a medieval conception of physics, is simply not sufficient to render the working class a revolutionary force. Furthermore, many Marxists are still not sufficiently critical to even raise the issue of critical awareness. Many of those who identify as Marxists and socialists still speak primarily the language of working-class common sense. If the present impasse of radical politics is to be overcome, it is crucial that a language of critical awareness become a living force in everyday life. First of all, as Marx once put it, the educators must be educated. Those of us who would change the world must first unlearn the dogmas of capitalism and construct new ways of thinking. Only when these ideas become sufficiently widespread (whether in the working class or a group defined on some other basis) can a challenge be mounted which could really threaten the dominant structures of the present society. Only then can we begin to consider the possibility of radical social transformation as an immediate political possibility.

Notes

1. Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1968, p.144.
2. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1971, esp. pp.323-42.
3. Cited in Mick Duncan and Alan McArthur, 'Education and the Struggle for Human Liberation', in *Workers' Liberty* No.36, November 1996, p.48.
4. In Deleuzian terms, one might refer to this as a contrast between a “minoritarian” class identity and a class identity as “molar aggregate”. The work of Deleuze and Guattari offers an important way forward in conceiving the relationship between power and resistance and in rejecting the tragic course which so often befalls social revolutions, of simply replacing one oppressive system with

another.

5. Lest I get accused once more of taking a sectarian anarchist position in distinction from Marxism, I should add that certain contemporary anarchist groups, most notably Class War and Red Action, are among the most consistent and blatant advocates of the approach I am criticising.

6. Needless to say, I am trying to move Marxism forwards in line with the approach to reading I discussed in 'Reading Marx Creatively' (*What Next?* No.25). The founders and "classics" of Marxism are by no means immune from the criticisms I elaborate on the basis of certain parts of their own theories. (I am not, for instance, claiming that one could not find a populist strand in classical Marxist uses of the word "class".)

7. See Claus Mueller, *The Politics of Communication*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973. The election example comes from Vivian Yates, 'Diary of a Local Election Candidate', *The Marxist*, Vol.9 No.2, July/August 2002, pp.78-82, p.80. The Marxist Party candidate received less than 200 votes in a ward with 20,000 potential voters.

8. Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1954, p.106.

9. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp.198-9.

10. Rosie Kane, 'Was it Something I Said?', in *Labour Left Briefing*, July 2003, p.13.

11. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1934, p.19.

12. For instance, the first thesis on Feuerbach reads: "The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism ... is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*" (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, student edition, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1970, p.121). The *ethical* importance of activity is most clearly articulated in the *1844 Manuscripts* ("labour, *life activity, productive life ... is the life of the species*", *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1977, p.68), although it is clearly also present in the *Grundrisse*. The concept of "alienation" would be meaningless without some prior valuation of creative activity. However,

work in the capitalist sense is the cause of alienation, not its negation. To clarify the significance of the distinction, one could consider a range of activities today which do not qualify as "work" but which are clearly in some sense "creative activity" (especially "leisure" activities, such as the epitome of "idleness", surfing).

13. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1976, pp.1024, 1055, 280; *1844 Manuscripts*, pp.30-1; David McLellan (ed.), *Marx's Grundrisse*, St Albans: Paladin 1971, p.171.

14. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1990, pp.234-5.

15. Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1964, p.69.

16. Avineri, p.89.

17. Rosa Luxemburg, *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, New York: Pathfinder 1970, p.392.

18. My discussions of workers' language-use is derived from Mueller's account. Mueller summarises a large literature on language, education and "socialisation" which supports his analysis. An issue which arises in relation to Mueller is the extent to which one can accord a Marxist concept of the "working class" with the kind of statistical groupings used by most sociologists (whether neo-Marxist or Weberian). On a certain definition with which I have some sympathy, one could suggest that most of the population of the contemporary world are "working class", since they either live from paid work or in the niches of the capitalist economy. In this article, however, I stick to something similar to Mueller's use, mainly because the perspectives I am criticising seem similarly to distinguish between working and middle classes.

19. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920*, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1977, pp.11-12; Gramsci, cited in Paul Ransome, *Antonio Gramsci. A New Introduction*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1992.

20. David Matza, *Delinquency and Drift*, New York: John Wiley and Sons 1964.

21. I have borrowed this example from Trevor Pateman, *Language, Truth and Politics*, Newton Pophelford: Trevor Pateman and Jean Stroud 1975, pp.69-70.

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