

OUR CRITICAL MARXISM: AN INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION TO THE THREE PARTS

Marxism traces its origins to Karl Marx (1818-1893), of course, sometimes to Marx and Frederick Engels (1820-1895), and here I am going to focus on Marx himself, his contribution. But Marxism in Marx's work is incomplete, and Marxism is an evolving tradition of work. Marx gives us analyses and methods to grasp the nature of capitalism, but we should not treat those analyses and methods as set in stone. We need to put them to work.

Sometimes activists say that they do not want to call themselves Marxist because they have not read Marx, and the main texts are then treated as academic hurdles, and as obstacles to us being able to think for ourselves. We need to get beyond that, and look at the key ideas that are useful to us. The way we find our way into Marxism – the way we are introduced to it, and the way we make sense of it – will vary; introductions and interpretations of Marx change because the world we want to change is itself changing.

I am going to follow one way of making sense of what Marxism is, but also questioning that as we go along, because there are some limits to it, limits we need to get beyond if we are to be revolutionary Marxists now. Let us follow Lenin (1870-1924) who set out 'The three sources and three component parts of Marxism' in an article for a Russian monthly journal called *Enlightenment* in 1913.

Lenin sums up the three sources and component parts of Marxism as being; 'German philosophy' which gives us materialism including dialectics, 'French socialism' which gives us class struggle as the driving force of development, and 'English political economy' which gives us the labour theory of value. Marx was a child of his time and place, nineteenth-century Europe, and it is not surprising that he drew on ideas that were available to him.

Who was he? Marx was born in 1818 in Trier in Germany, and died in 1883 in London. There is a useful outline of main periods and events in his life by Ernest Mandel in 1986, and that outline takes us from Marx's reading of the German philosophers Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach and others, to the writing in 1848 of the *Communist Manifesto* with Engels and then to *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, the first volume of which was published in 1867. There are many other contributions by Marx, many of which were part of the intense organisational and sometimes sectarian disputes with anarchists and other political rivals in the First International founded in 1864.

There is a lot to unpack in Lenin's attempt to sum Marx up, and he risks reducing Marxism in the process; in his defence, he is probably writing fast and

could write this kind of thing in his sleep, but we have to start somewhere and this is a good start. These are the three elements – philosophy, sociology and economics – that I will focus on in these three lectures.

PART ONE

PHILOSOPHY

We begin with philosophy or, more specifically, with the unfolding of experience. That is what we usually begin with when we encounter Marxism, experience in the sense of feeling and experimentation; the sense that something is wrong with the world and that things are changing, can change, should change. This is where Marx himself started, though there are traditions in Marxism that sideline that philosophical work as ‘early Marx’ or ‘young Marx’ that we can disregard in favour of the economically-focused ‘late Marx’ or ‘mature Marx’. We need to take that early work seriously.

There are three key aspects of the working through of experience of the world that Marx discusses as a kind of philosophical groundwork for what became Marxism, and I will look at each of these in more detail in this lecture; first, alienation, then dialectics, and then materialism.

ALIENATION

With the experience of alienation or ‘estrangement’ – in which the world and other people are made strange to us, separated from us – we are faced with a paradox concerning experience. At one and the same time, alienation is experienced by us in our relation to each other and to what is most intimate about ourselves, our needs and desires, as something missing, something wrong. That unease is also covered over so that although we feel that something is wrong, we are made to adapt to capitalist society in order to survive in it, and we are made to convince ourselves that our bad feelings are our own fault. This is one reason why most definitions and measures of alienation are so misleading; they do not look at the objective causes of our misery.

Alienation is separation of ourselves from ourselves, and that estrangement that makes us strangers to ourselves is what makes us divided and unhappy, this while we told that we should be happy. Marx points out that in a world composed of things to be bought and sold – commodities – we are confronted by objects of a particular kind. And here is the twist; we are no longer the kind of human subject who makes objects, but those objects, commodities, turn us into a particular kind of divided alienated subject, as if we too are objects. We can see this more clearly if we look at four forms of alienation or estrangement that Marx discusses.

Work

The first form of alienation is fundamental to our experience of work under capitalism. Because our creative labour is controlled by others, controlled by those we sell our labour power to for a specific period of time, we are separated from what we produce. We are estranged from the fruits of our labour, divided from ourselves at the point of production. What is most human about us, which is our ability to realise ourselves in creative work, is betrayed. Here we need to think of 'work' in its broadest sense to include the creation of materially useful and beautiful objects. That experience of work, which should be enjoyable and fulfilling, is systematically distorted.

There is a horrible mutation of what we are as human subjects and of our creativity, mutation into 'objectification' of the things we produce and of ourselves. What we produce is ripped from us, so that from the very first moment of production what we produce is intended by those who bought our labour power to be an object that will be sold for profit; it is turned from being something materially useful or beautiful into a peculiar kind of object, a commodity that then exists out there in the world separate from us, set against us. From the moment we sell our labour power we too are turned into exchangeable objects, commodities, to be bought and sold.

Others

The second form of alienation is where we are divided from our fellow workers. The search for employment, where we sell our labour power on the market-place, is a competitive process that turns other human beings into competitors. This is the case whatever kind of labour power it is, whether it is physical labour or mental labour or, in the service sector, 'emotional labour', care for others itself is turned into a commodity. Other human beings are turned from being allies into threatening objects, into categories of being that threaten to deprive of us of the essential wages we and those we care for need to survive.

In this way human nature is distorted, so that the necessarily collective nature of creative labour is corroded; it seems then as if work is the combination of the labour of separate individuals who have fought and succeeded in selling their labour power. More complex creative labour requires more human beings to work together to enable that to happen and that collaboration provides the necessary context for us to be able to creatively produce something, but we are set against each other.

Bodies

The third form of alienation is where we not only experience other human bodies as threats, but also our own bodies as separated from us. We are estranged from our own bodies, bodies turned into machines that we must take to the marketplace and sell, and that must be sold every day to work efficiently for us and for others. Impairment, disability and illness are experienced by us as anxiety-producing and possibly fatal threats to our need to work.

Work is thereby turned from being a defining aspect of what it is to be human, what Marx describes as our 'species being', into an experience of lost time, time from our lives that is sold to others. Here also is one of the material historical roots of the ideological division between our bodies; the bodies that carry out work, and our minds, the thinking and feeling that we dissociate from, are separated from while we work.

Nature

There is a fourth form of alienation that Marx touched upon. It is implicit in his work, and has been brought to the fore by ecosocialists. That form of alienation is separation from nature as such. Our 'species being' is corrupted by capitalism in such a way that we experience not only our own individual nature separated from others as threatening, but the realm of nature is turned into a hostile environment which must be tamed, brought under control.

There is an ideological flipside of that process in which our alienated and sickening experience of capitalism leads us to try and escape this miserable human world and, as it were, 'return to nature'. But to romanticise nature in that way, to attempt to find ourselves in it can also be an expression of alienation, an estrangement from the world in which other human beings are viewed as threats instead of as providing the necessary context for us to be fully human, part of nature, working creatively with it to transform it and ourselves.

These four forms of alienation – estrangement from our creative labour, from other people as competitors, from our own bodies and from nature as such – give rise to a pathological society peopled by those who experience their distress as their own personal pathology. Marx's analysis speaks to the many ways we are deadened, reduced to the status of animals in our creative work and how we look to animal bodily pleasures as the only place where we feel alive, as if we are human there. This tragic state, which also divides us from other animal species on the planet, Marx puts as follows in 1844: 'What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.' You see a peculiar reversal here, so that things are turned into their opposites.

DIALECTICS

The transformation of things into their opposites is one of the most well-known motifs of dialectics, and philosophical discussion of dialectics in the nineteenth century was the trademark of the work of Hegel (1770-1831). I have already mentioned Hegel as one of the main philosophers Marx learnt from and challenged. Marx took Hegel's concept of alienation, for example, as a separation of subject from object that Hegel saw as part of a process of self-discovery, but Marx grounded it in real exploitative relationships under capitalism. Hegel was an idealist philosopher; that is, he was concerned with the unfolding of ideas, of concepts, but Marx simultaneously took what was most radical about all that and revolutionised it.

At one point in his own development, Marx was a 'young Hegelian' or 'left Hegelian'. You could say that Marx's reading of Hegel was dialectical. Dialectics gave Marx, and gives us a way of understanding the world that focuses on change instead assuming social relations to be unchanging, unchangeable. We look at the relationship between things in the world instead of seeing them as separated from each other, separate, and we reflect on our consciousness of that process instead of experiencing history happening behind our backs, out of our control. Let us take these three aspects of dialectics – contradiction, relations and consciousness – in turn.

Contradiction

It is easy to say that everything changes. It is not so easy to analyse those changes in such a way as to take seriously what holds things in place as they are now, what prevents change. We need to attend to those two elements; we need always to notice that there is continual change and that there are obstacles to change. What Marx did was to home in on a key characteristic of change which is that it operates through contradiction. Dialectical method in Marx's hands was an analysis of contradictions, the contradictions that explode at certain points to bring about transformations in our understanding of reality and transformations in reality itself.

Contradiction is the motor force of real changes in the world. It appears first as fractures or fault lines where there are opposing forces set against each other in what becomes an increasingly unstable state of affairs. At those moments there is a tension between what seems to remain the same, social relations that seem unchangeable, and new possibilities, an opening to another world that now seems possible. Then there is a sudden shift from the slowly accumulating small changes, quantitative changes, to 'qualitative leaps', ruptures. We see the contradictions come clear at times of rupture, revolution. That is dialectics in action.

Relations

This means that an understanding of change for Marx is intimately tied up with an analysis of social relations. It is easy to say that everything is connected with everything else – that is a favourite notion in spiritual and new age thought – but not so easy to link things in a meaningful practical way that takes existing social relations at different historical moments seriously. Dialectics is concerned with the interrelationship between different aspects of reality, and so with the intersection between different aspects of identity and experience. That is also why Marxism is intrinsically interdisciplinary, refusing the standard academic division of knowledge into separate compartments.

Marxist analysis is also dialectically linked to change, working to open up the contradictions that it discovers, linking struggles that may be divided from each other by reason of alienation and divide and rule, and intensifying struggles between the exploited and exploiters. That also means there is a necessary dialectical connection between what is happening as an objective process and the way it appears in the understanding of social actors as agents of change. The interlinking and conflict-ridden relation between historical social processes on a global scale was anticipated by Marx, and theorised later as ‘combined and uneven development.’

Consciousness

Our Marxist interpretation of the world is designed to change it, not to wait for an invisible immortal dialectical unrolling of history to happen, and so the role of consciousness is essential, ineliminable. Marx is concerned with our time in history, rapidly globalising capitalist society, when our consciousness of what is happening to us becomes an all the more essential ingredient of social processes. It is often said that, for Marx, capitalism creates its own gravedigger; capitalism creates the proletariat as a material force that is brought together in such a way as to become collectively aware of its task, to overthrow capitalism. Capitalism creates the possibility for people to become conscious of the nature of society as something they have a role in creating, as something they can seize and recreate.

Marx’s concern with the conditions in which working-class consciousness becomes possible leads him to make some disparaging comments about peasants as not having that consciousness of society. Feudalism rests on deeply ingrained assumptions about the natural order of things, and Marx then sees peasants as like ‘potatoes in a sack’; what is needed is the transformation that working together collectively gives rise to, consciousness of the working class ‘in itself’ which, at times of revolution becomes a working class ‘for itself’, an active agent in the dialectical transformation of society.

This dialectical transformation both retains what was valuable in the contradictory situation and negates what was problematic. The term 'sublation' is sometimes used in this context to capture how we transcend a contradiction in a dialectical movement forward that both preserves and transforms its object at a higher level. This is a complex theoretical issue, but lies behind what Marx is up to.

Anyway, to return to Marx's sometimes negative comments about peasants, he is also at other moments very positive about peasant communes, and about the possibility of collective consciousness being forged there. The question is how to raise consciousness, work with its contradictions and not to disparage people as suffering from 'false consciousness', which is a phrase Marx himself never actually used.

Dialectics is the analytic device through which we grasp contradiction, specifically class struggle, as the motor of history now, under capitalism, and in that way we are able to consciously act on the world. We need to differentiate this open Marxist understanding of dialectics from the fixed Stalinist formulae that reduce it to a 'unity of opposites' or to a closed sequence of 'thesis, antithesis, synthesis' that Marx never himself specified. There is no closure in dialectics, for we are always acting on the world, either to keep the social order going or to challenge it.

The role of consciousness is crucial in dialectics, and this is an aspect of it that tends to be forgotten in the attempts to find dialectics in nature, and that sometimes turns it into a kind of religious worldview, 'idealism'.

MATERIALISM

Marx battles away against Hegel's idealism, against the claim that all that matters are our ideas about the world, and against the assumption that history unrolls through a dialectical process of self-alienation and unfolding of the 'World Spirit', of what Hegel terms 'absolute consciousness' and the 'End of History.' Hegel does edge toward a historical account of change, and even to a collective rather than individual understanding of that dialectical process, but his focus on concepts that disregard material reality needed to be tackled. It is often said that Marx took Hegel's upside-down account, a topsy-turvy idealist image of development and put it the right way up, stood it on its feet, on the ground, grounded it in material reality.

There is, for sure, subjective understanding of the world that is necessary to keep the social order operating under capitalism. To say, as Marx did, that 'the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class' is to draw attention to the importance of those ideas. That is why some later Marxists have rejected the

rather pathologising and individualising descriptions of 'false consciousness' to argue, instead, that there is a 'necessary false consciousness' that enables us to make sense of the world, to survive. Subjective understanding of the world is of a world that is objectively real, mostly independent of our consciousness, and our understanding of the world is fraught with contradiction.

It is in that sense that we are materialists and, because we emphasise change, transformation, we are historical materialists. Marx's historical materialism is foundational, and includes a way of grasping what is objective, our practical engagement with that reality and the standpoint from which we act on the world. We can take those three aspects of historical materialism – objectivity, practice and standpoint – in turn.

Objectivity

Marx speaks about the role of 'objectification' in our understanding of the world and our intervention in it. Science, for instance, requires us to grasp natural and social phenomena as kinds of objects, causal mechanisms and laws, and so there is a necessary degree of 'objectification' involved in that kind of empirical and analytic work.

We move, Marx says, 'from the abstract to the concrete'; from things viewed separately, abstractly, to things in their context, concretely. When we grasp something in the world it includes our reflective thoughtful activity, and then we can step back and analyse it. The objective world outside us, mostly independent of us, is in this way examined concretely, held in consciousness, the better to define and analyse it.

Marxist 'social science', if you can call it that, is of a special type in that it insists on our interpretation of the world. What we hold and discuss in our conscious awareness of the world is not merely a reflection of the world but is moulded by our interests in it, in what we want to do with it. So there is a difference between objectification as the entwinement of our subjectivity with the objective world and the widespread 'reification' that we suffer under capitalism, the reification or 'thingification' in which social relationships are reduced to things, objects, and in which we are reduced to the status of mere objects. This is a world in which we have no say, no stake, as if we must be helpless in it.

Practice

This entwinement of objectivity and subjectivity is pointed to by attempts to link theory and practice in the term 'praxis'. In a sense, the term 'praxis' is not necessary, a tautology in Marxism because Marx's understanding of practice was already of it as something that required theory. We can see this in Marx's

famous *Theses on Feuerbach* written in 1845, which were a response to the limitations of the kind of materialism that the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) was advocating. It is the eleventh thesis that is often quoted, that 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.'

Marx opens his critique of Feuerbach by pointing out that we need to be able to understand reality not as a thing that is entirely outside of us. Yes, this objective reality is mostly independent of us, and particularly so when we are alienated from it under capitalism, but Marx insists that we need to understand this reality as 'sensuous human activity, practice.' He points out in the first paragraph, in the first thesis on Feuerbach, that the kind of materialism that disregards our subjective involvement in it is no more than a mirror image of idealism which itself does not know real sensuous activity as such.

Standpoint

Just as ideology is defined by Marx as the ideas of the ruling class – the world as experienced from a particular limited class standpoint – so every understanding of the world is infused with the particular interests of those who are embedded in the world, and viewing it from different standpoints. Marxism is, in this way, an early version of what later came to be described by feminists as a 'standpoint theory'. Marxism is a theory and intervention in the world from the standpoint of the working class, something we also now understand as being composed of many different standpoints of the exploited and oppressed operating alongside and intersecting with each other.

There is a kind of anthropological fairy tale that Hegel tells about the dawn of consciousness, an idealist story that Marx reworks as historical materialist analysis. For Hegel, the story concerns the dialectical encounter between a master and a slave, a slave who the master puts to work. The master is conscious and the slave is turned into an object, an object that works. The slave who works is, however, thereby able to grasp the world as it is and becomes conscious that the master is dependent on him and it also dawns on the master that he is indeed dependent on the slave. It is at that point that a dialectical reversal of positions takes place and the slave seizes control, becomes the master.

We can think of the relation between the capitalist ruling class and the working class in such terms, but what we need to notice about this story is that Marx is interested in the material conditions in which wage slaves collectively become conscious of exploitation and move into action. Consciousness is necessary to the dialectic through which the working class comes to overcome alienation

and bring about a world in which the division into different classes no longer holds.

After Marx died in 1883 there were a series of misrepresentations of what he wrote about materialism, misrepresentations that were not accidental, not merely misunderstandings of his ideas, but which were bound up with the objective material conditions of the working class organisations in Europe. The Second International, which was formed in 1889, included many politicians who thought of themselves as Marxists, but they turned Marxism into a caricature of historical materialism.

That mechanical 'materialism' was a mere flipside of the idealism that Marx tackled in classical German philosophy, and those social democrats made it seem like there was an inevitable historical process through which the concentration of the working class in industrial centres would automatically lead to the collectivisation of production, and so to a transition from capitalism to socialism.

That misrepresentation of Marx's historical materialist analyses of the emergence of capitalism out of slavery and feudalism was accompanied by a mechanistic and determinist view of history, a view of history that was eventually crystallised in 'stage theories' that then tried to make political processes correspond to that account. The bureaucratic apparatus of the Stalinist states and the Third International had a material interest in promoting that 'stage' account as part of the diplomatic alliances they sought with other regimes.

Some of the clumsy metaphors that Marx briefly used to explain the relationship between different modes of production and ruling ideas did not help, the classic example being the opposition between a material 'base' and an ideological 'superstructure'. Some Marxists then got trapped in that metaphor, forgetting all of the other things that Marx wrote. For example, when Marx wrote about religion, it is true that he was quite scathing about it and emphasised its reactionary role, but if we read what he wrote carefully, then we see something more complex, more dialectical. It is too simplistic to write off religious yearning as 'the opium of the people' and forget that Marx saw this yearning as the 'heart of a heartless world' and 'the soul of a spiritless condition.' Here is an indictment of capitalism and its miserable reduction of life to objectivity shorn of subjectivity.

CONCLUSIONS

It was useful to start with Lenin's schema of three component parts of Marxism, a schema that was written in 1913, and that emphasised historical

materialism as an alternative to Hegelian idealism, but in the years between then and the Russian revolution, Lenin spent a great deal of time reading Hegel, and his notebooks reveal a transformation in his conception of revolutionary change that actually brings him back to what Marx actually wrote.

Lenin realised that it is not possible to take over the state, to use it to manage an inevitable transition from capitalism to socialism as the Second International social democrats proposed. Lenin goes back to a dialectical understanding of ruptures in which, as Marx himself wrote, the state machine had to be 'smashed', broken up and replaced by new forms of democratic self-organised working class rule.

Another consequence of Lenin's Hegelian-influenced return to Marx was an understanding of the importance of resistance to colonialism and self-determination of oppressed nations against imperialist domination rather than assuming some kind of 'stage' model of development that saw capitalism as necessarily always progressive.

We can see in the case of alienation how ideological aspects of our experience of life under capitalism are embodied, material. Marxist historical materialism is therefore not simply a crude reductionist mirror-image of idealist approaches. Marx did not simply oppose Hegel, but learnt from the dialectical account that Hegel had developed, and Marx transformed that account. Marx himself never used the phrase 'dialectical materialism', and we should be careful not to turn that phrase into a kind of ideology. That is one lesson of the disastrous attempt to build a so-called Marxist science of nature in the Soviet Union which wanted matter itself to operate according to predefined 'dialectical' laws. Marx's analyses and methods were thoroughly materialist, while taking seriously the dialectical relationship with ideas, theories we have about history and about ourselves.

There also the problem of the 'recuperation' of Marx's work, the neutralising and absorption of his ideas. That ideological recuperation is something we see increasingly at work in the turning of critique into just another part of a media spectacle that dissolves the difference between truth and lies and, instead, circulates shallow and enjoyable images of the world and theories about it. That is already a version of the process we have seen in many academic representations of Marxism.

There is a continual danger that Marx's analyses can be turned back into mere ideas, mere philosophy, made abstract, useless. Yes, there is a Hegelian tradition in Marxism, in discussions of 'praxis' – the linking of theory and practice –and in the work of the Frankfurt School, for example, but we need to

take care; we can learn from those traditions, but we always have the aim of emancipating ourselves from ideology, and grounding our account of alienation and dialectics in the material reality of life under capitalism.