

MARXISM IN RELATION TO EVERY-DAY LIFE¹

Anthony Thomson

I wish to preface my remarks on Marxism at the level of every-day life with a few observations on religion. This is because Marxism has sometimes been labelled a 20th century religion, and I don't believe this can be dismissed out of hand. Some elements of Marxism offer many parallels with religious belief systems. There are positive as well as negative similarities which need to be pointed out. In an age of some revolutionary priests, there are very practical political reasons for taking the question of religion seriously.

The people who have classified Marxism as a religion do so, in part, because Marxism has been transformed in some circumstances from a critical social inquiry into a body of received ideas, into dogma or authority or sacred texts. Official Marxism has canonized some, de-canonized others and sometimes even re-canonized them. Marxism as a social movement has become fragmented into numerous groups and parties like so many sects.

It is not enough, however, to say that all this is merely bad Marxism; that good Marxism is really scientific and not like religion at all. It is not enough because there are other aspects of Marxism as a movement and an ideology which are positive, that also appear to parallel some aspects of religion. Marxism is critical, not only of existing structural arrangements, but also of the embodiment of these elements in individuals. This means that it is critical of people's actions. There are analogies, then, with some aspects of religious morality, although the basis for evaluation is entirely secular. The main point is that Marxism has implications for acting in the world. It is a call to put principles and values into practice, to intervene positively in the world. In these ways it does constitute something like a belief system.

This aspect of Marxism is most apparent when the object of analysis is the least abstract, at the level of every-day life. I am still concerned with a Marxist analysis, however, which means among other things to situate the particular in the context of the whole. There are specific links between the characteristics of the mode of production and the behaviour and attitudes of individuals within the society, links which may be especially clear in a capitalist society.

One of the main characteristics of the period of competitive capitalism at the time Marx was writing was the separation of politics from economics. This aspect of a capitalist ideology was clearly expressed in the economic writings of the 18th century when governments were told, in very certain terms, that they had no business in the board rooms of the nation.

The philosophy of *laissez faire* meant that individuals were to be free to pursue economic gains with the minimum of restraint from the government. It also decreed that vast areas of economic decision-making were to be "free" from the influence of those whose lives were in considerable part determined by decisions in these board rooms. Not only the government, but the great majority of the population were to have no voice in how the wealth of the society was created and used.

Of course, *laissez-faire* has largely been put to rest in the actual course of events in capitalist society, except as ideological rhetoric, and the role of the government has grown enormously as the external manager of the economy and the manipulator of monetary and social policies to provide the best environment for corporate decision-making.

But this new coalescence of the economic and the political has occurred only at the top. The primary condition of the separation of the economic from the political has remained, perhaps

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it has even been strengthened. Most people still have no influence over the direction of economic events. If economics has been separated from politics, perhaps a more fundamental separation has been that of economics and politics from most of the people.

One of the consequences of this separation is that "politics" has become a devalued word for many people in our society. Politicians are fat-cats, liars and opportunists who live off the sweat of taxpayers' brows. Politics is a back-room game, a competitive sport in which the most efficient backstabber makes off with the spoils. At best it is a mad scramble for personal advantage with everyone involved primarily concerned to get their piece of the action.

From a Marxist perspective, this is at most only a very small part of politics – the formal sphere of institutional politics. At the same time, however, one element of this political style is common at all levels of the social structure. The competitive, individualistic orientation of "the political" at the level of formal politics pervades the whole exercise of political action in the society.

Politics, then, isn't something that only happens in a green chamber in Ottawa, or every four years in a polling booth. Politics is something done to us every day, and also something we do every day.

It is done to us because the world we inhabit is shaped by powers that are external to us. It is shaped by those with private economic power who may decide, in their self-interest, to pull up stakes and move their plant and equipment from Canada to some repressive dictatorship, in South Korea or the Philippines, leaving behind them a bitter and discouraged community of unemployed workers.

It is shaped by those with political power who have decided to lengthen unemployment lines to a degree which has been unprecedented since the dirty thirties. It is shaped by those who control the media, who monopolize our newspapers and television stations, who manipulate our desires and tastes in popular culture.

It is the decisions made by these political and economic powers which in large measure determines whether you will be able to get a job in your chosen field, whether you will have to move somewhere to try to find work, whether you can contemplate having a family, taking out a mortgage, finishing your education. It is within these narrow parameters that you try to construct some personal life. Social life, then, is structured. Politics is done to us.

But politics is also something we do. There is, on this dimension, a complex relationship between structure and action that takes us beyond the view of the world as structured, however important this insight is to social analysis and practical action. Generally speaking, there is a connection between the structural properties which describe how a society is organized, and people's actions within these structures. This is the case, in the first instance, because people generally act in ways that are reproductive of these structures. This view expresses one aspect of the inter-relationship between structure and action, between how the world is organized, without our consent and often without our direct knowledge, and how we act within it.

The system works, or is maintained, only when people act in accordance with structures, within that range of behaviours which are compatible with dominant social interests and institutions. This structure is in part physical. The technology we use is better at controlling human beings than in liberating them. For example, the structure of this room is more conducive to one-way communication than dialogue.

But the existence of physical structures is not entirely what I had in mind. In addition, the system works because people do what they are required to do. Every-day actions reproduce, actually make-up, the social structures. Every day that a labourer goes to work and sells his

labour power, capitalism is being reproduced, albeit unintentionally. From this situation we can logically deduce that if everyone stopped doing what they are doing, then the system could not be reproduced.

For many good reasons, this kind of speculation is pure fantasy. The strength of the system, of the structure, is that many people want to do what is unintentionally reproductive, or they feel that they have no choice but to act according to social dictates (because within the system there are punishments for non-compliance), or they believe that it is the only right and proper way to act.

Explanation, however, cannot remain entirely at this voluntaristic level, particularly a Marxist explanation attempting to deal with the structure of every-day life.

It wasn't so long ago that the anti war slogan, "Suppose they gave a war and nobody came" was common currency among university students. It was a pleasant fantasy – if people simply refused to fight then there could not be a war. It is easy to point to the fallacy here; the assumption that people are free of social constraint and influence. There is, however, an important kernel of truth in it. There were draft dodgers; there were deserters from the Vietnam War; there was a massive movement to end the war. We can debate the effectiveness of these social movements in the final outcome. We can also debate the material interests which were frequently behind opposition to the war. No Marxist analysis which neglected these elements as a fundamental aspect of any explanation could lay claim to being acceptable social science. But the point to stress is that at some level there is a personal choice to make, a decision to take and a path to follow. This level is our every-day activity and the choice refers to how we choose to act in the world.

Personal life has a political dimension. It is political because, willy nilly, a choice is made and that choice has consequences of a reproductive or oppositional nature. It often appears that a conscious choice has been made only through opposition. Ironically, people don't have to act consciously to reproduce the structure. They merely have to follow the line of least resistance, to do what comes naturally or appears to be natural in the circumstances. Reproduction follows automatically when people act in accordance with the inertia of the structure. In capitalist society the chief dictate, the line of least resistance, is self-interest. Taking politics seriously means having a hard look at the complicated continuum which has at one end a host of particular interests and at the other end an equally complex network of more general interests.

Perhaps in no other aspect of capitalism is the link between the basic characteristics of the mode of production and people's orientations in every-day life more clearly drawn. Capitalism has its roots in an extreme form of individualism. The origins of capitalism are bound up in a system which placed the interests of the smaller economic unit ahead of the larger. The right of the propertied to do with their wealth as they saw fit ensured that particular rights were more important than more general and social interests, although the ideology of the period assured social practitioners that self-interest was the means for the greatest good for the greatest number.

Capitalism is still a system which is built on the minute calculations of personal advantage by everyone with something to gain. It is organized selfishness. Even its chief ideologues recognize this. According to a popular economic theory, the way to benefit the disadvantaged is to make things easy for the wealthy – give them plenty of tax breaks and subsidies. Then some of the social benefits will trickle down to those on the bottom of the system. It is a system which believes crumbs to be good enough for many of the people within it.

The absence of real power to influence decisive events in people's lives relates to a further separation which is reinforced if not engendered by capitalism: the separation of the personal from the political.

This separation has numerous sides to it, and I wish to discuss just one of them. The distinction, first, is between the individual and the collectivity, or rather collectivities, since while the individual is an absolute if complex entity – the person him or herself – there are numerous collectivities of which the individual is a part, from small and intimate groups such as the family, to large ones such as immediate work groups and societies as a whole. Clearly these collectivities differ in the degree of individual identification and commitment, and they differ in the degree of personal or individual stake involved.

Each collectivity does not exist in isolation but always in relation to other similar collectivities. At this level, the distinction between the personal and the political involves the problem of balancing the needs and interests of the various collectivities with respect to the relative autonomy of the individual.

The effect of capitalism, in its practice, is to emphasize the interests of the more particular in relation to the general. This basic principle, however, has become modified by the development of monopoly capitalism and the growth of the capitalist state. In this new circumstance, intermediate collectivities often take precedence, although more fundamentally the axis on which decisions are made and actions taken is more complicated.

In its earlier competitive phase, capitalism was synonymous with individualism, a response to the forced collectivism of pre-capitalist modes of production. The ideology of individualism still maintains its aura of rebellion in contemporary forms of middle class radicalism. Consequently, self-interest as the motor of the society has to be harnessed to larger particularisms such as the corporation or the state. Marxists talk about the creation of pseudo-general interests which mask more particular interests. Although they meet some of the needs of subordinate groups, dominant group interests define these needs and priorities and determine what is on the political agenda. Pseudo-general interests include many varieties of national patriotism as well as the corporate mentality of the "organization man". Even in this latter example, where the more general appears to take precedence over the more particular, the crux of the question of interests is the self-interest of the individual, the success of her or his career within the enterprise.

This endless emphasis on self-interest-first only begins at the level of economics. It ends at the most intimate levels of personal interaction. In between it affects and colours every-day actions. It is the same motive of self-interest-first that defines those with whom you are centrally involved as somehow forms of property, to be used, manipulated and controlled; that defines those with whom you work as either stepping stones or obstacles to individual success.

The motive appears in the question of personal expertise. In a system which has eliminated most forms of productive property from the great majority of the population, the only type of so-called "property" left is expertise, someone's skills. So the ability to do something well becomes a step-ladder in the competitive struggle for pre-eminence. It is something to be protected, to be monopolized if possible so that it can command the highest rewards. At best it is something to be displayed and dispensed in discreet, measured amounts.

Expertise is seen as a personal asset, as something that adheres only to the individual. And it is a personal attribute. But individual expertise also has a political dimension. It is political first because it is socially bestowed. Knowledge is a property of the collectivity and the individual has the benefit of this accumulated skill and wisdom. Second, it is a political issue

because a person's expertise is socially sustained. The need for personal reproduction, frequently the basis of the domestic division of labour, comes immediately to mind. Furthermore, the precondition of being an expert on some one thing is that many other people are experts in everything else that is required to sustain life. The person who complains that they shouldn't have to pay school taxes because they, personally, have no children who need educating, deals every day with other people who are trained and educated; depends on them for the necessities of life, and has a stake in their technical competence, on the one hand, and on their social service orientation on the other; that is, on their personal skill and on their politics.

Monopolization of expertise, however, is political for an additional reason. The very notion that someone, who possesses a gift that is largely socially bestowed and sustained, should primarily use this gift for personal gain, is itself a political position. It is political not least of all because it has powerful social consequences. It reinforces a world where individual advantage is given precedence over collective interests. It maintains, sharpens and extends existing inequalities rather than working progressively to narrow them. It divides people who have other interests in common from acting on these mutual interests.

All of this is a very far cry indeed from utilizing any kind of expertise for the benefit of others; using strength to impart strength rather than for control. It is a very different orientation – to take personal stock and then ask about its use, that is, the politics of its use, for one form of use is no less political than another. It is only a different form of politics.

These remarks have some applicability to academic circles. Marxism, as a conscious political philosophy, is isolated. For reasons that require a great deal of consideration, to the extent that socialist consciousness exists in advanced capitalism it does so primarily in more or less academic circles. It has even become quite fashionable in some disciplines. Papers can be given, articles can be written and published, and careers can be built by self-proclaimed Marxists.

These gains are not to be gainsaid. Few academics would advocate a return to the paranoia of the 1950s when left-wing intellectuals were hounded from the ideological professions. There are now more opportunities to teach and write, even if much of the writing is for other academics and most of the teaching is done for the benefit of the 10% of the population who attend university.

Clearly, much of this research and writing is valuable in itself as knowledge of social processes and as potentially useful guides for interested social action. But not all of the writing need be for other academics; not all of the teaching need be for the daughters and sons of the upper middle class.

The Marxist orientation compels its adherents to use whatever expertise they possess to work in the interests of the disadvantaged. It means an involvement with people: with fishermen, with women's groups, with trade unions. It means a commitment of time and energy, even when this energy is not valuable in terms of career building; perhaps especially when it is not valuable for this purpose. In another sense, this work is also personally very valuable. It is a humbling experience and few could benefit from a humbling experience more than academics.

Especially among academics, Marxism has fragmented – there are as many different types of Marxists as there are varieties of mushrooms. From the perspective of every-day life, however, we can distinguish between two main types. One is the type that emphasizes structure, the external constraints and conditions which pattern human social action. Structure is out there. It limits what is possible to do and affects what is possible to think and believe. It patterns

actions and events. Structure is also inside. It is in peoples' actions, values, cognitions and knowledge. It is something done to us and something we do.

The study of structure is a vital element of Marxism. Marx talked of seeking explanations beneath the level of every-day experiences. Sociological Marxists talk about uncovering the unacknowledged conditions of action, the distribution of resources and unintended consequences. They discuss the existence of false consciousness, that people may have distorted views of what they do and why they do it. Marx analysed reification, or the elevation of appearances to the level of explanation. This approach, then, emphasizes materialism and structure. Capitalism is something out there that does things to people whether they like it or not.

This, however, is only one side of Marxism. There is a second approach which contradicts the first, not in the sense that one of the two must be false, but in the sense that social action involves two opposite conditions. The other side emphasises action. People do not simply conform to external standards but act within them. They act to minimize their negative aspects, to try to gain whatever degree of control over their lives they can. You can see this everywhere, in informal work groups, in women's collectives, in labour unions and in relatively spontaneous actions such as the sinking of the DFO boats off Woods Harbour.

his perspective, the non-structural one, is important because it high-lights that people act, that people make history. To say that people act either to reproduce that which exists or to change it, is without doubt simplistic. After all, there are numerous ways to change things and many of these ways simply leave most things the same. Capitalism has been a very successful strategy in part because it thrives on change. Novelty is the life-blood of the system. The process of reproduction, then, becomes even more complicated in such a system, but more importantly, the process of change becomes especially complex and difficult.

The principle, however, remains important: change requires initiative and conscious organization. The reasons for studying the level of every-day actions and responses of individuals and collectivities is not merely to understand the political dimensions in the personal and the personal dimensions in the political. It is also to be in a position to intervene and use whatever is useful in expertise or training. It might prove to be very little. The worse that can happen is that something is learned and future social practice can be improved.

So support should be given to those who would push social scientists in the direction of getting their hands "dirty" in the field, with the added dimension that Marxism means an explicit identification with the interests of the disadvantaged.

In conclusion, capitalist society logically engenders or reinforces certain outcomes, including isolation, personal ambition and individualism. But it also creates huge needs which reflect alternative modes of action. Many individuals in the system respond to these needs. They do put collective interests ahead at certain times and places, realizing that anyone can only be effective if they, themselves, are healthy and secure. Over-idealism is as potentially self-destructive as over-individualism.

To bring this talk back to the theme of religion, a committed Christian I know is working on the notion that even atheists can be, unknowingly, "doing the gospel" in their every-day actions when they act positively in the world to help those in need. I think that there is an important insight here, but that it is turned on its head. Many people who take the social side of religion seriously, who work with the deprived to improve their living conditions and more fundamentally help them gain greater control over their own lives, are fulfilling the spirit of Marxist philosophy.

The final word, then, is that we should be open to the likelihood that many people who profess to be Marxists come up short in terms of their every-day actions. Perhaps more importantly, some who do not profess to be Marxists carry out their work in a manner which exemplifies a Marxist spirit.