The Continuing Relevance of Marxism for Popular Education Today

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Introduction

Over the past year there have been numerous events marking the 200th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx – including an international conference organised by the Marx Memorial Library and Workers' School, promoting popular political education and debate for our times. Is Marxism still relevant to current struggles, whether in Britain and/ or elsewhere? And if so, how and in what ways?

This contribution argues that Marxism is more relevant than ever, and particularly so for popular education and development in the contemporary context. The first section summarises the major challenges to be faced, with the growth of far-right populism on a global scale. How are we to make sense of these developments? And how should we respond, in developing community-based strategies for social justice and social solidarity? These questions set the context for identifying the relevance of key features of Marx's approach, focussing on his analysis of class, class consciousness and class conflict, as capitalism expands across the globe. Armed with these analytical tools, community and youth workers and popular educators have the equipment to support communities in challenging the growth of far-right populism, contributing to the development of more progressive agendas for social change. There *are* alternatives to neo-liberal agendas, just as there *are* alternatives to their effects, including the alienation and the anger that populist politicians foster, for reasons of their own. Marxism provides no easy answers, but it does provide the analytical tools with which to develop such alternatives from the bottom up.

The growth of far-right populism

The definition of populism presents challenges, it has been argued, given that the term has been applied to populisms of the political left as well as to populisms of the political right (Laclau, 2005), referring to very different movements in Europe and elsewhere, including Latin America as well as the United States (Lazaridis et al, 2016). Despite the differences, populisms have tended to share a common approach, however, identifying 'the people' as against the elite/ establishment (Ibid). As Bernard Crick presciently explained, well before the growth of the far right in recent years, populism represents a style of politics and rhetoric that seeks to arouse a majority who are, have been, or think themselves to be outside the polity, scorned and despised by an educated establishment (Crick, 2002). Populism was symptomatic of the shortcomings of representative democracy in other words, the democratic deficit that left so many people so very frustrated that their issues and concerns were not being addressed. In his latest book Castells' argues that there is a crisis of legitimacy, a rupture in liberal democracy, as citizens lose trust in mainstream political parties and established political institutions (Castells, 2018). This leads to the election of outsiders such as Trump, accompanied by increasing xenophobia and racism, as far right politicians blame the 'other' for people's problems, whether the 'others' are migrants and refugees, or whether they are elites, politicians, 'Washington insiders' or purveyors of so called 'fake news' (Panizza, 2005).

There is certainly plenty of evidence of widespread alienation and frustration, as well as rage against exclusion. Brexit slogans such as 'Take back control' have clearly had resonance in Britain. Arlie Hochschild's (2016) study of 'Anger and Mourning on the American Right' illustrates precisely such feelings in the southern states of the USA. Politicians had bailed out the financial elite that had caused the crash in 2008, whilst despising the southern whites who were bearing the brunt of the consequences, people told her. As one of those interviewed argued 'oh, liberals think that Bible-believing Southerners are ignorant, backward, rednecks, losers. They think we're racist, sexist, homophobic'… people felt 'strangers in their own land, afraid, resentful, displaced' (Ibid. 218).

Comparable feelings emerged from a series of focus groups that took place in older (de)industrialised parts of Britain, with expressions of extreme anxiety about the economic prospects, along with profound mistrust of the politicians who were supposed to be addressing the problems. A study of far-right groups found similar emotions – expressed in even more colourful terms: 'The rich cunts in the city …calling us racists. It's not their jobs on the line, is it? (Winlow et al, 2017. 93). 'The politicians today are just money-grabbing bastards mate, fucking liars and cowards (Ibid. 92). 'And 'posh white people who've taken over the Labour Party' .. people who 'think everyone's a fucking vegan and shops at Waitrose' (Ibid. 126) – they came in for similar scorn.

The feelings of alienation and anger emerge only too clearly. So do the potential risks as far right politicians appeal to these emotions for their own ends. Far right parties may not represent a major political force in Britain at the present time, although the British National Party has won local authority seats in the relatively recent past. But far right politicians *do* exert influence on mainstream politics, as demonstrated by the influence of UKIP on the wider political scene. And most damagingly, far right politicians' pronouncements give effective licence to far right behaviours; Boris Johnson's offensive comments about women wearing burkhas were followed by increasing abusive directed at Muslim women, for example.

Of course, there has been resistance. And there continues to be resistance, from women's marches in the USA to mass mobilisations against the far right in Germany. The question is how those working with communities can support them most effectively, enabling them to challenge the causes as well as the manifestations of far-right ideas in practice. And how might a Marxist analysis contribute here?

Marxist analysis

The first point to stress is that this is absolutely not about trying to find apposite quotations from Marx and Engels' 'Selected Works' and then applying/misapplying them to the contemporary context. This is about the relevance of Marxism as an analytical approach. The following discussion attempts no more than the briefest

summary of key features of this approach with particular relevance - whilst being mindful of the ways in which these have been, and continue to be, contested concepts. The concept of 'class' is centrally important as the starting point, along with the centrality of class consciousness and class conflict. *The Communist Manifesto* opens with the assertion that 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles' (Marx and Engels, 1968 edition. 2). The argument that is being put forward here is basically as follows: previous societies had their own distinctive relations of production, landlords with serfs working for them in medieval feudal societies, for example. From the tensions and the limitations inherent within this mode of production, modern capitalism sprouted, establishing 'new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones' (Ibid. 36), spreading out on a global scale. In capitalist societies, the bourgeoisie, i.e. capitalists, own the means of production. And the proletariat, i.e. the workers, sell their labour power, generating profit for capitalists as a result.

Without going into further detail here, the points to emphasise are simply these:

- that social class depends on whether you own the means of production or whether you sell your labour power and
- that there are inherent conflicts of interest involved in these relationships.

Capitalists aim to maximise their profits if they are to compete successfully in an increasingly globalising economic context, potentially undermining workers' pay and conditions in the process. These are the two key classes in capitalist societies. There are, of course, other classes too, including the self-employed. Also, class structures vary across time and space, with marked differences between advanced industrial societies in the global north, and less industrialised countries in the global south (Miliband, 1977). But the tendency was towards polarisation, in Marx's view, splitting societies into the 'two great classes directly facing each other' (Ibid. 36). Individuals may move between classes, but this doesn't alter the fact that there are still classes, just as there are first and second-class carriages on the train, even if individuals manage to move from the second to the first-class carriage. Although much criticised in the past for being too simplistic, this view would seem more relevant than ever, with the growth of

precarious employment and zero hours contracts across a wide spectrum of occupations, including the professions (Standing, 2011).

This is not necessarily how people perceive their class situation though. On the contrary, the common-sense perception of class is that of a ladder of occupational hierarchies, with opportunities for more or less social mobility between its rungs. Nor do people necessarily perceive class in terms of class conflict, although there so often *are* conflicts within as well as between social classes, in practice. There have been longstanding divisions between the 'respectable' as contrasted with the 'undeserving' poor, for example, conflicts that have been fanned by media attacks on so-called scroungers and benefit fraudsters in recent times. There have been conflicts between newcomers and longer established communities, just as there have been conflicts within and between communities based on factors such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, age and faith. There have, of course, been conflicts between capital and labour, with capital typically (although not always) supported by the forces of the capitalist state, as in the case of the 1984-5 Miners Strike, for example.

Addressing the causes of conflicts within and between different sections of labour has to be central to the development of strategies to challenge the far-right politicians that seek to exploit them for their own ends. Marxists recognise the importance of understanding and addressing such divisions, just as they recognise the importance of understanding and addressing oppression in relation to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, age and faith, alongside recognising the underlying significance of exploitation in relation to social class. As Shaw and I explained in our introduction to 'Class, inequality and community development (Shaw and Mayo, 2016) class cannot be experienced in practice outside these other forms of oppression, it cannot be 'lived outside of "race", "gender" or "sexuality" and the same is true of other categories' in the words of Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis (2014.35).

How then do people develop class consciousness and develop solidarity, taking account of such forms of oppression too? *The Communist Manifesto* argued that the working class was becoming concentrated in larger industrial units, engaging in workplace

struggles which could lead to increasing class consciousness. But this wouldn't happen automatically, a point of particular relevance in more recent times given the increasing fragmentation that characterises employment patterns today. Political organisation has been needed and continues to be needed, along with political analysis.

Community education and development workers have known this only too well. People can and do learn from their involvement in social movements (Foley, 1999). But they can draw reactionary conclusions rather than progressive conclusions from their experiences, becoming more exclusive, blaming the 'other' - reflecting and amplifying communities' darker sides (Kenny et al, 2015). The challenges involved in addressing such alienation would seem greater than ever in the current context, with the growth of the gig economy in the world of work, along with the social fragmentation that so often accompanies rapid change.

The relevance for education in communities

Drawing on the work of Paulo Freire and others, popular educators know just how important it is to engage in processes of dialogue on the basis of mutual trust, rather than attempting to harangue people and communities for being reactionary, racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic or whatever. Telling people that they are wrong is simply counterproductive, as the comments that have been quoted above so clearly illustrate. And myth busting exercises have similar risks, if people don't trust the source, potentially dismissing the information as fake news.

So, what tools do popular educators need themselves, if they are to promote such processes of dialogue based on mutual trust? Clearly, they need to be skilled popular educators and/or community and youth workers. I would argue that they need the tools that a Marxist analysis can provide as well. Marxist analysis can provide understanding of the underlying causes of people's frustrations and anger, the alienation to which far right politicians speak. Such understanding can provide the basis for building processes of dialogue just as such understanding can provide the basis for building solidarity across differences.

From a Marxist perspective, it is no wonder that many people feel angry and frustrated and no wonder that so many feel so alienated from established political parties. But this is not to be explained simply in terms of corrupt political classes (although there may indeed be corrupt politicians as well as incompetent ones), let alone being explained simply in terms of the arrogance of the elite (although that may indeed be an issue too). Rather, explanations need to go back to the operations of global capital, increasing financialisation and the effects of the crisis of 2008. Without going into detail here, the point is simply to emphasise the economic factors that have led to the politics of austerity, along with the case for developing alternative strategies.

This is not to suggest that politics can be explained simply in terms of the economy either. Nor is it to suggest that people's cultures and ideas can be read off in this way – an approach that has been described as 'vulgar Marxism'. Marx was absolutely not an economic determinist himself, arguing that people make their own history - if not in circumstances of their own choosing. Politicians could have made other choices then, despite the constraints. As it was, neither the politics of austerity, nor even the politics of 'austerity light' were likely to address the underlying problems; nor were they going to address the immediate problems that people were facing, as wages fell in real terms whilst public services and benefits were being slashed.

How then to build support for alternative strategies, building solidarity rather than increasing social fragmentation in the process? A Marxist analysis can help here too, in my view. Far right populists set the people/the nation against the bureaucratic establishment, elites that favour outsiders whilst ignoring, if not actually despising, the very people that they are supposed to serve. Marxists, in contrast, start from a class analysis: what are the conflicting interests involved, and how are these interests reflected in the state of class struggle in any particular context? How strong is the labour and progressive movement? Which exploited and oppressed groups have potentially common interests, despite their differences? And where might they be able to gather support? How far might it be possible to win government support to meet people's needs, despite the limitations of the capitalist state – as happened to a significant extent with the development of the Welfare State in the post second world

war period? And how might local struggles come together to achieve relevant reforms – whilst recognising the structural limits – making history despite not being in circumstances of progressive movements' own choosing? How to build solidarity across differences, working for effective reforms in the here and now, whilst being only too aware of the need for longer term strategies for social change?

In summary

Strategies for building alternatives to far-right populism *can* be promoted. But this requires shared understandings as the basis for developing solidarity across differences. A Marxist analysis can provide the concepts that are needed, if popular educators are to facilitate the development of class consciousness, in face of the challenges of far-right populism in Britain as elsewhere.

There seems to be massive interest in popular political education at the present time. Popular education sessions that address the causes of the financial crash and the case for alternatives are in demand, in my experience. The World Transformed events that have been organised alongside Labour Party conferences over the past three years have been drawing massive audiences. There were over six thousand participants in 2018, including enthusiastic audiences for the political education stream. The demand is there, including the demand for networking to take popular political education work forward. The need is greater than ever. And Marxist analytical tools have continuing relevance for popular educators committed to addressing these needs.

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