

FROM THE CPGB's WEEKLY WORKER

For realism, for humanity

What is the Marxist method? Hillel Ticktin looks at the main features. This is the first of three articles

In discussing the Marxist method one has to begin by saying that it applies only to political economy, its history and its philosophy - it would be absurd to argue that there is a Marxist physics, music, art or literature.

We have to re-establish respect for Marxism, given how Stalinism made it an intellectual laughing stock by using it in a caricature form. Stalin's declaration that the saxophone was a bourgeois instrument is obvious nonsense, but more sophisticated Stalinists were making parallel statements in fields where the nonsense was often accepted, because so few Marxists were able to refute such absurdities.

Even non-Stalinists have produced nonsense in the name of Marxism. In part that arises from the power of Marxism itself. Marxist analyses are able to get to the heart of the matter relatively quickly and painlessly. For that reason Marxists need to be careful. Marxism does not absolve us from making a painstaking study of the question under discussion, obtaining all the relevant facts, reading the various analyses and making sure what we say is coherent.

Two fundamental premises: First, Marxism is realist. It assumes there is a real world beyond our consciousness. It looks to understand that real world and takes the view that there is nothing that we cannot explain. There is nothing unknowable or held only in the mind of a god.

Secondly, Marxism starts from humanity. Gramsci explicitly puts it in terms of a humanity looking at itself in its own interest; a humanity arising out of nature and

operating within nature. On the one hand, we are looking at the operation of human society over time and trying to understand it. On the other hand, humanity is the highest expression of the universe - it is the cosmos become conscious of itself. That consciousness is not there in the beginning, as with a god, or with Hegel, but evolves in and through humanity.

Causation and explanation

The concrete is the concrete of many determinations, as Marx says. In other words, everyday empirical reality must be understood as a part of necessary relations, of a chain of causation and of driving causes, or of a redefined teleology. Marxists ask the question why. Why did that happen? Why does this or that exist? What is the meaning of such and such? Why did it come into being? Why did it cease to exist? Marxists are not satisfied with simple description.

What do we mean by causation? Besides simple, efficient causation - A causes B - we also see a driving cause, as for instance the driving cause behind change in society. But we do not start from our conclusion in its entirety. We do argue that society must evolve into one which is planned and that that is preordained, since it is the movement from a spontaneous, random, chaotic, unordered society to one which is consciously planned by everyone in the society. That is the natural order of history moving from unconsciousness to consciousness, from a society governed by nature to one in which nature is controlled in the interests of humanity. However, we do not say that everything in that movement or even in the goal is preordained. The progress to that end has gone through and will go through many more deviations, while the exact form of that society is unknown. It is not like the little tree in the acorn, as Aristotle saw it.

Above all, in looking at explanation we look at the origin of things and their evolution over time. All things come into being, mature, decline and die. In that process a new

entity subsumes whatever has ceased to exist. When a star dies it becomes a neutron star or a black hole, and it shoots off much of its substance which then begins life anew as part of a planet. The same is true of society and of all entities.

This means that Marxists argue that, underlying immediate empirical reality, there is an essence which is determining that reality. The essence provides the reason why that empirical reality comes into being and why it is in motion. It governs the motion involved but it does not exhaust the content of what it is governing. It provides limits and a source of movement. The laws of existence are embedded in that essence. It does not mean that one can reduce the empirical reality to those laws. But it does mean that those laws provide the necessary dynamic to all existence. So the law of gravity is crucial to understanding why we can walk and not float, why the earth goes around the sun, etc. The second law of thermodynamics tells us that entropy or the amount of disorder in the universe is increasing.

Similarly the law of value governs capitalism. The production of surplus value and so self-expanding value, capital, provides our understanding of capitalism. However, although we can see the phenomenal form of profit, we cannot immediately see the form of surplus value itself, or understand that it is the basis of capital. The word 'essence' implies that there are forces operating below the surface which we have to understand and which we can understand.

Laws, reduction, abstraction

Because we understand change to be a long-term, evolutionary process - coming into being, maturing and ending - we have to discover the laws underlying the process, and hence the contradictions and the poles of those contradictions. Paradoxically that must mean that we have to discover not just the source of change but also its opposite - the source of stability - of the system, and hence

the nature of the system in its movement. Stability and change are necessarily two sides of the same coin.

When we speak of an essence underlying reality, it does not mean that we can reduce the one to the other. They are different levels of operation and understanding. The concept of levels, which are irreducible, is a more general aspect of understanding and method.

We cannot reduce politics to political economy even though we argue that politics and the state can only be understood in terms of political economy and are determined by political economy. The laws of political economy determine the movement of our society, but they do not determine who will be prime minister. They did not determine whether the English Revolution would win or whether there would be a restoration.

Clearly the form of the surplus product - and hence property forms - are important for laws and the theory of laws, but the legal system has its own logic which, for instance, cannot simply be reduced to value.

Laws, are therefore in the essence, as opposed to the phenomena which we see around us. We cannot physically see the laws but we can see their effects. A law is a necessary relation. A law is the working out of the poles of a contradiction. The law of value therefore describes the interrelation between exchange-value and use-value.

Our task is to get to the essence of any part of reality that we are discussing. In other words we have to look at what is crucial or critical to the issue. That will be the thing which provides its dynamic. Just as stars, photons, or the ultimate strings of energy are self-motivating and self-energising forces, so too value and capital are self-motivating and we have to grasp what makes them such, in order to understand political economy.

Marxism is not mono-causal. But it does argue that there is a fundamental set of categories causing the change, which

we have to discover. For instance, the Iraq war was not set off by oil, or by the neo-conservatives, though both were necessary. It was the overall political-economic situation which is pre-disposed to war. There is often a trigger for a particular event, which is mistaken for the fundamental cause.

This process of discovery is the process of abstraction. Put simply, it is the finding of the crucial source of change in the entity. Marx contrasts the analytical method and the deductive method or the method of abstraction.

Why do contradictions provide the necessary motion? Because the poles of the contradiction mesh and interpenetrate. When they conflict, the system crashes, even if for a short time - but it is a necessary aspect of the relationship. The two sides are both antagonistic and necessary to each other and in the process of interacting each is changed. Eventually, the original forms are outdated and have to give way to their own descendants, which mesh together to form a new subsuming entity. The task of Marxism is to discover that contradiction. That is not easy. It cannot be the beginning of the investigation.

In political economy the key is the contradiction between use-value and exchange-value. Marx begins by pointing out this contradiction, one already noted by Ricardo. But unlike Ricardo Marx argues, first, that they are contradictory and, secondly, that they are both forms. Use-value is the form taken by human needs, and exchange-value is the form of value, which in turn is congealed human labour. Underlying these two forms lie the contradiction between concrete and abstract labour.

More simply, in investigating history or political economy we first and foremost try to find the particular form, as Aristotle and Marx put it, or the category which is particular to the mode of production or phase of that mode of production. We already have Marx's injunction that it is the particular form of the extraction of the surplus product which is the clue to the mode of production. In other

words, we look at the class relation and try to find the way in which the ruling class exploits the lower classes, showing how that relation changes and what effects the changes have. No one has done that for any mode of production other than capitalism.

Base and superstructure

How would this relate to the superstructure of society? If one was exploring the politics, law, art, music, etc? The answer is that Marxism does not argue that there is a Marxist music, as Stalinism did. It also does not claim that there is a Marxist physics or chemistry, although it does argue that it stands on a realist philosophy and so rejects the positivism of much of modern physics. Only a physicist could develop a Marxist cosmological theory or such a theory consistent with Marxism.

The same principle applies. The source of change in thought and social institutions lies in the changing form of the surplus product and its various results. Classes emerge from the nature of exploitation and the social and political forms and rules which are introduced and maintained follow from that. Does that mean that the superstructural forms are determined by the base in the last instance, as Althusser put it? No, that is ridiculous. There is no meaning to 'last instance', or at any rate the term is so broad as to leave the concept of determination contentless. The base will determine the fundamental parameters within which thought and art can function and will determine the sources of crucial changes in the disciplines. Thus the state is the organ of repression precisely because it is there to maintain the existing form of exploitation, and a change in political economy leads to changes in the state - becoming more bureaucratic, more repressive, inventing new forms of authoritarian rule, etc.

In the case of art, it follows its own rules and is far more complex, but it has historically been bound within various forms of authoritarianism, as under the clericalism of

feudalism or under Stalinism. In capitalism, the individual is bound within a repressive psychology manufactured by the capitalist environment and hence art must reflect that fact in its own way. We cannot say that this or that poet or violinist is a capitalist poet or violinist. Artists will transcend their background to reflect the real emotions and relations in the society, which in turn are determined by capitalism.

On the other hand, there is nothing to stop profoundly reactionary artists, like Leni Riefenstahl, producing great technical work with a repulsive content. A reactionary like Balzac did in fact produce novels of great genius, as Marx noted. However, we should note that, although Balzac wanted to go back to before the French Revolution, his work is profoundly humanist and is a genuine reflection of the emotional and generally human problems faced by humankind. That is because art is not political economy. It is not a consistent analysis, but something quite different. Art is art, following its own rules and its own forms, but they evolve within a particular socio-economic formation, with all its profound and complex consequences.

Within modern capitalism an artist who is profound - as opposed to a technical genius - can come from any class and have a wide range of views. The most profound work will be a deep critique of the present, looked at purely from the perception of the artist as an artist, as in the case of Balzac. To truly understand such an artist one has to fully understand the art itself. From this point of view there is nothing wrong with the slogan, 'art for art's sake', since it must lead to the same result as an art which sets out to understand and remake society, as long as the latter is the real motivation of the artist and is not imposed on the artist. The point, quite simply, is that all great art of the present time and indeed all great contemporary thought has to be critical, if it is independent, and follows the trend of thought to its conclusions. From this analysis it follows that the method of analysis of the non-social science disciplines in the superstructure are not the same as that of political economy.

Marxists have been much confused around this question of base and superstructure. According to the Althusserian answer, that the base determines the superstructure in the last instance, anything can happen without any relation to the base except in some final way, which is itself undetermined or unknown. So artists have their horizon broadened by the invention of new pigments, new canvases and the opportunity for new travel in modern capitalism, as well as the coming into being of new arts like photography and cinema. That is true but it is not at the heart of the problem.

Clearly artists, like everyone else, are influenced by the prevailing moods, ideas and political swings of the times. It is easy to see how Courbet was influenced to the left but the reverse - the period of reaction - which succeeds the defeat of the Paris Commune, which sees the rise of the impressionists, cannot simply be said to produce a reactionary art. That would be a nonsense. It is not hard to see how artists might prefer a different form in such a period but the exact relation requires an artist, or an expert on art, to analyse it.

However, there clearly is a relation between the period and the superstructure, and hence the political economy and the superstructure, and it is ongoing, but complex. When we say that there is a two-way interrelation, but the political economy is determining, then we are saying that the dynamic comes from the political economy. It is obvious that the politics of the governing party might shift the political economy one way or another. In other words, consciousness plays an important role, but it can only do so within limited parameters. That was made clearest in Stalinism, where the slogan of putting politics in command used by Stalin and more explicitly by Mao was a refusal to accept the real limits of 'socialism in one country'.

Socialism does alter this situation and hence, the closer we get to socialism, the more the subject-object relation changes. In other words, more and more of the society

becomes amenable to conscious change. It becomes increasingly true that the market is subject to organised control or proto-planning. Technology itself becomes increasingly 'planned' and controlled. Nature itself is increasingly moulded by humankind. That is clear in both a positive and negative sense.

In other words, any analysis of superstructure is extraordinarily complex, requiring to understand firstly the political-economic dynamic of the period; secondly the prevailing moods and swings in consciousness and their relationship to the first aspect; thirdly an analysis of the subject in its own terms; and finally the putting together of the whole.

Generalisation versus abstraction

This approach must be contrasted with the bourgeois method of generalisation (models are series of generalisations). Generalisations have their place, but subordinate to that of abstraction as defined. The limitation of simple generalisations is that they provide a static snapshot of the society or part of the society or entity at any one time. The snapshot may or may not provide the information needed for a profound understanding. It is a matter of luck. Why? Generalisations take a period of time or a series of situations and look at what is common and then strip the rest of the variables out of the equation. That does provide some information, but everything then depends on whether one has a period of time or a series of situations which are typical of the entity. If they are not the generalisation is dubious.

If we take the period 1940-76 in western Europe as typical of capitalism and generalise on that basis, we end up with the welfare state, growth and full employment as necessary features of capitalism. If we take generalisations over the last 200 years we might conclude that capitalism raises the standard of living but imprisons more and more people.

Everything depends on what we understand by capitalism, and its mainspring.

If we start from the proposition that it is the extraction of surplus value and so self-expanding capital, then we say that we cannot produce such generalisations because the form of capital itself has changed over time, not least under the influence of the class struggle. In other words, we cannot easily produce a generalisation across different phases of capitalism and it is certainly very difficult to do so when we are talking of a capitalism in transition away from capitalism itself.

Paul Sweezy in his Theory of capitalist development argues that the method of abstraction is that of the method of successive approximations. The latter is a series of progressively more limited generalisations. In contrast, Marxism has to examine the causation of change by looking at the different causes and then deciding which was crucial. The causes themselves must relate to Marxist categories and they, in their turn, to contradictions and so laws.

The fact that Marxism looks for the driving cause, the crucial factor causing change does not mean that it argues for a single cause for everything and anything. There will usually be particular conditions which allow the driving cause to operate and they are part of the change of causation, even if they are not crucial. Thus, as I stated earlier with regard to the Iraq war, oil, the neo-conservatives advisors around Bush, al Qa'eda, etc were all important in helping cause the war, but in themselves, separately or combined, were not crucial. It was the necessary drive of the political-economic system towards war which propelled it to find a weak enemy.

Marxist method has, therefore, a hierarchy of causes. Without this, the result is an eclecticism which paralyses thought.

Critical viewpoint

Marxists reject the value-free approach. We say there is no such thing. Why? Because there is always an implied goal in any analysis of society. It might be the maintenance of the status quo, which looks neutral because it is not advocating change, or it might be the restoration of what formerly existed, which is regarded as the preordained nature of things and therefore natural and not ideological. All aspects of present-day society have some function and hence one can argue that they are not parasitic or declining or wasteful. If one abolishes advertising then most newspapers and news outlets will fold, so one can argue that advertising is necessary for the production of news. It is true that within modern capitalism it is necessary.

However, if one starts with a critical approach to reality, to modern society, arguing that all things must decline, be overthrown over time and be replaced, we can argue that there are alternative ways of organising society in which advertising is unnecessary. Of course some things are trivially related to capitalism and can be abolished within capitalism itself and a so-called unbiased attitude might reject those things as wasteful. But even in that case there is an implied value judgement that waste is wrong.

The second reason to reject the value-free approach is that Marxism argues that our values are derived from our analysis of society itself. Of course, we start from the assumption that human society ought to be ordered in the interests of humanity. Beyond that everything else follows. Humanity is necessarily social. It necessarily in its own interests engages in social labour and has evolved a human nature which requires social labour. Hence a society that allows labour to become humanity's prime want is both desirable and necessary. Contrariwise, those who talk of a value-free analysis have to reject an approach based on the

needs of humankind and smuggle in a series of class-based values.

Here lies the importance of history and political economy. If one starts from a simple, superficial description rather than looking for the sources of changing reality, one will miss the real historical function of categories and aspects of society. Marxists, therefore, reject positivism and pragmatism and always look at the historical evolution of the society or part of the society. Marxists have to look at historical evolution - history and political economy - in order to understand society.

We cannot understand the present without its history. The political economy of the present is based on the political economy of the past and future. A purely technical political economy which describes a kind of perfected if repulsive set of social relations is simply nonsense. In the Soviet Union, in the early 20s there was precisely such a debate - whether one had to look at political economy in an historical perspective or not. At the same time, a simple empirical reading of history without political economy is rudderless and often worthless. A history of kings and queens can tell you very little. The critical variable in all history is the form of the extraction of the surplus product, from the point where it came into existence.

Categories and class struggle

Marxists have to look at the way in which the class struggle has intertwined with the evolution of the political-economic categories. Any attempt to emphasise the importance of one over the other leads to a false understanding of reality. The class struggle must play the crucial role in overthrowing the old social order, but it is the decay of the categories themselves that permits that. Of course, the categories do not act by themselves.

Capital is a social relation, but the form of capital itself evolves from the petty bourgeois artisan, away from merchant capital, away from agricultural capital to industrial capital and then to finance capital. Abstract

labour only reaches its full form in industrial capital. The evolution of the serf payment from labour service or in kind to the money form is crucial. On the other hand, without the bourgeoisie actually taking power in its own name after Charles I and finally, in 1688, eliminating the conservative forces of the time, capitalism would not have been able to evolve. We can see that in the case of Spain, which remained mired in an early form of capitalism. While humanity's struggle with nature - technology - permits the development of new social forms, they do not evolve automatically.

It is not easy, therefore, to write a Marxist history. Marx gives an example in the last chapters of capital. At first sight history might appear relatively easy, involving the recording of events over a period of time. It would require much detailed sifting and checking of records, but for a Marxist that would only be one stage of many in which the crucial driving categories and their operation would have to be revealed. And they would have to be shown operating in relation to the class struggle. Equally it is not easy to write a good political economy of the present time because the changes of the form of the surplus product have to be discovered, described and their relationship to other categories identified. This is both historical and analytical (that word not being used in a philosophical sense).

Unfortunately much so-called Marxism is either Stalinism and its derivatives or mumbo-jumbo. One cannot simply call up dialectics and fit things into it. One has to know the entity involved and discover what is driving it and then consider how that relates to the categories of the contradiction and how they interpenetrate. Unless one has a thorough knowledge of the subject, as well as a good understanding of Marxist method, one will produce either nonsense or at best a very tentative stab at the subject.

A few brief examples:

SWEEZY, mentioned above, rejects dialectics and so produces a mechanical Marxism in which the quantity of socially necessary labour time, and so prices, underlie a crisis theory of underconsumption. Contradiction plays no role. The theory is left Keynesian in method as well as in content.

MANDEL was a Marxist. In Late capitalism he outlines his method. He provides a list of crucial categories like the rate of profit, etc, all of which play a role in movement of the economy. He does not prioritise them. They are all operative, in his view. What is missing is an attempt to show how they relate to the laws of capitalism and how they relate to each other. It is not possible to avoid a statement as to what is dominant in the period of which he is writing. Lenin effectively argued that it was the decline of capitalism that was the chief feature driving it to action: that meant the rise of monopoly, the fall in the rate of profit, disproportionality, underconsumption, finance capital, etc. In other words, he has a series of features, but they are subsumed into the dialectics of capital. Mandel is adrift - with an eclectic method.

PREOBRAZHENSKY in his work also discusses method. He argues the need for abstraction: the need to look at capitalism in the first instance in its pure form, abstracting from the other forms existing; the need to abstract in order to discover the essence of things. In a non-capitalist economy the division between essence and appearance is not there and hence the method is different.

An example of pure nonsense is the work of **STALIN**. On the one hand, he produced apologetics on the Soviet Union, but on the other he and the Stalinists had to justify it with a crude view of Marxism - so we get a simplistic view of crisis. Stalinists like Maurice Dobb produced a more sophisticated version. Note that Stalin's writings, with their vicious attacks on the real Marxists could not convince

anyone who was an honest intellectual, but they did serve an emotional role which continues to the present day. The antagonism to Trotsky, among some Marxists, cannot be explained as being rational but is rather a leftover from the earlier period.

POPPER makes great play of the argument that Marxist propositions are not susceptible to disproof. That is nonsense. For instance, the statement that the socio-economic formation in Russia was semi-Asiatic, as argued by Trotsky, is provable or not by, firstly, whether it provides explanations of historical changes which are superior to others; secondly, whether its consequences lead to predictions which prove true; thirdly, whether the theory is internally consistent and coherent; and, fourthly, in comparison with alternatives, whether the theory is superior in the first three.

In this instance, it involves a comparison with the alternative theory - that Russia was feudal. Feudalism was not generally highly centralised, with an autocratic despot. Here we see the difference between Marxism and bourgeois method. For Marxism, feudalism has to be defined by its mature form. Russia simply did not fit into the usual categories, so had to be described *sui generis*, which is what Marx, Plekhanov and Trotsky did. Stalin, however, needed it to be called feudal, because he was afraid of the comparisons with Stalinism itself.

In the frontiers of the sciences today, there is no absolute proof in the sense that an object can be isolated and its qualities tested. Instead there is an indirect proof shown by predictions of experimental results which become possible over time. Theories rest on their explanatory power above all, which then leads to predictions. However, it can be very difficult to disprove such theories until there is an alternative paradigm or some new fact of the universe proves inexplicable within the theory.

Marxist theory has this kind of proof or disproof.