MARX AND MARXISM

REVOLUTIONARY PRACTICE

SIMON MARGINSON

As a researcher, writer and activist over the last dozen years in the student movement and the union movement, I have become progressively less interested in symbolic identification and more concerned about the practical use of ideas. The influence of Marx has increased. Originally, in the heady days of the new left — we sometimes thought that the "realm of freedom" had already arrived — that influence was second-hand and dimly perceived during collective actions. Later, the inter-tendency struggles in the student unions demanded individual theoretical knowledge, and my political development was influenced by marxist writers such as Mandel and Lenin. It was only after that that I started to read Marx directly.

In common with most activists I had been repelled by various "academic marxists" and tended to extol practice at the expense of serious theoretical work. I now think that was as great a mistake as to pursue theory to the exclusion of practice. Further, the primary unsolved problems are not practical (even organisational!) but theoretical.

It is difficult to trace the influence of Marx in one's political work because sometimes prior experiences were confirmed by the ideas, while on other occasions the reading was assimilated first, changing actions as a result.

Marx's work is an essential starting point in analysing any economic issue, useful in political matters and provides a methodological aspect of all inquiry. Sometimes it contains complete arguments of immediate relevance. The "wages cause inflation" argument is convincingly refuted in Chapter 50, Volume 3 of Capital, for example. (Some of our contemporary "Marxists" would do well to read it.) The Grundrisse anticipates the automation of production and the elimination of labour from the production process. Marx's critique of Adam Smith resembles the necessary, and so far unwritten, critique of Milton Friedman. Marx is an essential starting point in the development of new bodies of theory and new syntheses, such as the unwritten political economy of education and the unwritten (notwithstanding Brian Fitzpatrick and the early Intervention writers) "development of capitalism in Australia".

I have no sympathy with those who abandon the labour theory of value, without replacing it with a superior theory, and call themselves Marxist. This is the crucial achievement, unifying Marx's starting point (labour) with the mathematical logic of the production process. The unity of science and ideology. Chop out the science, and Marx is left as a sort of ethical humanist who disliked low pay and occupational injuries, but didn't understand what was really happening. Which means that we can't either.

I am continuously attracted by the rigor and objectivity of Marx's argument, and its anti-dogmatic nature. Marx confirms a practical political lesson of my student work; that there must be no division between what is politically desirable and intellectually correct. Otherwise we render our goals separate from our actions, making those goals utopian. The separation of means and ends is really the separation of science and politics. And people are not fools; if their leaders lie to them it becomes apparent. Consciousness is deadened by these processes.

In the First International, says Lenin:

By uniting the labour movement of various countries, by striving to direct into the channel of joint activity the various forms of non-proletarian, pre-Marxist socialism (Mazzini, Proudhon, Bakunin, liberal trade unionism in England, Lassallean vacillations to the Right in Germany, etc.), and by combating the theories of all these sects and schools, Marx hammered out a uniform tactic for the proletarian struggle of the working class in the various countries.
An open ideological struggle, and striving to establish unity on a conscious basis is not sectarian but the opposite. Sectarianism is one of our single great obstacles, leading to barren exchange of slogans rather than argument, setting up divisions that are social rather than political. I have met good activists and thinkers in every left tendency, bar none when they behaved as if their interests were based on those of the movement and not of their own group.

The passage from Marx that had the greatest effect on me when I read it was in the third of the Theses on Feuerbach:

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.

This sentence provided the necessary extension of the feminist insight "the personal is political" by placing it in an historical context. "Liberation is an historical and not a mental act" (German Ideology). The power of the women’s movement to induce a deep internalisation of its principles in women and men was greatest when the movement also drew those same women and men into external political campaigns. Radical oppositional politics makes you sharply confront yourself, and each other. The "personal is political" by itself maintained the internalisation process, but permitted the abandonment of practical politics by many who retreated into privatisation and various ghettos. Many people I knew took that sort of step at the end of the new left era; later many women comrades did the same. But the women who stayed in politics, pursuing the fuller principle in the Theses tended to reveal a deeper political commitment than men. In my experience in Victoria, women activists carried the student unions and the teacher unions from the mid-seventies on, more particularly at the grassroots level. How many new activists now undergo such a thorough politicisation?

I can think of at least four reasons for maintaining a classical marxist "optimism". Firstly, although the means of technological destruction are established, so are the means of the elimination of want and drudgery. Secondly, while the hegemony of conservatism in Australia seems stable, history shows that shifts in stability can occur sharply. Political upheaval is occurring in both capitalist and post-capitalist countries, the developments in the latter being the more exciting and significant. Thirdly, we should never lose sight of the potential that human beings can show when they start to become political and break out of the cycle of oppression and repression. It is certain that in the future such changes will occur in people that we know, and possibly whole groups of people.

Fourthly, and more personally, I have been able to gradually accumulate knowledge and confidence through the processes of experience and study. The more one understands, the more one is able to assess what is determined and what can be changed through individual or collective activity. This knowledge maximises our freedom and our power to make history, As Marx said: "Freedom is the appreciation of necessity". The road to socialism and beyond has been characterised as a continuous journey from necessity to freedom. As I gradually develop more control over the forces that govern my own life, and a little further knowledge of how to influence history, I sometimes sense this transition from necessity to freedom in my own existence. It is the source of optimism.

Lastly (and the location of my own work reminds me of this) there is another passage from the Theses:

It is essential to educate the educator.

I believe that this dictum applies to political activists and our anti-theoretical political parties as much as it does to teachers or researchers, and that the "education" of the "educator" must be both practical and theoretical.

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory, but is a practical question. (We) must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power ... of (our) thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.

It is necessary to be revolutionary intellectuals, and all activists have the potential to assume that role.

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.

Marx did.