The Australian Labor Movement and Marx

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In Australia black and white societies have existed side by side, and together, intermingled, for nearly 200 years. The dominant society has been basically and characteristically capitalist, established in the first place by acts of state policy of the world’s oldest and most technically developed capitalist country just as it was beginning to go into its heroic period of development and industrialisation. The forging of the Australian colonies of Great Britain ran parallel to the industrial revolution, and the colonies promoted the growth of imperial Britain. Australian society and the emerging and evolving Australian nation can only be understood as a part of greater Britain, or Britain overseas. The ambiguous relationship of dependence and independence that still shapes so much in Australian life goes back to these origins.

Because mainstream Australian society was a transplanted society of a fairly unusual sort, it exhibited certain specific characteristics: a small population thinly spread mainly around the coastal fringe of a very large land mass; an economy that developed, apart from the chance existence of large, accessible gold deposits principally as a supplier of raw materials for the metropolitan industries and markets; a truncated, incomplete society, very much a distorted reflection of some aspects of British society; a new society in which everything had to be started from scratch, in which there was a premium on improvisation; and because of the circumstances, a society in which certain bits of the British model took root more strongly than others.

Being part of greater Britain, in the Australian colonies things developed first as an extension of things British. Britain inspired and shaped the social classes, the political models and the social and cultural patterns. But inevitably differences occurred and led to a growing conflict of interests. As national and anti-imperial sentiment grew, the economy, population and evolving social and cultural patterns began to produce more clearly defined classes on a national basis. A fairly distinctive labor movement took shape in the context of the emergence of a national Australian sentiment, a labor movement that was both product and producer of this national ethos. A political culture that valued highly common sense, pragmatism, adaptability and the hip-pocket nerve...
immigration, to the fortunes of Labor governments, the history of the trade union movement, and the political struggles surrounding the changes in the ordering of sexual difference and division.

There is already a body of work attempting this approach in Australian history. For example, Connell and Irving's *Class Structure in Australian History* is a notable attempt to interpret the relevance of class formation and relationships for general developments within Australian history. They are particularly concerned to develop an understanding of class relationships which includes the workplace confrontation between capital and labour but also goes well beyond that, into the political, social and cultural levels. And I could mention others, especially the work undertaken through the journal *Labour History*.

Nevertheless, those attempting this kind of analysis are in a small minority in Australian historical work. And I'm not talking here just about academic histories, but also popular historical works, in print, and on film and television. There has been an upsurge in recent years of interest in Australian history, and the audience continues to grow for these popular historical representations, in books, film, television, and other forms such as historic reconstructed villages, museums, historic homes and the like. This can be interpreted partly as an element in a renewed nationalism, an attempt to define Australian society as unique, as special. But it is also something, I think, much healthier than that, an attempt to come to grips with just what kind of society we live in, where we've come from, and where we're going. But most of these historical works and representations avoid the insights Marx suggested a hundred and thirty years ago. This is not surprising, for Marx's history had evolved. Attachment to the political practice of parliamentary government was the main organising principle of this British colonial milieu.

This labor movement took about half a century from, say, 1890 to 1945 to evolve and for its main characteristics to emerge fully. Of course its evolution has continued to this day. As society has changed the labor movement has reflected the changes.

One or two historians, looking for a useful concept to analyse some of the patterns of Australian history, have seized on a phenomenon that was first recognised in the USA of the 1890s — the phenomenon of populism. Growing out of the farming discontent and the labor unrest of the late 1880s and early 1890s, American populism produced the People's Party which ran presidential candidates in the 1892 elections. In 1896 and 1900 the charismatic but unsuccessful Democratic candidate, William Jennings Bryan, ran for US presidency on what was essentially a populist program. Perhaps the differences are more important than the similarities, but the parallels between the emergence of US populism and Australian labor are very striking, including time, economic factors, social development and ideas. Among the obvious differences is the proportional weight of the farm sector and the labor sector. In what was a much less geographically favored country and a much less developed social and economic milieu — very much still part of greater Britain — the developing Australian trade union movement had much more significance than its American counterpart.

The Australian labour movement took shape in the context of the emergence of a nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiment and within a British colonial milieu. Far left: The first display of Eight hour banner, Melbourne, 16 April 1856. Left: Seaman's strike, Melbourne, 1918, demanding a 50% increase in wages.

All this needs to be approached rather cautiously but perhaps laborism can be usefully considered as a form of populism. This may be a fruitful approach helping to focus on certain fixed points and the interrelationship of populist and class propositions, people and class.

The concept of populism has been adopted and applied by a number of political and social theorists to analyse various third world social and political phenomena, especially in Latin America and Africa. In some discussions the three most general populist propositions are social justice, democracy and nationalism. I would, in some cases, certainly in Australia, add liberalism, freedom, justice, etc. Obviously the order of importance and the balance of these...
propositions is going to differ from time to time, from occasion to occasion, and from place to place. In Australia populist anti-colonial and national propositions have been very important. Democratic propositions were one part of the British model that took root more firmly and more quickly in the new Britannia than in the more complex, more class-ridden old Britannia. And the emerging Australian ambience took propositions about social justice more or less for granted. By 1913 Australian standards of social welfare and economic well being had made an impact on world opinion.

Another feature of Australia's heritage as a colonial society has been the relative significance of popular culture in the emerging national culture. What culture there was tended to be popularly inspired, and national culture came from below, rather than from the top down. A characteristically Australian political culture, no less than a literary and artistic one, developed from below also. Although it has probably never been true that Australia lacked an indigenous high culture, it nevertheless remains a fact that most high culture has been imported. Even now exotic ideas dominate most serious and systematic Australian literary, philosophical and political discussion. Perhaps there is no better example of this state of affairs than the case of modern marxism itself.

Just why liberalism has been so persistent in English-speaking discourse is by no mean clear. After all if we follow the logic of a deterministic marxism, then an English marxism should have emerged very early to challenge British capitalism. In fact, among the early British radical publicists of political and social reform were several who, independently of Marx but following Ricardo, the radical side of the English Enlightenment, and the realities of the time, anticipated Marx's ideas of class, class antagonisms and class struggle and Marx's economic theories. And Marx himself drew on their theoretical discoveries. But none of these thinkers and publicists was capable of the systematic synthesis in which Marx excelled.

One possible cause of the persistence of the English liberal and radical heritage is the relative insularity of the English-speaking world: the effects of the long boom from 1850 to 1880 and the world economic domination of British imperialism are probably another, and a third, quite as important, may be the intrinsic worth of the liberal tradition itself with all that it contains. In any case the Australian colonies as much as the USA, if not more so, became attached to a liberal-democratic model and liberal discourse. Apart from the liberal tradition, Carlyle, J.S. Mill, Ruskin and Darwin were the most important influences in shaping 19th century Australian praxis. Towards the end of the century Marx began to make an impact. But as far as we know, among the enlightened educated, liberalism still held sway. It was among the growing class of largely philosophically and economically self-educated trade unionists that some, at first, very simplified versions of Marx's ideas began to make headway.

English liberalism, empiricism and empiricism and until very recently logical analysis have generally resisted marxism. However there has been another British tradition stemming from early marxism and other — Owenite, chartist and trade union — influences. This was largely a self-educated tradition. For the sort of reasons that I've touched on, autodidactism flourished in Australia, making it that much easier for the labor movement to break through so relatively easily in the 20 years from 1890 to 1910. Again carrying on an illustrous British tradition, the skilled printing tradesman — the compositor particularly — was the archetype of this breakthrough. Some of the names read like part of a list for a hall of fame of the early labor movement: O'Sullivan, Hinchcliffe, Holland, Watson, Ross. Not all of them by any means turned to Marx but at least two were to be found among the handful of early important Australian marxists. To them could be added the odd mason, operative painter, shearer, miner, seaman.

The strength of the autodidact tradition has been to keep theory and ideas close to everyday life and the practical tasks of building organisation, propaganda of action as Gordon Childe called it. It has triumphed in Australia in trade unionism, electoral politics and the forming of parliamentary governments. Its major weakness has been an inability to provide a sufficiently constructive alternative to simple material values and attitudes and economic policies. Of recent years these tendencies of the self-educated have sometimes been backed up or replaced by what often seems like old wine in new bottles.

The Marxist theories that were eventually taken up in explanation of the privilege, inequality and poverty existing in Australian life were the more accessible ones in some of Marx's simpler works and to some extent in the orthodox marxist manifestos and theories of the Second International. These made a pretty heavily deterministic and economic marxism. The most important of Marx's ideas that began to circulate were those to do with economics, ideas that helped to explain the inequities of wage labour; the labour theory of value and the idea of surplus value as the source of profit, explaining capitalist economic exploitation. Then there were all the ideas and concepts associated with the materialist conception of history — the existence of a class-divided society based on a certain mode of production, class interests and antagonisms as the basis of class struggle, all history as a history of class struggles, etc — these were powerful organising principles of the fight to change the social and political order.

Then, next in importance were more or less marxist theories of political and economic organisation. A considerable debate on the principles embodied in the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) preamble lasted for about 20 years. One important aspect of this was the debate about the role of the marxist revolutionary socialist party as opposed to the revolutionary union. And interwoven into this whole discourse was the debate about the value of reforms, or palliatives, as they were often known, and their relevance or irrelevance to revolutionary struggle. After the very traumatic 1917 suppression of the IWW, the problem of the state became an acute issue and this debate received a strong shot in the arm from Lenin's The State and Revolution and the flood of far-ranging theses of the first two Comintern congresses, which the relatively unsophisticated Australian labor movement found somewhat indigestible.

As it is an immense field I don't intend to deal in any detail with the Communist International and the various schools of thought — Leninist, Trotskyist, Stalinist, Maoist, Titoist, etc — that took Comintern doctrines as their starting point. I suppose the principal additional development of this period was the elaboration of the rather sketchy ideas on the nature of the Communist party and the transition to socialism left by Marx and
Engels. How much of this theory and practice Marx would have endorsed is of course the subject of much debate. But the important point for this paper is that there was really very little that changed, and nothing much happened to alter the basic nature of the wage labour and capital relationship. The £1 per week for a socialist transformation. But are Australian labor movement. They are of the Comintern's so-called Third common" and the most famous slogan employing class have nothing in formulations which would seem to the call for a free and just society and future?

And one pressing task is to find a way round this disunity. The growing influence of Trotskyism politically and the intellectual importance of university marxism are, it seems to me, the principal recent developments of which we have to take note. Its difficult to make an assessment of the consequences. Obviously one consequence is that Marx's vision, and while it seems to me, the principal recent developments of which we have to take note. Its difficult to make an assessment of the consequences. Obviously one consequence is that Marxists much more attend to the whole of Marx and his successors' ideas and practice, but its difficult to identify any positive impact on the whole of Marx and his successors' ideas and practice. It should not be beyond the wit of Marxists to grapple with this situation; after all it was one of Marx's primary concerns, perhaps expressed most profoundly in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and re-stated in a different context and language in the Communist Manifesto four years later. At the moment in Australia we are faced with what is a transparently populist call for national reconciliation; how should marxists intervene? Perhaps Marx and Engels gave us a clue at the end of Section II of the Communist Manifesto, the part called "Proletarians and Communists". They said, (paraphrased a little), that with a communist revolution it seems to me that an effective contemporary marxism has to relate more to the populist character of the labor movement. Of course, marxists certainly must advance socialist propositions within the populist framework. In particular, they need to much more fully establish the legitimacy and relevance of these propositions in terms of the debate that has run on now for nearly a hundred years. Much historical elucidation is still needed, particularly of the debate about socialism in the Labor Party. More effective analysis is required in order to update and elaborate the socialist propositions themselves. But as important, and in a sense more important, are marxist interventions into the other strands of populist discourse. The extent of Marx's influence in the Australian labor movement has been limited partly by a narrowness with which many, if not most, Australian marxists have viewed the range of issues that demand their attention. They should be speaking to many more, to those who are as yet deaf, or at least not listening intently, to a class discourse, but whose ears are more open to other calls and who may be more easily swayed by appeals to national, liberal and democratic sentiment, or to the assertion of a whole range of individual and group interests and rights, and to the call for a free and just society generally.

And what hope is there for such a development? What of the recent past and future?

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