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Final Brief

***On Marx and Historical Materialism***

Huey Newton, on page 279, defines historical materialism as using the past as evidence for what will happen in the future. Dialectical materialism is defined by everything in the world having internal contradictions (278). I appreciate this conception a great deal. With this logic, Newton would accept quantum physics (eg matter and antimatter as contradictions), but not Newtonian physics. He goes on to describe how most Marxists are historical materialists where they really should be dialectical materialists and that this addresses the question of Marx’s views on race. Using these definitions, however, dialectical and historical materialism do not seem opposed or even related. Certainly, one can consider the past as well as believe in the internal contradictions of all things. Further, I do not understand how dialectical materialism lends itself to Marxism for Newton and the Black Panther Party. His argument is that he is a dialectical materialist and one component of Marxism may have an internal contradiction, therefore he is a Marxist. This doesn’t explicitly accept the central theories of Marxism.

“You do not believe in the conclusions of one person but in the validity of a mode of thought,” he concludes (279). Where is the internal contradiction here for a dialectical materialist? Is the contradiction between following the thought and the conclusion itself? If so, this seems more of an external contradiction, thinking of thought and conclusion as two separate entities. In fact, this doesn’t seem to be a contradiction at all. Thought and conclusion are complementary entities, rather than opposing forces. Whereas a Marxist would focus on the method over the conclusion, utilitarians focus on the conclusion over the method. Thus, utilitarians are diametrically opposed to dialectical materialists. However, both fall short. It seems problematic to accept one (among mode of thought and conclusion) at the cost of the other. Defenders of utilitarianism will swear by the practical and efficient nature of their ideology, up until the application of it is placed in front of them. Utilitarians may say that it would be better to oneself shoot one person in order to save a village from being shot by an army, but very few of us would be willing to shoot that person. Our thoughts lead us to our conclusions (although this path may not be linear) and our conclusions influence our thoughts. There is no contradiction between the two – there may well be a school of thought that demands emphases on both method and conclusion.

Conceptualizing method and conclusion as two separate entities negates the argument for an internal contradiction, however, treating Marxism as one entity with modes of method and conclusion is also difficult. They would be considered complementary – given that they influence one other, we cannot separate them.

~~We can consider this in the context of Newton’s discussion of racism in Marxism. We cannot simultaneously argue that it is irrelevant whether Marx was racist in order to accept his ideology, and and also defending the ideology by pointing to instances where Marx did in fact discuss race in his writings.~~

***On African American Movements in the US***

Is (one of) the difference between Black Panther and Black Lives Matter that the former believed that black Americans were the vanguard and the first to be freed, followed by all oppressed people, whereas the latter only aims to free black Americans? What other differences can be found, and how can we evaluate the two movements?

***On Intersectionalism, Identity Politics and Other Modern Ideologies***

Upon reading Robinson, I am reminded of Melanie’s comment during the last intersectionalism discussion. If intersectionalism comes out of Marxism rather than post-narratives, then where exactly do (or did) intersectionalism and Marxism diverge? How would a Marxist intersectionalist explain the conditions differently from a postmodern intersectionalist? Immaterial of the true views of Marxists, it makes a lot of sense that post-narrative arguments would reject Marxists as “totalizing the grand narrative” because Marxist theory may think of race, class and gender as an open totality, but the writings speak of “class contradictions” and “class relations,” thus emphasizing class above race and gender in the triad.

"Here is where the Marxist claim for the explanatory superiority of a class analysis comes into the mix" (Foley, 2018). Marxists are really having their cake and eating it too here. They say they treat race, class and gender as equal in an open totality, but they also want to hold class above the others as having explanatory superiority. This quote is central: "to say this is not to “reduce” gender or “race” to class as modes of oppression. It is, rather, to insist that the distinction between exploitation and oppression makes possible an understanding of the material (that is, socially grounded) roots of oppressions of various kinds." Simply, rather than arguing both ends, we should relinquish the argument about an open totality and hold on to the centrality of class.

*"Those who assert that liberal anti-racism is a necessary phase en route to a more viable working-class left politics either suffer from bad faith or are engaging in the worst form of pandering — namely, supporting black-led political tendencies uncritically as a means of demonstrating one’s anti-racist commitments."*

It may certainly be true that such anti-racism would be a crass form of pandering or bad faith. But this may be, in today’s stage, an inapplicable theory entirely. We know that the Democratic Party in the US in the last midterm election lost even more votes among the rural white population, to the point that it seems that there is a fundamental split that simply cannot be bridged (Beauchamp, 2018). It would seem that today’s left-wing groups, then, are no longer interested in creating a working-class left politics, because it is believed that rural white voters are interested not in economic inequality, but in social issues such as abortion (Anderson 2018).

Individualization of politics (318) not such a bad thing in order to remain relevant in today’s culture, and in order to produce concrete analysis of concrete conditions taking into account today’s cultural norms. It does not necessarily reduce us to attacks about individual sexist behavior (326), but rather empowers the individual to participate in the politics they by now feel distanced from. Newton feels the need to give “practical example after practical example” (285) to relate his teachings to the lives of the masses; individualized liberal politics has succeeded in enabling the masses to think of their own practical example after practical example.

***On Earlier Conversations***

I really enjoyed Newton’s answer to the question about revolution against armed governments with troops and police forces (282), a question that has been asked in class before. The response, that the larger an empire becomes, the weaker it is, is one that has been proven time and time again to be true. It was part of the Soviet Union’s fall from power. It was the reason that many previous powers have decided to remain concentrated around their center or capital. And it is one specific reason that can offer much hope to anyone struggling against the imperialism of the US.

Newton talks at length about the problem of simplifying ideology for the masses (285). I’m again and again fascinated by this instance of the internal contradiction between theory and practice (including strategy). Fanon and Mao believe that the peasants will understand the issues without simplification. Cabral believes in Newton’s simplification. Theory says the people have the power. Practice (at least for some) seems to say that the people only deserve a limited breadth of knowledge, and knowledge being power, a limited amount of power.

***Navigating Some Terms***

Does Newton separate socialism and communism (if so, when and how did this division occur?) when he describes communism as a stage succeeding socialism, in which “human values will shape the structures of society” (281)? Even communism is not the final and perfect solution, according to Newton. It will develop internal contradictions that will eventually lead us to a state of “godliness.” Is this like the anarchy Marx foresees for us at the end of the road? I’ve become lost again about where anarchism fits into the developing ideologies. My understanding is that explicit anarchists wished to destroy the state immediately, whereas Marxism concluded that the state would fall away on its own when it was no longer necessary, because communism would raise the standards and create the ability to self-govern in the people. Now that we’ve read some authors that would argue, for instance, that capitalism does not itself fall away, rather it has to be destroyed, the same would be argued to say that the state and communism would not fall away, it would have to be destroyed (is this a historical materialist way of thinking?). And where does the anarcho-Syndicalist fall into all of this? Finally, how do we know when the “technological and administrative base of socialism exists?” (281). For Newton, it existed in 1971, before the computational revolution of today. Does it exist today? Or will it exist after the AI revolution has exhausted itself, after we have produced “smart cities” or automated the majority of our lives?

Additional Reference

Beauchamp, Zack (2018). The midterm elections revealed that America is in a cold civil war.*Vox***.** <https://www.vox.com/midterm-elections/2018/11/7/18068486/midterm-election-2018-results-race-surburb>

Anderson, Dianna (2018). *Twitter*. <https://twitter.com/diannaeanderson/status/1069256816595369984>