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# MARXISM AND HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

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by  
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In this country there has long been a mutual antipathy between the left and the therapy movement. There has been the current of "radical therapy", and the anti-psychiatric movement, but in general therapists and others involved in Humanistic Psychology treat Marxism with considerable suspicion, not to say distaste.

Why is this? It's partly because Marxism is an extremely rational system of philosophy, and Humanistic Psychology has largely resisted any such cognitive system in its move away from intellectuality and analysis. And also because Marxism has tended to ignore the individual in favour of the broad movement of social history: this goes against the person-based stance of most therapies. I suspect also that good old British empiricism is at work here as well - Marxism goes against the traditional reliance on experience and pragmatism that has pervaded this country since the seventeenth century.(1)

We can also cite the unedifying nature of countries such as the Soviet Union which profess to be Marxist, and particularly the appalling use of psychiatry to

silence political opposition, although there is plenty of evidence that this use of psychiatry is found in the West.

As I said, the suspicion towards Marxism shown by much of the therapy world is reciprocated. Until recently it was a tremendous risk to broach matters to do with personal growth in left-wing circles - one might well be greeted with derision, and cries of "petty-bourgeois individualism" and so on. However I have noticed recently that this hostility from the left has abated.

I should add that a further factor causing antagonism is the shift towards spirituality that has occurred in Humanistic Psychology: this is like a red rag to a bull for most Marxists who treat all spiritual matters with aggression and even contempt.

It might be felt, in the face of this evidence as to the incompatibility between Marxism and Humanistic Psychology, that efforts to find links between them would be fruitless and disheartening. This is not true however, and in recent years I have been increasingly interested in some of the implications

that Marxism has for psychological theory and therapeutic practice, and I would like to mention several of these in this article.

One of the key concepts in Marx's philosophy is that of alienation and fetishism. Fetishism in the Marxist sense means simply that relations between persons are replaced by relations between things. This is demonstrated most clearly in economic relationships - the product of human labour, in fact labour itself, is alienated from us, and for many people, turns into something that dominates and oppresses them. For the car-worker or the office-worker, work often appears as a voracious monster which they must continually appease. Unemployment shows clearly that people are economically sub-ordinated to things (e.g. profit). The climax of economic fetishism is found in money, which is transformed from a useful instrument of exchange and distribution, into a godlike force that rules our lives.

But the Marxist notion of fetishism goes beyond economic relationships. ALL relationships, and ALL aspects of culture take on fetishistic attributes. This is clearly pertinent, for example, to the contemporary struggle of women to stop being treated as "house-wife objects" or "sexual objects". Another example is the way in which modern art is turned into a set of COMMODITIES which are actually discussed in the financial pages of newspapers as good or bad investments. Thus the expression of human spiritual and artistic creativity itself becomes a "thing"

to be bought and sold. Prostitution is probably the most obvious example of fetishism - sexual relations between people become financial transactions. But it can be argued that prostitution has become the dominant metaphor of our age: I often hear people say that they are tired of "prostituting" their talent or energy.

But is the Marxist notion of fetishism relevant to psychology and psychotherapy? I would argue that it offers a very powerful explanation for the meaninglessness and despair that many people in society today face. A feeling of meaninglessness is a perfectly appropriate response to a culture in which fetishism TAKES AWAY MEANING, replaces persons by things, we might say turns people INTO things. To perceive this isn't neurotic - we might say it's an extremely hopeful sign, the first blow struck against it. Thus the meaninglessness experienced by the client who comes to therapy is absolutely authentic and valid.

I am also struck by the relevance of the theory of fetishism to models of the human personality - in particular, to the psychological persona or "mask". From being a useful temporary means of disguise or defence the persona can become a domineering coercive force that is autonomous and independent of the ego: It has become "fetishized", under the pressures to conform and to fit into certain roles that are so strong in our culture. The persona is like money - it functions as a means of social circulation, but it becomes an aut-

onomous fetishistic entity with a life of its own".

I would like to cite here several of Marx's comments on alienation, written when he was 26:

"The devaluation of the human world grows in direct proportion to the increase in the value of the world of things."(2)

"In the sphere of political economy the objectification of labour appears as a LOSS OF REALITY for the worker."(3)

"Man is estranged from his own body, from nature as it exists outside him, from his spiritual essence, his human essence . . . an immediate consequence is the estrangement of man from man."(4)

It astonishes me that these remarks were written in 1844 - they point forward to so much that has been discovered and described in the twentieth century about human alienation and the loss of connection with others and with oneself.

Of course the aim of the therapist who might agree with these comments and Marx's own aims, differ drastically. Marx was not interested in individual healing - there lies one of the key differences. Nonetheless I find that this area of Marxist philosophy offers me a profound and EXPLANATORY account of human loneliness in our century. Does it affect the way in which I work with clients? The answer is undoubtedly yes, because my understanding is that their problems are not utterly discrete and walled off in their own psyche.

There is an osmosis between psyche and society - and fetishism grips both. This doesn't mean that I necessarily EXPLICITLY point this out - I believe that could be an interference in their own process.

Of course, some therapies take these factors into account. For example, family therapy is, in the widest sense, "political" therapy. The problems of the individual are referred to, and explicated against, the wider social context of the family. But why ARE families frequently coercive institutions? Is it original sin? Human nature? I would rather believe that in fact the family is the key transmission belt for the coercive nature of social relations as a whole.

I am reminded of a very relevant case-study. A woman client (not mine) was referred to a hospital, showing signs of severe depression, including self-wounding, setting fire to herself, and other self-destructive behaviour.

Therapy proceeded in a fairly conventional way and the woman improved slightly. But then she was referred to a particular psychiatric social worker (working as a therapist), who was a militant feminist. This therapist could sense the woman's intense anger at all the pressures that had been put upon her to fit her into a stereotyped feminine role. Not only did she make this the focus of their conversations; she took the client to Greenham Common. The client made an immediate improvement, became a militant peace-campaigner and feminist, and stopped the self-destructive behaviour.

Of course, it can be argued that the fundamental depression or anger may only have been bypassed, or that she will still eventually have to deal with her own tendency to internalize anger. But it looks to me as if a colossal amount of suppressed energy was creatively released. The extreme alienation experienced by the woman - so that she treated herself AS A THING (setting fire to herself etc) - changed once she was able to find a context where her anger could be channelled in a way that made sense, and where RELATIONS BETWEEN PEOPLE could begin to replace "relations between things".

I'm not suggesting that therapists drag off all their clients to peace demonstrations or give them political diatribes: Far from it. But the case does illustrate for me the indissoluble nexus between personal distress and social/cultural alienation. In the past, many therapists and psychologists have tended to ignore the latter. Some of the New Age spirituality that is around at the moment threatens to render us even more asocial and narcissistic. In fact, paradoxically, it was my own personal development that forced me to go back to Marx for an understanding of the effect on the human spirit of the profound social alienation that surrounds us all.

A huge number of questions are

#### Notes

1. Contrast the situation in France where the rapprochement between Marxism and psychoanalysis is a very rich one. Unfortunately much of the written material, e.g. by Lacan, is pretentious and obscure.
2. "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" (1844), in EARLY WRITINGS of Karl Marx, Penguin, 1975.

raised by this kind of perspective. One thing that is an important issue to me is the connection between images and archetypes of the psyche, and the socially determined fetishism that I have been referring to. To investigate that the relationship would require a historical examination of changes in psychic imagery vis-a-vis social relations - a vast undertaking.

What is the connection between social alienation and the PSYCHIC split between ego and unconscious? Does the human ego emerge in human development as human society splits into social groups (classes)? Does the unconscious refer to our biological essence, and the ego to our social essence? I find these tantalizing questions, and they seem to lead into a more philosophical realm than we are accustomed to inhabit in Humanistic Psychology. But I believe that Marx shows the importance of philosophical investigation - to take us away from the immediate impression or the detail of experience to a satisfactory holistic view. Lest anyone fears this will lead to an intellectual cul-de-sac, it was of course Marx who said that;-

"the philosophers have only INTERPRETED the world, in various ways; the point is to CHANGE it."(5)

3. ibid p.324
  4. ibid p.329
  5. "Theses on Feuerbach", Appendix A. in EARLY WRITINGS, p.423
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# APP

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