

Talk by Andy Blunden at the Socialist Party's Summer School, February 2006:
Changing the World: The relevance of Marxism in the 21st Century

Marx and Class Consciousness

Introduction

Let me introduce myself. While an Engineering student in 1966 I was called up for Vietnam. I burnt my draft card and participated in the antiwar movement, but when I finished my course I left the country. Harold Holt was Prime Minister and Henry Bolte was State Premier and in fact I had never known anything other than conservative governments in Australia, and I didn't see any hope of change in Australia. So far as I could see, it was leaving the country or rotting in military prison.

In 1968, after participating in big battles in London, and travelling through France, I read a little book "What is Marxism?" by Emile Burns. I was instantly converted to Marxism. I studied Marxism, read *Capital* and so on, on my own for a number of years. I did not regard any of the Left parties as Marxist, I developed all sorts of crackpot theories and situated myself on the ultra-left. I did eventually join a left party, Gerry Healy's WRP and spent 11 years as a loyal party member in London. Here my crackpot theories were replaced by a more substantial, but maybe equally questionable, understanding. From when I started work until I retired in 2002, I was an active trade unionist and for most of the time I was the local branch representative. I have never been an academic, but I have always been a public Marxist.

But when I retired at the age of 57, this was a deliberate move to get myself out of day-to-day activity and concentrate on study. I had embraced a pretty orthodox, if ultra-left version of Marxism in the 60s and 70s. Capitalism had gone through enormous crises, and the world had changed almost out of recognition, but we were no closer to the victory of socialism than we had been in 1968. Some serious reflection and study was necessary.

I don't believe there can be any such thing today as a communist activist who isn't also a student of theory. To just continue with the old ideas or carry out a party line, is to bash your head against a brick wall. The real work is changing the way we live and fight. This is a practical task to be sure, but it requires continuous study and reflection. If you're not reading and studying, then there is not much point in practical political activity. The reverse applies as well I might say. Theory that is not for the purpose of fighting and is not informed continuously by the experiences of struggle, is worse than useless.

Now while saying we 'can't continue with the old ideas', I should mention that my work has led me to value above all the writings of Karl Marx, and his predecessor in philosophy though not politics, Hegel. All Marxist thinking keeps coming back to the re-examination and evaluation of the work of Marx and Hegel.

But also it is absolutely impossible to develop Marx's ideas today without taking the liveliest interest in *all* currents of thought which make a critique of modern capitalist society. Marx does not have the answers. You have to read everything you can get your head into; you have to critically appropriate everything you can, and try to integrate it into the basic outlook of a communist, i.e., Marxism.

Let's have a look at Marx.

Spontaneous organisation to Secret Society

Marx was not the first communist. That would be Babeuf. Marx was brought up in Germany but near the French border, not far from Paris, and for the whole period of Marx's youth Paris was a seething vortex of class war.

The first communist organisation in history was Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals. They held public discussions at regular times in a public square, and dispersed when the troops arrived. After not too long the leaders were rounded up and put to death. Blanqui - Marx's hero - describes the way of organising practiced by communist workers in the Paris street-battles in the early 19th century:

“They lack organisation. Without it, they haven't got a chance. ...

“Each barricade has its particular group, more or less numerous, but always isolated. Whether it numbers ten or a hundred men, it does not maintain any communication with the other positions. Often there is not even a leader to direct the defence, and if there is, his influence is next to nil. The fighters can do whatever comes into their head.”

Blanqui advocated the form of organisation which was the model for radicals at this time: the *secret society*. The same model was used by the Chartists. A few men gathered together, swore a blood oath of loyalty, recited their catechism, and worked in secret. This form of organisation was forced on them by police repression and the simple fact that they were a small minority. Invariably, the police succeeded in penetrating their ranks and mostly they ended up in prison.

Marx joined such a secret society in 1847. It was called the Communist League, the first international communist organisation. And it was under the direction of the Communist League that Marx wrote the *Communist Manifesto*.

But what Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto* ran directly counter to what every communist in his time believed:

“the Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions.”

declared the *Manifesto* in its famous closing lines.

The idea that communists should openly declare their aims was a very significant and courageous proposal. And Marx meant it. Soon after the publication of the *Manifesto* Europe erupted in revolutions. Marx launched the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* and openly urged workers to enter the struggle for democracy and overturn the old regime in Europe. The funny thing is of course that the *Communist Party* that the *Manifesto* spoke of was just an idea.

The paper is repressed, Marx jailed but found not guilty by a jury but ultimately after months of agitation in Germany and France, he is exiled and winds up in London. In London, for all intents and purposes, Marx leads a quiet life, working on his writing and bringing up his family, while reaction rules across Europe, for 15 years, until 1864.

In 1864 Marx was invited by one of his old German Communist friends to join in the founding of the International Workingmen's Association, a project mostly of English trades council activists and a range of exiled European communists. For the next 8 years Marx worked like a Trojan helping to build the International.

The First International

The International was not a party in any normal sense, and nor was it a trade union, but sometimes whole unions with their thousands of members joined the International *en bloc*, also workers educational associations and cooperatives, small political groups; the International intervened in strikes and sometimes the whole workforce of the factory would join, and then disappear again after the strike was won. The International had its policies, and very good ones, most of them written by Marx, but how many of its members actually agreed with these policies is an unknown. How many members they had is pretty much an unknown too, though it was a *mass* organisation. Members joined mostly by affiliation of their organisation. Professionals and bourgeois were eventually allowed to join, as individuals, but Marx always used his immense presence and formidable rhetorical powers to make sure that no petty bourgeois exercised any influence on the class character of the International.

The International was really a massive mutual aid society for workers; its watchwords were 'solidarity' and 'internationalism'. It resembled an English trades council in its organisational procedures and was totally open. In fact frequently when members of the International were brought before the courts charged with membership of a secret society, they could honestly say that the International was *not* a secret society, and reports of its meetings could be read in the *London Times*, if you doubted it.

Eventually the International fell victim to the tide of reaction which followed the defeat of the Paris Commune and infighting between the Communists and the Anarchists; it was for all intents and purposes wound up and the remnants left to the Anarchists to play with.

Marx died in 1883 and this is as far as he took his struggles for a communist party in his lifetime. In the meantime however, the *Communist Manifesto* and Marx's ideas had spread to every corner of the globe and remain with us today as symbols of revolutionary struggle against capitalism.

Let us pause for a moment to see the changes which Marx oversaw. The form in which the struggle against capitalism showed itself went from spontaneous, uncoordinated, temporary associations, to disciplined and closed secret societies to a massive international mutual aid society. Marx did not live to see a Communist Party.

These were the '*subjects*' of revolutionary struggle. By 'subject' I mean the self-conscious, active agents in history. The form of subjectivity changed and *grew* according to conditions. In each case these subjects were immediately *connected to the proletariat* and represented its aspirations, its suffering and the conditions of its existence.

At the beginning, the proletariat hardly existed. The English and French workers who joined the Chartists and the Parisian barricades were part of a class which was only just emerging, was largely illiterate, its organisations banned. We could say that the workers of that time lacked 'class consciousness'. Or more exactly, their class consciousness was expressed first in spontaneous, unorganised outbursts of protest, then by small secret societies of self-educated conspirators, and then as the class started to come on to the scene in a mass way in the 1860s, by a tempestuous, dynamic, confused mutual aid association.

We can sum up Marx's life work as the struggle for class consciousness, that is to say, a form of self-organisation of the proletariat capable of speaking with *its own voice*.

Class and Class Consciousness

Marx was won to communism because he was convinced that capital was at the root of all the social problems of his time and only the proletariat, which hardly existed then, was capable of *overcoming capitalism*. The issue then was the question of the proletariat becoming a subject, a player on the historical stage.

Let me be clear. A class is not an employment or income category; a class is only *fully* a class when it is *also* a social movement.

Common conditions of life do not necessarily constitute a class, but they do constitute a ‘class in-itself’, a class waiting to be born:

“The separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against another class; otherwise they are on hostile terms with each other as *competitors*. On the other hand, the class in its turn achieves an *independent existence over against the individuals*, so that the latter [the individuals] find their conditions of existence predestined, and hence have their position in life and their personal development *assigned to them* by their class, become subsumed under it.” [German Ideology, Chapter 1D]

Listen to how Marx describes the French peasantry:

“The great mass of the French nation is formed by the simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes. Insofar as millions of families live under conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter [other classes], they form a class. Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests forms *no community*, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they *do not* constitute a class.” [Holy Family, Chapter 7]

A class is only really a class, a class ‘for itself’ when it is *also a social movement*, when it has a *consciousness* of its mission and the *organisation* to express that and bring it about.

So this was Marx’s struggle. For *class consciousness*.

Just a few years after his death, as the tide began to turn, Marx’s wish began to come to fruition. Communists and workers leaders of all kinds came together in a number of conferences in Europe in the 1890s and the Second International was launched. The Second International was quite different from the First. It was a federation of *political parties* each based in a different *country*.

These parties became very large, eventually numbering their members in millions, they had members in Parliament, they ran the trade unions, they provided education and health and a social life for their members. They were **mass parties** of the working class and when people joined they were committed to the socialist program. It was one of these parties which made the first social revolution and took state power - not in advanced Europe, but in backward **Russia**.

Party and State

So in line with Marx's original idea in the *Manifesto*, the subjectivity of the working class took on the form of a political party, but the question is, did Marx foresee the proletarian subject as a State? Since a political party is almost by definition a 'government in waiting' surely this is obvious? And didn't Marx use the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat'? and didn't he welcome the Paris Commune as the first 'workers' state'?

Yes, Marx welcomed the Paris Commune and described it as the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' (and he would have welcomed the Russian Revolution in just the same terms). Many of you may have read Lenin's book, *State and Revolution*, in which Lenin observed that democracy is a form of dictatorship, that of the majority over the minority. What you may be surprised to hear is that that was the normal understanding of the word 'dictatorship' in the mid-19th century. British aristocrats routinely described Parliament as a dictatorship. But further, while dictatorship was regarded as an *abnormal* state of affairs it was by no means regarded as *evil*; the term was used to describe those occasions when executive power is seized because the country is in danger. In other words, normally a fairly *temporary* condition.

It seems to me, and others think so as well, that Marx never foresaw this 'dictatorship of the proletariat' as being any more than a *temporary* measure. Marx consistently called not for a 'workers' state', but for the destruction of the state.

Although Marx and the anarchist Bakunin fought hammer and tongs in the First International, mainly because Bakunin was an inveterate conspirator, incapable of the kind of open political work which Marx stood for, you know, 'Marxism' was a term invented only after Marx's death, and anarchism and communism only definitively parted company when the Second International was built. Marx, like Bakunin, sought the destruction of the state, not its capture; he differed because he saw not a group of conspirators but a *mass movement* of the working class as the vehicle for socialism.

Listen to the *Communist Manifesto*:

"the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class *to win the battle of democracy*."

"The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible."

and:

"When, in the course of development, class distinctions have disappeared, and all production has been concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation, the public power will lose its political character."

"A *vast association of the whole nation*," what does Marx mean by that? And what exactly does he mean by "*win the battle of democracy*" and "*wrest, by degree*, all capital from the bourgeoisie"? You know, these are all highly *ambiguous* formulations. They could justify a social democratic reformist program equally as well as an anarchist program. In fact, Marx did not have a program for the next hundred years of workers struggle, but he did have a feeling for the direction and aim of workers' struggles in his time, which he was able to discern and gave expression to in the *Manifesto*.

The Formation Class Consciousness

I am not going to get into the to-s and fro-s of what Marx really thought; certainly he *never thought through* the situation the Bolsheviks found themselves in, having captured state power in Russia, but I am satisfied that the idea of a protracted epoch of rule by a one-party state on behalf of the working class was something he never envisaged, and that his own vision was for the *destruction of the state* and all such instruments of compulsion. It is up to us to work out how to go forward from *here*.

As it happens, apart from the Russians, the other great Social Democratic parties got entirely tied up with *bourgeois officialdom*. Kautsky believed that in the course of time, the proletariat would become larger and larger, stronger and stronger, and the middle classes would gradually fade away until a vast organised mass of social democratic workers would be confronting a small group of ultra-rich capitalists and the conditions for the implementation of the program of the *Manifesto* would be in place and the revolution would be swift and decisive.

Rosa Luxemburg was the leading critic of Kautsky's policy of *waiting* for the revolution. Luxemburg held that class consciousness did not arise spontaneously, but had to be actively shaped and politically organised through class struggle activism.

“... the task of social democracy does not consist in the technical preparation and direction of mass strikes, but, first and foremost, in the *political leadership* of the whole movement.

“The social democrats are the most enlightened, most class-conscious vanguard of the proletariat. They cannot and dare not wait, in a *fatalist fashion*, with folded arms for the advent of the ‘revolutionary situation’”

[*The Mass Strike*, Ch 6, 1906]

But Luxemburg shared with Kautsky that the working class would make the revolution *alone* and could not count on the support of the petit-bourgeoisie who would after all, be inevitably eradicated by the development of capitalism itself. *In Russia however*, the working class made the revolution *in alliance with* another class, the peasantry.

So what basis did Kautsky and Luxemburg have for believing in the ever-growing strength, independence and unity of the working class? and where did it go wrong?

In the 1880s, shortly after Marx's death Frederick Taylor implemented his program of ‘scientific management’ in a steel mill in the US. By the time of the First World War his methods were being used all over the world, as they had to be because Taylor achieved productivity multiple times over that achieved without his methods. We learn from Taylor that before he came along, capitalists regarded all workers other than front-line operatives as ‘unproductive’, and their objective was always to reduce the number of ‘unproductive’ workers to the minimum and extend the working hours as long as possible and use low wages and penalties to make the workers work harder. This is exactly the capitalist mentality that is reflected in Marx's *Capital* and lay at the basis of his theories of value, wages, profits and so on. As Taylor points out, this method is not only lousy at producing profits, it pushes the proletariat into a great mass held together in solidarity against the boss, motivated to produce as little as they can get away with. A class warfare which the bosses could never win.

The Changing Composition of the Working Class

What Taylor did which is important, though it is usually overlooked, is that he promoted about 25% of the workforce into technical and supervisory roles with higher pay, less arduous work and a status above that of their colleagues, so long as they weren't union members. The big picture effect of Taylor's revolution was the fracture of the working class into multiple layers in which a significant proportion of the working class (not just a professional middle class, the working class itself) shared a portion of the boss's profits and a share of his point of view, as supervisors and planners of other people's work.

On top of this, Henry Ford came along and made a genuine revolution in capitalist thinking by proving that you can *increase* profits by *reducing* working hours and *increasing* wages! Millions of workers driving around in their identical black T-model Fords spelt big profits. This created a huge social base for a working class which was tied into a paternalistic type of capitalism which offered many workers material improvements without class struggle.

These changes in the nature of the capitalist labour process and the resulting change in the composition of the working class was something Marx never lived to see. What manifested itself after the First World War and the Russian Revolution, was two great working class parties - the Social Democrats and the Communists, each representing different sections of the working class, not to mention parties representing the peasantry and petit-bourgeois who were potential allies of the working class..

Thus the strategy for class consciousness had to take a different form, that of the United Front. Since no working class party could unite the entire working class, each party would have to retain its independence and join together to lead a united mass movement against the fascists and capitalists, all the while conducting an open political debate to determine who had the right to leadership of the people. In reality, this aim was rarely achieved; here and there, for a moment in Spain, for a moment in Vietnam, but mostly either *brief* or *fraudulent*. Nevertheless, the idea of a Front recognised the objective necessity for accommodating political differences, reflecting social differences within the working class, while struggling for a united class consciousness.

The Fordist/Taylorist configuration fell in a heap with the Great Depression, fascism and the Second World War. After the War we faced a world in which the leaders of the workers movement were left to administer a vast empire in the East and capitalism adopted the policies of Keynesianism, in a deal which forestalled revolution in the West by getting rid of unemployment and introducing the *Welfare State*. Before the war (though much earlier here in Australia) the working class was constituted by great systems of mutual aid such as had been initiated by the Chartists and early communists and generalised by the First and Second Internationals. Now the capitalist state intervened in this system and instead of workers depending on solidarity and helping each other, the poor and unemployed received their aid from the capitalist welfare state, who gathered in funds by taxing everyone. Nothing could be more *destructive of class consciousness* than the removal of these bonds of mutual aid and solidarity and their replacement by a relation to the capitalist state.

The massive *class compromise* which came out of the Second World War meant that those who had been excluded - the people in the colonies, the Blacks in the US and women especially - put their hand up and demanded a share of the deal.

Social Movements

Thus were launched a whole series of vast *social movements*.

Social movements are subjects in history; their basis is in particular social conditions, but they are not *class* conditions as such. But in the circumstances which unfolded after World War Two, these subjects, these organised forms of social consciousness, *overshadowed* proletarian consciousness and subjectivity. Working class consciousness took the form of contesting for leadership of these social movements.

I will abbreviate my story at this point. As the social movements evolved, they became more and more particular; their aim was not the overthrow of the state or bourgeois society, but rather the rectification of injustices and the incorporation of their subjectivity *into* the state, the universal consciousness of society. This is more or less how the workers' struggle had evolved in fact, with the incorporation of the trade unions and workers' mutual aid into the state. As social movements became more and more particular, their capacity to mobilise became narrower and narrower.

Capitalism simultaneously faced the end of the possibility of managing the world economy with macroeconomic tools like Keynesianism and Monetarism and Toyotist methods of management were introduced which further fragmented the working class, turning everyone into their own manager and introducing the market relations into the internal management of companies.

From the great national liberation and civil rights movements we arrived at *identity politics*, the very *anathema* of social consciousness. This period negated itself into what we now know as '*Alliance politics*', where people join together for a finite, limited individual action, without any debate about politics or ideals or theory, and then *disperse* again when the action is over. Very powerful for carrying out limited protests and so on, but utterly lacking in any vision of a better world or any program to overcome the injustice and degradation of capitalism.

This brings us to the question I have been asked to speak to you about: *The Relevance of Marxism in the 21st Century*. Sorry I took so long getting there!

The Problem of the Social Subject

Firstly, all these forms of class consciousness *still exist*; when a new form arrives, the old one does not disappear. We still have spontaneous outbursts of workers' anger; we still have secret societies (even if they call themselves parties), workers mutual aid and solidarity, social democratic parties, fronts and social movements. But the working class we had before Taylor and Ford and Keynes and Toyota is to be found only perhaps in China or the Free Trade Zones, but even then, it's not the same any more.

The working class still exists, and it is *not* like the sack of potatoes to which Marx likened the French peasantry, but nor is it *even potentially* the kind of class which was *coming into being* in the First International. And it would be foolhardy indeed to rely on History to come to our rescue and create a resurgence in class consciousness. Nothing is inevitable. Unlike Stalin, Marx had no time for 'laws of history':

“*History* does *nothing*, it ‘possesses *no* immense wealth’, it ‘wages *no* battles’. It is *man*, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; ‘history’ is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve *its*

own aims; history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims.” [The Holy Family, Chapter 6]

The Marxist movement has given us a plethora of different forms through which class consciousness can be built, but none of these are adequate to the challenges of today. No-one however has tackled these problems the way Marx did. We can't repeat the formulae Marx came up with, because they belong to another own time.

Think about this one. According to Marx:

“The proletariat ... is compelled as proletariat to abolish itself and thereby its opposite, private property, which determines its existence, and which makes it proletariat.” [The Holy Family, Chapter 4]

and the same thought is expressed in numerous places by Marx as well as Lenin, Trotsky and everyone else. *That the proletariat must abolish itself* is one of the fundamental maxims of Marxism.

But can you really believe this, in the sense in which it is usually understood? If the working class raises itself to a self-conscious social movement, is it likely to abolish itself? Does *any* social movement abolish itself? Sure, it aims to *do away with the injustices* which motivated it to take up the struggle, but as a social movement, it is not likely to *abolish* itself. The communist parties which achieved power didn't; the trade unions didn't; the women's movement didn't. What all these social movements did was *institutionalise* themselves, they incorporated themselves into the state.

Class and Movement: Not Identical

Here *a little dialectics is necessary*. Class consciousness means a social class, sharing common conditions of life, *and* a social movement organised around a demand for justice and a vision of the future. But these two entities are **never actually identical**. Class consciousness is the unity of two opposites which are *never* absolutely identical.

The working class that Kautsky envisaged becoming more and more homogeneous and gradually swelling to include the entire population is not going to come about. *Class* consciousness is very weak, and quite honestly I don't see the social basis for it turning the corner, at least not in countries like Australia. Just as in the earliest days of communism, communists will probably belong to small groups, 'secret societies'.

But secondly, while proletarian class consciousness is very fragmented and weak, capitalism has become absolutely *ubiquitous*, it covers the entire globe and penetrates even the most private and the most communal of relations. As a result, the potential for an *anti-capitalist formation*, **based on the social conditions of all of us suffering** under capitalism, is really there. But when I say 'formation' I mean that it cannot be a 'movement' like the social movements of the past. I'm sorry, but I think the social conditions for such movements, which gave the communists the opportunity to contest for leadership of the people, have gone.

This is not a bad thing. It just means that the social conditions for socialist revolution and for socialism itself are coming about in a somewhat different way than we envisaged. The *Manifesto* envisaged:

“In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development

of each is the condition for the free development of all.” [*Communist Manifesto*, Chapter 2]

The communist ideal has always been connected with the modern wage labourer insofar as he or she thinks in and for his or her class. The task of Marxists today is to figure out how to translate that vision into forms of social consciousness which make sense in today's world, *in a form which embraces the irreducible diversity* of modern society. The writings of Karl Marx and the experience of millions who have fought the good fight over the past 150 years remain a priceless resource, ... so long as we are prepared to find new solutions to new problems.