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Conference Report: “Teaching Marxism” Workshop, The People’s History Museum, Manchester, 17th February 2010.

Robin Weaver
University of Birmingham.

“Teaching Marxism” was an interdisciplinary workshop organised by the University of Warwick’s Higher Education Academy (HEA), and held at the recently refurbished ‘Coal Store’ of The People’s History Museum, Manchester. The workshop’s aims were to ‘explore the challenges of teaching Marxism to History, Classics and Archaeology students in the 21st Century’ (http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/heahistory/events/marxism). Speakers representing these three disciplines spoke about their experiences of teaching and researching with Marxism. The audience was made up of postgraduates and early career researchers from the arts and humanities, and was well attended. In fact, the event was particularly ‘delegate-focussed’, providing support and resources, and there was a pleasing emphasis on discussion time and networking, closed by a round table discussion at the end of the event.

The event forms part of the HEA’s Teaching Controversial Topics series, and as one might expect, the workshop necessitated a confrontation with a great number of issues surrounding Marxism, not the least of which are the role of the academic/teacher in contemporary society and accusations of ‘politicising the class-room’. Marxism’s ability to bring out strong emotions and passionate polemics sets particular challenges for teachers and researchers who define themselves as Marxist or favour Marxist perspectives. Indeed, these may not amount to the same thing, and to complicate matters further, there are significant problems both in the definition of Marxism’s integrity as a system of thought and in ‘what Marx really meant’ in individual texts and at different points in his career. Marx himself famously denied being a Marxist (1882, quoted by McGuire 2002: 21); seemingly rejecting that orthodoxy must become dogma. But Marxism *is* associated with dogmatism; his (and Engels’) theory of history perhaps most of all. More than a decade has passed since McGuire (2002 [1992]) and McKeown (1999) reviewed the theoretical landscape in which archaeologists, classicists and historians encountered Marxism. Accordingly, a review of the workshop will provide something of an evaluation of the character of the humanities’ interest in Marxism today. Why teach Marxism today?

The first speaker, Richard Alston (Classics, Royal Holloway), focussed on Marxism’s application to the historiography of the ancient city and argued that Marxism’s value is not solely in the area of socio-economic analysis but also as a significant theory of ideology. He launched an attack on a teaching of classical studies that relies upon the notion of modernity as the inheritor of the rationality of the *polis* system of governance. He observed that Roman and Greek cities were

manifestly hierarchical and based upon social inequality. They were therefore full of potential social tensions, just as are today's cities – "why then", he asked, "is there no peasant history of Rome; why are students not given a sense of slaves and others as class-conscious agents"? Alston went on to explain his thesis: that the focus upon the perceived rationality of the ancient city erodes difference, thus making the Greek and Roman worlds' places in which social tensions were largely absent. This in turn fails to provide a history or understanding of non-elite groups and does not provide an account of the variability of the city in time and space. Cities seem to evolve from one closed, ideal *polis* system to the next (a modular history), and geographically a *polis* is a *polis* is a *polis*.

Alston's interest in Marxism, particularly the Franco-Italian tradition (he cited Althusser, Jameson & Gramsci), derives from the targeting of this idealism with a strong focus upon the core Marxist principle of social practice (see for example, Marx and Engels 1977a); that is, seeing the 'material conditions' of everyday life and social experience, rather than decontextualized concepts, as the motor of history. Alston illustrated this with a review of Marxist geographer Manuel Castells' examination of the coalescence of San Francisco as a community with a wide-ranging '70s counter-culture within a fairly conservative part of a conservative country. This time and place was personified by the election in 1978 of Harvey Milk as the first openly gay person elected to public office in America. But these social movements, and Milk's political successes, were not simply isolated products of different identity groups, nor were they limited spatially or socially to the city itself. Rather, people and spaces are brought into being by the social and political forces particular to a time and a place; it is from this dynamic that we need to construct our social categories and concepts (McGuire 2002: Ch. 4).

Michael Sommers (Classics, Liverpool) also pointed to the prevalence of ideal social types in the study of history. He drew on Max Weber's concept of *idealtypus*, and his warning that such categories are essentially heuristic devices and cannot be found in reality. Sommers made a textual analysis of Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, one of the few pieces published in Marx's own lifetime (1852). This is the work in which Marx famously asserted 'men make their own history, but not in the circumstances chosen by them' and that history occurs 'first as tragedy then as farce' (Marx 1977: 300). It is in both these respects that Marx examined the rise to power of Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew as Emperor Napoleon III in 1851-2. Even in Marx's day people were anachronistically calling this Caesarism. As Sommers revealed, Marx's analysis suggests that Caesarism is a profoundly inadequate description of the social and political forces in play in France since the 1848 revolution. Marx digs deeper than this, which leads him to question the use of socio-economic ideal types in analysis. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire* Marx made the

following conclusions about the political machinations of the various social and political groups involved in Napoleon III's rise:

1. Bonaparte motivated emotional as well as economic interests in his supporters;
2. traditional economic and political interests (upon which analysts often base ideal types) do not always coincide. On the one hand, the political bourgeoisie could not control Napoleon even though they thought that he represented their class interests;
3. at the same time, the underclass of workers and 'fragmentary peasantry', which supported Napoleon, did not self-identify as a class.

These points suggest, once more, that there are significant problems in seeking to explain peoples' motivations using social categories which may not have had a basis in reality. The fact that Napoleon III was Napoleon I's nephew *was* a significant motivating factor, and this can be linked to the behaviour of both *different* classes (i.e. the urban workers and bourgeoisie) and 'non-classes' (the fragmentary peasantry). Sommer's overall conclusion was that there is contingency in Marxist ideas: individuals matter in history, and therefore so must the study of historical characters. Moreover, economic factors are not the only aspect of society to which Marx attributed influence in history. Sommer went on to link these conclusions to the ways in which ancient historical characters can be approached and speculated about in a way that could make their study more interesting for students. The examples he cited were the political leaders of ancient Greece, classical Sicily and Rome, asking, with self-conscious anachronism, "was Augustus an ancient Bonaparte?" Sommers reported that his students had responded positively when challenged to think in this way.

John Barrett (Archaeology, Sheffield) was unable to attend as planned, but has since commented on the main themes that his paper was to have explored. In line with Alston's and Sommers' presentations, Barrett wanted to argue that higher education "should be about addressing contentious issues" (Pers. Comm.). This approach would, he said, stimulate students' critical thinking. Barrett contends that archaeology students often find it hard to respond when made to question the forces of history. This might be considered a particular problem in archaeology, a discipline strongly associated with the collation and organisation of the remains of the past into a modular historical narrative (e.g. the three age system). It should come as no surprise to readers familiar with Barrett's work (e.g. 1995) to hear that he had intended to criticise this politically neutral stance and the vacuity he sees in much recent 'post-processual/post-modern' archaeological writings (J.C. Barrett Pers. Comm.). In Barrett's opinion the key term is history, because with this perspective

> we confront worlds which are different and unfamiliar to us … [historical interpretation] explores the way certain material conditions may have been inhabited, used and given meaning (1995: 9).

Barrett has consistently argued that material culture is the *medium* of social practice rather than only its *outcome or product*. Hence the questions with which teachers ought to be able to challenge their students are to do with the production, not just of things (artefacts), but of the social conditions of the past: why are some practices reproduced and others suppressed, how are "life chances circulated, controlled and distributed in society" (Barrett Pers. Comm.)?

Steve Roskams (Archaeology, York), Catherine Feely (History, Manchester) and Helena Sheehan (History, Dublin) also discussed the motor of history in their respective comments about teaching with Marxism. Their feeling is that Marxism is often taught as just one of a series of –isms, an evolutionary perspective on the history of ideas in which the latest thought is accepted as the most 'highly evolved'. This raises many questions, not the least of which is the status of Marx's analytical terminology. Have aspects of Marx's thought, such as class analysis, effectively been subsumed by studies of 'identity' and the histories of 'identity groups'? Or is Marxism *the* meta-philosophy of all social life? Roskams and Feely were the only speakers who made reference to the workshop's 'set text', Randall McGuire's *A Marxist Archaeology* (2002). Both cited the work negatively, unhappy at the work's approach to the question of terminology; Roskams because the definitions in *A Marxist Archaeology* were too vague for his liking, Feely because of McGuire's understanding of Marx's ideas as "basic and unambiguous." Feely considered the best of Marx to be the ambiguity; Roskams, by contrast, thought him not ambiguous at all. I would tend to disagree with both characterisations of McGuire's work which, on the one hand, is clear about defining its particular Hegelian Marxist perspective, but on the other, celebrates Marxism as 'a vibrant palette of many colours' (McGuire 2002: 9). It is surely a sign of the workshop's plurality that both disagreed with McGuire for different reasons. I would consider such a disagreement beneficial to the workshop, rather than as detrimental.

This difference of opinion indicates just how complex Marxist 'historiography' is. Roskams and Feely blamed Marxism's own secondary literature for these problems. Roskams characterised the majority of Marxist works as little more than a 'caricature of "Marxism,"' because of the arcane language sometimes employed by contemporary Marxists. This greatly limits their ability to communicate with the uninitiated, and as a result they are a painful read for students. It is easy to see how this might account for a superficial reading of Marx's key texts and little comprehension that Marxism itself is diverse. Feely agreed and thought Marx's ideas somewhat constrained by works such as the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 1977b). As a set of ideas for the most

part laid down in the nineteenth-century this can give students (and others!) the impression that Marxism is one of a number of closed systems of thought which have now been surpassed. In point of fact, Marxism is a philosophy that was evolving even during Marx's and Engel's life times (see for example Balibar 1995; Thomas 1991), and discussion of this issue was an important part of the workshop. Moreover, Marxist ideas recur throughout twentieth/twenty first-century intellectual thought, being constantly re-assessed in the light of contemporary concerns, something made clear by Sheehan's paper. As she pointed out, Marx's concept of ideology enables the history of ideas *itself* to be examined. Philosophy is a social product, and consequently the history of ideas is quite telling of the gender, class and political affiliations of past thinkers. That thought cannot be considered neutral and objective is a key Marxist principle, and terms such as history, class and ideology gain their meanings from the context of there use. At the same time, Marx and Engels were part of a distinct society and involved in definable traditions of thought; therefore, we should not neglect the context of *their* work any more than we should over look that of our own.

With this point we come full circle in our report and return to the central concern of the workshop: why should academics adopt a radical and controversial approach such as Marxism in teaching? All the speakers acknowledged that the present context of teaching Marxism at Higher Education level is that the arts and humanities are in a difficult position when compared to the so-termed 'hard sciences' and more obviously vocational training. In view of the current financial crisis it seems likely that courses providing a definable 'economic impact' will be placed ahead of the arts and humanities in the queue for funding and the cultural importance of such things as heritage and research may slip from the public view. The speakers rejected such a short sighted notion and communicated passionately that Marxism speaks to the ideological nature of knowledge that lies behind such pronouncements. Each paper demonstrated that knowledge makes an intervention in the world, is always political, and hence engages and motivates students. As Alston put it, if our education system is to transform students into capable critical thinkers rather than merely resources of 'marketable skills' then we need the radical traditions. This excellent workshop made it abundantly clear that, as key disciplines in the arts and humanities, History, Classics and Archaeology have a role to play in this ongoing struggle.

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THE WORKSHOP'S PROGRAMME

Session 1 – Chair: Sarah Francis – Centre for Classics and Archaeology

Richard Alston – Royal Holloway: "Marxism, Utopianism and Teaching the Roman City"

Michael Sommer – University of Liverpool: "By the beard of the prophet! Marxian paradigms and ancient (hi)story/ies"

Session 2 - Chair: Lyn Hughes – Centre for Classics and Archaeology

John Barrett – University of Sheffield: "Teaching Marxism as a question rather than as an answer"

Steve Roskams – University of York: "The Relevance of Marxism to Archaeological Theory and Practice: some York experiences"

Session 3 – Chair: Sarah Richardson – History Subject Centre

Catherine Feely – University of Manchester: "Theory and Practice: How and Why Should History Students Read Karl Marx"

Helena Sheehan – University of Dublin: "Teaching History of Ideas from a Marxist Perspective"

Session 4 – Chair: Sarah Richardson – History Subject Centre

Round table discussion on the current challenges to teaching Marxism.