

# FROM THE LEFT

## THE MARXIST SECTION

### NEWSLETTER of ASA

Fall, 1997: V 21 No 1  
T.R. Young, Senior Editor



If you want justice for women and minorities,  
you must fight for economic justice!!

**\*\*Cartoon by Crumb**

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\*\*Guest Editorial\*\*

Alan Spector, Chair, Marxist Section, American Sociological Association.

Marxists should oppose: democracy, binding elections, academic freedom and free speech in general, feminism, multiculturalism, selfdetermination and all nationalisms, and, of course, peace. Why would a Marxist say that? After all, isn't Marxism the umbrella standpoint that opposes elitism, especially authoritarian elitism, the suppression of the voices of oppressed groups and classes by the coerced hegemony of the powerful, as well as sexism, racism, imperialism, and the ravages of greed-inspired wars?

While there have been many types of political standpoints and groups which call themselves "Marxist", it is certainly true that Marxists have been in the leadership of most major struggles against the forms of capitalist oppression, including racism, sexism, and imperialism. What distinguishes Marxism from other modes of opposition is not Marxism's concern for the wellbeing of the exploited and oppressed. What distinguishes Marxism from other modes of opposition is that Marxism strives to base its analyses and strategies on a scientific analysis of the material world (including the social world, in all its everchanging complexities and contradictions).

That analysis sees the centrality of class relationships as the axis which shapes, even creates particular modes of oppression. These modes of oppression are extremely brutal and have extremely complex aspects which may appear to be completely unrelated to class economics. But to assert that they are "parallel" to class oppression (as some of the "Class, Race, and Gender" discourse does) is to actually support the reductionist definition of class while endorsing a kind of psychological reductionist explanation for "other types" of oppression. Marxists

oppose all forms of exploitation and oppression, but as long as capitalism or any class society exists, these forms of oppression can never be finally defeated.

Back to the use of the word "science" surely a point of controversy. We know that the term "scientific" has often been used by the powerful and their puppets as a way to deny the complexity of the world, to inhibit the search for better, deeper, more comprehensive, multidimensional answers, and to silence the voices of oppressed people whose credentials have not been validated by the powerful. We are using the term "scientific" here not to reduce the complexity of the world down to a few variables, but rather to acknowledge the complexity of the material world.

The idealist philosophies often pretend to be even more "radical" than Marxism because they are not just against "class" oppression, but are for ALL GOOD THINGS. (Not surprisingly, many of the so-called "ultraradical" anti-economic theorists find themselves alongside the most narrow of economist theorists in supporting liberal reform politicians.) In fact, advocates of idealistic philosophies, including, in particular, psychological reductionism, often critique materialist Marxism as being one dimensional, superficial, and incapable of grasping complexity, when, actually, it is the antimaterialist, metaphysical ideologies which reduce the complexity of material social reality down to some simplistic, abstract, nearly sanctified phrases.

Being abstract and sanctified, they can't be criticized, and those who do are often ostracized as being deviants, subject to the kind of labelling and ad hominem arguments one finds in religious arguments, (e.g. "He criticizes selfdetermination? Well, what can you expect from a privileged white person", or "He doesn't believe in Absolute Free Speech? Well, what can you expect from a Stalinist", or "He didn't cry for Princess Diana? Must be another Marxist with no feelings for humanity.") This kind of discourse destroys honest investigation even as it bathes itself in the rhetoric of sensitive, creative, multidimensional humanistic philosophy. But there is another important point.

It is not simply the case that Marxists SHOULD oppose the Sanctified Abstractions listed above. In fact, NOBODY believes absolutely in any of those slogans. Therefore, to use those slogans as the basis for "proof" that one's position is automatically correct is specious dogmatism at best, and can be outright dishonesty at worst. Example: democracy. What is democracy? Rule by majority? Which majority? Where? Is it elections? Should elections always be binding? What if the majority of students at a school vote to endorse the Vietnam War? Are students who try to physically block university participation therefore acting "undemocratically?" Did the Vietnamese get to vote? Is the U.S. embargo against Iraq, which has killed tens of thousands of children, an example of democracy in action? Did those children get to vote? Even if people do have the formal right to vote, would we always accept the results as binding? Of course not. Everyone, except perhaps Plato's interpretation of the death of Socrates, reserves the right to oppose unjust policies, even by force, whether or not those unjust policies were the result of some kind of election. (And this is without even discussing the manipulation of elections by the media, schools, and outright coercion.)

Example: selfdetermination, including the "nationalism of the oppressed." If self-determination is a phrase that automatically wins arguments, then does that mean one is supposed to support Croatia's split from Yugoslavia? How about Protestant communities wanting to split from Catholic Ireland? Or the Confederate States wanting to split from the United States? Perhaps these examples seem extreme, but even in less extreme examples, whose selfdetermination is being discussed? Does Haiti have selfdetermination because it has black politicians running the government? If someone puts forward the slogan of "selfdetermination" as the winning card in an argument, they may find themselves having to eat their words later. (And as a side point, a particularly perceptive Marxist from Africa pointed out to me recently (to paraphrase): "Just look at the phrase SELFdetermination. What does that have to do with Marxism? SELF? SELF? Of course we want a society where individuals can develop. But do we want to enshrine the concept of SELF as the key concept in Marxist liberation? Isn't SELFdetermination the ideology of capitalism?")

Similarly with "oppressed group nationalism." The experience of Algeria should have put that argument to rest. Should Marxists support struggles against imperialism? Of course, with all the commitment and energy we can muster! But that does not mean supporting the colonized "nation" as a "nation." Are we not allowed to criticize a nationalist leader if we believe he or she is selling out the struggle? All the nations of the world were created by capitalists. There are different classes within every nation. We should oppose the capitalist class within each nation, rather than blurring over the differences in class and considering the whole "nation" as an oppressed group.

Multiculturalism, as many others have pointed out, may sound like an especially radical form of antiracism, but in fact, it weakens and dilutes the antiracist struggle by implying that we should tolerate the cultures of people who are supposedly so different, rather than understand that underneath the differences there are fundamental similarities and that it is the racists who exaggerate the differences that need to be directly opposed with actions, not with ethnic food festivals.

Feminism? Are there not many women who participate in the exploitation and oppression of other women? To destroy sexism, in all its complex economic, political, and cultural forms, do we have to assert that all women are bound together and men, even well meaning men, "just don't get it?" How have the capitalists used the phrases of selfdetermination, nationalism, multiculturalism, and feminism to weaken the struggle against capitalism, thereby strengthening racism, imperialism, and sexism? Are Princess Diana and Mother Theresa more friends to the billions of working class women of the world than, say, a male Marxist who is dedicated to smashing sexism?

Academic freedom? Free Speech? Nobody supports the right of a psychology professor to teach that the rape of children is good for their mental health. Nobody would support the right of a group to hold a film series on campus with child pornography. Nobody supports the right of a pharmacist to tell a customer to drink bleach as a way to cure a cold. Nobody believes in Absolute free speech and nobody believes in absolute academic freedom. Even progressives reserve the right to censor views from their publications, email lists, or other media if they so choose. Racism should not be taught in schools. Racist films should not be shown. Some people say that it is a "different" issue than child pornography? Is it? Isn't racism as bad as child pornography? Aren't the effects of racism deadly to tens of millions of people? "But it is more difficult to define 'racism'", say some people. Perhaps, but insofar as we can identify it, it should not be taught.

If that means that Marxists are vulnerable to attack, then so be it. Marxists have to defend their right to teach on the grounds that what we do falls within the range of reasonably accurate, socially constructive social sciencenot on the grounds that anyone should be allowed to do whatever they want. And finally, peace. Peace for whom? The normal condition of peace under capitalism is mass murder of the working class. Of course we oppose the capitalist wars. But to call for Peace as an absolute is to politically disarm the working class and other oppressed people, making it appear that the struggle to eliminate capitalist oppression can happen easily and peacefully. Were the slaves wrong to revolt against slavery? Were Partisans in Eastern Europe, concentration camp prisoners in Sobibor, soldiers in the Red Army wrong to make war against the Nazis?

The point of this discussion is to infuse what is distinctive about Marxism into these discussions. Marxism is not about "higher wages". Of course ideas are important. Why else did Marx, (and the rest of us) spend our lives reading, writing, learning, and teaching. Economics is a socialpolitical relationship. Class struggle is as much about shaping and controlling production as it is about ensuring egalitarian distribution. Marxism seeks to expose the underlying contradictions, contradictions that are about relationships, not simply about "amounts of money". Abstract philosophy seeks to blur the irreconcilable antagonistic class relationships and substitute superficial, abstracted ideas. Contrary to the argument that Marxism is "class essentialist" (unfortunately reinforced by some who call themselves Marxist), actually Marxism opposes all essentialism. Classes are both objective and constructed, temporary relationships. Asking the Marxist questions: "For Whom? Which class does this serve? Does this serve the cause of creating a world free of exploitation and oppression or does this serve one or another of the exploiters and oppressors?"asking these questions is not reducing the discussion down to economist, superficial one dimensionality. On the contrary, it is reliance on abstractions, even ideas that wear the cloak of creative, sensitive humanism, that denies the everchanging, multidimensional richness of the material world. This was written in the spirit of wanting to provoke controversy and comment. Please send your comments to:

[<spectors@mail.netnitco.net>](mailto:spectors@mail.netnitco.net)

The journal CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY (formerly The Insurgent Sociologist) is seeking an (unpaid) editor to succeed Val Burris, who has valiantly carried this task on for many years and now wants to move on with life. The editor needs to be familiar with and committed to the goals of CS, which is a blindrefereed journal appearing three times a year: to publish articles and reviews "within a broad definition of critical or radical social science." She or he needs to be a competent administrator and an efficient editorial reader. Willingness to recruit mss. reviewers, special issue editors, and do general coordination including liaison with the publisher is essential. A minimal amount of institutional support, such as a course off-set, and a few colleagues near by, will be helpful. A tenured position is pretty much necessary unless the candidate is retired. Production will be moving to a commercial house by midyear, so that keeping track of subs, bookkeeping, etc, will not be necessary. An interest in outreach

(broadening the base of readership and influence more generally) is essential.

Section members are urged to contact Val Burris:

[<vburris@oregon.uoregon.edu>](mailto:vburris@oregon.uoregon.edu)  
or Board member Marty Oppenheimer  
[<oppfink@compuserve.com>](mailto:oppfink@compuserve.com)

until Jan. 1) with possible candidate names, as well as other suggestions for the journal. In addition, the present Board members and Associate Editors would like very much to ascertain the degree of support for the journal among Section members, whom they urge to contact Val or Marty. A simple "yes, I want CS to continue in business" or a "no, I do not find CS relevant to my concerns" or words to either effect would be helpful. Many section members do subscribe; those who do not may want to consider a sub, which is US\$20/yr for individuals. The snailmail address for CS is: Critical Sociology, c/o Dept. of Sociology, Univ. of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403.

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## SECTION ANNOUNCEMENTS

Glenn Muschert is compiling a list of the members for the Marxist Section Home Page. It will soon be up and running at the CSF server located at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He will create a list of members and their interests that could serve as a resource for our finding one another. Please send the following information:

1. name
2. institutional affiliation
3. (snail mail) address
4. telephone number
5. fax number
6. email address
7. research interests
8. web URL (if you have one)

[<glenn@sobek.colorado.edu>](mailto:glenn@sobek.colorado.edu)

\*\*Subscribe to Critical Sociology and preserve the rich progressive legacy in sociology from the 1960's.

The Section came up a bit short of the 400 for the Section on Marxist Sociology membership drive, although we are ahead of where we were a year ago. All that came in late will count for 1998, which is okay. The only problem will be if people who were members in 1997 sent in only their additional section memberships for 1997; since they will count for 1998, those people will have to send in ASA memberships of some sort for 1998 as well. Barring any major event, I am confident that the section will surpass 400 by next year, and we will have three sessions plus roundtables for the convention in Chicago in 1999.

The two sessions we have are:

1. A panel organized by Rhonda Levine on the work of Eric O.Wright
2. A session organized by Steven Rosenthal on "How Useful or Harmful is the concept of White Skin Privilege in the struggle to expose and eliminate racism"

In addition, we hope to have lots and lots of roundtables, (organized by Stephanie ShanksMeile) which are terrific opportunities to get experience presenting a paper at the ASA as well as a chance to meet others of similar interests (and possibly differing perspectives!) So there is plenty of opportunity for people to actively participate in the program in San Francisco. Alan Spector, Chair

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The Society for the Study of Social Problems, SSSP, has issued a booklet containing challenges and visions and experiences which may be used as guide in working toward a Just World in the 21st Century. Pam Roby is Editor of the collection. Section Chairs were asked for:

1. a vision of a Just World in relation to the mission of each Division.
2. one or two examples which embody this vision.
3. a list of obstacles in working toward that vision.
4. a list of key references upon which to ground the quest for a just world.

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A. Community Research and Development, Bonnie Winfield, Chair:

Mission for a Just World:

1. Safe affordable housing
2. decent health care, nutrition, education
3. democratic participation in community affairs
4. eliminate discrimination

Demonstration Projects:

1. Dudley St. Neighborhood
2. Centros Sor Isolina Ferre

B. Conflict, Social Action, Social Change, Susan Stall, Chair:

Mission:

1. Democratic participation in governance
2. Support for social justice movements
3. Support for small scale movements
4. Elimination of structures of Inequality
5. participatory social research facilities
6. integrated educational- community relations.

Projects: Policy Research Action Group: Chicago

C. Crime and Juvenile Delinquency: Nancy Matthews, Chair:

Mission:

1. A Criminal Justice System oriented more to justice than social control
2. Concern with crimes of the powerful against the weak
3. elimination of targeting by police of minority youth
4. resources for rehabilitation more than incarceration
5. preventive policy more so than punitive responses: jobs, support for families, education and recreation.

Projects: Family Conference Model, New Zealand, Chicago

D. Drinking/Drugs: Peter Venturelli, Chair:

Mission:

1. an international network of drug research
2. professional scholarship in drug use
3. sharing of drug use/abuse information
4. public forums for debate about drug use policy.
5. referendum on drug policy
6. civil liberties for responsible drug use
7. share results on drug use policy between nations
8. support for good teaching/research on drug use.

Projects: Lindesmith Center, National Development and Research Institute, New York

E. Education Problems: Pamela Quiroz, Chair:

Mission:

1. Equal opportunity to learn for all peoples regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preferences and social class.
2. support of scholarship, research, activism to realize this vision.

Projects: Head Start, other programs.

F. Environment and Technology: T. Jean Blocker, Chair:

Mission:

1. protection of environment
2. Human rights for a safe environment

3. Public Health regulations enforced for all groups
4. involvement of poor, minorities in policy
5. responsibility for pollution by those who pollute.

Projects: Office of environmental Equity, National Environmental Justice Advisory Council, Executive Order 12,898.

G. Family: Mary Lou Wylie, Chair:

Mission:

1. Basic needs for families guaranteed so families could spend time together; each member develop to full potential.
2. Adequate health care.
3. Gender equality.
4. compensation/resources for home care; children. the aged.
5. diversity of family forms/family relationships.

Projects: Sweden

H. Health, Health Policy, and Health Services: Arthur Greil, Jeanne Calabor, Jean Elson, coauthors:

Mission:

1. Study of social sources of illness, disability.
2. Study of social definitions of health/illness.
3. Study of health care delivery systems.
4. Cross cultural Comparisons of health care delivery systems.

Projects: Western industrialized countries offer some guide.

I. Labor Studies: Vicki Smith, Chair:

Mission:

1. to work for justice; against inequality on the job.
2. concern about effects of great transformations in work and economy [on race, gender, class, third world nations].
3. effects of new technologies
4. new labor organizations
5. evaluation of transformation of labor movements
6. effects of contract/temporary forms of work.
7. examination of new forms of racial/gender stratification at work

Projects: Labor Studies Division of AFLCIO Organizing Institute. Sociology Labor Network Directory.

J. Poverty, Class, and Inequality: Alan Spector, CoChair: [Frank Harold Wilson, CoChair did not contribute to this part of Section Statement. Alan Spector reports he could not contact him.]

Mission:

1. expose ways class structures create misery and injustice as well as poverty.
2. study/oppose dismantling of social welfare safety nets.
3. mass imprisonment of minority youths.
4. ethnic wars among peoples abandoned by capitalism.
5. evaluate attempts to combat class domination by peoples around the world.

Projects: Most projects which are cited in Western Societies are founded on surplus profits from imperialism and sale of military hardware. [Thus one should be careful about holding such projects as effective solutions to social problems. They work in so far as they transfer US problems to poor countries in the 3rd world].

T.R.Y.

K. Psychiatric Sociology: Sarah Rosenfield, Chair:

Mission:

1. Make visible the class, gender differences in patterns of mental distress.
2. study how differences in childhood experiences, in social relationships, in occupational conditions create such patterns.
3. study how differences in economic resources affect such patterns.
4. study effective forms for coping.
5. study effects of mental illness on family, self esteem, homelessness.

Projects: Training in Community Living, The Clubhouse model are examples mentioned.

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