



Identity: Stalinist realism and open communism in relation to class in psychoanalysis

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Introduction

These two key terms, ‘identity’ and ‘class’, are signifiers. While these signifiers may indeed correspond to entities outside language, the way we discuss and so understand signifiers is freighted with meanings that are given by their relation to other terms and by historical context. There are social theorists who have drawn heavily on psychoanalysis and who have eventually abandoned key tenets of Marxism, claiming that the term ‘class’ no longer corresponds to an economic-political entity (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The term ‘class’ is now only seen by some ex-Marxists or so-called ‘post-Marxists’ as a ‘signifier’ that constitutes a form of ‘identity’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987).

Inside the clinic we track and intervene in the domain of signifiers, and how we mark them and interpret how they structure and anchor lives will have real consequences as well as therapeutic effects. However, and this is the crucial clinical psychoanalytic point, we do not do this by pinning down their supposed real underlying meaning within our own coordinates as analysts who imagine that they know what is outside language, but we facilitate a different freer relation to language and so also to reality.

To mistakenly spell out what we think the signifiers that appear in the clinic really mean to us and should mean to our analysands is a manifestation of what I call ‘stalinist realism’ (Parker, 2022). Here is a toxic complement to the ‘capitalist realism’ that tells us that this is the way the world is and that there is no alternative (Fisher, 2009). The possible freer relation to language and reality enabled by our clinical work is potentially – and only potentially, for we cannot guide the politics of our analysands – what I call ‘open communism’. Here an alternative is possible, including to the regimes that masqueraded as socialist and were threatened by such practices as psychoanalysis (Miller, 1998).

I say this as a communist who fights politically for an open democratic form of communism that must of necessity pit itself against the Stalinist tradition, a tradition that turns Marxism from being an analysis and guide to changing the world into a kind of faith or worldview that buttresses a closed bureaucratic apparatus (Parker, 2020). That also means that as a revolutionary Marxist I am committed to class struggle, to understanding class struggle as a motor force in political-economic change and intensifying class struggle to bring an end to wretched misery-producing global capitalism.

Inside the clinic

These are identity statements – that I am a communist, a Marxist – strategically deployed here, and very different from what I say as a psychoanalyst inside the clinic. Psychoanalysis questions, even unravels identity in the clinic, loosening attachment to forms of identity that lock us in place, whether in families, relationships, institutions or class status hierarchies. Whatever I say inside the clinic is accorded authority in the transference, which must also eventually, if not fully, be dissolved, but not by knowledge that I claim and hold for myself in a supposed identity of a psychoanalyst. Here, identity is linked to class.

The authority I am accorded in the clinic is shaped, among other things, by class – by my class privilege, or lack of it, depending on how the analysand positions themselves – and psychoanalytic institutions and their trainings are, of course, structured by class. That structuring includes financial resources, education pathways and acculturation into appropriate language codes. It is where class seeps into presumptions about ‘identity’ inside the clinic that there is a danger of class relations being crystallised as part of the transference, effectively functioning as obstacles to an analysand making new decided choices about their lives.

Whether that is really a problem or not depends very much on whether any claim to identity by an analysand is treated by them as fixed and fast-frozen, or is reflected upon in terms of the sometimes progressive and sometimes regressive work the claim to identity is doing for them. We should not moralise for or against identity in the clinic.

Here inside the clinic class and identity are not complementary, and if they do seem to be so then that is a sign of a problem. If anything, they are antagonistic, as antagonistic as that between different forms of identity, and as productively antagonistic as can be the relationship between analysand and analyst. They are things to be worked through, which is not the same as saying that they are things to be resolved.

Outside the clinic

Identity claims function in different ways, sometimes problematic, outside the clinic. Psychoanalysis has something to say about these claims because it is institutionally-embedded in these matters. The signifiers that psychoanalysis works with inside the clinic are structured by the very cultural processes that make psychoanalysis as such possible. Sensitivity to political-economic issues must be part of psychoanalysis, all the better that the psychoanalyst can thereby leave politics as such at the clinic door, not to moralise about political choices inside the clinic.

There is a danger, though, that when psychoanalysis is turned from being analysis into a kind of worldview, it does then imagine itself capable of applying itself to politics and decoding it; that is, recoding it in its own particular vocabulary. Then, the pretence of

all-encompassing fool-proof knowledge and the identity of those who speak it is itself a danger in psychoanalysis, and psychoanalysis itself risks speaking on the side of stalinist realism, moralising in line with power, instead of on the side of open communism, free association.

It is when we step outside the clinic and reflect upon the institutions and forms of knowledge that psychoanalysis too-often endorses that we can see how versions of stalinist realism take shape. There is thus an internal political battle that takes place – let's call it class struggle inside psychoanalysis – between the closing of knowledge on the one hand and possibilities for change on the other.

Some social theorists were tangled in that kind of class struggle when they took the so-called 'Eurocommunist' road away from the old closed Marxism of the Moscow-directed communist parties (Mandel, 1978). The psychoanalysis they employed to theorise the role of 'signifiers' in politics was not the kind of psychoanalysis that tells us what identities should count and what identities should not. In this they were correct, and authentically psychoanalytic even while the reformist direction of their political engagement was problematic.

Stalinist realism, and this is the kind of old closed Marxism that they fled from, is actually a worldview that cuts up reality in a certain way and assigns categories of people to different camps and bodies. Regimes that inherit the legacy of Stalinism have very clear ideas about what a family is, what a man and a woman is, and what the destiny of a nation is, as well as clear ideas about what does not count as an ethnicity and what does not count as a form of sexuality or gender, attacking those that stray from approved legitimate boundaries of geography and biology.

Identity

Stalinist realism is obsessed with identity, and it turns the identities it approves of against the ones it does not. Open communism in the domain of politics that works with constellations of identities that operate intersectionally, in intimate relation to each other, is then seen as a threat. The language of the far right – against what is termed in that language 'cultural Marxism' or against what they complain about as 'woke politics', for example – is wielded as a weapon against it, against open communism.

The reformist Eurocommunist turn away from Marxism and away from class as such was a false path that dissolved politics into provisional alliances that were often cross-class, class collaborationist and demobilising of the joint struggles of the oppressed (Anderson, 1976), and now it is viewed by some self-professed Marxist detractors as a symptom of 'identity politics'. Paradoxically, however, it left behind a more potent and toxic Stalinist 'identity politics' that now obsesses against any kind of intersectionality that escapes its own map of the world.

Here class is treated as a privileged form of identity that is underpinned by quasi-scientific knowledge – sometimes borrowed from bureaucratized Marxism and sometimes

from bourgeois sociology – is set against the identities of other oppressed groups. Those other oppressed groups are seen as antagonistic and ‘divisive’ when they make their own claims in and alongside the working class and as complementary, only acknowledged if they agree that their claims to identity are less important, have a less solid foundation.

Class

For revolutionary Marxists, class is not an identity but a relation. We are reminded of this aspect of identity – that it is always a relation – by feminists and by psychoanalysts. What it is to be a worker is, for Marx, to be structurally-embedded, and constituted as a subject, in a relationship of exploitation, exploitation of their labour. This, as Marx also noted, is in a political-economic system, capitalism, in which all that is apparently fixed and fast-frozen melts into air (Berman, 1982). Here is the vertiginous, perplexing and alienating condition of life under capitalism – the kind of thing that frames and bleeds into distress we meet in the clinic. It is disturbing but it is also invigorating, energising and empowering.

Those who obsess about class as if it should be an identity, as if the working class were a kind of self-contained protagonist, and who obsess about other supposed pretenders to identity that are positioned as antagonists in this imaginary game, are prey to a double danger. The first aspect of this double danger is they are relaying into the field of psychoanalytic politics the language of the far-right, as well as conceptions of class that are poisonous to creative enabling intersectional conceptions of who we are and who we could be.

The other aspect of this double danger is that when a too-certain mistaken view of identity finds its way into the clinic there is a real danger that some forms of identity will be endorsed and others pathologised. This is indeed where the intersectional nature of politics, including of class politics becomes salient as a valuable practical critique of that danger, the danger of stalinist realism.

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis as a class-stratified institutional practice as well as a clinical practice is suffused with possibilities of ‘class transition’ – of the psychoanalysts cleaving to their professional career and of the analysands often hoping that analysis will make them both happier and more productive, more successful. That process needs to be subjected to scrutiny, and on the side of the oppressed, instead of obsessing about supposed threats of – a favourite target of reactionaries nowadays – proliferating queer transition across sexed bodies that are corroding an otherwise unified working class (Gleeson and O’Rourke, 2021). The stalinist realist transphobes want to lock certain kinds of gender and sexuality into certain kinds of bodies. Not in my clinic, the clinic-correlate of open communism.

While the one conceptual-political target – ‘class transition’ and its conservative homologue ‘class mobility’ – are part of a meritocratic and conservative image of society

that does little to question either the structures or the identities that comprise it, the other target – that which is sometimes viewed with suspicion by reactionaries as woke ‘identity politics’ – actually gives us a more progressive tactical reflexive vision of change.

The one, a fixation on class and the misrepresentation of what class and class struggle is about and what it aims at, is at one with the broader ideological project of stalinist realism. The other, which gives us a genuinely historical-materialist way of thinking about classes of people and class as such, is more open, valuing the forms of solidarity that the oppressed construct through their different overlapping forms of fluid identity, more in tune with the road to open communism (O’Brien and Abdelhadi, 2022). The one is not really psychoanalytic at all, and closes down what Freud drew attention to as the varieties of gender and sexual orientation that people map onto their bodies, while the other aims at free association inside and outside the clinic without ever reducing one field of action to the other.

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