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**A Conversation with Ian Parker**

Robert M. Young

**Young**: I am more of a dialogue person than I am an interviewer, but I will try to discipline myself. I cast my mind round to discover the Marxists I knew, and everyone I thought of among my immediate acquaintances had turned out to be an ex-Marxists or ex-radical. It seemed that over time they all had accepted jobs from one or another of the power brokers of psychoanalytic academia. Pretty soon the reference to Marxist thinkers and concepts had diminished to the vanishing point in their writings. I may be exaggerating, but that is my impression. To be perfectly honest I once found myself changing the title of a paper of my own, deleting the word ‘Marxism’, vaguely thinking that this was the diplomatic thing to do. Do you think the culture of academic Marxism has diminished?

**Parker**: When I was registered for my PhD in Southampton, a PhD that included just one chapter on psychoanalysis that the external examiner tactfully did not mention during the viva, the chair of the admissions committee kindly changed the word ‘Marxism’ in my proposal to ‘politics’. He said it would not have got through Faculty otherwise. There has long been a problem of this kind. But today there is an additional problem, I think. Left culture has diminished, and that means that there is less space for Marxist discourse, less space for people to call themselves Marxists, less space for it to make sense to other people. They feel embarrassed about using the term. At least in academia. I would say that while this is happening, and academics are being driven to be more liberal and shy away from Marxism, there has been a growth of interest outside academia. The word ‘socialist’ at least is on the agenda again among the Corbyn supporters – half a million members now of the Labour Party – and in the US in the wake of the Sanders movement, not to mention Latin America where Marxists are prominent in the political field.

**Young**: The new crowd never was politically practicing Marxists, never affiliated with a political movement in the narrow sense of the word. They were theoretical and philosophical leftists.

**Parker:** Some of them have overlapped with Left groups, but, yes, that always was really part of the problem. Marxism is a praxis, not a top-down theory. It is the diametric opposite of a conspiracy theory, and in its praxis it requires involvement in building movements of resistance. It cannot merely be abstract academic ‘critique’.

**Young**: What was your path into these matters?

**Parker**: Into Marxism or psychoanalysis?

**Young**: Both

**Parker**: Well, it was into Marxism first.

**Young**: Where were you?

**Parker**: I was in Newcastle as an undergraduate student. I got involved in a reading group organized by the Communist Party of Britain Marxist-Leninist. Our text was Lenin’s *State and Revolution*. I got into that, because I had worked for a year in a shop in south London. There were only two of us in the shop. The manager was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, idealised the Soviet Union, was a member of the Anglo-Bulgarian Friendship Society and believed that when the revolution came he would be in a good position.

**Young**: That’s idealistic and romantic.

**Parker**: It*was* idealistic and romantic, but it kind of won me over to a Left position of some kind. But the route I took was neither Soviet nor Maoist Stalinism, but Trotskyism. I still define myself politically in some circumstances; it is not always helpful because of misunderstanding and caricature, as a Trotskyist. When I went off to university I wanted to learn more. I signed up for botany and zoology, and I had to choose a third subject, and by chance I chose psychology. I failed the botany and zoology, partly because of my political preoccupations. I think I was also drunk most of the time. I waited for two years and returned to college in Plymouth to take a psychology degree.

**Young**: Very diligent.

**Parker**: I think it was guilt really. I found something that I was truly interested in. That’s what it was. I found something that was an intersection of two discourses that were just as important to me. One was the Marxism, revolutionary Marxism I picked up in Newcastle. And the other, through a circuitous route through academic psychology, was eventually to psychoanalysis as a way of thinking about subjectivity that did not reduce it to the individual or normalize it and try and *fit*people into society. There was something in that that was somehow compatible with the Marxism. The question was, which kind of psychoanalysis would enable that. It took a while to settle on something I was happy with.

I did once try to weld the two together during my college education – as a Reichian. We set up a Sex-Pol Society. If we could have his critiques of capitalism without his dotty ontology, we thought, we might be okay. It was a false path, and I think it drew attention to a deeper problem. To be honest, from that time on I have never thought it possible to develop either a psychoanalytic Marxism nor a Marxist psychoanalysis. They are different domains of experience. Different domains of struggle. I am a psychoanalyst now, and a Marxist. I don’t weld the two together.

**Young**: Was there something in what you experienced as an undergraduate that made you think you might want to be a therapist?

**Parker**: No. Not at all. I was allergic to therapy as an undergraduate. When I was thinking about what to study my political comrades told me that I should not do psychology because it was a bourgeois discipline - which was absolutely right. But that was what attracted me to learning about it. It also meant that I was suspicious of therapy as a part of psychology. It was only later when I taught psychology at Manchester Polytechnic I began to feel bad that I did not know anything about therapy as a practice. So I began to learn about psychotherapy as a practice in the local NHS Service from Bob Hobson. He was a lapsed Jungian, thinking in terms of Winnicott and Klein. It was really interesting, and so I got into it as a practice.

**Young**: I had a depressed mother, and at Yale if you had a scholarship they gave you a job in an area chosen by you. So I went to work as a dogsbody for an eminent psychologist specializing in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, John Dollard, and for two years I had the job of filing his library of off-prints but also as an assistant, recording psychoanalytic therapy sessions on tape and comparing the tapes with the transcripts. It was a wonderful apprenticeship in theory and practice that taught me a great deal. I was hooked. I came into it through my family experience and next worked in a mental hospital as an aide for a summer.

**Parker**: My family connections would have kept me away. That’s a long story. I still felt a bit edgy when I went into the NHS service. I was also involved in the so-called ‘anti-psychiatry’ movement, alongside therapy and psychoanalysis, and am still involved in *Asylum: Magazine for Democratic Psychiatry*. I was unsure whether the way to connect distress at the level of individual subjectivity with societal oppression would be through the motif of the ‘group’. That level of work, with groups, does seem like an obvious mediating point. I did the introductory course in Group Analysis in Manchester, and teetered on the edge of doing the Group Analytic training. I was accepted on the Diploma Course, but I was also reading more about Lacan, and I eventually went with Lacanian analysis in Manchester. I wanted something social.

I eventually came to the conclusion, I might have been wrong, still might be wrong, there are plenty of problems with it, that Lacan’s focus on the unconscious as the discourse of the other opened the way to a fully social psychoanalysis.

**Young**: Was there Marxism in your Lacanian Training?

**Parker:** No. Not at CFAR, the Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research. No, it was a good training, but not Marxism in the training. No. At a CFAR conference recently a prominent psychoanalyst, someone I respect immensely, accused me of making judgmental comments because I urged those attending to participate in the anti-Trump demonstrations. Ok, I might have said ‘you should all be there at the demonstrations’, but then I was told that I made people feel bad who didn’t go on demonstrations. This guy said that psychoanalysts had interesting things to say about politics at dinner parties. I was very well behaved, and though I am not a Maoist had to refrain from reminding him of Mao’s comment that a revolution is not a dinner party.

**Young**: Which brings us to our main topic. I wanted you to persuade me that there is Marxism in various aspects of the trainings and institutional dynamics in the culture of psychoanalysis, broadly conceived. I have not found it anywhere.

**Parker**: Nope. That’s why *Free Associations* and the Psychoanalysis and the Public Sphere conferences, which I attended back in the 1990s were once so important. The project of Free Associations then and those Public Sphere conferences, as I understand it, was that psychoanalysis in the British Tradition, and its institutions, was centre or left of centre, and that progressive intervention and dialogue with those people could draw it further to the left. I never bought that, to be honest, but I found the debates that took place very interesting.

**Young**: Recently it is almost as if a miasma has overcome us. Have you noticed this?

**Parker**: Yes. I believe that we have lost a place where Marxists and psychoanalytic folks can speak together. We’ve tried many times, and it is important to keep trying. A small group of us, that is me and Erica Burman and Dick Blackwell, two Group Analysts, organised, for example, a conference 2-4 May in 2008 at the Institute for Group Analysis about radical psychotherapy forty years after May 69. The title was ‘Psychotherapy and Liberation: The legacy of May ‘68’. The involvement of Group Analysts was important. I’ve never lost my fondness for that approach. It is a parallel path, I reckon, to Lacan as a way of addressing the social dimension of subjectivity. We had papers by psychoanalysts, but for me what was most important was that we had political input, in that conference we had Peter Tatchell come along, for example as a keynote speaker. Some papers were collected together by Dick Blackwell in a special issue of the journal *Psychotherapy and Politics International* in 2009*.*

If we want to do something politically progressive as psychoanalysts we have to organise politically. In 2016, for example, the Free Psychotherapy Network, FPN, organised a founding conference in Manchester called ‘Minding the Gap: Free Psychotherapy in an Unjust World’. Many of those involved, I would call them my political comrades, they are not Trotskyists but no one is perfect, are active today through the FPN and the Alliance for Counseling and Psychotherapy, protesting against the use of therapy as a disciplinary apparatus against benefit claimants.

In 2017, that’s last year, we had a conference of nearly 200 people in Manchester at the Asylum Democratic Psychiatry conference, in which participants alongside those who use psychiatric services were psychotherapists, some psychoanalysts. The usual suspects, but what can you do when we are thin on the ground. We have to stay active and support each other in these kind of political initiatives.

**Young**: Integration never got off the ground.

**Parker**: It opened a space for radicals and analytic folk could come together.

**Young**: Could they ever actually come together institutionally?

**Parker**: No. I think we have to be clear what psychoanalysis offers to Marxism and what Marxism offers to psychoanalysis. In both cases there are limits. What does psychoanalysis offer to Marxism? I think first it offers an alternative conception of subjectivity to the wretched adaptive disciplines of psychology, psychiatry and mainstream psychotherapy. Psychology as a discipline is completely bankrupt, useless. Well, it is very useful to capitalism, developed at the same time as it, that’s what I argue in *Revolution in Psychology*, but useless to radicals who want to overthrow capitalism. A psychoanalytic conception of subjectivity, depending on how we finesse it, *may* be compatible with Marxism, as dialectical and transformative. Possibly but not necessarily. Second, psychoanalysis does offer a critique of organisations, including Marxist organisations, many of which do operate on a hierarchical basis. That critique, particularly from within Group Analysis, chimes with the socialist-feminist argument that ‘the personal is political’, and I reckon any Marxism worth the name needs to take feminist arguments on board. Third, well this is a negative point we have to be clear about; I would say that psychoanalysis does *not* offer an alternative fully formed account of society. And it should not.

As far as what Marxism offers to psychoanalysis, I think three things stand out. One is that Marxism draws attention to the historicity of psychoanalysis, and of the many ludicrous claims that psychoanalysts make about their work as scientific, the idea that they are discovering universal unchanging truths about human nature. This is something that Lacanians, and other psychoanalysts of course, didn’t like about my book *Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Revolutions in Subjectivity*. The argument there was that Lacan showed us that Freud invented psychoanalysis, invented the unconscious, did not ‘discover’ it. We need to locate psychoanalysis historically as a particular kind of practice, a useful practice for addressing distress, under the alienated conditions of life we experience under capitalism. It was not always with us, and will not always be with us. Second I would say that Marxism complements our practice inside the clinic with revolutionary activity outside the clinic. It does not replace it. This is a very modest claim. And third Marxism is a revolutionary practice, praxis,that supplants psychoanalysis as a practice symptomatic of capitalism. Which is not to say that Marxism is a worldview and that we will one day live in a Marxist world . I hope not, we’ve had that kind of nonsense in the kind of Marxism turned into a faith of the Stalinist bureaucracies.

Marxism is a practical critique of capitalist society, relevant to that society, and when we have overthrown capitalism we will develop a variety of other theoretical systems to make sense of those different kinds of reality. Not ‘Marxist’ as such, and not ‘psychoanalytic’. And certainly not a combination of the two.

**Young**: I draw from this conversation that you believe that history shows that psychoanalysis and Marxism are unlikely to achieve theoretical and/or institutional integration. For now all we can hope to do is to keep the dialogue between them alive.

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